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Cross or Labarum? Character and Meaning of the Sign in the Central Quarter of Early Christian Sarcophagus in Museo Pio Cristiano in Rome (Lat. 171)

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Abstract: The topic of this paper is a sign in the central niche of Sarcophagus Lat. 171 in Museo Pio Cristiano. It is a shaft, crossed by a horizontal bar with two birds and crowned by the monogram of Greek letters – X and P in a wreath. Two Roman soldiers sit on both sides of the shaft. Above there is an eagle with outstretched wings. Many scholars have identified the sign as a cross and the soldiers as the guards at Christ's tomb. To this day, it provokes many doubts. The sign from Constantin's vision was mentioned by Lactantius, Eusebius, Hermias Sozomen and Socrates of Constantinople. The symbol in the niche is most similar to that described by Eusebius. The most likely model for the sign under study was the image of two soldiers guarding the labarum, as depicted on coins, and the representation of the victorious emperor holding the labarum, as seen on medals. The research used two methods – an iconological method with iconographic analysis and a semiotic method using denotation and connotation, as well as syntagma and paradigm. The most valuable research finding is the identification of the labarum in the sign on the central intercolumniation of the sarcophagus. It is a personalised symbol, representing the Risen Christ-Saviour as the source of eternal life. The study's results contribute to a better understanding of the labarum.

Keywords: Labarum; Vexillum; Christological monogram; Passion sarcophagus; Constantin the Great; Christ

The subject of this study is not the sarcophagus, known as the Passion Sarcophagus, located in the Museo Pio Cristiano and formerly marked with the signature Lat. 171, now designated R I 49. It is supposed to have come from the catacombs of Domitilla, and to have been made in a Roman workshop around the year 360. Similarly, the set of bas-relief depictions on the sarcophagus front panel is not the subject of this study either. These are placed in five niches, separated by columns with composite capitals. The intercolumniations contain the following scenes, from the left: *Simon of Cyrene carrying the Cross*, *the Coronation*

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of Christ by a Roman soldier, a scene with an X and P Christogram, *the Captivity of Christ* and *Pilate washing his hands*. The positioning of the scenes on the sarcophagus is deliberate and seems to convey important content. Their reading requires separate research. The subject of this article is the central niche. It contains a representation dominated by a wreath with a Christogram, placed on a high shaft with a crossbar. Above the Christogram, the upper part of the compartment shows a bird of prey with its wings spread. Above its wings, in both upper corners, are small bust figures. One is accompanied by a symbolic element. Both arms of the crossbar feature pigeons, which peck at the leaves of the wreath. At the base of the shaft sit two Roman soldiers. Each wears a short tunic and a cloak – a chlamida. They wear helmets on their heads. The soldier on the right watches and raises his head towards the wreath. The soldier on the left rests his hands on the rim of the circular shield and puts his head on them.

This raises the question of what this remarkable depiction presents. What message does it convey? An attempt to answer this should begin with an overview of previous research on the sarcophagus and its representations. André Grabar has classified it in the group of sarcophagi with Passion representations, which visualise the sufferings of Christ as well as the martyrdom of the Apostles Peter and Paul. As for the central scenes of both Sarcophagus Lat. 171 and the sarcophagus of Arles, he recognised that they are symbolic representations of the Resurrection. Indeed, he believes that in the centre is a cross surmounted by a wreath with a Christogram, flanked by two doves on its shoulders. At its feet sit two soldiers, as if, according to the author, they were guarding the tomb of the Crucified One[2]. Annarosa Saggiorato concluded that the sarcophagus came from the Domitilla catacombs and determined the time of its creation to be between 360 and 370 AD[3]. The works of Pasquale Testini and Rina Sansoni have yielded basic data on the sarcophagus with the determination of the time of its creation and the identification of the representations on it[4]. Dagmara Stutzinger made a formal analysis of the sarcophagus scenes and identified it

[2] See A. Grabar, *Die Kunst der frühe Christentums von den ersten Zeugnissen christlicher Kunst bis zur Zeit Theodosius I*, München 1967, p. 266-267.

[3] See A. Saggiorato, *I sarcofagi paleocristiani con scene di Passione*, Bologna 1968, p. 20-22.

[4] See P. Testini, *Le catacombe e gli antiqui cimiteri cristiani in Roma*, Roma 1966, p. 236; R. Sansoni, *I sarcofagi paleocristiani a parte di citta*, Roma 1969.

as the first sarcophagus to be decorated with Passion scenes[5]. Jean Pierre Caillet and Helmut Nils Loose mentioned the sarcophagus in a study on the themes of eternal life in sarcophagus sculpture. They dated the creation of the sarcophagus to around 360 and attributed it to a Roman workshop. The researchers identified the scenes, including a cross topped with a laurel wreath in the central niche. They interpreted the Passion scenes as preparing the faithful for eternal life[6]. Hans Georg Thümmel identified the symbol in the central intercolumniation of the sarcophagus and determined its basic structure, derived from the *labarum*. This is presumed to be evidenced by the figures of the soldiers at its feet, who – according to Thümmel – take turns guarding the banner. However, the original form of the *labarum* has been transformed into a cross, as the cloth hanging from the transverse bar is missing. Moreover, the transverse bar is no longer fixed but permanently fused to the vertical shaft. A Christogram is placed on top of it. The motif so transformed can no longer be called the *labarum*; it takes the form of a cross sceptre with a Christogram[7]. Guntram Koch identified the motif with the guards in the central field of the sarcophagus as a cross. He recognised it as a symbol of Christ's Passion but, above all, his resurrection. Further, he pointed to examples of sarcophagi with a similar motif in the central niche[8]. Richard Viledesah stated that the motif of the cross but without the Crucified One began to be used frequently in the time of Constantine. According to him, the emperor made the cross the main motif of his battle banner, the *labarum*. The long, vertical shaft with a crossbar was crowned with a wreath made of gold and precious stones, housing Christ's X and P monogram. Viledesah also noticed a cross hidden in the Chi-Ro monogram fused to the vertical shaft. Moreover, he pointed to a mosaic from the Archbishop's Chapel in Ravenna[9]. Mahmoud Zibawi identified the depictions on the sarcophagus' front panel, recognising the figure of Jesus as the dominant lawgiver and sage, particularly in the scene of Pilate's Judgement. The placing of a wreath on Christ's head is

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[5] See B. Stutzinger, *Die frühchristlichen Sarkophagenreliefs aus Rom*, Bonn 1982, p. 113-115.

