

The Power of the Cross

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From the reign of Constantine onwards the cross transformed rapidly from a symbol of disgrace into the Christian symbol par excellence. It became prominent as the symbol of life, light and salvation. The sign of the cross became visible everywhere: it was depicted on coins, houses, sarcophagi and weapons, sewn on clothes and tattooed on bodies. The cross was not only a symbol, it was also real and present. Around the year 330 pieces of wood, considered to be the cross on which Christ had died, were found in Jerusalem, and relics of it were soon distributed throughout the world. The cross was thought by believers to have the power of healing; it offered protection against evil and was able to ward off demonic powers. But the cross was perhaps foremost a sign that brought victory and power for Christianity and Christian rulers.

In my paper I will focus on the cross as a symbol of victory and power over Christianity's adversaries. Since this is a rather broad subject I intend to concentrate on celestial appearances of luminous crosses in the fourth century and the way in which they can be viewed as reflecting the power of Christianity. I will deal briefly with Constantine's famous vision of a celestial cross before the battle of the Pons Milvius (312) and its eastern counterpart at the Danube, but I will pay particular attention to two appearances of the cross in the sky above Jerusalem. The first took place in 351; of this we have a fascinating report in the form of a letter to the emperor Constantius II by Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem at the time. The appearance of the cross was clearly meant to advance the position of Jerusalem within the power structures of the time. The second occurred in 363 when the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple had just started; in the aftermath of this event the restoration of the Temple was abandoned. Of this appearance we have reports by, i.a., Gregory of Nazianzus and the Church Historians. In this case the cross may be seen as symbolizing victory over Judaism.