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CHRISTIAN CRUCIFORM SYMBOLS AND MAGICAL *CHARAKTÈRES*

Communication prononcée dans le cadre du Colloque *Polytheismus – Monotheismus : Die Pragmatik religiösen Handelns in der Antike* (Erfurt, Philosophische Fakultät, 30/06/05).

As everyone knows, the gradual political entrance of Christian cruciform symbols in imperial institutions is closely connected with the reign of Constantine. Christian chroniclers intended — with success — to find a starting point of this story in the victory of Constantine over Maxentius in Milvius Bridge (on the Tiber, oct. 28 of 312).

In the year 310, while he was still in Gaul, Constantine is said to have been visited by an apparition of Apollo accompanied by Victoria. According to the panegyrist, the god was anything but the proper image of emperor himself[1]. The pagan panegyrist of the year 313 does not make any mention of Christianity. In rhetorical terms, he merely questions himself about the identity of the *deus*, *maiestas* or *divinitas* who gave so much *ardor* to Constantine and his army[2]. He thinks the emperor being in secret complicity (*aliquod ... secretum*) with a divine spirit (*illa mens divina*) the text does not name. Similar phraseology will be engraved in the triumphal arch of the year 315 : Constantine « has delivered the state from the tyrant [...] through divine inspiration (*instictu divinitatis*), and great wisdom (*mentis magnitudine*) »[3].

In the years 315-320, Lactantius introduces a well-known topic : the "Christian revelation" of Constantine. During the night preceding his victory in Milvius Bridge, Constantine « was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign of God (*caeleste signum Dei*) to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He does as he had been commanded, and he marks on the shields the Christ[’s name] (*Christum in scutis notat*), the letter X having been rotated (*transversa X littera*) and his top part curved in [half-]circle (*summo capite circumflexo*). »[4] This *caeleste signum Dei* corresponds to the sign ☧ [5]. Strangely, however, Lactantius does not refer to the cross. For him, this sign is only an abbreviation (*compendium*) of the first two letters (X and P) of Χ*ριστός* name. But the contraction ☧ previously had nothing to do with the Christ name[6]. It appears in biblical manuscripts of the second- and third-century as a *compendium* for the four letters *ταυρ* of *σταυρός* (cross) and *σταυροῦν* (crucify)[7]. In fourth-century manuscripts, this "staurogram" is used as an

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[1] *Paneg. lat*. VII, ch. 21, § 4 sq.

[2] *Paneg. lat*. IX, ch. 2, § 4 and ch. 22, § 1

[3] Ed. and transl. Richard BRILLANT in *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century, Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Metropolitain Museum of Art, Nov. 19, 1977 - Feb. 12, 1978*, ed. K. WEITZMANN, New York, 1979, p. 67.

[4] LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum* (before 320, maybe c. 315), ch. 44, § 5-6, ed. J. MOREAU, *SC* 39, Paris, 1954, p. 127 (BnF ms lat. 2627, f° 13r°, l. 15-16). The manuscript gives *xpo*, but this form can be explained as a wrong reading for *xpū* (= *xpum* = *christum*). See J. ROUGÉ, « À propos du manuscrit du *De mortibus persecutorum* », *Lactance et son temps : recherches actuelles*. *Actes du IVe Colloque d'Études Historiques et Patristiques*, (Chantilly, 21-23 septembre 1976), ed. J. FONTAINE and M. PERRIN (Coll. Théologie historique, 48), Paris : Beauchesne, 1978, p. 13-22, esp. p. 19-21.

[5] H. I. MARROU, « Autour du monogramme constantinien », *Mélanges Étienne Gilson*, Toronto / Paris, 1959, p. 403-414, reprinted in H. I. MARROU, *Christiana Tempora. Mélanges d'Histoire, d'Archéologie, d'épigraphie et de Patristique*, (Coll. de l'École Française de Rome, 35), Rome, 1978.

[6] E. DINKLER - VON SCHUBERT, « CTAYPOC : Vom "Wort vom Kreuz" (1 Kor. 1, 18) zum Kreuz-Symbol », *Byzantine East, latine West art-historical studies in honor of Kurt Weitzmann*, Princeton, 1995, p. 29-39. M. BLACK, « The chi-rho Sign ; Christogram and/or Staurogram ? », *Apostolic History and the Gospel* [*Mélanges Bruce*], Exeter, 1970, p. 319-327.