[6] See J-P. Caillet – H. Nils Loose, *La vie d'éternité. La sculpture funéraire dans l'antiquité chrétienne*, Paris – Genève 1990, p. 80-82.

[7] See H.G. Kümmel, *Die Wende des Constantins und die Denkmäler*, in: *Die Konstantinische Wende*, ed. E. Mühlenberg, Gütersloh 1998, p. 169-170.

[8] See G. Koch, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, München 2000, p. 284-294, 191-194.

[9] See R. Vildesah, *The Beauty of Cross. The Passion of Christ in Theology and in Arts from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance*, Oxford 2000, p. 42-44.

said to evoke the crowning with thorns. In the figure of Simon of Cyrene, Zibawi recognised traces and allusions of a triumphal entry into the Eternal City. Most important, however, is interpreting the motif in the central niche as a sign of victory, crowned with a wreath featuring a Christogram. Zibawi notes that the Instrument of the Passion became a trophy, a sign of God's wisdom and power. It is not so much suffering as its salvific outcome that is evoked by this symbol[10]. Jutta Dresken-Weiland pointed to sarcophagi whose front panels feature a *labarum* with two guards. She recognised it as a *tropaion* that points to the resurrection of Christ but also to the future fate of his disciples[11]. In her more recent work, Dresken-Weiland confirmed the recognition of this sign as a *tropaion*, but drew attention to the wreath at the top, comprising the Greek letters X and P. She interpreted the figures of the soldiers as the guards of Christ's tomb and the birds pecking the wreath as the souls of believers or the souls of the dead participating in the gift of immortality. She regarded the whole as a symbol of Christ's resurrection and victory over death[12]. In the first volume of his monograph on Christian iconography, Hans Georg Thümmel devoted much attention to Sarcophagus Lat. 171, especially the central compartment and its symbols. While he recognised it as a stylised cross, he also deemed it a military sign – *a labarum*. According to him, the eagle with outstretched wings in the upper section is part of the symbolism of triumph. The entire set of symbols is supposed to convey the message of *militia Christi* but also *vexillum regis* or *vexillum crucis*[13]. Stanisław Kobielus recognised the sign in the central niche as a cross, guarded by two sentries, symbolising the sun and salvation, as well as darkness. The wreath in the eagle's beak is flanked by birds, which are supposed to be doves or phoenixes and symbolise immortality. The researcher referred to the banner described in the biography of Constantine; however, he opted to recognise the symbol on the sarcophagus as a cross, which was supposed to symbolise resurrection[14]. Catherine Hezser

[10] See M. Zibawi, *La fioritura dell'arte cristiana*, in: *L'arte paleocristiana. Visione e spazio dall'origini al Bisanzio*, ed. M.A. Crippa – M. Zibawi, Milano 1998, p. 139.

[11] See J. Dresken-Weiland, *Bild grab und Wort. Untersuchungen zu Jenseitsvorstellungen von Christen des 3. Und 4. Jahrhunderts*, Regensburg 2010, p. 135.

[12] See J. Dresken-Weiland, *Imagine e parola: Alle origini d'iconografia cristiana*, Città del Vaticano 2012, p. 183-186.

[13] See H.G. Thümmel, *Ikonologie der christlichen Kunst. Band 1: Alte Kirche*, Leiden – Boston – Singapore – Paderborn 2019, p. 144-145.

[14] See S. Kobielus, *Krzyż Chrystusa: od znaku i figury do symbol i metafory [The Cross of Christ: from sign and figure to symbol and metaphor]*, Warszawa 2000, p. 195-198.

analysed the depictions on the front panel of the sarcophagus and interpreted them as scenes of the Passion. According to her, the central compartment contains a cross topped by the letters X and P. Hezser emphasised the use of the cross in the context of late imperial politics and the symbolism of the two letters as signs of political and military triumph, the Roman Empire of the time and the later Byzantine Empire[15].

The above authors have given considerable attention to the centrepiece of the Passion Sarcophagus' central niche. Their iconographic readings, however, focus on only two motifs. These are the Christogram at the top of the spear and the crosspiece that supposedly forms the cross. The prevailing view of almost all scholars is that the battle banner was transformed into a cross – the symbol and instrument of Christ's Passion. There has also been a view that, in this motif, the Instrument of the Passion was transformed into a symbol of victory, triumph and resurrection. The above positions should not come as a surprise. After all, the other niches feature motifs related to the Passion of Christ. The scenes in them allude to some selected episodes of the Passion.

Nevertheless, identifying the centerpiece of the central niche as a cross – the Instrument of the Passion – is questionable. This raises several questions. What is the role of the Roman legionaries seated at the foot of the motif? Why would the guards be placed at the foot of a "cross" on which the Crucified One is not depicted? Why is the top of the cross' vertical beam crowned with a laurel wreath featuring a monogram composed of two Greek letters: X and P? To verify the identifications made so far, it is first necessary to refer to literary sources.

1. Literary sources on the *labarum*

The first evidence of the use of Christianity's victory sign is mentioned in *Mors persecutorum* by Lactantius (c. 314). He reported that Emperor Constantine had a dream in which he saw the celestial sign of God (*coeleste signum Dei*). In the dream, he was instructed to place this sign on the shields of his soldiers. He followed this instruction by placing the letter X, the monogram of Christ, on the topmost bend of the shield[16].

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[15] See C. Hezser, *Bild und Kontext. Jüdische und christliche Ikonographie der Spätantike*, Tübingen 2018, p. 120-122.

[16] See Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* XLIV 6.

The panegyric *Vita Constantini* by Eusebius of Caesarea (337-339/40) reports two events at greater length. Namely, Emperor Constantine was reflecting on the help of the gods, which was proving ineffective. Facing an imminent battle, the emperor offered prayers to the One God and a miraculous sign was shown to him. Namely, in the afternoon before sunset, the sign of a luminous cross appeared in the sky[17]. The Emperor did not understand what this vision could mean. However, while he was asleep, Christ appeared to him and ordered him to make the sign he had seen in the sky and to use it for defence in all battles[18]. Constantine supposedly sat down among the craftsmen and instructed them on the shape and material of the sign they were to make[19].

