From Stumbling Block to Royal Banner:
The Cross’ Transformation into a Symbol of Christianity

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“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”¹ – Paul the Apostle

The Christian cross is arguably the most recognizable and ubiquitous religious symbol in recorded history, adorning churches, houses, and bodies. As a symbol and sign, it communicates both tragedy and triumph to the Christian believers who venerate it. Although its message of victory over evil emerged soon after Christ’s death, the use of physical crosses emerged late in the development of early Christianity. Furthermore, the cross troubled many Polytheists, Jews, and even Christians because it represented crucifixion, a brutal form of execution intended for the worst criminals. Christians, therefore, turned to other symbols, such as fish and anchors.²

During the fourth century, however, this all changed after two key events: The Roman emperor Constantine’s vision of the cross and Helena Augusta’s alleged discovery of the “True Cross.” The cross subsequently proliferated across the Christian world. The same object that their redeemer died upon began to appear in the everyday life of Christians as a protective symbol. Therefore, the question is why and why at this time? This paper argues that the cross began as a ‘stumbling block’ for many, but eventually emerged as the triumphant symbol of Christianity because the Royal Family—Helena Augusta and Constantine— took concrete actions to transform the cross into a symbol of divine protection and victory.

The Cross in Roman History and Among the Earliest Christians

Crucifixion—death by nailing or binding the wrists or hands and feet to a cross—existed long before Romans used it. The Assyrians, Phoenicians, Persians, and Carthaginians all used

¹ 1 Cor. 1:18 (New American Bible)
various types of crucifixion as a punishment for criminals. Because of its brutality, Romans reserved crucifixion for non-Roman criminals—thieves, slaves, or political traitors—whom they thought undeserving of more humane capital punishments. The Romans would crucify them in different positions ranging from upright to upside down.

Because Jesus was crucified, the cross acted as a “stumbling block” for many; even some Christians found it difficult to accept that their god would let his son suffer one of humanity’s most painful deaths. Nevertheless, most early Christians believed that Jesus entered the world in order to die, concluding that death was the objective of Jesus’ life. Interestingly, Christians at this time did not recognize the cross as a symbol of triumph. While many accepted that their god was crucified, some Christians found it ludicrous that a god would undergo such suffering and humiliation. As a result, many Christians tried to deny Jesus’ death in various ways, resulting in a proliferation of heterodox Christian sects, whose beliefs were considered heresies by orthodox Church Fathers—early Christian theologians, also known as patristics.

One such heterodox sect was called Docetism—derived from the Greek word for “seeming”—which taught that Jesus’ body was an illusion and, therefore, he never truly died on

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5 *Ibid*, 41.

6 Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *Jesus Christ through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1985), 95.


the cross.\(^9\) *The Gospel of Philip*, a Docetist source, argues that when Jesus proclaimed, “my God, my God, why, Lord, hast thou forsaken me,” he “separated [from] the place [of his crucifixion].”\(^10\) Instead of accepting Jesus’ death on a cross, Docetists argued that Jesus was never truly crucified. For example, *The Acts of John* portrays Jesus speaking with John while a ‘proxy’ was crucified in Jesus’ place.\(^11\) The emergence of heresies demonstrates that many early Christians found the cross problematic and tried to deny it. Therefore, in addition to the cross’ dearth as a symbol, heterodox Christians often denied the crucifixion itself because of its scandalous nature.

Accordingly, early Christians did not use the cross as a symbol. In fact, Clement of Alexandria, a second century Christian theologian, even excluded the cross in a list of Christian symbols. Clement instead told Christians to use symbols of “a dove or a fish …or of a ship’s anchor.”\(^12\) Clement’s exclusion of the cross as a symbol is logical; Christians resisted the visual representation of the cross, as many people would likely resist visual representations of an electric chair today.\(^13\) Clement further makes note of an anchor as a symbol, which was often accompanied by images of fish.\(^14\) Fish symbolized the followers of Jesus, while the anchor symbolized Jesus, who Christians perceived as the ‘anchor’ of their beliefs.\(^15\) Early Christians

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\(^13\) Jensen, telephone interview by the author.
\(^15\) For an image of an early Christian ring with the symbol of a fish on it, see Appendix A.
inscribed anchors on glassware, pottery, and even gems.\textsuperscript{16} The ichthys—the Greek word for ‘fish’—was also especially popular among early Christians. Ichthys is an acronym for the Greek words meaning ‘Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.’\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, the Christian resistance to the cross hindered its ability to flourish as a symbol.