[7] Pap. Bod. II (P^{66}, c. 200) : C☧OY (with a continuous line above the word) for *σταυροῦ* (Jn 19, 31) ; EC☧AN (above-lined) for *ἐσταύρωσαν* (Jn 19, 18). Pap. Bod. XIV (P^{75}, beginning of the third century) : C☧ΩΘΗΝΑΙ (above-lined) for *σταυρωθῆναι* (Lk 24, 7) ; C☧ON (above-lined) for *σταυρόν* (Lk 9, 23 and 14, 27).

autonomous ornament at the end of evangelical books. The Christogram ☧, obtained by contracting the first two letters of Χ*ριστός* name, has been developed apart from the staurogram ☩ : it is not used by the most ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, and, in the catacombs of Rome, no pre-constantinian Christogram is known[8]. The first securely dated Christogram in this environment is to be found in an inscription of the year 323 (IN PACE ☧)[9].

In the ninth book of his *Ecclesiastical History* (before 324), Eusebius does not still favour Constantine with a vision. Before his battle against Maxentius, the emperor merely invokes « as an ally the celestial God and his Word, Jesus Christ himself »[10]. After his triumphal entrance in Rome, Constantine « orders that the trophy of the Saviour's Passion (*τοῦ σωτηρίου τρόπαιον πάθους*) be placed in the hand of his own statue » — a trophy also called by Eusebius « the saviour sign » (*τὸ σωτήριον σημεῖον*)[11]. In the *Vita Constantini*, a text written after Constantine's death (337), the emperor sees in the heavens, in the middle of the day, « the trophy of the cross (*σταυροῦ τρόπαιον*), made of light (*ἐκ φωτός*) and placed above the sun (*ὑπερκείμενον τοῦ ἡλίου*), and an inscription relating to it, saying : "Conquer by this [trophy]" (*τούτῳ νίκα*) »[12]. The next night, the Christ appears to Constantine during his sleep and commands him to make a « likeness » (*μίμημα*) of the sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies. Eusebius gives a description of this so-called *labarum*[13] of which he asserts having seen a specimen in the imperial palace of Constantinopolis[14]. It was a standard with two perpendicular poles — « cross-shaped » (*σταυροῦ σχήματι*), Eusebius says — carrying a square fabric. We can easily identify this banner with the traditional *vexillum* of the Roman army, in which apologists had already recognized a close likeness with the cross[15]. At the summit of the vertical pole of the *labarum* was however an undeniable Christian symbol, the Christogram surrounded by a crown : ☩.

Numismatics shows that officialization of Christian symbols was not an event as unexpected as Christian historiographers would have liked to make it believe. Studies of Patrick Bruun threw noticeable light on the subject[16]. Constantinian coinage just shows the monogram ☧ used by local workshops as an issuing mark among others (stars, half-moon, palm leafs, etc). On a very rare reverse from Constantinopolis (327), Christogram ☧ appears at the top of a standard piercing a snake[17]. In the mid-fourth

On later periods, see A. H. R. E. PAAP, *Nomina Sacra in the Greek Papyri of the First Five Century A.D.*, Leyde, 1959, n°s 22, 264, 271, 313, 389.

[8] P. BRUUN, « Symboles, Signes et Monogrammes », *Sylloge Inscriptionum Christianarum Veterum Musei Vaticani*, dir. H. ZILLIACUS, 2, *Commentarii* (Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae, vol. I, 2), Helsinki, 1963, p. 73-166, esp. p. 157.

[9] E. DIEHL, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, 2, Berlin, 1927, n° 3257.

[10] *Eccl. Hist.*, IX, ch. 9, § 2.

[11] *Eccl. Hist.*, IX, ch. 9, § 10.

[12] *Vita Const.* I, ch. 28, § 2.

[13] The late title of chap. 31 (*Vita Const.* I) gives this latin name : *Ἔκφρασις σταυροειδοῦς σημείου, ὅπερ νῦν οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι λάβαρον καλοῦσιν*. *Labarum* occurs in fact for the first time at the end of the fourth century, in PRUDENTIUS, *Contra Symmachum* I, v. 487.

[14] *Vita Const.*, I, ch. 31, § 1-2.