The sign in the vision had the following appearance: A vertical shaft clad in gold, with the crossbar arched to suggest the shape of a cross. At the top of the shaft was a wreath (*corona*), decorated with jewels and gold. At the centre of the wreath was a monogram – the combined Greek letters P and X. These were the first two letters of *Christos*. On the crosspiece hung a square sheet of cloth, richly decorated, covered with numerous precious stones and interspersed with gold. The author mentioned the unspeakable beauty of this cloth. Above the upper edge of the cloth sheet were portraits of the emperor and his two sons. The emperor used this sign and ordered it to be used by all troops[20]. Two more literary testimonies should be cited. In his history of the Church, Socrates Scholasticus reported that Constantine saw a pillar of light in the sky, similar to a cross, and an inscription saying that in this sign, he shall conquer. Then, in a dream, he saw Christ instructing him to draw up a sign like the one he had seen in the sky. And so the sign was made and is still kept to this day[21]. Hermias Sozomen also described an event with a vision of the cross. The emperor was said to have instructed craftsmen to make the sign. They transformed a banner, known in Rome as the *labarum*, giving it the form of a cross[22].

The context in which the description of the sign is found speaks volumes about the role and function of the sign in the local culture. The reference to Constantine's meditation on the help of the gods in battle is

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[17] See Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* I 27-28.
[18] See Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* I 27-30.
[19] See Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* I 30.
[20] See Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* I 30.
[21] See Socrates Scholasticus, *HE* I 2.
[22] See Sozomenus Hermias, *HE* I 3.

significant. Assistance from the hitherto worshipped deities had proved insufficient and ineffective. As such, Constantine began looking for other help and another deity to assist him and grant victory. What would prove to be providential was a mysterious vision with an inscription and a dream occurring at night after the sign had appeared. Was following that call and command already taking sides with Christianity? Not yet, it would seem. Admittedly, the *Vita Constantini* is a panegyric. The author reveals a clear intention to portray the emperor as a just and good Christian ruler. Nonetheless, the acceptance and reading of the symbols described in the texts seem to be more an expression of the Roman mentality, which tended to seek in the supernatural realm a deity who was ready to favour the combatant and bring him victory. This is what Constantine did according to Eusebius' description.

Lactantius' account is somewhat different. According to the latter, Constantine is said to have seen the heavenly sign of God in a dream. The vision was accompanied by a command for him to place this sign on his shields. The sign, however, was not described. The author mentions that the emperor ordered it to be placed on the soldiers' shields. It was to be situated at the topmost bend of the shield, and it can be assumed that this was the apex of the *scutum's* convex surface. What mark was placed on the shields? It was simply the Greek letter X.

What is notable is the disjunction that both Lactantius' and Eusebius' accounts show between the waking vision or dream and the specific disclosure of its content or the consolidation of the vision in military symbolism. The description of the sign in Constantine's vision is missing from Lactantius's account altogether. According to Lactantius, it was the *coelestis signum Dei*, and the version in which the emperor had it placed on the shields was the letter X. According to Eusebius's account, the emperor saw a cross of light; however, he commissioned a design which was only reminiscent of a cross, its centrepiece being an ornamented sheet of cloth descending from the crossbar, a wreath decorated with stones and gold atop the spear and a monogram of two intertwined letters, X and P, inside it. A cross of light appeared in the sky, whereas in the vision the emperor saw a *vexillum* topped by a wreath with a Christological monogram.

Nonetheless, it is intriguing that the sign that Constantine saw according to Eusebius in his dream and the one he instructed the craftsmen to make differ significantly. This raises the question of why such a discrepancy occurred. However, this is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

One can only express some hypotheses and conjectures. On the one hand, it should be stressed that the *Vita Constantini* is not a work bearing witness to mystical experiences, but a panegyric, and the author uses cultural patterns and literary topoi designed to highlight the character of the biography's main subject. The description of the vision and the preparation of the sign seem to serve this purpose. On the other hand, the design of the supposed victory sign drew on the Empire's existing symbolic resources, and these included military insignia.

Still, a new question arises: What was the most important part of both accounts? What appears as a sign of victory, one revealing divine assistance, in both recounted visions? That would be the letter X and the Christogram – a monogram of X and P. These were the signs deemed to be of the greatest value and the highest effectiveness. Eusebius mentions that Constantine placed a Christogram on his helmet. However, a Christogram had already appeared on a silver medal from Ticinum, minted in 313/315 (Munich, Staatliche Münzensammlung)[23]. This means that this sign was in use much earlier than Eusebius' panegyric was written.

Adam Ziółkowski interpreted the signs revealed in Constantine's visions, as recounted by Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea, as well as in Constantine's dream and his instructions given to the craftsmen. He concluded that the mark Constantine instructed to be placed on the shields was the *labarum*, a variation of the legion *vexillum*. The *coeleste signum Dei* from Lactantius' description was supposed to be such a form – a reduction of the *labarum*, shaped like a transformed letter X, where one of the lines is set horizontally and has a bent upper end, with the other acting as a crossbar[24]. The implication is that the sign in the emperor's vision, and the instructions given to the master craftsmen was the *labarum*, not the cross. Yet, the banner from the vision coincides in a certain sense with the sign in Lactantius' account, as the spear with its crossbar and wreath overlaps in part with the sign on the shields, the latter comprising the letter P with a crossbar[25].

One has to wonder why, according to Eusebius' account, Constantine ordered that the sign be created as a legion banner. Still, both events – the daytime vision and the nighttime dream – were part of Constantine's

[23] See K. Müller, *Das Kreuz: eine Objektgeschichte des bekanntesten Symbols von der Spätantiken bis zur Neuzeit*, Freiburg – Basel – Wien 2022, p. 84.

[24] See A. Ziółkowski, *Wizja Konstantyna: reinterpretacja [Constantine's Vision: A Reinterpretation]*, VoxP 4 (1983) p. 200-215.

[25] Ziółkowski, *Wizja Konstantyna: reinterpretacja*, p. 207.

military engagement. He was facing a decisive battle with Maxentius, and the signs revealed were identified as symbols of future salvation. Therefore, it appears as an essential sign, which Constantine orders to be used as a *vexillum*.

