
The Cross in Its Place

To die by crucifixion was hideous and horrific. One ancient historian called it a “most pitiable of deaths” (Josephus, *The Life* 76). One incident in particular reveals the extent to which crucifixion was recognized as a most agonizing form of torment. A Jewish soldier, captured by Roman forces in the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66–70 CE, was saved from crucifixion by the efforts of his comrades, who agreed to surrender en masse and become slaves of Rome rather than see their colleague crucified (Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.202–203). Because of the excruciating pain involved in crucifixion, one ancient rhetorician said that “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears” (Cicero, *Pro Rabirio* 5:16). And the Jewish apostle who took the message of “Christ crucified” to the Greco-Roman world spoke of “the scandal of the cross” upon which his Lord died (Gal. 5:11; cf. 1 Cor 1:18, 23).

It is popularly imagined that, despite its scandal, early Jesus-followers were making lavish use of the sign of the cross in every

place from the very start. Whereas the sign of the cross adorns the majority of churches in the Western world today, and has dominated the focus of Christian art for over a millennium, the common expectation is that the cross was at the forefront of Christian devotion and artistry since the early years of the post-Easter Jesus-movement.

A view of this kind crumbles the minute it is tested against the historical data. Although the material evidence from the early Christian centuries is relatively thin, it suggests that the cross was not at the focal point of devotion in Christian gatherings until much later. The cross came to the forefront of Christian artistic display only in the aftermath of the initiatives of Constantine, who rose to power in the early fourth century and progressively imposed Christianity and its symbols on a world he sought to unify and control.



Figure 1.1. Constantine on a Roman coin from the first half of the fourth century.

The story of the cross and Constantine goes this way. Just before entering into the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine

looked into the sky and saw a cross standing above the sun, together with the Greek words, “With this sign you shall conquer” (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 28). Because Constantine did, in fact, win the battle, this moment became a watershed in the history of Christian symbolism. It began to propel the cross (along with other Christianized symbols, especially the chi-rho symbol emblazoned on the shields of Constantine’s army) to heights that it had never previously enjoyed in the artistry of Christian symbols. With a foothold in Constantine’s account of his experiences prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, the cross would eventually become the predominant symbol of Christianity. Embracing the symbol of the cross was further enhanced decades later when the story began to circulate that Constantine’s mother, Helena, traveled to the Holy Land in 326 and found the cross of Jesus’s crucifixion.¹ By the end of the century, Christian emperors such as Valentinian and his brother Valens were adopting the chi-rho as a symbol of military power and triumph—as depicted in coins showing emperors dragging a captive in their right hand (representing the subjugation of the nations) and holding a chi-rho standard in their left hand (see fig. 1.3). The symbol of the simple cross was adapted to play a significant role in the accumulation of political power.

1. See especially Jan W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).



Figure 1.2. A mid-fourth-century coin honoring Emperor Constantine II, depicting a chi-rho at the middle right.



Figure 1.3. A late fourth-century coin depicting Emperor Valens dragging by the hair a captive (i.e., the barbarian nations, on the coin's left side) through the power of the chi-rho christogram (on the coin's right side).

While this much is certainly true, one common interpretation of the material record requires adjustment. It is indisputable that the cross became a powerful symbol in the wake of Constantine's promotion of Christianity within his empire, but it is to be disputed that only in the fourth century and beyond did the cross become a Christian symbol.

In contrast to popular opinion, historians have frequently adopted the view that the cross had no place within Christian symbolism in the pre-Constantinian era. In this view, a watershed divide existed between pre- and post-Constantinian contexts, with the cross on one side but not on the other.

This view draws its impetus from the fact that there was a significant difference between the two sides of this watershed with regard to political power. Constantine gave Christianity a significant presence within political structures of power, a presence that could never have been imagined prior to Constantine's rise to power. It was only when an emperor who favored Christianity was at the helm (the argument goes) that the cross could be used for "constructive" purposes (that is, to help unify the empire). In that project, the cross became incorporated into a militaristic, triumphalist Christianity—a far cry from the humble beginnings of the early Jesus-movement nearly three hundred years earlier. Prior to the Constantinian era (the argument continues), Christians avoided the cross at all costs to ensure that their religion was not associated with the shame of crucifixion.