[15] JUSTINUS, *Apol. I*, ch. 55, § 6.

[16] P. BRUUN, « The Christians Signs on the Coins of Constantine », *Arctos* (Acta philologica fennica nova series), 3, Helsinki, 1962, p. 5-35 ; ID, « The Victorious Signs of Constantine : A Reappraisal », *The Numismatic Chronicle*, 157, 1997, p. 41-59.

[17] P. BRUUN, *The Roman Imperial Coinage, VII, Constantine and Licinius, A.D. 313-337*, Londres, 1966, p. 352 and pl. 18, n° 19 (only three examples listed). The snake should depict Licinius (defeated in 324) or the barbarian foes.

century, the *labarum* had become the personal standard of the emperor, at the bottom of which a prisoner is often kneeling. Christian symbols disappeared during the reign of Julian the Apostat (361-363) and came back under Jovian (363-364). Issues of Valentinian and Valens widely spread the *labarum* carrying equally ☧ ✳ ✕ ⸸ or ┼. From now, the different cruciform symbols are interchangeable with the cross[18]. On the pedestal of the column of Arcadius (around 402), two Victories in flight are depicted three times, carrying in a crown A☧ω, ┼ and ✝[19]. From the reign of Theodosius II (408-450), the cross is definitely in favour within imperial court : on *solidi*-reverses of 422, Theodosius' sister Pulcheria updates the iconographical model of Victoria holding a large trophy, now substituted by a large "latin" cross, sometimes outlined with pearls[20]. Thereafter, this kind of reverse will achieve a great success : during the fifth century, it will be used, among others, by Galla Placidia and Julius Nepos, and, in the sixth century, by Burgondian, Visigothian and Frankish rulers[21].

At first sight, the rise of cruciform symbols within fourth-century administrative and political structures does not seem mysterious. An irresistible Christian pressure on the institutional sphere could be enough to explain it. For proof, the "pagan interlude" of Julian, during which coinage carefully avoids a Christian repertory already identified as such since about thirty years. But that kind of explanation seems quite unsatisfactory. It forgets that the progressive adoption of these symbols would not have succeeded without a sort of mutual receptivity : it was necessary that Pagans and Christians be able to recognize each other in the choices privileged by imperial "communication services".

Before Constantinian time, the cross was naturally a well-known subject in Christian apologetical, exegetical and theological literature. Among other realities concerning life and works of the Saviour, the cross had been subjected to many allegorical interpretations, particularly in the scope of the Old Testament's typological reading[22]. But graphical use of the cross before the fourth century is quite badly documented. The so-called "*taw* symbol" has never been reproduced on Palestinian ossuaries of the first century before and after Christ. For the most part, cross marks and others designs found on ossuaries are anything but matching signs, namely guides for the positioning of lids on corresponding receptacles[23]. As previously said, the staurogram ⸸ appears only in c. 200 manuscripts as *compendium litterae* within words *σταυρός* and *σταυροῦν*[24]. At the same period (late second- early third-century, and not before) the Church begins to sign every new baptized with the cross. It is the best known "graphical use" of the cross before the fourth century. Cruciform "signation" consists in drawing with the finger the sign of the cross on one or more parts of the body. Sometimes, this gesture was done by taking saliva, or by moistening

[18] P. BRUUN, 1997, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

[19] A. GRABAR, *L'empereur dans l'Art byzantin*, Paris, 1936, pl. 13-15.

[20] R. H. STORCH, « The Trophy and the Cross : Pagan and Christian Symbolism in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries », *Byzantion*, 40, 1970, p. 105-117 ; Chr. MILNER, « "Lignum Vitae" or "Crux Gemmata" ? The Cross of Golgotha in the Early Byzantine Period », *Byzantine and Moderne Greek Studies*, 20, 1996, p. 83-84.

[21] C. BRENOT, « Monnaies », *Naissance des Arts chrétiens*, Paris, 1991, p. 171, fig. c ; p. 173, fig. d ; p. 175, fig. b1, b2, a3.

[22] Among others, have been interpreted as prefigures of the cross : Moses' staff (Ex 14,16 ; 17, 5-6), Jacob's ladder (Gn 28, 12-13), Noah's Ark (Gn 6, 13 sq.) and others "saving woods". See E. CAVALCANTI, « Tipologia della croce nella letteratura patristica », *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale*, 5, 1994, p. 529-535.

