

THE SO-CALLED CONSTANTINIAN MONOGRAM ON LATE ANTIQUE TEXTILES*

While there have been several examinations¹ of the Christogram in painting, mosaics and sarcophagi, an investigation of the Christogram in textiles has been entirely overlooked. For this reason we will now address its occurrence in this medium.

In only a few countries of the ancient world were the climactic conditions for the preservation of textile material as advantageous as in Egypt. Moreover, this country enjoyed a leading position in the production of these artifacts and supplied virtually the entire Empire. Thus it is no surprise that the great majority of late antique textiles known today come from Egyptian necropolises. Unfortunately they quickly became coveted collector's items which were then torn out of their context and frequently – out of acquisitiveness – scattered in pieces across the world.

* For the translation into English I want to thank Ass. Prof. Dr. Ruth Ohm. St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park, CA.

¹ Among others see J. Valeva, *Les tombeaux ornés de croix et des chrismes peints*. In: N. Cambi – E. Marin (Eds.), *Acta XIII congressus internationalis archaeologiae christianae Split – Poreč* (25. 9. – 1. 10. 1994) 3. Città del Vaticano – Split 1998, 761 – 786; E. Cavalcanti, *La croce e il monogramma di Cristo nelle narrazioni del ciclo costantiniano*. In: A. Donati – G. Gentili (a cura di), *Costantino il Grande. La civiltà antica al bivio tra Occidente e Oriente* (Exhibition catalogue) Milano 2005, 44 – 55; A. Barbet, *Le chrisme dans la peinture murale Romaine*. In: A. Demandt – J. Engemann (ed.), *Konstantin der Große. Geschichte – Archäologie – Rezeption. Internationales Kolloquium vom 10. – 15. Oktober 2005 an der Universität Trier zur Landesausstellung Rheinland – Pfalz 2007 „Konstantin der Grosse“*. Trier 2006, 127 – 141; O. Gabór, *Christograms from the Northern Late Roman Cemetery of Sopianae (Pécs)*. In: A. Szabó – P. Vargyas (Eds.), *Cultus deorum. Studia religionum ad historiam 2: De rebus aetatis Graecorum et Romanorum. In memoriam I. Tóth (Ókortudományi Dolgozatok [Papers of Antique Studies])*. Pécs 2008, 289 – 310; F. Bisconti, *Il vessilino, il cristogramma. I segni della salvezza*. In: G. S. Chiesa (a cura di), *L'editto di Milano e il tempo della tolleranza. Costantino 313 d. C.* (Exhibition catalogue). Milano 2012, 60 – 64; I. Popović, *The Motif of Christogram on the Architectural Elements of the Imperial Palace in Sirmium*. In: *The Edict of Serdica (AD 311): Concepts and Realizations of the Idea of Religious Toleration*. Sofia (in print), Ch. Lambert, *Il monogramma costantiniano e altri cristogrammi nelle epigrafi tardoantiche della Campania (IV – VII sec.)*. *Novità CIAC* 16, Rome 22 – 28 Sept. 2013 (in preparation) and S. Sande, *The Chi-Rho-Minogram in the 4rd (sic!) Century. Symbol of Christ or Imperial Victory?* Poster *ibid.*



Fig. 1 Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes: Inv. No. AF 5766 (© Georges Poncet)

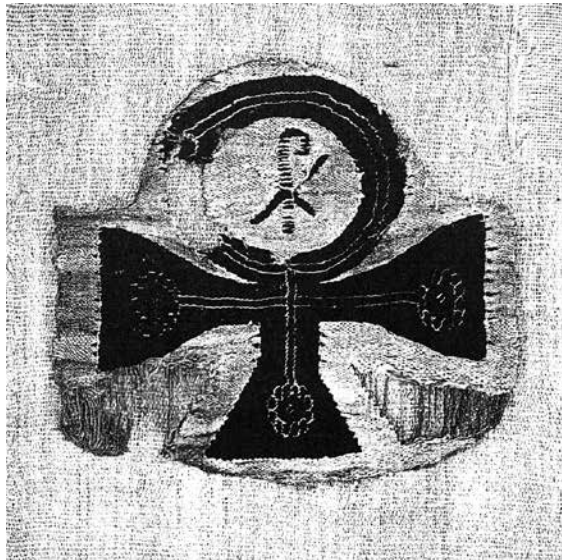


Fig. 2 Den Haag, Gemeentemuseum: Inv. No. OW 1 – 1936 (according to A. C. Lopes Cardozo [see note 4], 15)

This was also the fate of the textiles with Christogram images.

