

## Late Roman Auxilia and Constantine's "Vision"

*Andrey Valerievich Bannikov*

Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia

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**Abstract:** There are many publications about Constantine's vision and his conversion to Christianity. In the opinion of some researchers, originally the symbol accepted by Constantine had no concern with Christ's initials. It had a heathen nature. Maybe it was connected with the cult of Apollo. More likely is the hypothesis that not Christian or solar symbols but runes were depicted on the shields of Constantine's warriors. This can be explained by the large number of northerners in the army of the emperor.

**Key words:** Constantine • Auxilia • Cornuti • Runes • Labarum

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### INTRODUCTION

The question about the origin of the Late Roman *auxilia* is still not completely clarified. According to the widespread hypothesis, they were almost recruited from among extra-imperial barbarians. The time of their recruitment is associated with the tetrarchy period [1]. At the same time, the analysis of the data we have shows that the *auxilia* were not numerous at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup>- beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century their number increased to such an extent that they became the main type of infantry units [1].

Another theory says that Constantine was the one who created the new type *auxilia* which consisted mainly of extra-imperial elements. It is beyond any doubt that many barbarian recruits got into the Roman Army under this emperor. For example, it is well-known that when preparing for war with Maxentius, Constantine remanned his troops with captive barbarians especially from Germans and Celtic tribes [2]. This information was frequently patchy, but these scraps became the ground for the historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to speak about the large-scale barbarization, or rather the germanization of the army that took place during the reign of Constantine [3].

Some of new *auxilia* acquired a great fame in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. They included *Cornuti*- the detachment that was a part of Gallic Army. Ammianus Marcellinus often mentions them in his records. It is assumed that the *Cornuti* (Latin "horned") took part in

fight for Italy in 312. The proof of it is found in "horned" helmets the warriors wore. These helmets are depicted at one of the reliefs on the Arch of Constantine. They look like not Roman and this fact denotes the foreign origin of the soldiers.

On a miniature in the sixth chapter (n. 9) of Eastern part of the *Notitia dignitatum* [4], there is an insignia of the *Cornuti* in the form of two snakes looking at each other and rising on the common base. One can see a similar symbol on the shield of a warrior depicted on the Arch of Constantine and on the shield of bronze statuette of Constantine from Princeton. F. Altheim connects these images with the figures of two dancing snakes that often decorate German arms [5].



The image on the shield of a warrior on the Arch of Constantine. Detailed drawing by I.V. Kirsanov.

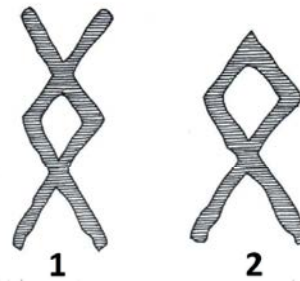
The warchiefs of tribes which lived in the territory of Denmark and Sweden in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century frequently used these symbols. The items with detailed images were often dedicated to the god of war [6]. Thus we can assume that the Cornuti and some other Roman auxilia having similar symbols were formed of northern Germans, possibly captive. There was an opinion in Roman Empire that the strongest and fiercest warriors lived in northern countries. Consequently, before Constantine, Romans could recruit mercenaries on the North Sea coast- the territories of modern Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein [6]. This conclusion is proved by the words of a panegyrist who asserted that Constantius Chlorus recruited soldiers in the lands Romans did not reach and settled them in Gaul. That is why he could recruit some Roman detachments just in these northern regions [6].



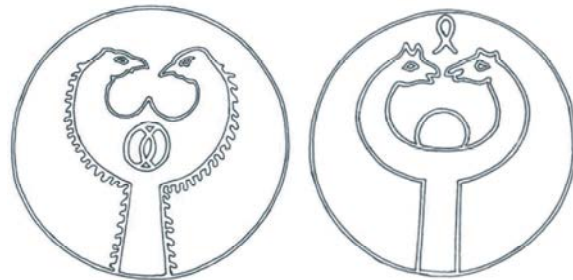
Bronze statuette of Constantine from Princeton. Detailed drawing by I.V. Kirsanov.

There is one more proof of the Cornuti's northern origin- the depiction of rune "ing" (*inguz, ingwaz*) on the above mentioned image in *Notitia dignitatum*. This is not the single insignia in *Notitia* with runes. In the same chapter of this document (n. 16) there is an insignia of the auxilium palatinum *Vindices* [4]. In general, it is similar to the image on the Cornuti's shield, but there is a rune "odal" (*othila, othala*) above their heads. This rune was dedicated to the god Odin.

The Cornuti and other units which had two snakes on their shields were treated as the most battleworthy and had privileged positions in the Army of Constantine. This was the reason why the statuette from Princeton portrays the emperor holding the shield with such symbols.



Rune "ing" (1); rune "odal" (2).



The images on shields in *Notitia dignitatum*. Detailed drawing by I.V. Kirsanov.

This was not unusual because on ceremonial occasions emperors often appeared in the armour of their elite units [6].

According to the existing hypothesis, there was a hierarchy in *Notitia dignitatum*. The list of military detachments began with from the oldest and high-level units. In Chapter V of the Western part of *Notitia dignitatum* (n. 158–163) the Cornuti are at the head of the list of auxilia, then follow the *Brachiata*, the *Pethulanta*, the *Celts*, the *Heruli* and the *Batavi* [4]. The images on the shields of the Cornuti, the *Brachiata* and the *Pethulanta* are practically identical. A. Alföldi and some other researchers supposed that they depicted horns [7]. Although it is more likely that initially these were the same two snakes facing each other depicted on the shields of Celts. As a result of multiple copying of the miniatures, the images lost their zoomorphic shape [5].