\textbf{The Cross, Early Church Fathers, and Non-Christians before the 4\textsuperscript{th} century}

Although early Church fathers did not recognize the cross as a Christian symbol, they did develop a sophisticated theology around the cross, pioneered in the 1\textsuperscript{st} century with Paul the Apostle. Much of this theology arose because they attempted to defend Jesus’ crucifixion from the attacks of others, such as Roman Polytheists and Jews. Roman Polytheists argued that an immortal god could not possibly be crucified and that deifying a crucified person, logically, is ludicrous.\textsuperscript{18} Many early Christians, however, believed that Jesus’ death on the cross and supposed resurrection was one of the main reasons for his veneration.\textsuperscript{19} They further believed that his death on a cross was a fulfillment of past prophecies and brought salvation to humanity.\textsuperscript{20}

Roman Polytheists, however, took issue with the cross in other ways. Around the second century, they began to accuse Christians of Staurolatry—the worshipping of a cross.\textsuperscript{21} Romans also accused Christians of worshipping a god with a donkey’s head, known as Onoletry—the

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 45.
\textsuperscript{20} Justin Martyr, \textit{Dialogus Cum Tryphone}, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin, Germany: Werner Hildebrand, 1197), 48.
\textsuperscript{21} Paul Carus, \textit{The Crucifix}, 674-675.
worship of a donkey. In fact, a graffito—an image deliberately scratched on a surface such as a wall—was found in a Roman barracks on Palatine hill depicting a crucified man with a donkey’s head. Accompanying it was a Greek inscription, which translates to “Alexamenos worships his god.” By accusing Christians of worshipping a god with a donkey’s head, Polytheists pointed out the absurdity of worshipping a crucified god. In addition to Polytheists, many Jews believed Jesus’ death on a cross was contradictory to their beliefs and contradictory to the Torah, which states: “A hanged man is accursed by God.” Further, the Jews expected a great king to be their savior, not the son of a carpenter who died on a cross.

While Jews found the cross contradictory to their scriptures and Polytheists found it foolish, early Church Fathers saw the cross as having protective power; they believed that Jesus defeated sin through it. John Chrysostom, for example, argued that the cross would provide many benefits to Christians, including protection from the devil. Nevertheless, the cross as a symbol was nowhere to be seen prior to the fourth century.

The persecutions of Nero (64-67 C.E.) and Diocletian (303-311 C.E.) resulted in the crucifixions of many Christians, which likely prevented the cross’ use as a symbol. Nevertheless, early Church Fathers seemed to find the cross in everything, sometimes stretching

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22 Robin M. Jensen, The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy, 11-12. For an image of the graffito, see Appendix B
23 Jensen, telephone interview by the author.
25 Ibid, 17-18. Many Christians, such as Origin of Alexandria argued that Jesus is not venerated because of the way he died, but rather that he willingly suffered death on a cross.
27 Jensen, telephone interview by the author.
their imagination to do so. Indeed, The cross was very important to Christians and, while they accepted the story of the cross, they resisted the cross as a symbol because of its brutal nature.

**Constantine and the Chi Rho: A Turning Point**

In the times of Constantine (306-337 C.E.), the Roman Empire was split into two parts: the Eastern Roman Empire and the Western Roman Empire. Two leaders ruled the Western Empire: a Caesar, an ‘emperor in training,’ and an Augustus, the chief emperor of his half of the empire. The same was true for the Eastern Empire. Trouble, however, emerged in 307 C.E., when both Constantine, the Caesar of the West, and Maximinus Daia, the Caesar of the East, proclaimed themselves the Augustus of the West, resulting in war.