[23] R. H. SMITH, « The cross marks on Jewish ossuaries », *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 106, 1974, p. 53-66. L. RENAUT, *Marquage corporel et signation religieuse* [PhD Thesis], 2004, p. 656-683.

[24] See note 7 above.

the hand with breath. This last feature makes it possible to compare signation with others similar popular practices which antedates Christianity, namely prophylactic or apotropaïc "touches", which could be performed quickly and repeatedly, with saliva or no substance at all[25]. In all probability, cruciform signation had been firstly used in personal devotion, before having been integrated in the major rite of Christian initation, baptism, where it will be soon associated with unction[26].

It seems to me that an unfairly neglected field should be taken in consideration, a field concerned with various magical symbols reproduced in phylacteries on different supports (papyri, metal leafs, gems). In Late Antiquity, these phylacteries are often engraved with symbols looking more or less like current alphabets (Latin, Greek or semitic ones) or unalphabetical series (literary *apparatus* signs, arithmetical, geometrical, musical or astrological symbols). Magical, philosophical and patristic texts often call them *charaktères* (*χαρακτῆρες*), a denomination usually adopted by archaeologists and philologists.

Numerous *charaktères* are shown in Hans Dieter Betz's edition of Greek Magical Papyri in translation[27]. The two pictures reproduced here give some examples of this sort of signs. By metonymie, phylacteries alike could be called *charaktères*, as it can be seen in the second excerpt below (Basil of Caesarea).

Fig. 1 : Egypte, lapis-lazuli. *Ouroboros* (*δράκων οὐροβόρος*) enclosing *charaktères*. Kelsey Museum (Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.), n° 26052.[28]

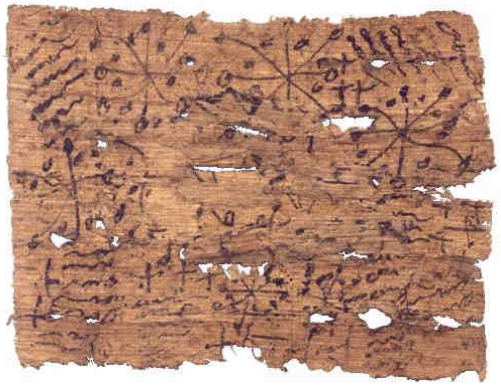

Fig. 2 : Egypte, *charaktères* on papyrus phylactery. Pap. Duke.inv. n° 526.[29]

The relationship between Christian cross and *charaktères* is illustrated by the Fathers of the Church, who intended to contrast practices which in fact are very close :

> 1) « Amulets and charms are useless remedies. [...] An old woman has recited for you the snake incantation, taking for price twenty obols or a quarter of wine ; and you were remaining here, left dazed like a donkey, carrying around the neck the quadruped's dirt (*τὴν ῥυπαρίαν τῶν τετραπόδων*), and denying the seal of salutary cross (*τὴν σφραγῖδα τοῦ σωτηρίου σταυροῦ*). Not only diseases fear this seal, but the entire evil troop is afraid and filled with terror. That is the reason why there is no magician stamped with the seal (i.e. baptized). »[30]

[25] See especially PLINY, *Nat. Hist.*, XXVIII, ch. 7, § 36-38 ; ch. 13, § 60 and 64.

[26] L. RENAUT, *Marquage corporel et signation religieuse* [PhD Thesis], 2004, p. 767-770.

[27] H. D. BETZ (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, 2nd ed., Chicago / London : University of Chicago Press, 1992.

[28] C. BONNER, *Studies in magical amulets chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Londres : University of Michigan Press, 1950, n° 292. Illustration from http://www.lib.umich.edu/pap/magic/images/10.jpg. Similar configuration (*οὐροβόρος* enclosing *χαρακτῆρες*) in *PGM* VII (*P. Lond.* 121, IIIe / IVe s.), l. 586 sq.

[29] Illustration from http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/images/150dpi/526-at150.gif (Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C., U.S.).

[30] PSEUDO(?)-ATHANASIUS, *De amuletis* [fragment], *PG* 26, col. 1320 A-B.