Kathrin Müller expresses the view that the X sign in Lactantius' account refers directly to the cross, i.e. it is a staurogram. She argues that the emperor ordered the sign's shape to be somewhat changed. The letter X was rotated clockwise by about 45 degrees and its vertical stem was bent from above. The resulting letter P then received a crossbar. Such a mark was to be placed on the shields of soldiers[26]. This differs from the ligature of the letters X and P in the Christogram described by Eusebius. She concluded that it was the Christogram that was given more importance, however. Nonetheless, Kathrin Müller paid more attention to the imperial banner, which was the subject of Constantine's dream vision. She notes that the crossbar intersecting a vertical spear shaft could indicate a cross. In opposition to this, she cited Tertullian's account of the soldier's attitude towards military banners. He demonstrated a far-reaching reserve when it came to military sign reverence, effectively rejecting such reverence – even in the case of signs shaped like a cross[27]. Given the above, two opposing positions can be evoked. On the one hand, the victorious cross sign would simply be a banner Constantine saw in his dream. Müller argues for this because she believes that Constantine would never have been deceived by a false image. On the other hand, it would indeed be a cross, since the emperor recognised it as such by juxtaposing the crossbar and the upright spear[28]. Müller herself did not resolve this dilemma but focused on the item visible in the emperor's dream – the *labarum*. She considered that, through it, the military sign was reinterpreted in a Christian spirit. This was made possible by the wreath with the Christogram. It was no longer a matter of placing this symbol on the helmet for protection. The *labarum*, featuring a wreath with a Christogram on top of the spear, was to serve as an actual weapon. Thus, the Christological monogram comprising combined letters X and P proved the most important.

Nathali de Haan and Olivier Hekster have concluded that, at some point, the banner – the *labarum* – became a sign of the emperor's relationship with the deity that protected him. According to them, it is not

[26] Müller, *Das Kreuz: eine Objektgeschichte des bekanntesten Symbols*, p. 84.
[27] Müller, *Das Kreuz: eine Objektgeschichte des bekanntesten Symbols*, p. 86.
[28] Müller, *Das Kreuz: eine Objektgeschichte des bekanntesten Symbols*, p. 84-86.

known when the *labarum* acquired great significance and how much time had elapsed up to that point since the battle at the bridge. The *labarum* as a military sign was supposed to be a symbol of the cross; the *labarum* as a variant of the *vexillum* became a sign not so much of the victory over Maxentius but of the sign and commemoration of the help given by Christ in that victory[29].

Fabrizio Bisconti noted that the *labarum* became highly popular in the second half of the fourth century, especially in funeral iconography. According to him, the sign took on a multitude of meanings. Indeed, it acquired a kind of autonomy and evolved from a sign of victory to a symbol with numerous resurrectional meanings, becoming a Christological symbol and offering a solution to circumstances of passion and death[30]. In his work on Christian sarcophagi, Bisconti considered the sign in question to be the centre of the pictorial composition, inscribed in the passion cycles of Christ, Peter and Paul, as depicted on them. He considers it *signum anastasis*, an resurrectional sign, shedding light on the passion scenes flanking it[31].

Both the sources analysed and the research findings refer to the following dilemma: Is the symbol from the vision a cross or a banner? This dilemma indeed affects how the sign in the central niche of the sarcophagus is read and understood. As such, the following section attempts to interpret it and resolve the dilemmas that arise.

2. The sign in the central quadrant of the sarcophagus: Cross or banner?

The visions described, as well as their interpretations, have been cited so that they can help to correctly read and interpret the sign in the central

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[29] N. de Haan – O. Hekster, *"In hoc signo vinces". The various victories commemorated through the "labarum"*, in: *Monuments and memory: Christian cult buildings and constructions of the past. Essays in honour of Sible de Blaauw*, ed. M. Verhoeven – L. Bosman – H. von Asperen, Turnhout 2016, p. 17-30.

[30] F. Bisconti, *Il Vessilio, il cristogramma, I segni della salvezza*, in: *L'edito di Milano e il Tempo di Tolleranza: Costantino 313 d*, ed. G. Sena Chiesa, Milano 2012, p. 63-64.

[31] F. Bisconti, *I sarcophagi cristiani antichi: la produzione, la diffusione, la decorazione*, in: *Instrumentum domesticum: Archeologia Cristiana – temi, metodologia e cultura materiale della tarda antiquità e dell' alto medioevo*, v. 1, ed. G. Castiglia – P. Pergola, Città del Vaticano 2022, p. 287.

scene of the sarcophagus. Two questions arise here. The first is whether the sign depicted – a vertical shaft with a crossbar, topped by a wreath with a Christological monogram – can be considered to have been inspired by the *labarum* described in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*. The second is whether the sign depicted is indeed a cross – one completed only by the wreathed Christogram.

To answer the first question, it is necessary to compare the sign from the description that, according to Eusebius, Constantine presented to the craftsmen. Two elements link the description in the panegyric about Constantine and the image on the sarcophagus. One is the vertical shaft, described as a spear, which is surmounted by a Christogram in a laurel wreath. The other is the crosspiece – a horizontal shaft connected to a vertical one. Here, however, a problem arises. In the description, a sheet of cloth richly decorated with interlaced gold bands and precious stones descends from the horizontal crossbar. By contrast, the sign in the sarcophagus' central intercolumniation only includes a transverse beam permanently connected to the vertical shaft. There is not even a semblance of fabric hung from the crossbar. For many researchers, this was simply a form of cross. Yet, this statement raises a number of questions.

First, the main features of the sign in the central compartment mirror the structure of the banner from the vision, as described by Eusebius. Second, a Latin cross topped by a wreathed Christogram has never been encountered. Third, some vital elements of the entire representation in the niche, although having no counterparts in the vision, suggest that the interpretation of the central sign as a cross should be rejected in favour of viewing it as a *labarum*, albeit in a reduced form. These elements are the two Roman legionaries seated at the foot of the spear. Indeed, there are no depictions of the cross flanked by legionaries. Thus, we find the answer to the second question. The sign in the central niche is therefore not a cross but a banner derived from the *vexillum*. As such, it is appropriate to outline here, albeit briefly, the use and symbolism of the Roman military insignia from which the *labarum* appears to have been derived.

Several types of these were used. These were the *aquila, signum and manum, vexillum and imago*. The *aquila*[32] was the sign of the highest

[32] H.L. Kryśkiewicz, *Rzymskie znaki legionowe: nomenklatura, typologia, symbolika [Roman Legionary Signs: Nomenclature, Typology, Symbolism]*, in: *Z dziejów historii wojskowości Polski i powszechnej [From the History of Polish and Universal Military History]*, ed. R. Gołaj-Dempniak – K. Kastran – D. Kąkol, Szczecin 2016, p. 15-17.

rank. It represented the largest tactical unit – a legion. This sign was introduced by Gaius Marius. It was intended to symbolise the loyalty of the soldiers and their devotion[33]. It was the most important sign. Nonetheless, it was always accompanied by two other banners – the *vexilla*. Pliny the Elder states that the custom of using the aquila was adopted around 104 BC. The second sign was the *vexillum*. It appeared long after the Marian reforms. The *vexillum* was a square piece of purple cloth hung from a crossbar attached to a spear. When the *vexilla* – cloth sheets on crossbars – began to be used, they served as the banners of the *hastati* and the *principes*, the two essential parts of the legions. This system of major banners became firmly established in the last years of the republic – the *aquila* was entrusted to the *primus pilus*, and the two flanking banners to the *hastati* and *principes*[34].