Constantine, searching for a religion, prayed to the Christian god, “imploring him to show him who he was.” Then, according to Eusebius, a Byzantine historian, at midday, a Christogram (☧) of light appeared to Constantine. Below it was the text “by this sign conquer.” The Christogram was supposedly formed of two Greek letters—Chi (X) and Rho (P), the first two letters of Jesus’ name in Greek. At night, Christ supposedly appeared to him again with the Christogram and told him to make “a copy of the sign” to use “as protection against the attacks of the enemy.” “Having this sign (XP), his troops stood to arms.” Constantine also placed “a

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28 Paul Carus, *The Crucifix*, 674. For an example of a Church Father who saw the cross in everything, look to Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, 122. In this work, he sees the cross in objects ranging from trophy frames to the form of a person with their arms extended horizontally.
29 Jensen, telephone interview by the author.
tall pole plated with gold [which] had a transverse bar forming the shape of the cross” at the head of his army.\textsuperscript{34} As Constantine advanced toward Rome, Maxentius left the city to fight him. Eventually, Constantine defeated him, with Maxentius and much of his army drowning in the battle.\textsuperscript{35} After Constantine’s victory, the cross became a sign of triumph over both demonic and human enemies.\textsuperscript{36} In the historiographical frame of the time, the power of the cross and the Christian god carried Constantine to victory. His ‘divine’ victory made the cross a symbol of two intertwined victories: Christ’s victory over death and the emperor’s victory over his earthly enemies.\textsuperscript{37}

After his defeat of Maxentius, Constantine, according to Eusebius, “announced to all people in large lettering and inscriptions the sign of the saviour.”\textsuperscript{38} What was once an instrument of torture was now a “royal banner.”\textsuperscript{39} That tragic cross, which many had viewed as a “stumbling block,” was now a symbol of triumph.\textsuperscript{40} After Constantine, the cross became increasingly popular, eventually becoming “the Christian symbol par excellence,” appearing everywhere in Christian societies.\textsuperscript{41} Constantine’s announcement of the Chi Rho suggests he believed that it had

\textsuperscript{34} Eusibius, Life of Constantine, 81.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 84.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 52.
\textsuperscript{38} Eusibius, Life of Constantine, 85. See also: Robin M. Jensen, The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy, 85. After Constantine’s victory, the cross often appeared on Constantinian coinage. For example, a mid-320s C.E. coin depicts a banner affixed with a Chi Rho piercing a serpent—most likely representing his later rival Licinius, whom Constantine also defeated. For an image of this, see Appendix C.
\textsuperscript{40} Pelikan, Jesus Christ, 104.
divine power. Therefore, he began to emphasize it as a victorious symbol, placing it on coinage and on statues.

Not surprisingly, Constantine’s role as military commander helped create a martial meaning to the cross. For example, during a 5th century sermon, an anonymous priest described Jesus descending into hell “holding his victorious weapon, his cross.” Christians believed that the cross itself contained the power of their god—the power to heal afflictions and even defend against enemies. Constantine’s army, for example, carried a banner, depicting the cross, at the head of their army. Furthermore, later Western Christians believed that the cross protected Christian soldiers who wore it to war—making it the symbol of the Crusades during the twelfth century and beyond.

**Helena Augusta and the True Cross**

While Constantine certainly contributed greatly to its transformation into a symbol of victory, the discovery of the supposed True Cross—what Christians believe to be the actual cross which Jesus died upon—stimulated great reverence for the cross as a symbol. Christians accredit Helena Augusta, the mother of Constantine, with the discovery of the True Cross. The legend of Helena discovering the True Cross, however, emerged long after her death, and when it did emerge, many Christians had already been venerating the True Cross for decades. Furthermore, there are many variants in the different legends of her discovery.

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42 Unknown, "An Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday" (speech transcript).
46 Jensen, telephone interview by the author.
47 Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 81; Jensen, telephone interview by the author.
While the legends are likely apocryphal, the cult of the True Cross spread throughout the Roman Empire in the form of idea and physical relics. According to the legends, in 325 C.E., Helena supposedly journeyed to Jerusalem, where she found the True Cross in a temple dedicated to the goddess Venus, built by the Emperor Hadrian.49 After discovering the cross, she erected a church, over the site of discovery—now known as the Holy Sepulcher—believed by Christians contain Jesus’ tomb.50 After the True Cross’ discovery, Cyril of Jerusalem, an early Church Father, wrote that, “The whole world has since been filled with pieces of the wood of the Cross.”51 Cyril’s work suggested that, because of Helena, the relics of the True Cross, and the symbol of the cross itself, spread throughout the Christian world. Regardless of the historicity of the event, in the fourth century, after Helena supposedly discovered the True Cross, a great veneration of the cross arose from Jerusalem, spreading throughout the Roman Empire.52

The cross gained such a great importance that Christians began placing it on their tombs. Between 340 and 370 C.E., the cross became the central theme of “Passion sarcophagi.” The sarcophagi contain scenes of the Passion—Jesus’ trial, suffering, and death—but never actually show Jesus on the cross. Instead, they usually showed an empty cross with a Christogram inside of a wreath, known as the crux invicta—“the unconquered cross.”53 Passion sarcophagi painted

52 Drijvers, Helena Augusta, 93.
the cross in a funerary context—a conquest over death—and gave Christians a hope in a perceived resurrection.  