2) « Your child falls ill ? You ask for the enchanter (*τὸν ἐπαοιδόν*), or for this one who hangs the magical *charaktères* (*τοὺς περιέργους χαρακτῆρας*) around little childrens' neck ; or at last you come to ask for the doctor and for remedies, neglecting the One who has the power to save. »[31]

3) « But we [Christians] by the naming of Christ crucified (*ὀνομάζοντες τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον Χριστόν*) put all demons to flight, whom you fear as if they were gods. Where the sign of the Cross is (*ἔνθα τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ σταυροῦ γίνεται*), magic is weak and remedies do not work (*ἀσθενεῖ μὲν μαγεία, οὐκ ἐνεργεῖ δὲ φαρμακεία*). [...] And having said this, Anthony called upon Christ (*ἐπεκαλέσατο τὸν Χριστόν*), and signed (*ἐσφράγισε*) the sufferers two or three times with the sign of the Cross. And immediately the men stood up whole, and in their right mind, and forthwith gave thanks unto the Lord. »[32]

The last extract shows how the signing the cross can be linked with naming and calling upon « the Christ crucified » (*τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον Χριστόν*). This "draw-and-invoke" procedure can be found again in pagan phylacteries, where *charaktères* are called upon as personal gods :

« Holy names and symbols and dread *charaktères* (*φοβερ[οὶ] χαρακτῆρες*), protect from all dangers the man or woman who carries your [aug]ust divine powers. »[33]

« I adjure you, holy angels and archangels and holy Eulamôn and holy assessors and holy Symphonia and holy *charaktères*, who are inscribed in this lead lamella [...]. »[34]

In his *Egyptian Mysteries* (*Περὶ τῶν αἰγυπίων μυστηρίων*, c. 300 AD), Iamblichus answers to the lost treatise of Porphyry *Letter to Anebon* (c. 263-268 AD). A short quotation of this letter talks about a « private and non public form of divination » (*εἶδος ἰδιωτικὸν καὶ οὐ δημόσιον μαντείας*) performed by « those who are standing on *charaktères* » (*οἱ δ' ἐπὶ χαρακτήρων στάντες*)[35]. Modern commentators provide no relevant parallels to this quotation. Even so, I found myself an interesting document suggesting a very old practice :

« [To see] an oracular decision (and/or) a dream. [You set out] a censer of juniper during the night, before the stars of the night. You recite this incantation three times over (a piece of) tamarisk. You place [.....]. At the head of your bed [.....] You draw (your) own personal god (out) of cheap scented flour. You lie down, and you will see an (oracular) decision (*purussû*). »[36]

The sketch to be drawn is depicted in two cuneiform tablets of the serie[37]. It consists in four intersecting lines in two different but approaching

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[31] BASIL OF CAESAREA, *In psal*. 45, § 2, *PG* 29, col. 417 C.

[32] ATHANASIUS, *Life of Anthony* (shortly after 356 AD), ch. 78 and 80.

[33] Reverse of a bronze pendant from Beisan (Palestine) : *ἅγια ὀνόματα κ[αὶ] σύ[μ]βολα κ[αὶ] φοβερ[οὶ] χαρακτῆρες φυλάξατ[ε τ]ὸν φοροῦνταν ἢ τὴν φ[ο]ροῦσα{σ}ν τὰς [σεπ]τὰς θίας ὑ[μῶν] δυνάμ(ε)ις [ἀ]πὸ πά[ν]των κινδ[ύνω]ν*. On the obverse, very corroded, were the names, symbols and *charaktères* invoked, and a demonic figure drawn with dotted lines (C. BONNER, *Studies in magical amulets*, *op. cit*., 1950, n° 317, pl. XVI, and p. 215-216, 305).

[34] R. WÜNSCH, *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln aus Rom*, Leipzig : Teubner, 1898, n° 16, l. 71-75 (with *voces magicae* and *χαρακτῆρες*), p. 19 : *Ὅτι ὑμᾶς 72 ὁρκίζο ἁγ[ίους ἀν]γέλους καὶ ἀρχανγέλους καὶ ἅγιον 73 Εὐλάμοναν καὶ ἁγίους παρέδρους καὶ [ἁγί]α Συμφων[ία] 74 [καὶ] ἁγίους χ[αρα]κτῆρες οὕσπερ γεγραμμένους ἐν τού-75-τῳ τῷ πετάλῳ τῷ ψυχρωφώρῳ* [...]. The « holy *χαρακτῆρες* » are called upon again in n° 17, l. 38-39 ; n° 18, l. 19 ; n° 20, l. 27 ; n° 23, l. 22-23 ; n° 26, l. 28 ; n° 29, l. 12-13 ; n° 31, l. 5.

