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CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS ON CONSTANTINE'S SISCIA HELMET COINS

by
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Between A.D. 318-320 the Siscia mint issued a bronze coin type with obverse iconography showing Constantine the Great in his new high-crested, bowl-shaped imperial war helmet. The reverse depicted two victories holding a votive shield over an altar surrounded by an inscription celebrating the "Happy Victories of the Perpetual Princes." P. Bruun has classified this type of coin at Siscia into five issues. The first three have long reverse legends—VICTORIAE LAETAE PRINC PERP—and infinitely varied altar designs. The last two, and a contemporary irregular issue, have short legends—VICT LAETAE PRINC PERP—and a capital letter I on the altars of the coins struck in the A and B officinae, and a capital letter S on the altars of those from the Γ, Δ and E officinae.¹

Though providing interesting information as to the kind of military head gear worn by Roman emperors in the early fourth century, this coin type has stirred more interest among scholars and collectors because of the fact that a few specimens contain Christograms on the obverse helmet. Bruun has located at least three such pieces in museum collections. One of the best examples is at the Bundessammlung in Vienna, and clearly exhibits the chi-rho marking on the central crossbar of the helmet (✠—Figure 1).²

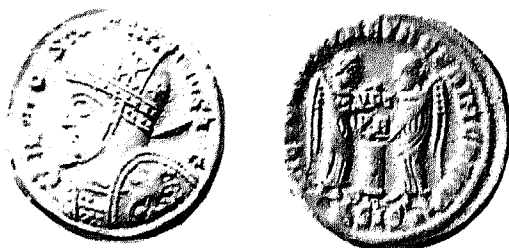


Fig. 1. Obverse: IMP CONSTANT-INVS AVG—emperor, facing left, in high-crested helmet marked with Christogram (RIC 61). Reverse: VICTORIAE LAETAE PRINC PERP—victories holding votive shield over altar, BSIS*, third issue, 319 (Bundessammlung, Vienna).

A. Alföldi has argued that these monogrammed specimens represent the prototype design sent down from the central court, and reflect the emperor's open avowal of Christianity in imperial art. In his thinking, the many other marks, designs and symbols found in the vertical crossbar of the helmet are simply degenerated Christograms.³ Bruun, who has carried out the most extensive examination and cataloging of the coin material, has held that this is not the case. The vast majority of coins he has listed do not contain Christograms. The monogram of Christ occurs only in the third issue of this five issue coin type, and then only from the B officina.⁴ Specimens of this coin type from the other western mints under Constantine's control do not contain any Christograms at all.

Recently, this writer acquired an interesting specimen of the coin type under discussion which apparently bears a form of the Christian cross on the obverse helmet.⁵ There are coins containing similar markings in some museum collections. An analysis of the author's piece together with these other specimens may lead to a better understanding of the place of Christian symbols on this Constantinian coin type.



Fig. 2. Obverse: CONSTANTI-NVS AVG—emperor, facing left, in high-crested helmet marked with Greek cross (RIC 84).

Reverse: VICT LAETAE PRINC PERP—victories holding votive shield over altar, probably •BSIS*, fourth issue, 319 (Odahl collection).

1. P. Bruun, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, VII (London: Spink & Son, 1966), pp. 416-18, 430-37. The mint marks of the respective issues are: 1) ASIS*, 2) ASIS, 3) ASIS•, 4) •ASIS•, 5) ASIS*.
2. RIC #61 (A.D. 319). For the numismatic-historical discussion concerning these coins, see: J. Maurice, *Numismatique Constantinienne*, II (Paris: Leroux, 1911), pp. ix, xiii, 1, 1x; A. Alföldi, "The Helmet of Constantine with the Christian Monogram," *Journal of Roman Studies*, XXII (1932), pp. 9-23; G. Bruck, "Die Verwendung christlicher Symbole auf Münzen von Constantin I. bis Magnentius," *Numismatische Zeitschrift*, LXXVI (1955), pp. 28-29; K. Jacob, *Coins and Christianity* (London: Seaby, 1959), pp. 24-25; P. Bruun, "The Christian