In addition to Passion sarcophagi, the cross began to appear regularly on Christian items—such as necklaces, rings, and weapons—because it emerged as a symbol of divine protection. From the fourth century onwards, jewelry, sometimes containing pieces of the True Cross, was an especially popular means to wear the cross. Christians were so zealous to obtain for themselves a relic of the True Cross that one Christian even took a bite out of it. Therefore, during the fourth century, the cross began to emerge in the everyday Christian’s life.

The Cross Today: Many Different Views

In modernity, the cross is not universally viewed as a symbol of victory, but rather as a symbol of death. For example, when the cross turns on its side, it takes the shape of a sword. Additionally, burnings of innocents—Jews, ‘witches,’ heretics, homosexuals, and even other Christians—occurred in the name of the cross throughout the history of Christendom. Furthermore, the Ku Klux Klan burned the cross in order to terrorize victims and incite hatred against African Americans. Despite these horrible deeds done under the symbol of the cross, the cross itself has become the most important symbol in Christianity and one of the most recognizable symbols in the world. It appears everywhere—from grave markers to cathedrals,

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54 Ibid, 71. For an image of the passion sarcophagi, see Appendix D.
56 Drijvers, Helena Augusta, 91-92.
57 Matthew Fox, A Spirituality Named Compassion (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1999), 112.
from ancient works of art to mass-produced jewelry.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, the cross remains, for Christians, a symbol central to their faith.\textsuperscript{60}

Constantine and Helena changed the way Christians viewed the cross during the 4\textsuperscript{th} century—transforming the cross into a symbol of victory throughout the vast Roman Empire. They allowed for the development of a symbol that aligned with the theology of the cross, which Paul the Apostle pioneered. Because the cross was the means of death for Jesus, the symbol, at first, acted as a stumbling block for many. Even Christians did not want to wear the cross, which was used to kill Christians. Then, in the fourth century, Constantine defeated Maxentius and Helena Augusta supposedly found the True Cross, changing the cross’ trajectory as a symbol. Because of their actions, the cross remains one of the most recognizable symbols in the world and appears in numerous items—from jewelry to priceless pieces of art—and has played a significant role in history, making it one of the most important symbols in history. Therefore, since the 4\textsuperscript{th} century, Christians have viewed the cross as indicative of the triumph of Jesus Christ over the tragedy of his crucifixion and death.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, ix.
\textsuperscript{60} Jensen, telephone interview by the author.
Appendix A

Spier, Jeffrey. *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems*. Courtesy of the British Museum

This is an example of an early Christian signet ring. Before the fourth century, Christians adorned their jewelry with symbols such as fish. “Aemelia,” a Roman name, is inscribed on the ring.
Appendix B


This graffito acted as a way to mock Christians because they worshipped a crucified god. Roman Polytheists would often accuse of worshipping a god with a donkey’s head.
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This is an example of Constantinian coinage. The reverse of the coin depicts a banner with three heads piercing a serpent, most likely representing Licinius or Satan.

This passion sarcophagus illustrates how the cross became a victorious symbol over death.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


*The New American Bible* reveals how Paul viewed the cross as triumphant. I quoted it to show how the cross was folly to many, but to Paul, who developed a theology around the cross, it meant salvation.


Augustine wrote the sermons between the late 300s through the early 400s C.E. In Sermon 165, Augustine discusses how the cross has length, depth, width, and height. It helped me to understand how Early Church Fathers viewed the cross.


Clement wrote *Christ the Educator* in c. 198 C.E. In *Christ the Educator*, Clement explains Christ’s role as an educator. I used it because he excluded the cross as a symbol which Christians should wear.