[35] IAMBLICHUS, *De myst*., III, ch. 1, ed. É. DES PLACES, *CUF*, 1966, p. 116-117.

[36] S. A. L. BUTLER, *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals* (Alter Orient und Lates Testament, 258), Münster : Ugarit-Verlag, 1998, p. 366-367 : *Rituals to obtain a purussû* (ROP), obverse, col. II, l. 48-51.

[37] O. R. GURNEY and J. J. FINKELSTEIN, *The Sultantepe Tablets*, 1 (Occasional Publications of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankhara, 3), London, 1957, pl. XCI, n° 73, l. 48-51 ; O. R. GURNEY, *Ur Excavations Texts*, 7 : *Middle Baby-*

patterns. A second ritual, set aside « to speak with his personal god and his personal goddess, and to learn his future », shows two crude anthropomorphic drawings provided as models :

> « You cleanse yourself according to the rules (?) for a pure man and a pure woman. You draw sketches of Ea and Asalluhi. You [.....] with your personal god and your personal goddess. They will decide your own future for you. You draw [this] sketch which I drew for you. »[38]

The former recipe is unquestionably the most astonishing one. Maybe the drawing of geometrical patterns was a common feature in a well-established tradition of Near Eastern magic — a tradition which remained unfortunately "private", and therefore endowed with insufficient historical visibility. To find a more consistant account of this "underground" tradition, we must turn towards authors with an inquiring mind, like Julius Africanus. In the years 230s AD, Julius collects and describes a great number of phylacteries intended for human beings, but also for animals (especially for horses)[39]. Julius commands to inscribe within (or above) a "pentagon" (i.e. ☆) or an "hexagon" (i.e. ✡) various *charaktères* which he calls *σημεῖα*. Sometimes he adds Greek or Latin formulae, and even animals drawings. Julius Africanus' *σημεῖα* are nothing but musical symbols belonging to vocal and instrumental series[40] :

Pentagons	n° 1	n° 2	n° 3	n° 4	n° 5	n° 6	n° 7	n° 8	n° 9
Vocal signs	⊿	⊿	R	∀	⋎	Φ	C	P	Π
Instrumental signs	⊢	Γ	L	⊿	⋎	F	C	∪	Ɔ

The question remains wether Julius is innovative or not, especially with the musical symbols, whose the use is unknown elsewhere in magic. At least his contribution bears witness to the great interest in this matter on the part of the intellectuals. Neoplatonism and broadly late antique philosophical circles display indeed a heightened awareness of *charaktères*. The emperor Julian could write :

> « The unutterable and even unknown nature of *charaktères* is useful : not only it heals souls, but bodies too, and it causes gods arrival (*καὶ θεῶν ποιεῖ παρουσίας*). »[41]

According to Saloustios, Julian's friend and adviser, *charaktères* are even quite fine copies of the superior gods :

> « The *charaktères* imitate unutterable powers from above (*οἱ δὲ χαρακτῆρες (μιμοῦνται) τὰς ἀρρήτους ἄνω δυνάμεις*) . »[42]

Proclus (412-485 AD) goes further. According to him, the cruciform diagram of Plato's *Timaeus*, the great X (*χῖ*) depicted by the World's Soul[43], is the supreme *charaktèr*, the essential image of cosmic order and a model for

Ionian Legal Documents and Other Texts, London, 1974, pl. LVII, n° 118, obverse, l. 4-7.

[38] S. A. L. BUTLER, *op. cit.*, p. 367 : ROP, obverse, col. II, l. 56-60 ; O. R. GURNEY and J. J. FINKELSTEIN, *op. cit.*, pl. XCI, n° 73, l. 56-60.

[39] See J.-R. VIEILLEFOND, *Les "Cestes" de Julius Africanus. Étude sur l'ensemble des fragments avec édition, traduction et commentaire* (Publications de l'Institut français de Florence, 1ère série : Collection d'études d'histoire, de critique et de philologie, 20), Florence / Paris, 1970.