Something of this view was articulated by George Willard Benson long ago:

The very fact of the cross having been used for centuries for the crucifixion of criminals was a powerful reason for not using it as a religious emblem. To the early Christians it was a symbol of disgrace. They could not look upon it as an object of reverence. Death by

crucifixion was the most shameful and ignominious that could be devised. That Christ should have been put to death, as were debased and despised criminals, was bitterly humiliating to his followers. It was years before this deep rooted feeling could be overcome.²

Views such as Benson's regarding Christian embarrassment about the cross of Jesus help to bolster a historical scenario in which the cross became a visual symbol only in the early fourth century and beyond, with the advent of a sociopolitical leader who actively promoted Christianity. The cross of shame was hidden and subdued by powerless Christians, who made no use of it as a symbol of devotion until such time as the cross of opportunistic and intolerant aggression emerged through the scheming initiatives of powerful Christians.

While it cannot be denied that the cross became a powerful symbol in the wake of Constantine's promotion of Christianity within his empire, subsequent chapters of this book will problematize one key component of this reconstruction—the view that only in the fourth century and beyond did the cross become a Christian symbol.

The view that the cross is absent from the material record prior to Constantine has deep roots. It is reflected, for instance, in the comments from 1875 of Pompeian archaeologist Thomas Dyer. He claimed that it is “in the highest degree improbable” that Christians would ever “have ventured to exhibit any public sign of their religion” prior to Constantine, since doing so would have jeopardized their lives.³ More recently, Pompeian scholars have articulated much the same view, such as Agnello Baldi in 1964 and Antonio Varone in 1979. Both of them assessed material evidence with the working assumption that Christians would have done

2. George Willard Benson, *The Cross: Its History and Symbolism. An Account of the Symbol More Universal in Its Use and More Important in Its Significance Than Any Other in the World* (Buffalo: George Willard Benson, 1934), 28–29.

3. Thomas H. Dyer, *Pompeii: Its History, Buildings and Antiquities* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1875 [1868]), 321.

everything to avoid drawing attention to themselves prior to Constantine, from whose time the cross as a Christian symbol derives.⁴

But the view is not restricted to discourse in one scholarly corner; it is reflected far more widely by scholars of notable repute who have shaped scholarly discourse significantly. In 1951, erudite historian and archaeologist of early Christianity Erich Dinkler regarded it as “absolute dogma” that “the symbol of the cross makes its first appearance in the age of Constantine.”⁵ Although he would later modify this view somewhat (as we will see in chapter 5 below), it has continued in the role of “absolute dogma” since he crowned it as such. For instance, Graydon Snyder’s influential work *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Christian Life before Constantine* first appeared in 1985 but has seen reprint after reprint in the years to follow; it states simply that the cross as a symbol of Christianity “ought not be considered pre-Constantinian.”⁶ Snyder offers no robust engagement with the cross in the pre-Constantinian material record since, in his view, there simply is no such thing.

4. Agnello Baldi, *La Pompei: Giudaico-Cristiana* (Cava de Tirreni: Di Mauro Editore, 1964), 39–40; Antonio Varone, *Presenze guidaiche e cristiane a Pompei* (Naples: M. D’Auria Editore, 1979), 33.

5. Erich Dinkler, “Comments on the History of the Symbol of the Cross,” *Journal for Theology and the Church* 1 (1965): 132. The article was first published in German in 1951, the quotation here being from page 157 of the 1951 article.

6. Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 14. Horn, Lieu, and Phenix cite Snyder as support when they claim that “the cross is not a significant symbol in Christian art and depiction until the fourth century” (Cornelia Horn, Samuel N. C. Lieu, and Robert R. Phenix Jr., “Beyond the Eastern Frontier,” in *Early Christianity in Contexts: An Exploration across Cultures and Continents*, ed. William Tabbernee [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014], 63), but Snyder never used the important qualification “significant” that they attribute to him. Although Robin Margaret Jensen (*Understanding Early Christian Art* [New York: Routledge, 2000]) took note of the fact that a few pre-Constantinian Christian artifacts display cross-markings, her case was minimalistic and her point has not filtered into scholarly discourse: “some definite cross-markings found among the pre-Constantinian graffiti at the Vatican or on more formal Christian epitaphs elsewhere in Rome or found in other parts of the empire can be dated to the third century” (137).

With voices of repute articulating this view so unreservedly, it is little wonder that others have adopted it without restraint. In 1997, for instance, Carolyn Osiek and David Balch asserted that “the cross as a visual symbol is . . . wholly unattested for the first several Christian centuries.”⁷ In 2006 Mark Heim pointed his readership to what he called “the absence of images of the cross in the first four Christian centuries,” claiming that there is “no entirely satisfactory explanation of why the cross would figure so centrally in Christian faith and worship, but be visually absent” from the material record.⁸ And “this story is still told . . . to this day” (to hijack the claim made in Matt. 28:15).⁹ My hope is that we can now begin to set the record straight and tell a story that is representative of a much fuller spread of the historical data.