Some doubts arise here, however. Indeed, the *vexillum* was not the central and most important sign of a legion. This was the role of the *aquila*. The two *vexilla* were the banners belonging to the cohorts that had been part of a legion since the Marian reforms. As such, they were subordinate to the main sign. This sentence was added in response to a reviewer's suggestion. What caused the new banner to be created based on the *vexillum*? What motivated the emperor's decision, described by Eusebius, to create a banner based on the *vexillum*? Indeed, the *labarum* is not a classical *vexillum*, and the sign from the vision and the instructions given to the master craftsmen differs from the typical cohort sign, although it does contain its basic elements. Answering this question should be left to further research, however.

One has to wonder why the sign on the central niche was not complemented with the essential component that was the banner cloth. This is where several questions arise. Was this due to the insufficient skills of the sculptor, who found it difficult to shape the stone in such a way as to be reminiscent of folded fabric? This does not seem to be the case. The sarcophagus was made in a Roman workshop, which must have had sculptors of adequate skill. Was it a matter of lack of space? After all, about 40-45% of the height of the niche flanked by columns is taken up by the monumental wreath with the X and P monogram. Sculpting a descending cloth would have meant that there would have been no room for the figures of the soldiers, sitting at the foot of the spear on both

[33] L. Keppie, *The Making of the Roman Army: from Republic to Empire*, Oklahoma – London 2002, p. 46-47.

[34] Keppie, *The Making of the Roman Army: from Republic to Empire*, p. 47.

sides. This last hypothesis seems the most likely. After all, the sign taken from the panegyric about Constantine had to be adapted to the new function it was to perform on the sarcophagus front panel. The original was therefore subjected to the reduction necessary from the above point of view. First, the banner cloth was dropped. Another element in the description, i.e. the three portraits, was also discarded while other elements were added. These included an eagle with outstretched wings above the wreath, two birds sitting on the crossbar and pointing their beaks towards the leaves of the wreath, and allegorical figures in the two upper corners of the niche, above the eagle's wings. The two vigilant soldiers are also a vital addition.

Thus, to summarize the discussion so far, one should distinguish between elements derived directly from the text of the *Vita Constantini* – the spear, the crosspiece and the wreathed monogram – and the heterogeneous additions: the soldiers, the eagle, the birds and the personifications in the bust figures in the upper corners.

The element worthy of more attention is the two soldiers sitting on stones at the foot of the spear. Where does this motif originate? Roman legionaries staying near the *vexillum* were depicted on Roman coins. The reverse of a Roman coin – a *follis* from 337-340 (RIC VIII Siscia 99) depicts the *labarum* suspended from a spear. The cloth bears the X and P monogram. The banner is flanked by two standing legionaries facing the viewer, dressed in tunics, breastplates and helmets. With the outer hands, they embrace their spears; with the inner, the shields standing at their feet. Their faces are turned towards the banner[35]. A similar *follis* (RIC VIII Siscia 87) has a similar representation on the reverse[36]. The reverse bears the inscription "GLORIA EXERCITUS" and, at the bottom, "ASIS". A Roman coin – a *follis* from Thessalonica, dating back to around 330, also carries a very schematic representation of two soldiers standing on either side of a *vexillum*. However, the banner cloth is not marked with a Christogram in this case. The reverse of a coin minted at Siscia shows two soldiers armed with spears and shields, standing on either side of two *vexilla*. They are devoid of the Christogram. The time

[35] *Chi-Rho Standard of Constans AE Follis Reverse #2*, Minting A Christian State: Making Heads or Tails of Christian Symbols on Roman Coins, in: https://exhibits.usask.ca/MintingAChristianState/items/show/16 (accessed: 20.05.2023).

[36] *Chi-Rho Standard of Constans AE Follis Reverse #1*, Minting A Christian State: Making Heads or Tails of Christian Symbols on Roman Coins, in: https://exhibits.usask.ca/MintingAChristianState/items/show/15 (accessed: 20.05.2023).

of this coin's creation is estimated to be 334-335, during the reign of Emperor Constantine[37]. It bears the inscriptions "FL CONSTANTIS BEA C" on the obverse and "GLORIA EXERCITVS" on the reverse. Similarly, a coin minted in Alexandria in 333-335 during the reign of Constantine depicts two *vexilla* guarded by two legionaries[38]. It bears the inscriptions "FL IVL CONSTANS NOB C" and "GLOR-IA EXERC-ITVS".

We are dealing with the phenomenon of the reverence for a military sign. The banner, the *vexillum*, was a sacred item in the Roman camp. It was at this banner that the oath was taken and the legal and ceremonial soldierly activities held[39]. Moreover, this is supported by two patristic testimonies. In his apologia, Tertullian reported that the religion of the Romans mandated that camp signs should be venerated, oaths should be taken on them and that the signs themselves be dedicated to the gods. With a certain dose of irony, he described the statues of the gods as crude poles that were part of a cross. He stated that the signs on the banners are merely ornaments that cover the crosses. For if Christians worship crosses, they are praying to a completely different God[40]. Minucius Felix confirmed that signs and *vexilla* at Roman camps were venerated. He distanced himself from them and noted that only pagans worshipped wooden crosses as parts of their deities[41]. In the texts by both authors, one can see that they maintain a dogmatic distance from Roman cult items. Minucius Felix claimed that Christians do not venerate crosses or offer prayers to them. He separates himself from his pagan fellow citizens, who consider crosses to be part of their deities[42]. In this regard, he refers to the cross-shaped *vexillum*. In contrast, Tertullian considers the signs on the banners to be simply the ornaments of these wooden crosses, and the cloth symbols of the horsemen to be the garments in which the crosses are clad[43]. This must be attributed to the actual distance that Christians kept

[37] *Constans as Caesar*, AD 333-337 Æ Follis, 2.6g, 19mm, 6h; Siscia mint, 334-5, RIC VII Siscia 238, r1, p. 456, in: https://www.cointalk.com/threads/constans-gloria-exercitvs-a-complete-roman-mint-set.327104/ (accessed: 20.05.2023).

[38] *Constans as Caesar*, AD 333-337 Æ Follis, 3.1g, 19mm, 12h; Alexandria mint, 333-5. RIC VII Alexandria 61, r1, p. 711, in: https://www.cointalk.com/threads/constans-gloria-exercitvs-a-complete-roman-mint-set.327104/ (accessed: 20.05.2023).

