

THE CHRISMON

Subject matter: Chrismon or Chi-Rho monogram.

Keywords: Chrismon, Monogram, Late Antiquity, High Middle Ages.

Summary: The chrismon is an anagram formed by the first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek -Χριστος-, Chi (X) and Rho (P), superimposed. It often incorporates a horizontal crossbar at an average height, whose intersection with the Rho stem assimilates it into the cross and completes a number of eight radios. The letters A and Ω may appear flanking the symbol or be suspended from both the arms of the Chi or the horizontal stem¹. It is also usual to surround the Chrismon within a circular shape and to include in it heraldic designs as the imago clipeata, carried by two angels. The Chrismon is a symbol of Christ and also an emblem of victory because of its association with Constantine and the defeat of paganism.

Primary sources: The Chrismon was associated from its origins to the vision of Constantine on the eve of the battle of the Mulvian Bridge against Maxentius. Eusebius of Caesarea² and Lactantius³ gave an account of the episode and narrated the adoption of the Chrismon as an imperial insignia and as a mark of the army. References to the Chrismon are also found in Patristic literature, glossed by Paulinus of Nola⁴ and Saint-Orens of Auch (c. 439)⁵, who offered a theological interpretation of the symbol. In the High Middle Ages, authors such as Rabanus Maurus⁶ and Liutprand of Cremona⁷ also dealt with it.

Other sources, non-written sources:

Geographical and chronological framework: Its presence is found almost everywhere in the geography of Christendom, with special emphasis in the West, where it remains in force throughout the entire High Middle Ages, being much more limited in the later centuries of the Middle Ages. In its origins, around the 3rd century, and especially since the 4th century, the Chrismon is particularly common in Italy (Rome and Ravenna), North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, Gaul, and Syria. In the early medieval period its depiction stands out in Hispanic sculpture (niches or inner doors), in the production of Merovingian sarcophagus (workshops of south western France) and in Carolingian art. In the centuries of Romanesque art, the Chrismon knew a special impact on North Spain -Aragon and Navarra mainly- and in the regions of the French Pyrenees.

¹ Both letters, which constitute the beginning and the end of the Greek alphabet, give a nuance of eternity to the monogram, also emphasized by its inclusion in a circle. The textual basis of this symbolism has a biblical origin: Rev. 1, 8, 21, 6, 22, 14. The investment in the order of both letters (Ω-A) has been interpreted in a funerary sense of hope in eternal life: through the end (death of the body) to the beginning, according to the incidence of this change in funerary contexts.

² EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *Vita Constantini*, I, 28-31 (*Patrologia Latina* [from now on, *PL*], t. VII, cols. 22-23).

³ LACTANTIUS, *Liber ad Donatum confessorem, de mortibus persecutorum*, XLIV (*PL*, t. VII, col. 261): "Commonitus est in quiete Constantinus, ut coeleste signum Dei notaret in scutis, atque ita praelium committeret. Fecit ut justus est, et transversa X littera, summo capite circumflexo, Christum in scutis notat. Quo signo armatus exercitus capit ferrum".

⁴ PAULINUS OF NOLA, *Poema XIX*, vv. 617 y ss. (*PL*, t. LXI, cols. 544-545).

⁵ SAINT-ORENS OF AUCH, *Commonitorium*, II, *Item plus de Trinitate* (*PL*, t. LXI, col. 1002).

⁶ RABANUS MAURUS, *De laudibus sanctae crucis* (*PL*, t. CVII, cols. 237-238).

⁷ LIUTPRAND OF CREMONA (*PL*, t. CXXXVI, cols. 1039-1042).

Artistic media and techniques: The Chrismon is depicted in virtually all media, although its incidence varies with the centuries. Its use as an abbreviation of the name of Christ and its exaltation as imperial symbol justified its presence in all kinds of fields and objects. In this sense, its character as a motif associated to the funerary world remained a constant during the medieval period, so their appearance is extremely common in epitaphs, sarcophagi, and tombstones. In manuscript illumination stands out its presence in figure XXII of the *carmina figurata* of the Rabanus Maurus' *De Laudibus Crucis*, a work of which many different copies of diverse chronology and provenance are kept. It should also be outlined its emergence as a heading of countless documents on parchment and paper and its use in coinage. As decoration of architectural surfaces, the Chrismon is shown in mosaics (Albenga Baptistery vault) and mural painting (San Pedro de Sorpe, Lleida). In sculpture, as well as the sarcophagi cited above, the Chrismon stands out as the ornament of lintels and tympanums in the Romanesque period, although there are a few examples in capitals (Moissac, Saint-Barthélémy de Gueyze, France). Sumptuary arts incorporate it frequently, especially trousseau objects of early Christian art, whether in gold, ceramic, metal or glass. It is also present in liturgical furniture (altar of Besançon; altar supports, cancels and niches from Mérida).

Precedents, transformations, and projection: Prior to becoming a part of Christian visual imagery, the formula X+P was used by pagans to abbreviate words as *existimare* and *αρχοντος*⁸. Among the monograms of Christ's name, three main variants were used in the first centuries of Christianity: the combination of I+X and the association of Chi and Rho (X+P) from the 3rd century, and the cruciform monogram or monogrammatic cross (T+P), which appeared in the 4th century. The characteristic formulation X+P will be the dominant combination throughout medieval times.