What We Will and Won't Be Seeing

In the following chapters, I will propose (twisting Heim's claim around a bit) that there is no entirely satisfactory explanation as to why the material evidence of the cross in pre-Constantinian Christian circles has been neglected for so long. Prior to Constantine, the cross may not have been the object of Christian veneration that it was later to become in the fourth century and beyond; nonetheless,

7. Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 86. This view receives important nuancing in David L. Balch, “The Suffering of Isis/Io and Paul's Portrait of Christ Crucified (Gal. 3:1): Frescoes in Pompeian and Roman Houses and in the Temple of Isis in Pompeii,” *The Journal of Religion* 83 (2003): 53–55.

8. S. Mark Heim, “Missing the Cross? Types of the Passion in Early Christian Art,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 11–12 (2006): 183–94.

9. For instance, Oliver Larry Yarbrough (“The Shadow of an Ass: On Reading the Alexamenos Graffito,” in *Text, Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Aliou Cissé Niang and Carolyn Osiek [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012], 239–54) speaks of “the absence of the crucifixion (and cross) in early Christian art” and of “Christian avoidance of the cross in art” (251). Anecdotally, I have had numerous conversations with university professors who have confessed that they have taught this view to their students for the course of their teaching career.

it was incorporated into the symbolism of the pre-Constantinian Christian imagination and found its way into the realia of the ancient world.

The view that the cross became a Christian symbol only in the fourth century has the enticing advantage of being a sleek and streamlined instrument for dissecting history into two easily managed segments, one prior to Constantine and the other in the wake of Constantine's rise to power. In subsequent chapters of this book, however, we will see evidence that overturns this attractive construct. If the cross was neither ubiquitous nor predominant in the pre-Constantinian record, neither was it absent from that record. In fact, in certain sectors it seems to have been a symbol with real attraction.

The task at hand, however, is not simply an exercise in counting artifacts. More significantly, the counted artifacts will act like windows into the character of pre-Constantinian Jesus-devotion. What those artifacts tell us about the configurations of Jesus-devotion in a pre-Constantinian environment is just as significant as the counting up of their number.

In undertaking this task, three chapters (chapters 2 through 4) clear the way for the main data that follows. Two subsequent chapters of this book bear the brunt of the weight, foregrounding the material artifacts demonstrating that the cross has a foothold within pre-Constantinian Christian devotion. The first of those chapters (chapter 5) offers an overview of the relevant material from a number of locations in the second and third centuries, while the second (chapter 6) engages one particular artifact from Pompeii, the sprawling first-century town covered by ash during the explosion of Mount Vesuvius in 79.

Much of the material evidence that will be presented in chapter 5 has already been gathered by others, but that evidence tends to be spread throughout disparate scholarly publications. This has enabled

the consensus view to saunter on, since these artifacts, often from different fields of specialty, can all too easily be neglected or simply deemed to be “exceptions to the rule” and left as outliers. But when these “exceptions” are harnessed together and their full force is felt, they prove to be exceptional not only in their number but also in what they reveal about the nature of Jesus-devotion in the pre-Constantinian era.

One further chapter (chapter 7) will draw on relevant texts of the first three centuries that support the findings from the material record.¹⁰ This will allow us ultimately to interweave the relevant textual and material records, helping us to see that what is appearing within the material record relates to what is being discussed in texts from roughly the same time and the same geographical territory. As a consequence, in chapter 8 we will plot what the extant data reveals regarding the geographical and temporal spread of Christians who made use of a cruciform symbol as an expression of their religious devotion. Unless we imagine that all the pertinent data has been salvaged from the material record without loss, the picture we can devise will have numerous holes in it. But even the tatty and threadbare tapestry that emerges enables us to recognize that the cross was, in fact, a symbol utilized by Christians long before Constantine.

10. It is not my intent in this project to canvass all the ancient texts pertaining to crucifixion. That hefty task has already been done by others. On crucifixion in the ancient world, see especially Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977); David W. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); John Granger Cook, “Roman Crucifixions: From the Second Punic War to Constantine,” *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (2013): 1–32; idem, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). The arguments of Gunnar Samuelsson, *Crucifixion in Antiquity: An Inquiry into the Background and Significance of the New Testament Terminology of Crucifixion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), (one of which is that the Roman cross was always only a vertical post without a crossbeam) have been compellingly dispelled by John Granger Cook, “Review of Gunnar Samuelsson’s *Crucifixion in Antiquity: An Inquiry into the Background and Significance of the New Testament Terminology of Crucifixion*,” *Review of Biblical Literature* (April 2014).