A 0.40×0.58 m fragment of linen interlaced with wool depicts an ankh, the hieroglyphic character for „life“², on the left and on the right a Constantinian monogram (e.g., a Christogram) with the Alpha and Omega; it is currently kept by the Louvre Museum in Paris, in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities under Inv. No. AF 5766 (Fig. 1)³. The colored rectangles on the symbol of Christ are reminiscent of jewelled crosses (*crux gemmatae*), whereby the workmanship of the Christogram is in distinct contrast to the embroidered decoration of the ankh.

Without its context, it is not possible to date the textile piece. Only the Christogram offers a *terminus post quem*, namely the beginning of the 4th century after the Constantinian shift.

A Christian usage, perhaps as a curtain or cloth, is certainly given.

Another example is offered by The Hague's Municipal Museum (Gemeente Museum Den Haag) under Inv. No. OW 1-1936 (Fig. 2)⁴. This 0.12×0.13 m woven cloth depicts an

² For an initial overview compare M. Cramer, *Das altägyptische Lebenszeichen im christlichen (koptischen) Ägypten. Eine kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Studie auf archäologischer Grundlage*. Wiesbaden 1955.

³ Details by R. C. (= R. Cortopassi). In: M.-H. Santrot, *Au fil du Nil. Couleurs de l'Égypte chrétienne* (Exhibition catalogue). Paris 2001, 128, No. 91.

⁴ Briefly discussed by A. C. Lopes Cardozo, *Koptische Weefsels*. Den Haag 1982, 15 and 45, No. 24.

ankh with a Christogram in the loop and embroidered rosettes on the remaining three arms. It originates from art trade circles and was cut out of a larger textile.

For this reason, a more accurate dating remains unanswered in this example as well.

With respect to its usage, one could consider it as a decorated piece of clothing similar to that in a fresco of the Roman catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro (Fig. 3)⁵.

Classified under Inv. No. 2023 (Fig. 4)⁶ is a 0.76×1.36 m fragment of a linen cloth interwoven with wool (so-called loop textile or nubbed fabric) in Cairo's Coptic Museum. It de-



Fig. 3 Rome, SS. Marcellino e Pietro (according to J. G. Deckers – H. R. Seeliger – G. Mietke [see note 5], Pl. 65 a)



Fig. 4 Cairo, Coptic Museum: Inv. No. 2023 (according to L. Török [see note 6], 194, No. 138)

⁵ In J. G. Deckers – H. R. Seeliger – G. Mietke, *Die Katakomben „Santi Marcellino e Pietro“*. Repertorium der Malereien (RSC 6), Città del Vaticano – Münster 1987, Pl. 65a.

⁶ Further details in G. Gabra, *Kairo, das koptische Museum, die frühen Kirchen*. Kairo 1976, 76 (translation by C. Fluck); *id.* – M. Eaton-Krauss, *The Illustrated Guide to the Coptic Museum and Churches of Old Cairo*. Cairo – New York 2007, 62, No. 29, and L. Török, *After the Pharaohs. Treasures of Coptic Art from Egyptian Collections* (Exhibition catalogue). Budapest 2005, 194 – 196, No. 138.



Fig. 5 Athens, Benaki Museum: Inv. No. 7158 (© Benakimuseum)

picts two arcades supported by spiral (?) columns. Pictured on the right and left are, respectively, a red ankh with yellow and green dots (jewels) and a red Christogram against a dark background in the loop; branches (palm fronds?) grow from the ends of the broadening horizontal arms of the ankh. The middle field in between is unfortunately destroyed beyond recognition, but appears to have had a similar image. Resting on the arcade arches are peacocks and doves, symbols of immortality or eternity and of souls⁷. A border composed of opposing triangles runs below the strip of images; above is a second border with a meander and atop this a (Coptic?) inscription with the name „Phoibamon“.

Again no precise date is possible, but its usage as a (wall) hanging seems very likely.



Fig. 6 Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes: Inv. No. AF 5556 (© Georges Poncet)

An additional purple ankh with dots (an imitation of jewels) and a red Christogram, complete with an Alpha and Omega in the loop, is located under Inv. No. 7158 in Athens's Benaki Museum (Fig. 5)⁸.

The determination of its dating and usage remains open due to the lack of further specifications.

Most interesting is a 0.46×1.30 m linen fragment interlaced with wool housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris in the Department of Egyptian

Antiquities under Inv. No. AF 5556 (Fig. 6)⁹. It depicts a row of five ankhs, respectively patterned with two purple ankhs to the left and the right of a red ankh; the ankhs are enclosed between two decorative borders consisting of red and blue or red and green plaited bands. Inside the loops of the hieroglyphic

⁷ Further in F. Sühling, *Die Taube als religiöses Symbol im christlichen Altertum* (RQS Suppl. 24). Freiburg 1930.