- Signs on the Coins of Constantine," *Arctos*, Series 2, Vol. 3 (1962), pp. 10-18, 31, & *RIC*, VII, pp. 62-63, 417-18, 433; M. P. Bastien, "Le chrisme dans la numismatique de la dynastie Constantinienne," *Collectionneurs et collections numismatiques* (Paris: Hôtel de la monnaie, 1968), p. 113. The varied marks on the bowls to either side of the central, vertical bar of the helmets have almost unanimously been interpreted as representing jewels or decorations, and, thus, will not concern us here.
3. Alföldi, "The Helmet of Constantine," pp. 10-11; *Hoc Signo Victor Eris: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Bekehrung Konstantins des Grossen*, "Pisciculi" (Munich, 1939), pp. 2-3; *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 39-41. Cf. Maurice, *Num. Const.*, II, pp. ix, xiii, & 1.
4. Bruun, *RIC*, VII, pp. 62-63, 417-18, & "Christian Signs," pp. 10-18.
5. Acquired from Mr. Fred Drost of the Organization of International Numismatists, and authenticated by the American Numismatic Society.

The obverse of the writer's specimen appears to carry a Greek cross, surmounted by two dots, in the central, vertical bar of the emperor's helmet (☩ — Figure 2). The legend breaks around the crest at the I-N point: CONSTANTI-NVS AVG. The reverse carries the abbreviated legend VICT LAETAE PRINC PERP, and an altar marked with an I. The short legend puts the coin in the last two issues of this type. The fifth issue has a six pointed star, or asterisk, to the right of the mint mark. This coin does not have the asterisk, so it has to be a part of the fourth regular issue with two dots (•ASIS•), or of the contemporary irregular issue with only a right side dot (ASIS•). Bruun feels that the paucity of specimens with only a right side dot may indicate that these pieces are really a part of the fourth regular issue.⁶ There is clearly a dot on the right side of the author's piece. There may have been one on the left side as well, but the coin is too badly worn there to tell for sure.

The officina mark is not entirely clear either. However, the capital letter I on the altar indicates that the coin had to have been struck in either the A or B officina. Although the possibility of A ought not to be ruled out, the B officina seems the better choice since the shape of the worn mark is similar to other B marks the writer has seen on coins of only slightly better condition. On the basis of such criteria, this specimen should most probably be classified as a part of the fourth issue, struck in either of the first two officinae.⁷

The other specimens carrying crosses on the emperor's helmet with which the author is acquainted are from different issues, but were struck in the same officinae. The American Numismatic Society Museum has a piece marked with a Greek cross surrounded by four dots on the crossbar of the obverse helmet (☩). It is numbered with the fifth issue, and is from the B officina.⁸ The British Museum owns a specimen bearing a Greek-like cross in the same vertical bar of the helmet without any dots (☩). It is classified as a part of the first issue, and was struck in the A officina.⁹

Summing up the evidence presented here, it seems that monogrammed helmets occur only in the third issue and from the B officina, while crossed helmets appear in the first, fourth, and fifth issues, and from both the A and B officinae. The number of pieces bearing marks which might be interpreted as Christian symbols, however, is very small in proportion to all the specimens of this coin type in museum and private collections.¹⁰ What, then, might

these few pieces suggest to us about the role Christian symbols played on this Constantinian coin type at the Siscia mint?

The crossed specimens discussed here provide support for Bruun's theory that the prototype design from Constantine's chancellery did not contain Christograms. The markings on the vertical bars of the helmets were quite varied, in fact, consisting of different arrangements of dots, lines, swivels and symbols (—Figure 3). The variations in the helmet engravings must have originated in the local mint rather than at the imperial court. Such markings, therefore, did not serve as media for official, imperial propaganda. The great diversity of the helmet engravings also rule out the possibility that they may have served any controlling function at the mint, such as indicating an issue or series within this coin type. The marks, quite simply, were helmet decorations designed, engraved and stamped within the individual officinae of the local mint.

