

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHI-RHO IN ROMANO-BRITISH
MOSAICS

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In

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by

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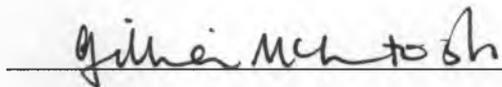
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I certify that I have read, "The Political Implications of the Chi-Rho in Romano-British Mosaics," by Serena Nichole Crosson, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Classics: Latin and Classical Archaeology at San Francisco State University.



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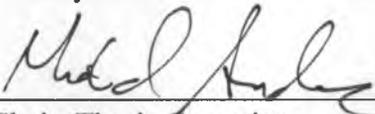
THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHI-RHO IN ROMANO-BRITISH
MOSAICS

Serena Nichole Crosson
San Francisco, California
2016

This thesis addresses issues of representation and interpretation regarding the Chi-Rho monogram in the fourth century Romano-British villas from Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone. The presence of the monogram and “pagan” imagery together in these villas has facilitated many discussions about the spread of Christianity in the province and the transference of Christian ideologies onto ancient myths. However, past interpretations of the Chi-Rho have been limited on account of the assumption that there was a strict divide between paganism and Christianity at this time, and thus the Chi-Rho has often been treated as an indisputably Christian symbol.

In the following pages I examine the form of the Chi-Rho and the historical conditions under which it spread to Britain in the fourth century. I argue that the formal and historical contexts of the symbol reveal that the Chi-Rho alone cannot tell us whether or not Christians were present in these villas, nor can we assume that the Chi-Rho itself was intended to be viewed under a single, Christian lens, especially in representations where non-Christian elements were present, as is the case in the villas.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

28 March 2016

Date

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
1. The Chi-Rho and Past Scholarship on the Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone Villas.....	5
2. Syncretism in Roman Britain.....	10
3. The Chi-Rho and Symbolic Syncretism	13
4. Emperors and Sun Gods.....	17
5. The Villas.....	23
5.1 Hinton St. Mary	24
5.2 Frampton.....	34
5.3 Lullingstone	40
Conclusion	48
Bibliography	51
Appendix- IMAGES.....	57

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix	Page
1. IMAGES.....	42

Introduction

Historical records that account for the spread of Christianity in the British province tells a story of gradual growth, not immediate takeover. According to Tertullian (c. 160-240CE), Christians were in Britain by the third century.¹ By the fourth, there were a handful of operational dioceses, judging from the church officials that represented Britain at the Council of Arles in AD 314.² However, after the Council of Arles and the Council of Nicaea in 325, Christianity was still not the dominant religion in Britain during the fourth century, and polytheistic worship continued in Britain into the fifth century.³ Even Emperor Constantine, who promoted Christianity and forbade Christian prosecution, was not baptized into the Christian faith until he was on his deathbed in 337.

There is little written evidence from Roman Britain dating to the fourth century, so scholars are reliant upon the material evidence to reconstruct the history of the province. From the material evidence, the appearance of the Chi-Rho monogram, $\chi\rho$, has become one of the chief methods of measuring the spread of Christianity in Roman Britain from fourth century onward. The symbol was introduced by Constantine to the empire in 312, and its subsequent appearances in Roman Britain has led to the conclusion

¹Tert. *Adversus Iudaeos* 7.4: [...] *et Galliarum diversae nationes et Britannorum inaccessa Romanis loca Christo vero subdita et Sarmatarum* [...]

²Haddan and Stubbs, 1869: 7. When the Council at Arles took place in AD 314, the historical leger records that five Christian officers arrived as representatives from Britain: three were bishops, one a priest, and one a deacon.

³Henig, 2003:119-138.

there from 312 onward.⁴ This conclusion depends upon the assumption that the Chi-Rho was only interpreted as a reference to Christ and was used by Christians to express their faith. In cases where the symbol appears with images from the Classical milieu,⁵ the explanation has been that the pagan images function as allegories for Christian ideologies and practices.

This thesis analyses three fourth century Romano-British villas where the Chi-Rho appears amongst non-Christian images: Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone. The mosaics at Hinton St. Mary and Frampton were executed in common Romano-pagan styles which included scenes from Classical mythology such as Bellerophon slaying Chimaera and Dionysus riding a leopard. At Lullingstone, wall paintings with the Chi-Rho appeared on a floor above a room that was reserved for non-Christian forms of worship, but the villa also housed mosaics of Bellerophon slaying Chimaera and Europa and the Bull.