[40] For a more complete board, see J.-R. VIEILLEFOND, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[41] JULIAN, *Speech* VII (362 AD), § 11 (216c), ed. G. ROCHEFORT, *CUF*, 1963, p. 59.

[42] SALOUSTIOS, *Of Gods and of the World* (362 AD), ch. 15, § 2, éd. G. ROCHEFORT, *CUF* 1960, p. 20.

[43] Namely the intersection of ecliptical circle (i.e. zodiac) with celestial equator (PLATO, *Timaeus* 36b-c).

individual souls[44]. Proclus also refers to other personal *charaktères* used to call upon heroes and wise men :

> « *Charaktères* of Heracles, Pentheus, Agavae and Plato himself. But these *charaktères*, only gods are able to know and reveal »[45].

Is Constantine not the favoured emperor to whom God revealed the personal *charaktèr* of his Word (*Logos*) ? Was it not logical that *Logos*' *charaktèr* — called *caeleste signum Dei* by Lactantius — had some likeness with the supreme *charaktèr* of the World's Soul, the χῖ ? That may have been allusively suggested by Lactantius who explains the sign ☩ as a rotated letter X (*transversa X littera*). It should be also noted that instead of naming the letter P (ῥῶ) of Χριστός, Lactantius deals with the « top part curved in [half-]circle (*summo capite circumflexo*) ». Maybe this wording could bring to mind a common feature of many *charaktères*, i. e. the fact that endings of lineaments often carry small circles, like ℕ ℵ ℣ ⁂.

A quotation of Porphyry by Proclus supplies another common feature between surrounded Christogram ⊛ and World's Soul *charaktèr* :

> « As reported by Porphyry, among Egyptians there was a *charaktèr* of this kind (ἦν τις τοιοῦτος χαρακτὴρ), which, surrounding the χῖ by a circle (τῷ Χ κύκλον περιβαλών), gives the World's Soul symbol (σύμβολον φέρων τῆς κοσμικῆς ψυχῆς). »[46] *id est* ⊗

Porphyry's quotation reflects the fascination with Egyptian wisdom frequently expressed by the Greeks. The latter believed that Egyptian priests owned figures (σχήματα) far more superior to common alphabetical letters, « wiser figures » in which they « enclosed a secret knowledge (ἀπόθετος γνῶσις) »[47]. For his part, Plotinus praises images (ἀγάλματα) engraved in Egyptian temples, which are « something basic and compacted » (καὶ ὑποκείμενον καὶ ἀθρόον), a science and wisdom (ἐπιστήμη καὶ σοφία) superior to letter imprints (τύποι γραμμάτων) and to letters imitating voice (μιμουμένοι φωνάς). Similar ἀγάλματα are contemplated in the upper world by gods, heroes and blessed ones, and, in this world, by the wise man[48].

A very interesting text of Proclus (Fifth century AD)[49] must be quoted. It deals with geometry, and in this text Proclus intends to set up a hierarchical classification of figures (σχήματα), starting with the more ungratefuls ones, and ending with the more august. — First are « the figures produced by art » (ἀπὸ τέχνης). — Second « the figures that are the works of nature's craftsmanship ». — Third « the figures of souls (τὰ σχήματα τῶν ψυχῶν) ». — Fourth « the intelligible figures ». — Fifth and last « the perfect, uniform, unknowable and ineffable figures of the gods (σχήματα τῶν θεῶν) ». Proclus explains afterwards that these σχήματα τῶν θεῶν are used by theurgy to adorn and consecrate statues, in different ways : a) by *charaktères* « that express the unknowable divine powers », and b) by configurations (μορφωμάτα) and imprints (τύποι), « making some standing, others sitting ; some heart-shaped, some spherical or otherwise ; some of them are simple, others composed, with several shapes (μορφαί) ».

As can be seen, neoplatonist notions about the World's Soul closely concern the cross as speculative image of the *Logos*. In the second century, Justinus had yet compared *Logos* activity and his stretching all over the

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[44] See also PROCLUS, *In Remp.*, ed. W. KROLL, vol. 2, *BT*, 1901, p. 143-144.

[45] PROCLUS, *In Tim.*, III, ed. E. DIEHL, vol. 2, *BT*, 1904, p. 256.