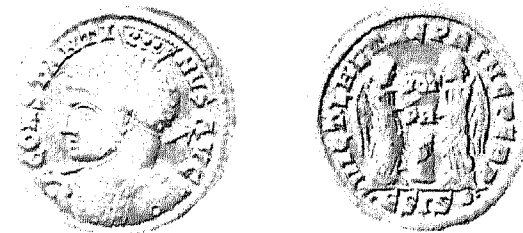


Fig. 3. Obverse: CONSTANTI-NVS AVG—emperor, facing left, in high-crested helmet marked with three dots or points (RIC 84). Reverse: VICT LAETAE PRINC PERP—victories holding votive shield over altar, •ESIS•, fourth issue, 319 (British Museum, London).

Although the marks described here as Christian were certainly exceptional on this Siscian coin type, they probably ought not to be interpreted as simply the products of randomness in design. There had been no random appearance of Christian symbols on Roman coins before Constantine's conversion in A.D. 312. Nor were they appearing on the coins of Licinius, Constantine's pagan co-emperor in the east, at the time these Siscian helmet coins were being minted. It was only in the mints of the western half of the empire, where Constantine and his co-religionists were vigorously promoting Christianity at the expense of paganism and its devotees,¹¹ that Christian symbols were beginning to make an appearance on Roman coinage. Correspondingly, in the same mints controlled by Constantine the old pagan deities were beginning to

6. Bruun, *RIC*, VII, p. 417, note 3.
 7. *RIC* #84 (A.D. 319), or alternately as part of the contemporary irregular issue, and numbered *RIC* #102 (A.D. 319-320). Bruun, however, lists no known A or B specimens with #102.
 8. *RIC* #95 (A.D. 319-320). Associate Curator William Metcalf brought this piece to my attention recently.
 9. *RIC* #50 (A.D. 318). Examined by the author in 1974.
 10. The author knows of a few other specimens containing an X, sometimes identified as the cross of St. Andrew, on the vertical bars and/or side bowls of the helmets on this coin type (see *RIC* #61 & plate 13 for a picture). There are also a few pieces that bear a Greek-like cross on either side of the vertical bars of the helmets. It would be easier to make a case for some Christian content with

the latter, especially since they come out of the first two officinae like the Christograms and crosses discussed here (see the essay by C. R. Thayer, "Constantine the Great (est) and his Coins," *JOIN*, XI, Second Quarter (1977), p. 41, for an illustration).
 11. Alföldi, *Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, pp. 25-84; H. Dörries, *Constantine the Great* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 40-60, 177-85; R. MacMullen, *Constantine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 128-35, & 160-62; C. Odahl, "Constantine and the Militarization of Christianity," a doctoral dissertation for the University of California, San Diego (1976), Chapter III.

disappear from the coinage.¹² Thus, with this era it is reasonable to assume that signs which obviously look like the monogram and cross of Christ may very well have been intended as such, and even though they may not always have been official or regular markings, they may certainly be interpreted as reflections of the changing religious situation in the Roman Empire.

Since his conversion, Constantine had been encouraging Christians to take service under him and favoring those who did with his patronage.¹³ Church leaders had supported the emperor's call for Christian service to the state at the Synod of Arles in 314 with canons officially approving of Christian magisterial and military careers for the first time in Church history.¹⁴ Literary and epigraphic sources from the following decade provide proof that Christian laymen were engaging in governmental careers, and moving up the ladder of success rapidly.¹⁵

The use of Christian crosses as issue and series marks on the coins of Ticinum (316, 319), Rome (318) and London (320) may indicate that Christians had risen to high, directorial posts within those mints, and were freely choosing the symbols of their imperially favored religion as controlling marks for the coinage they supervised.¹⁶ The exceptional and irregular character of the Christian signs on the Siscia helmet coins probably indicates that Christians did not hold any positions higher than that of *signator* or engraver within the mint when these coins were produced.¹⁷ This is a tenable assumption since Constantine had only gained control of the province within which the Siscia mint was located in 316.¹⁸ The rise of Christian government workers may thus have started later there. However, the irregular appearance of Christograms and crosses on specimens from the B and A officinae at Siscia must mean that Christian workers had infiltrated at least two of the mint's five officinae, and were serving as engravers therein between 318-320.