[39] M. Popławski, *Bellum Romanum: sakralność wojny i prawa rzymskiego*, Lublin 2011, p. 40.

[40] Tertullianus, *Apologeticum* XVI 6-8.

[41] Minutius Felix, *Octavius* 29, 6.

[42] Minutius Felix, *Octavius* 29, 6.

[43] Tertullianus, *Apologeticum* III 6, 2.

from sacralised military signs. Besides, the cross was not yet venerated as a sign of salvation at that time.

The depictions on the coins originate from the reverence and the atmosphere of sanctity surrounding the *vexilla*. In this case, the *labarum* is the central element, with soldiers guarding it. Still, the inscription "GLORIA EXERCITUS" may well explain a lot. One must ask: Is the representation on the coins about the central sign – the *vexillum* with the Greek Christogram X and P, or is it about distinguishing the Roman soldiers and highlighting their merits? The similarity between the depiction of the seated soldiers under the sarcophagus sign and the images of standing soldiers guarding a *labarum* with the Christogram on the coins should be particularly highlighted here. Is this similarity all that significant? At this point, it is still difficult to answer this question. Could it have been the sole and most important reference for the scene in the central niche of the sarcophagus? This does not seem to be the case. One should therefore look for this source elsewhere. But where should one seek the source of the iconographic type that is Roman soldiers surrounding a *labarum*? Research into the origin of the depiction reveals three possible sources. Each should be approached critically; however, elements that harmonise with the depiction should be found.

The first source may have been the literary topos of the end of a battle or the landscape after a battle. The elements of such a landscape may be soldiers resting near a military sign; however, what distinguishes this topos is the image of birds of prey descending from all directions and feeding on the battleground. Such an image of the end of a battle is present in biblical texts (Job 39:30; Matthew 24:28; Luke 17:37; Rev 19:17-21)[44]. An eagle could be such a bird. This is because it is not a figure in a particular pose, perched on top of a shaft, but a bird flying with its wings outstretched. Such a topos appears in many works, not only of the ancient world. Still, we are dealing with only one bird, dominating the entire composition of the painting. This bird is characterised by dignity and dominance, which cannot be attributed to battlefield scavenger birds. Thus, to see in this topos the origins of the composition of a *labarum* with two legionaries raises many objections.

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[44] *Ptaki. Ptaki nieczyste*, in: L. Ryhes – J.C. Wilhoit – T. Longman III, *Słownik symboliki biblijnej: Obrazy, symbole, motywy, metafory, figury stylistyczne i gatunki literackie [Dictionary of Biblical Imagery. An Encyclopedic Exploration of the Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of Speech and Literary Patterns of the Bible]*, Warszawa 1998, p. 844.

The second source may be dramatic events during battles, as described by some authors. When the Roman formations began to break under the onslaught of the enemies, the commander would snatch the sign – eagle or *vexillum* – from the signifer's hands and throw it far into the enemy's ranks. Such a voluntary loss of the sign was supposed to mobilise the soldiers to fight harder and mount an assault to reclaim it, but also to regain the glory and honour of the Roman army[45]. Perhaps the two soldiers standing next to the *labarum* were meant to symbolise a scene after the recovery of the insignia. The motto *Gloria Exercitus* could also be attributed to this. Yet, this raises doubts. An attack to recover the *signum* would be violent, while the coins and the sarcophagus present a calm and balanced composition. Could it correspond to an event amid the fervour of battle, even after the signum had been snatched from the hands of the enemies? If it is an allusion, it would be a remote one indeed.

The third situation would be a triumph – *triumphus currulis*[46]. It should be noted that in the procession the commander, riding in a chariot, was accompanied by praetorian guards, and the chariot was followed by soldiers in formation, some wearing decorations and all adorned with wreaths[47]. In the case of the coins, a triumph appears to most closely match this depiction. The motto "GLORIA EXERCITUS" seems to tie the two situations firmly together – the procession, in which soldiers participate, and the depiction of two legionaries flanking the *labarum*. However, the descriptions of a triumph do not mention a *vexillum*, nor do the accounts of Constantine's victory and the role of the *labarum* in it mention a triumph. And yet, there is mention of a wreath – *corona triumfalis*[48]. The glory of the soldiers was not questioned and their merits were acknowledged. However, it should be noted that a triumph glorified the commander. The descriptions also do not mention the role of the banners carried by the signifers in the cohorts following the commander's chariot. It can be assumed, however, that such banners were present. Significantly, a triumph had a religious nature. While the victorious commander was placed at the centre of the procession, the entire triumphal ceremony was considered dedicated to a deity.

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[45] Kryśkiewicz, *Rzymskie znaki legionowe [Roman Legionary Signs]*, p. 27; Popławski, *Bellum Romanum*, p. 42-43.

[46] Popławski, *Bellum Romanum*, p. 137-149.

[47] Popławski, *Bellum Romanum*, p. 146-147.

[48] Popławski, *Bellum Romanum*, p. 156-157.

Which of the above situations could have been the source for the depictions – that on the coins and that in the central quadrant of the sarcophagus' front plate? This is a particularly difficult question to answer. It seems that the relationship of these events to the *labarum* flanked by soldiers may be very distant and loose. Thus, none of the described situations – topoi – can be considered the direct source of the sarcophagus depiction. Nevertheless, one must not forget that the *labarum* is on the coin's reverse; the obverse features the emperor of the time. Military glory, merit and splendour can only be recognised in relation to the reigning monarch.

However, the three situations described above – the landscape after the battle, the throwing of the banner towards the enemies and the triumph – have to do with a victory achieved by the leader or emperor. The legionary sentries at the banner and the motto "GLORIA EXERCITUS" on the coins also refer to victory. It should be stressed, however, that this is a very general association. The main principle of this relationship is the idea of victory and the person of the victor.

Where should we seek another source for the iconographic type under study? It can be found in medallic works created around the mid-fourth century. Emperor Constantine's medallion from Siscia, created around 347, depicts a standing emperor. He is holding the *labarum* with a Christogram in his right hand. The inscription identifies the person: "FLAVIUS IULIUS CONSTANS TRIUMFATOR GENTIUM BARBAROROM"[49]. Emperor Magnetius' medallion, created in Aquileia in 351, depicts the emperor wearing a tunic and armour. In his right hand, he holds the *labarum* with a Christogram. The image is accompanied by the inscription: "VICTORIA DOMINI NOSTRII AUGUSTI"[50]. Made in Rome between 395 and 423, Honorius' medallion depicts the emperor with the *labarum* in his right hand. The inscription explains the merits of the emperor: "TRIUMFATOR GENTIUM BARBARORUM"[51].