[46] PROCLUS, *In Tim.*, III, ed. E. DIEHL, vol. 2, *BT*, 1904, p. 247, l. 18-20.

[47] CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Contra Jul.*, IX, 299, *PG* 76, col. 960D.

[48] PLOTINUS, *Enn.* V, treatise 8, ch. 5, ed. É. BREHIER, *CUF*, 1931, p. 142.

[49] PROCLUS, *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, tr. G. R. MORROW, Princeton, 1970.

world with World's Soul layout in χῖ-shape[50]. On this subject, the short study by Wilhelm Bousset remains useful[51]. Among others, three Christian authors may be cited : Irenaeus of Lyon[52], Gregory of Nyssa[53], Basil of Caesarea[54]. It should be also necessary to take gnostic[55], heterodox[56], and manichaean[57] literature into account, and to compare this material with neoplatonist texts. This working plan, too large to be treated here, meets the first intent of this present contribution : showing how a general concept dealing with (neo-)Platonic ideas' theory and geometry has found a relevant issue in the different Christian cruciform symbols. Enlightening this concept should be helpful to understand Christian attitude towards images in general, which often agrees with an aniconism being latent until the iconoclastic crisis. As Plato said in the *Republic*, geometry is a way of knowledge far more superior to « shaded painting » (*σκιαγραφία*), i. e. figurative arts[58]. In the Antiquity, reproduction of and speculations about geometrical figures were on the philosophical syllabus. With the cross, Christianity had the opportunity to turn to practical works[59]. Today, my only purpose was to show that before and parallel to the cross, other symbols, the *charaktères*, were ready to be (and have already been) included in the program. This wealthy symbolical substratum must be taken in account : is it not because « *charaktères* imitate (*μιμοῦνται*) unutterable powers from above » (Saloustios) that Constantine was commanded to make a « likeness » (*μίμημα*) of the sign he had seen in the heavens (Eusebius) ?

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[50] JUSTINUS, *Apol. I*, ch. 60, § 1.

[51] W. BOUSSET, « Platons Weltseele und das Kreuz Christi », *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde des Urchristentums*, 14, 1913, p. 273-285.

[52] *Demonstr.*, ch. 34, éd. A. ROUSSEAU, *SC* 406, Paris, 1995, p. 130-133.

[53] See J. DANIÉLOU, « Le symbolisme cosmique de la croix », *La Maison-Dieu*, 75, 1963, p. 23-36. Three texts are translated by A. ROUSSEAU in *Demonstr*, *op. cit*., p. 372-376.

[54] *Comm. in Is.*, *PG* 30, col. 557 : « an intelligible cross has been crucified with the whole world before the woody cross (*πρὸ τοῦ ξυλίνου σταυροῦ νοητός τις τῷ κόσμῳ παντὶ συνεσταύρωται*) ».

[55] Very worthy of note are *The Books of Jeu and the untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, ed. C. SCHMIDT, transl. and comm. V. MACDERMOT (*The Coptic Gnostic Library*, *Nag Hammadi Studies*, 13), Leiden, 1978. See also P. CORBY FINNEY, « Did Gnostics make pictures ? », *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism* (Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978), vol. 1 : *The School of Valentinus*, éd. Bentley LAYTON, Leiden, 1980, p. 434-454.

[56] J.-D. KAESTLI, « Le mystère de la croix de lumière et le johannisme - Actes de Jean ch. 94-102 », *Foi et Vie*. *Cahier biblique*, 26, 1987, p. 35-46. J.-M. PRIEUR, « La croix vivante dans la littérature chrétienne du IIe siècle », *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, 79, 1999, p. 435-444.

[57] On this topic, see A. BÖHLIG « Zur Vorstellung vom Lichtkreuz in Gnostizismus und Manichäismus », *Gnosis, Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, Göttingen, 1978, p. 473-491.

[58] See PLATO, *Rep*. VI, 510d-511a ; VII, 527b-c ; X, 602d-e.

[59] On Christian iconography, see L. RENAUT, « La description d'une croix cosmique par Jean de Gaza, poète palestinien du VIe siècle », *Iconographica*. *Mélanges offerts à Piotr Skubiszewski*, éd. R. FAVREAU et M.-H. DEBIÈS, Poitiers, 1999, p. 211-220.