By then, it was common knowledge that Constantine had adopted the Christian God as his patron, and had successfully employed Christian symbols as apotropaic talismens on war implements during his campaign



Fig. 4. Obverse: IMP CONSTANTINVS PF AVG—emperor, facing front, in high-crested helmet, with Christogram badge on top of front of helm, and cross-scepter over shield, 315 (*RIC* 36, Staatliche Münzsammlung, Munich).

against Maxentius for control of Rome in 312. The official silver medallions struck for the emperor's *Decennalia* at Ticinum in 315 had already shown him with a Christogram badge on his war helmet, and a cross-scepter over his shoulder (Figure 4).¹⁹ Written accounts of his battlefield conversion and public use of Christian symbols had been composed and circulated by the Christian authors Lactantius and Eusebius.²⁰ The Christian engravers at Siscia, influenced by these happenings and knowing that their actions would not be censured, seem to have taken it upon themselves to express their own faith, and reflect the emperor's new religious predilections by decorating the imperial visage on a few pieces of the VICTORIAE LAETAE coinage with the monogram and cross of Christ.

Though neither official nor regular markings, the Christian symbols on the Siscia helmet coins are historically significant, nevertheless, because they do reflect Constantine's conversion to Christianity, and indicate the presence of Christians in Roman governmental service.²¹ These small signs are one part of the evidence indicating the formation of a new Church-state partnership during the reign of Rome's first Christian emperor.²²

12. H. Mattingly, *Roman Coins* (London: Methuen, 1962), pp. 238-42; & *Christianity in the Roman Empire* (New York: Norton, 1967), pp. 62-63, 67; Bruun, "The Disappearance of Sol from the Coins of Constantine," *Arctos*, Series 2, Vol. 2 (1961), pp. 15-37, & *RIC*, VII, p. 48.
13. MacMullen, pp. 128-29, 160-62; Alföldi, *Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, p. 49.
14. Canons 3, 7 & 8, printed in the *Corpus Christianorum*, CXLVIII, *Concilia Galliae*, A. 314 - A. 506 (Turnholt, 1963), pp. 9-13. Cf. Alföldi, *Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, p. 49.
15. The Christian Aelafius served as a governor in North Africa—*Epistola Constantini ad Aelafium*, in Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, VIII, 484-85. The Christian careerist Acilius Severus served as a vicar, a prefect and even consul of Rome between 318-325—A.H.M. Jones, et al., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, I (Cambridge, 1971), p. 834; & MacMullen, p. 129.
16. Probably as *Procuratores monetarum* or *Officinatores*. Bruun, *RIC*, VII, pp. 61-64, & "Christian Signs," pp. 5-8. Cf. Maurice, *Num. Const.*, I (1908), pp. xxxi-xxxv; II (1911), pp. viii-x, and "Tableau résumé des signes et symboles chrétiens."
17. Bruun, "Christian Signs," p. 17, seems to favor an "engraver" for these marks.
18. Bruun, *RIC*, VII, p. 76.

19. Alföldi, "The Initials of Christ on the Helmet of Constantine," *Studies in Roman Economic and Social History in Honor of Allen Chester Johnson* (Princeton, 1951), pp. 303-11; "Das Kreuzzepter Konstantins des Grossen," *Schweiz. Münzblätter* 4, Heft 16 (1954), pp. 81-86; K. Kraft, "Das Silbermedaillon Konstantins des Grossen mit dem Christusmonogram auf dem Helm," *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte* (1954-55), pp. 151-78; Bruun, "Christian Signs," pp. 9-10, 18, 23, & *RIC*, VII, pp. 62-63.
20. Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IX. 9—both usually dated to ca. 315. The stories that would later appear in Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* I. 26-40 (ca. 338) were probably circulating orally in the decade after Constantine's conversion as well.
21. Eusebius, *Vit Const* IV. 52, reports that by the end of Constantine's reign the highest military and administrative positions in the empire were held by Christians.
22. The author would like to thank Mr. Fred Drost of the Organization of International Numismatists, Mr. Daniel Clark of Clark's Ancient Coins, and Mr. William Metcalf, Associate Curator for Roman and Byzantine Coins at the American Numismatic Society, for their kindness in examining his coin (Figure 2 above) and sharing their opinions on its attribution and interpretation. Special thanks are also due Miss Teresa Lejardi of the Boise State University Educational Media Services for photographing the author's coin, and making 1/2 size enlargements of it and the other coins for this article.