The significant role of the Cornuti and other detachments formed from northern mercenaries in the war for Italy makes it possible to find quite a rational explanation of Constantine's "vision". According to the existing tradition, the day before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge Constantine received a sign that presaged him future victory. There are two different versions of this event. One of them says the emperor saw a prophetic dream. Lactantius wrote: "During the dream Constantine received a command to mark the heavenly sign of God on

the shields of his soldiers and then to join the battle. He did this and called Christ by means of a slanted letter X with the top of its head bent round. Armed with this symbol, the army drew their swords” [8].

The second version of the miracle is told by Eusebius. He states that he heard this story from Constantine himself: “the basileus got an amazing sign send by the Heavens, so that it was hard to believe if someone else told this. But the victorious basileus himself assured us by way of an oath that this was so, when long after that we wrote this writing and was honoured by his acquaintance and talk. Therefore, who will doubt the truth of his story, all the more so that the further time witnessed this truth? “Once in the midday hours, when the sun began to wester,”- the basileus said, - “I saw with my own eyes in the heavens a trophy of the cross arising from the light of the sun, carrying the message "With this sign, you will conquer!". This sight filled him and his army with terror. The army followed him, not knowing where and continued to contemplate the miracle” [9].

There are many publications about Constantine’s vision and his conversion to Christianity. In the opinion of some researchers, originally the symbol accepted by Constantine had no concern with Christ’s initials. It had a heathen nature. Maybe it was connected with the cult of Apollo. Not without a reason, the legend says that this god came to Constantine before the war for Italy and promised him his patronage [10]. Ancient Christian authors saw in this sign two crossed Greek letters – C and R forming the Christ’s monogram; and the divine being that came to the emperor in his dream was considered Christ himself. Besides, there is an opinion that Constantine intentionally chose a sign which could be accepted as a Christian symbol by some people and a heathen symbol by other people [11].

According to A. Alföldi, the *Christogram* (*Chrisma*) appeared on the coins of Constantine in 315 [12]. Others think that coins with symbols which could be considered as Christian began to be issued only after 317 [10]. However, these symbols can also have a “heathen-solar” interpretation. A triumphal arch was erected in 315 as a memorial of the victories gained by Constantine. This Arch can indicate that Constantine didn’t have any Christian views in the period after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Four bas-reliefs of the Arch show the sacrifices to heathen gods and there is no a slightest hint of Christian symbols [13].

In the opinion of M.M. Kozakov, the war with Maximianus Herculeus prevented Constantine from choosing the cult of Hercules as an official religion. On

the other hand, the emperor could not introduce a wide worship of Apollo because the majority of his soldiers consisted of Gauls and Germans for whom this cult might seem complicated and obscure [10].

At the same time, even if we suppose that Constantine was attached by Christianity, it was impossible and unreasonable to replace Hercules with Christ because Constantine’s warriors were mainly heathens and there were as many worshipers of Apollo as of Christ among them [10]. Thus Constantine needed an “intermediate option” and he found it in the cult of the *Invincible Sun* (*Sol Invictus*), Constantine united it with the cult of Apollo [10]. As for christogram, M.M. Kozakov thinks that Constantine’s soldiers could have an insignia of swastika or crossed lines reminding Roman digit ten (X) depicted on their shields. However, M.M. Kozakov himself admits that the sign of Christ’s monogram had never occurred before and thus it attracted the attention of ancient authors who could not find a suitable explanation for it [10]. It is doubtful whether Latin letters X or V, in which the researcher sees the prototype of christogram, could surprise Lactantius or Eusebius.

We suppose that Constantine himself was an initiator of the legend about the divine interference the day before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Later Constantine told Eusebius this fictitious story. At the same time, the information about special symbols depicted on the shields of Constantine’s warriors in which one could easily discern the christogram was based on real facts.

Lactantius’s version is the earliest report about the vision of Constantine. Lactantius did not mention any fiery cross in the sky. He even did not report who commanded Constantine to depict the christogram on the shields. Lactantius indicated that the christogram looked like letter X “with the top of its head bent round”. Such a symbol, as we had already noted, can be found on shields in *Notitia dignitatum*.

M.P. Speidel assumed that Constantine followed the example of his German soldiers who had runes on their shields and commanded all warriors to mark the christogram on their shields [6]. We believe that Constantine did not order his soldiers to mark any special sign. Later tradition took runes on the shields of German auxilia of the emperor for Christian symbols. For example, rune “odal” could be identified not only with christogram but also with the image of a fish- one of the earliest symbols of Christianity.

The legend about the vision of Constantine is also connected with a new standard for the army- the *labarum* – which Christ supposedly told Constantine to accept. A

special detachment was created to guard the new standard: "... Constantine ordered those armour-bearers who are notable for their sound bodies, strong souls and devout disposition to serve solely this banner. There were at least fifty such men and they had not other responsibilities except standing around the standard, or following it as a guard when each of them carried it on their shoulders in turn" [9].

Apparently, the guardsmen whom Eusebius told about were German soldiers with runes on their shields. All this engendered the legend about Christian guard created for the sacred standard.

The legend about a miraculous vision made up by Constantine himself and told to Eusebius got an official status very quickly. Coins issued during the reign of Constantine's sons already had a christogram and inscription "IN HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS" (variants "IN HOC SIGNO VINCAS" or "IN NOMINE XRI VINCAS SEMPER" are also possible). It is obvious that heathen symbols could be Christianized much later than the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. The reports of sources about the political demarches of Constantine meant for Christians belong to the period after the year 320 when the emperor got an intention to subdue the eastern half of Roman state where Christianity was much more widely spread than in the west. This was the moment when monetary iconography changed and the monogram of Christ appeared at the labarum [13].

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