All three examples reveal one important feature. It is not the glorification of a victory but of a victorious emperor, albeit with the help of a deity who is represented by the *labarum* with a Christogram. Indeed, all the medallions were created after the Edict of Milan, and their meaning

[49] *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977 through February 12, 1978*, ed. K. Weitzman, New York 1979, p. 42.

[50] *Age of Spirituality*, p. 43.

[51] *Age of Spirituality*, p. 43.

attributes the emperors' victories to the help of Christ. This is related to the account of Constantine's life continued by Eusebius of Caesarea. After his victory over Maxentius, Constantine entered Rome and ordered the erection of a monumental statue, whose main attribute is the *labarum* with a Christogram held in the right hand[52]. Can this entry to the Eternal City be equated with a triumph? This is unclear given that it is only vaguely mentioned.

It is most likely that while the ideological template for the sign in the central niche of the sarcophagus was the description in Eusebius' panegyric, the direct artistic inspiration was the depiction of soldiers flanking the *labarum* and the image of the emperor holding the *labarum*. This leaves aside the issues of the appearance of the X and P monograms before the *Vita Constantini* was even created. This is a separate research problem, diverging from the main topic.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that a victory followed by a triumph is personal, for it places one and only one person at the centre. Even the presence of soldiers and their glory cannot overshadow that person. Erecting a statue or a triumphal arch confirms and glorifies the person of the victor as well. It can be assumed that the depictions featuring two soldiers and an emperor holding a banner correspond to a triumph by merely being signs of victory. Yet, one must immediately ask the following question: Are they signs of victory or representations of the victor?

This can be explained by an analysis of the biblical texts. The author of the Letter to the Colossians presents the image of Jesus as the victorious leader who, having disarmed the powers and authorities, made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them (Col 2:15)[53]. The powers and authorities (*archoi kai eksousiai*) were disarmed by Christ and became his captives. The Greek verb *thriombeuō*, which can be translated as "to triumph", was used in this case[54]. It referred to driving the defeated powers and authorities in a triumphal procession. In his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul draws a picture of Christ ascending to the heights of heaven, leading captives with him and giving gifts to

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[52] Eusebius, *HE* IX 9, 10.

[53] *List do Filemona*. *List do Kolosan*, tr. B. Adamczewski, Częstochowa 2000, p. 272-273; D. Hamm, *Listy do Filipian, Kolosan, Filemona: katolicki komentarz do Pisma św.*, tr. E. Litak, Poznań 2022, p. 257; R.W. Wall, *Colosians and Philemon. The IVP New Testament Commentary Serie*s, Downers Crow 1993, p. 116-117.

[54] *List do Filemona. List do Kolosan*, p. 272.

his people[55] (Eph 4:8). Theodoret of Cyrus commented on these verses of both Letters. Referring to verse 15 of the Letter to the Colossians, he recognised the powers and authorities as demonic forces having power over man through his passions. Christ, by taking on human flesh, nullified Satan's dominion, showed their weakness and secured his victory[56]. Commenting on verse 8, chapter four of the Letter to the Ephesians, he noted that two acts had already taken place. Indeed, Christ ascended to the heights of heaven, leading captives with him, and bestowed gifts on mankind from heaven. This means that God has accepted our faith and has given us grace. The captives mentioned in the Letter were human beings overwhelmed by Satan. Christ has freed us, slaves, from Satan's slavery and made us free[57]. The allusion to the Roman triumph is all too obvious in both texts. Christ appears in them as the victor on whom the fate of the defeated depends. He is the Paschal Christ who has passed through his passion, death and resurrection.

Having made these analyses, it is now time to try to read the essential meaning of the *labarum*, an autonomous symbol found in the central niche. This prompts the assumption that the *labarum* may be the *pars pro toto* of the person. Indeed, whenever it appears on medallions from around the mid-fourth century, it always remains in the hand of the victorious Caesar. This is because the *labarum*, both in the case of the depiction with two soldiers and with the emperor, is always related to the person. In fact, it practically does not appear independently on these coins. Its meaning can always be read in connection with the person. Even when depicted as flanked by two soldiers on the reverse, it always relates to the bust of the emperor on the obverse. This makes the connection between the *labarum* and the figure of the emperor holding it all the more clear. As noted above, all commemorations – whether a monumental statue, a triumphal arch or a triumphal procession – always relate not so much to the victory as to the victor. Thus, it can be assumed that the *labarum* always refers to an individual and has a personal meaning. But who does the *labarum* in the central niche symbolise? The next section of the text will be devoted to answering this question.

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[55] *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu. List do Efezjan*, tr. H. Langkammer, Lublin 2001, p. 283.

[56] See Theodoretus, *Interpretatio ad Epistolae ad Colossenses* II 15.

[57] See Theodoretus, *Interpretatio ad Epistolae ad Ephesios* IV 8.

3. The sign of salvation or the Saviour

Having identified the origins of the main sign in the central intercolumniation, i.e. the images of the *labarum* flanked by two soldiers and of a commander holding the *labarum*, it is now necessary to interpret the composite depiction from the central compartment of the sarcophagus. Throughout the iconographic type, the merits of the soldiers, this "GLORIA EXERCITUS", are relegated to the background. What is highlighted, however, is the victory achieved by the leader – Caesar or Augustus. Indeed, the dominant element is the *labarum* with a crossbar, topped by a wreathed Christogram, even though missing an explicitly depicted banner cloth. We should now consider what caused that symbol – the *labarum* – to take on a personalistic value. The first factor was the prominent figure of the commander in the representations on the coins. The second was certainly the monumental statue of Constantine, mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea, who held the *labarum* with a Christogram in his hand. One should also point to the Ticinum medallion, which shows a Christogram on the emperor's helmet. This reveals an important relationship. It is the relationship of the victor – the emperor – with the supernatural figure who granted the victory through the *labarum* with the Christological monogram. In literature, authors emphasise the gradual transformation of this sign. At first, it was the sign of some deity, different from those worshipped so far, but one helping effectively. The sign then proceeded to assimilate with Christianity, which had hitherto been removed to the margins. There was thus a gradual shift towards interpreting the help expressed by the sign as given by Christ.