In the following pages, I challenge the notion that Chi-Rho has a static meaning. The historical evidence not only reveals that the Chi-Rho had strong political connotations in association with Emperor Constantine, but also experienced a degree of symbolic syncretism with non-Christian deities. Since it is possible that the appropriation of the Chi-Rho monogram was inspired by non-religious reasons, it is prudent to

⁴ Frere, 1987: 321-22.

⁵ By "Classical" scenes, I mean images that refer to the visual depictions of ancient Greek and Roman mythology.

reconsider claims that the villas are “Christian” just because the symbol appears in each of them.

In part one of this paper, “The Chi-Rho and Past Scholarship on the Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone Villas,” I establish my interpretive methodology for discussing the Chi-Rho and its symbolic aspects. The Chi-Rho, at least in Romano-British scholarship, has often been treated as having only two aspects: *signifier* and *signified*.⁶ This approach has neglected interpretive variables such as the history of the symbol and its physical manifestations. I attribute this neglect to a preoccupation with the idea of the “triumph of Christianity over paganism” in the scholarship which has limited the parameters for discussing the symbol in the villas to Christian-centered readings. I propose that the historical and religious contexts of the symbol may be helpful for our interpretation of the symbol in the villas.

In part two, “Syncretism in Roman Britain,” I give an overview of the practice of syncretism in the province and emphasize that such practices were not restricted to *interpretatio* (the verbal equation of one deity with another), but often included iconographic combinations of two or more foreign deities.

In part three, “The Chi-Rho and Symbolic Syncretism,” I describe the form of the Chi-Rho, its known origins, variations in its representation, and contemporary symbols

⁶ Collingwood and Richmond, 1930 [Revised 1969]: 208-209; Frere, 1987: 322-323; Perring, 2003: 97-127; Todd, 1981: 220; Toynbee, 1964: 224-227.

that shared similar characteristics. These similarities point to a strong possibility of symbolic syncretism between the Chi-Rho and other symbols that were associated with sun gods such as Sol Invictus, Mithras, and Taranis.

In part four, “Emperors and Sun Gods,” I outline the historical conditions which encouraged the spread of the Chi-Rho, which had largely to do with the symbol’s employment by Constantine the Great. Constantine’s personal use of the symbol shows that the emperor continued to use imagery associated with the sun god, Sol Invictus, during the same time that he was popularizing the Chi-Rho. The circulation of imperial coinage and Constantine’s time in Britain likely affected the way the symbol was used in private contexts by Roman Britons, especially considering that this province played a seminal role in Constantine’s rise to power.

In part five, “The Villas,” I argue that the ambiguity of the Chi-Rho amongst scenes from Classical mythology necessitates a revised approach to interpreting the symbol at Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone. Here I propose additional interpretive possibilities for the symbol and its surrounding artistic contexts that consider symbolic syncretism, imperial influence, and data from the villas themselves.

Throughout this thesis I use specific, but uncomplicated, terminology to define religious practices in a way that is respectful to the diversity of cult beliefs that existed in Roman Britain during the fourth century. In order to avoid treating Christianity and paganism in a binary relationship, and in respect of the plurality of practices under the

“pagan” label, I use phrases such as “Romano-pagan,” or “Greco-Roman,” instead of just “pagan,” to refer to traditional Roman cult practices that involved deities from the Classical cannon. In a similar vein, I use terms like “Celtic” to refer broadly to native British-Gallic practices, and name specific cults when necessary. I also use the words “image,” “scene,” and “symbol” in descriptions of the data set. “Image” is used in reference to a specific figure in a “scene.” A “scene” depicts a series of figures on an object that either communicates a particular story or theme. “Symbol” is used in reference to any sign that conveys, or has the potential to convey, an abstract concept such as “Christianity,” “afterlife,” or “initiation.” The images, scenes, and symbols in this paper are treated in a way that attempts to employ realistic contemporary interpretations of the Chi-Rho in multiple physical and artistic contexts.