⁸ A publication by R. Cortopassi and S. Tsourinaki is in progress.

⁹ This is briefly discussed by M.-H. R. (M.-H. Rutschowskaya) in V. Legrand – A. Charles, *Égypte Romaine l'autre Égypte* (Exhibition catalogue). Marseille 1997, 238, No. 264.

character of life are (from left to right) a purple sunburst (eight-pointed star?), a red equilateral cross with four purple dots between the arms, a purple Christogram, another red equilateral cross with four purple dots between the arms, and a purple sunburst (eight-pointed star?). Below this decorative band are the remnants of another purple ankh with a red Alpha and Omega and a red Christogram in the loop.

Here, once more, neither an exact date or usage can be determined, though it most likely belongs together with a textile piece from Achmim. This textile fragment is currently in London's Victoria and Albert Museum under Inv. No. 258-1890 (Fig. 7)¹⁰ and bears exactly the same pattern.

Its 0.30×0.35 m linen cloth interwoven with wool depicts four ankhs (three purple, the second from the right is red), between two decorated plaited bands just like the textile described above, but now with the blue above. In the loop of the Egyptian hieroglyphic "life" is likewise (from left to right) a blue (?) sunburst (eight-pointed star?), a red equilateral cross with four purple dots between the cross arms, a purple Christogram and another red equilateral cross with four purple dots between the cross arms.

Above the top border and to the left is a red ankh with a purple dot in the loop, and to the right a red equilateral cross with four purple dots in between the arms; immediately next to the red cross is a scant trace of something purple. To the left is the selvedge, indicating the deliberate edge of the textile.



Fig. 7 London, Victoria & Albert Museum: Inv. No. 258 – 1890 (© Victoria & Albert Museum)



Fig. 8 Città del Vaticano, MPC: Inv. No. 28 591 (according to E. Cavalcanti [see note 1], Fig. 3)

¹⁰ In A. F. Kendrick, *Catalogue of Textiles from Burying-Grounds in Egypt 2. Period of Transition and of Christian Emblems*. London 1921, 12f., No. 309 and Pl. 4.

With respect to the dating the same can be said here as for all the other textile pieces. With regard to its usage one could think about a (wall) hanging or an (altar?) cloth in a Christian environment, such as, for example, a church.

On account of its resemblance to the piece in Paris (Fig. 6), one can look to fabric patterns, that is, so-called pattern books. An entire collection (over 100 samples) for textile patterns remains preserved, thus illuminating ancient workshop tradition¹¹. For the two textiles under consideration here, it means that they were perhaps made in the same workshop (in Achmim); in this case it is possible that the textile artefact in Paris could also have the same origin.

If we summarize our findings, one can observe that all the „Constantinian“ symbols of Christ on the Egyptian textiles presented here – with the exception of Fig. 1 – are located in the loop of the ankh.

In light of this, the question is raised whether the textile examples offered here only have to do with the hieroglyphic character or are perhaps not also a type of labarum¹², such as on Passion sarcophagi (for example, Fig. 8 in MPC/Città del Vaticano¹³).

Abbreviations

BSAC	.....	Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte
CIAC	.....	Congresso internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana
HdA	.....	Handbuch der Archäologie
MPC	.....	Museo Pio Cristiano
ÖAW	.....	Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften
RQS	.....	Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte
RSC	.....	Roma Sotterranea Cristiana
SbWien	.....	Sitzungsberichte der phil.-hist. Klasse der ÖAW
Suppl.	.....	Supplement

Ренате Јохана Пилингер „КОНСТАНТИНОВ“ МОНОГРАМ НА КАСНОАНТИЧКОМ ТЕКСТИЛУ

У прилогу се желе приказати како оригиналне тканине из касноантичког Египта тако и представе одеће са „Константиновим“ монограмом на истовременим споменицима и да се у кратким цртама покаже његов узајамни однос према анку и крсту.

¹¹ Further detail in A. Stauffer, *Antike Musterblätter*. Wirkkartons aus dem spätantiken und frühbyzantinischen Ägypten (Spätantike. Frühchristentum. Byzanz. Ser. A vol. 15). Wiesbaden 2007.

¹² See, among others, R. Egger, *Das Labarum, die Kaiserstandarte der Spätantike*. SbWien 234/1 (1960) = A. Betz – G. Moro (Ed.), *Römische Antike und frühes Christentum*. Ausgewählte Schriften von R. Egger zur Vollendung seines 80. Lebensjahres 2. Klagenfurt 1963, 325 – 344.

¹³ In G. Koch, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage* (HdA). München 2000, Figs. 5, 7, 57, 58 among others.