One of the most important features introduced in the early medieval period is the emergence of a letter S, usually placed on the lower end of the Rho. This is the last letter of the name of Christ according to a well extended Greco-Latin formula: *Xpistus*, abbreviated XPS according to the system of *nomina sacra*⁹. Its occurrence is very frequent in Diplomacy and it reached monumental art during the Romanesque period, preferably in the tympanums of portals. During the 11th and 12th centuries, the Chrismon had multiple variants that included the addition of other letters, causing designs of difficult reading (Chrismon in the crypt of Loarre Castle), or associating the symbol with legends like that of Carolingian origin *Pax Lux, Lex, Rex* (Chrismon of Saint-Pierre of Simacourbe), leading to the so-called by Daugé "chrismes parlants".

One of the most significant changes or reinterpretations of the symbol is embodied in the west tympanum of the cathedral of Jaca, where the Chrismon is taken as an emblem of the Trinity by associating a letter to each hypostasis (P=Father, A=Son, X=Holy Spirit)¹⁰ forming a new anagram -PAX- understood as a metaphor of the Trinity. This

⁸ CABROL, Fernand; LECLERCQ, Henri (1948): cols. 1482-1483; URECH, Édouard (1972): p. 32.

⁹ BRUUN, Patrick (1965): p. 532, points out the existence of the scheme XPS to refer to the name of Christ in Byzantium and Northern Africa.

¹⁰ The key is given by the inscription that surrounds the chrismon: + HAC IN SCVLPTURA LECTOR SIC NOSCERE CVRA / P . PATER . A . GENITVS . DVPLEX EST SP(iritu)S ALMVS / HII TRES IVRE QVIDEM doMINVS SVNT VNVS ET IDEM (In this sculpture, reader, try to understand this way: / P is the Father, A is the Son, the double [letter] is the Holy Spirit / This three are by right one and the same Lord).

association is based on a poem by Milon de Saint-Amand¹¹ and is echoed by other medieval authors like Atton of Vercelli (924-c.960)¹² and Rufin of Assisi¹³. The application of a Trinitarian symbolism to the rest of Romanesque chrismons, traditionally sustained by historiography, is questionable. The case of Jaca could be known and imitated, but the Chrismon never lost its primary character as a Christological symbol. Its association with Trinitarian contents had taken place prior to Jaca¹⁴. In late medieval times the presence of the Chrismon in monumental art was considerably reduced, appearing on the thresholds of some churches as a legacy of a long-standing practice.

Typology and related themes: other anagrams share many common points with the chrismon and were used with a similar meaning and purpose, especially the monogrammatic cross or staurogram, consisting of a Rho and a Tau superimposed. It is also clear its relationship to the cross, especially taking into consideration the character of labarum of both elements, which leads them to share traits like the presence of the A and Ω letters or their surface treatment as objects of gold work.

Images:

- Coin of Magnentius (350-353) from Arles. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, inv. 9413.
- Chrismon of Quiroga. Lugo, Diocesan Museum (beginnings of 5th century)
- Triple chrismon of the vault of the Albenga baptistery (c. 500).
- Sarcophagus of the Archbishop Theodorus. Ravenna, Sant' Apollinare in Classe (6th century).
- Altar of the cathedral of Besançon.
- Sarcophagus of Saint-Drausin. Paris, Louvre Museum (6th century).
- Rabanus Maurus, *De Laudibus Crucis*, ms. Vit. 20-5 of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, fol. 66 (10-11th century)
- Chrismon in the access to the crypt of Loarre Castle (end of the 11th century).
- West tympan of the cathedral of Jaca (end of the 11th century).
- Chrismon reemployed in the portal of the church of Saint-Pierre of Simacourbe - Pyrénées Atlantiques- (12th century).
- The most complete repertoire of Romanesque Spanish chrismons is hosted on the website http://www.claustro.com/Crismones/Webpages/Catalogo_crismon.htm, which also includes a significant number of French examples.

¹¹ MILON OF SAINT-AMAND, *De sobrietate*: “Pax apices scindit quos simplex sillaba jungit: / Hi tres sunt, quia tres personae essentia in una; / Litterulis ternis aptantur nomina terna: / P patrem, qui non aliunde hoc accipit ut sit, / A genitum signat, quod graecus nominat alfa / (“Alfa ego sum primus sermone, novissimus Ω sum, / ipse ego principium”, prior a vocalis apexque est) / Xque duplex, ab utroque venit quia spiritus almus, / Tertia fine apicum, ad reliquos quia rite recurrit, / Compar et æqualis partri natoque coevus”. Tomado de FAVREAU, Robert (2004): pp. 9-10

¹² ATTON OF VERCELLI, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Ephesios* (PL, t. CXXXIV, cols. 554-555).

¹³ RUFIN OF ASSISI, *De bono pacis libri duo* (PL, t. CL, cols. 1594-1595)

¹⁴ That is the case of the triple superimposed chrismon of the Albenga Baptistery (2nd half of the 5th century), whose composition is probably a visual reminder of the Trinitarian invocation under which baptism is administered. Other known cases are a North African piece of Carthage (5th-beginnings of the 6th centuries) in which the monogram appears contained in a triangle (OCÓN ALONSO, Dulce (1983): p. 249), or a Visigothic inner door preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid whose three times repetition of the chrismon probably refers to the Trinity (CRUZ VILLALÓN, María (1985): p. 292-293). In medieval times, numerous diplomatic examples juxtapose the monogram and a Trinitarian invocation.

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