The biblical texts like the two Letters of Paul (Col 2:15; Eph 4:8), in which Christ appeared as a victorious leader holding a triumph, remained somewhat in the background; this symbol on the sarcophagus must symbolise not so much a victory as a victor. This victor can only be Jesus Christ. Thus, the banner with the Christogram represents the figure of the Saviour.

The origin and meaning of the other elements of the whole representation are yet to be determined. The most important of these seems to be the eagle. It should be stressed at the outset that this is not the same eagle figure as that carried atop a legion's most important, central banner.

It is depicted as a bird in flight. Is it carrying the wreathed Christogram in its beak? It seems that placing the bird's beak within the wreath is merely an artistic trick due to the lack of adequate space. A more

important question is whether this eagle alludes to the significance of the eagle as ascribed to it by the Roman military religion. The representative eagle figure atop the shaft was the most important military sign and a legion's sacred item. The military oath – *sacramentum* – was taken before it, and its consecration feast was solemnly celebrated[58]. The aquila personified the presence of the legion's tutelary deities and guaranteed the protection of supernatural forces[59]. The eagle was usually associated with Jupiter; it was seen as a solar symbol and interpreted as a sign of future victory[60]. These were the meanings of the military symbol. But what meanings can be attributed to the eagle, which spreads its wings over the entire space containing the *labarum* and the two legionaries, as depicted in the upper part of the sarcophagus niche? Referring to the eagle on the sarcophagus, Dorothea Forster identified the symbol below as a cross with a wreath. According to her, the eagle symbolises the victory attributed to the risen Christ[61]. This is because it is evident that it is a living bird in flight and not a figurine on top of a shaft. Nor can it be categorised as a cloud of birds of prey flocking to feed on the battlefield. This bird is characterised by dignity and is situated in the topmost part of the depiction, i.e. it belongs to the supernatural realm.

In biblical symbolism, this bird is juxtaposed with divine power and supernatural protection, but also with divine judgment. In biblical accounts, the eagle was sometimes associated with God's concern for Israel (Deut 32:11; Isa 40:31; Rev 12:14)[62]. It may be a confirmation of the victory won by Christ.

Birds are perched on both arms of the *labarum* crossbar, extending their beaks towards the *labarum*'s wreath. The figures of antithetically arranged birds are known from other compositions. They usually turn towards a source, a fountain, etc., and raise their beaks towards the central element. Birds have been interpreted in many cultures as spiritual

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[58] Kryśkiewicz, *Rzymskie znaki legionowe: nomenklatura, typologia, symbolika [Roman Legionary Signs: Nomenclature, Typology, Symbolism]*, p. 15-17.

[59] Kryśkiewicz, *Rzymskie znaki legionowe*, p. 20.

[60] Kryśkiewicz, *Rzymskie znaki legionowe*, p. 15.

[61] *Orzeł* [Eagle], in: D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, tr. and ed. W. Zakrzewska – P. Pachciarek – R. Turzyński, Warszawa 1990, p. 240-243.

[62] *Orzeł* [Eagle], in: *Słownik symboliki biblijnej: Obrazy, symbole, motywy, metafory, figury stylistyczne i gatunki literackie*, ed. L. Ryhes – J.C. Wilhoit – T. Longman III, tr. Z. Kościuk, Warszawa 1998, p. 656.

entities, as symbols of the human soul[63]. In this case, however, it is possible to associate them with male or female doves. The symbolism of the dove as a soul has its origin in the Song of Songs, where the bride is referred to by this very term (Song 1;15; 2;14; 4;1; 5;2-12; 6:9)[64]. Consequently, a dove was recognised as the Church, but also as a soul marked by grace[65]. Doves could be viewed as the redeemed, or as symbols of human beings expressing a desire for redemption.

All these elements complementing the essential basic sign reinforce the meaning carried by the *labarum*. It is a sign of Christ the Saviour, a soteriological symbol, but one understood personalistically. This means that it highlights the person of the Saviour more than salvation itself.

4. Conclusion

The main motif of the symbolic representation in the central niche is a vertical shaft with a transverse bar, topped by an X and P Christogram, recognised by many scholars as a cross. Still, the most likely source of inspiration for it may have been the banner from Constantine's vision, described by Eusebius of Caesarea in his panegyric dedicated to that emperor. It was a military sign that the emperor ordered the craftsmen to make. The banner from that vision was intended to resemble the Roman banner assigned to the cohorts – the *vexillum*. Nonetheless, the symbol from the central compartment features only some elements of Constantine's *labarum* – while it is topped by a wreath, it is missing the banner cloth. The banner cloth was omitted because there was a need to depict the seated soldiers. The figures of these sentries are akin to those depicted on Roman coins from the early 4th century. They are two Roman legionaries in tunics, breastplates and helmets, holding spears and guarding one *labarum* or two labara. There is usually a Christogram on

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[63] *Ptaki* [Birds], in: *Słownik symboli*, ed. J.E. Cirlot, tr. I. Kania, Kraków 2001, p. 340-341.

[64] *Gołąb* [Dove], in: *Słownik symboliki biblijnej: Obrazy, symbole, motywy, metafory, figury stylistyczne i gatunki literackie*, ed. L. Ryhes – J.C. Wilhoit – T. Longman III, tr. Z. Kościuk, Warszawa 1998, p. 222.

[65] *Gołąb* [Dove], in: D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, tr. and ed. W. Zakrzewska – P. Pachciarek – R. Turzyński, Warszawa 1990, p. 228-230; *Gołębica* [Female Dove], in: *Bestiarium chrześcijańskie*, ed. S. Kobielus, Warszawa 2002, p. 102-108.

the *labarum* cloth. The two soldiers thus guard a banner with a Christian message. The reverse always features the inscription "GLORIA EXERCITUS". The scene depicted may refer to a victory, whereas the guarding of the banner itself can be traced back to the reverence shown to military insignia in the Roman army. Medals from around the mid-fourth century show the figure of an emperor, bearing an appropriate inscription and holding the *labarum* with a Christogram. Here we have a reference to the emperor's victory, but one achieved with the help of Christ. Thus, both the depictions on the coins, which feature the bust of the emperor on the reverse, and the representation of the ruler on the medallions glorify not the victory but the victor. This apotheosis of the victorious ruler allows one to correctly interpret the meaning and function of the *labarum* on the sarcophagus. It is thus a symbol of Christ, the victorious, risen Christ, and that is the meaning of the entire composition.

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Sarcophagus with scenes from the Passion of Christ, Museo Pio Cristiano, Lat. 171, front plate

Sarcophagus with scenes from the Passion of Christ, Museo Pio Cristiano, Lat. 171, central niche with the *labarum*