Cyril delivered his catechetical lectures around 348 C.E. Cyril of Jerusalem is famous for his catechetical lectures that he gave to participants awaiting their baptism. I used it to show how relics of the True Cross spread throughout the world.


Eusebius wrote *The Life of Constantine* in the 4th century C.E., but he never completed it on account of his death. In *The Life of Constantine*, Eusebius provides a biography of Constantine. I used as a source for Constantine’s vision of the cross.


*Vexilla Regis Prodeunt* is an early Christian hymn, first sung in 569 C.E. I used it to show how many early Christians saw the cross as a triumphant banner.


Scholars argue that Justin wrote *Dialogus Cum Tryphone* between 155 and 167 C.E. Justin Martyr’s *Dialogus Cum Tryphone* is one of Justin’s apologetics. I used it to show how Christians saw the cross as a fulfillment of past Jewish prophecies about their savior.

Justin wrote the first apology in 155 through 157 C.E. Justin refutes many criticism of Christianity in his first and second apologies. I used it to show how Early Church Fathers refuted the perceived absurdity of worshipping a crucified god.


Lactantius wrote *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died* in the 4th century C.E. In Chapter 44 in *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*, Lactantius describes Constantine’s vision and his subsequent defeat of Maxentius. I used it to show how Constantine’s troops used the Chi Rho as a sign in the Battle of Milvian Bridge.


Leo the Great delivered his sermons between 440 and 461 C.E., and delivered sermons during these years. Leo discusses the cross’ significance to Christians in one of his sermons. It helped me understand how Christians believed that the cross reversed the sin of Adam and brought redemption to the world.

Socrates of Constantinople. "Book I." In *Church History*. Translated by A. C. Zenos. Edited

Socrates of Constantinople finished *Church History* in 439 C.E. His early history of the Christian church contains a segment on Helena’s supposed discovery of the True Cross. I used it to explain the legend of Helena’s discovery of the True Cross.


Tertullian wrote *Ad Nationes* in 197 C.E. In *Ad Nationes*, Tertullian responds to the perceived hypocrisy of Roman Polytheists. I use it in a footnote to show how Early Church Fathers saw the cross in everything.


*The Acts of John* was composed in 180 C.E. *The Acts of John* is an example of a Docetist text. I used it to show how Docetists believed that Jesus was not actually crucified.


*The Apocalypse of Peter* was written in about 100 C.E. *The Apocalypse of Peter* contains a brief segment which argues that the cross will signify the end of the world.

This 5th century homily describes Jesus’ supposed descent into hell. It exemplified how early Christians saw the cross in a militaristic sense because it describes Jesus using the cross as his victorious weapon.


The Gospel of Philip was written in 3rd century. The Gospel of Philip is a Docetist text, which exemplifies the belief that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. I use it in my paper to illustrate how certain heterodox Christians denied Jesus’ crucifixion.

Personal Communications


Robin M. Jensen is that author of The Cross, a book which details the cross’ story throughout history. She was able to answer all of my questions and provided much insight into the history of the cross.

Secondary Sources


The Fathers of the Church provides short biographical entries on Fathers of the Church and gives primary sources written by them. I used its introduction, where it explains what Docetism was.

*The Crucifix* is a short article, which focuses on the cross. It gave me much background knowledge and I cite it numerous times in my paper.


In *Helena Augusta*, the author explores the legends of Helena’s discovery of the True Cross. I use it frequently in my paper to explain the importance of the True Cross to early Christians.


*A Spirituality Named Compassion* is a manifesto of compassion. I use it to show how the cross is often viewed as a symbol of violence.


*The Cross* was my most important source: I used it for background research and it helped me find many of the primary sources I used. *The Cross* details the entire story of the cross.

*The Wars of the Jews* provides a short summary of Jewish History and gives the histories of many Jewish wars. It gave me background into crucifixion because it details Jewish crucifixion after they were defeated.


*Jesus Christ through the Centuries* outlines Jesus’ role in culture throughout the ages. I used it to show that Early Christians realized rather quickly that Jesus came into the world to die.


This short article gives information on what crucifixion was like in antiquity. I used it for that very purpose.


*Light to the Nations* is a history textbook, which details early Christianity and its story. I used it for background research on the tetrarchy (the governmental system in the time of Constantine).


*Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor* is a biography of Constantine. I used it to show that the True Cross was discovered in an old temple dedicated to Venus.