1. The Chi-Rho and Past Scholarship on the Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone Villas

The Chi-Rho is a monogram formed by the first two letters of the Greek word for “Christ” (Χρῖστος). Thus, X+P = $\chi\rho$. As a symbol, it has a “primary or literal meaning” which “designates another indirect, secondary and figurative meaning.”⁷ From a poststructuralist point of view, the Chi-Rho should be considered beyond the idea that it

⁷ Hodder, 1982.

represented “Christianity” within a system of the opposing ideas of “paganism” and “Christianity.” Such a system is biased towards modern conceptions of Christianity that were not applicable in the fourth century, and incorrectly assumes that the Christian-pagan opposition is universal.⁸

The Chi-Rho has been discussed at length in works dealing with Constantine the Great and early Christian symbology, but these discussions are bound by the modern narrative of how Christians fought and eventually triumphed over paganism within the Roman Empire. For Britain, the common narrative is that the natives were “Romanized” from their indigenous practices, and then Roman-Britons progressed from their “pagan” practices to Christian worship between the second and fourth centuries.⁹ There is a preference in the scholarship for finding undisputable evidence of Christianity in the province, which in turn is treated with greater significance than non-Christian findings. For example, in 1981 Malcom Todd wrote that in Southern Britain during the fourth century “the vogue was for figured mosaics, often alive with scenes from Graeco-Roman

⁸ Webster, 1997: 324-338.

⁹ According to Bede’s history Christianity was never able to have a complete hold on the province even at the end of the fourth century, and possibly began to die out after Rome withdrew support for the province after AD 410. He narrated how the savage Angles, or post-Roman Britons, had to be converted by Augustine of Hippo in the sixth century: “In the fourteenth year of this emperor and about 150 years after the coming of the Angles to Britain, Gregory, prompted by divine inspiration, sent a servant of God named Augustine and several more God-fearing monks with him to preach the word of God to the English race” (Bede, *Ecc. Hist.* I.23). Bede also told a parable about Gregory’s encounter with some British slave boys at Rome, who were apparently “heathens”: “He was told that they [the boys] came from the island of Britain, whose inhabitants were like that in appearance. He asked again whether those islanders were Christians or still entangled in the errors of heathenism. He was told that they were heathen” (*Ecc. Hist.* II.1).

mythology, but occasionally hinting at more serious or more sophisticated tastes, as in the Christian pavements at Hinton St. Mary and Frampton, and in the Gnostic symbolism of the Brading mosaics.”¹⁰ The implication here is that the “Christian” pavements naturally possessed a higher degree of sophistication by promoting intellectual activities that were superior to their Greco-Roman counterparts. Todd went on to discuss the “splendid frescoes” at Lullingstone, the “serene majesty” of the “Christ mosaic” at Hinton St. Mary, and to propose that the Frampton mosaic was part of a “devotional chamber.” He nowhere mentions the non-Christian elements of these villas, but consistently praises the execution of the interior décor, and states that “British Christians were tapping the mainstream of western art and ideas in the fourth century.”¹¹

Sheppard Frere was also concerned with tracing the growth of Christianity in his 1987 history of Roman Britain, *Britannia*, and identified the villas at Lullingstone, Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Chedworth as “Christian” because of the Chi-Rho monogram. He posited that Christianity had first spread to Britain from eastern traders and was initially a minority religion, but in the fourth century (after the Council of Arles) “it was through the wider aristocracy that Christianity reached the villas, where wider evidence exists for it.”¹² His “wider evidence” was from the villas mentioned above, but, like Todd, he does not mention their Romano-pagan features, and the remainder of the

¹⁰ Todd, 1981: 220.

¹¹ Todd, 1981: 228-229.

¹² Frere, 1987: 322.

section was dedicated to the progress of Christianity and the “decay of paganism.” To Frere’s credit, he makes the concession that “we are now entering an era when events are recorded from the Christian viewpoint,” but then continues to talk about the process of Christianization in terms of its *incompletion* and *survival* throughout the fifth century, thus illustrating that he was unable to detach himself from the Christian viewpoint that Britain’s conversion to Christianity was inevitable.¹³

Frere’s work illustrates the difficulties of circumventing the Christianity-defeats-paganism narrative, even if one is able to recognize the narrative itself. Martin Henig previously observed that “[t]riumphant Christendom rewrote history,” conveying that retrospective views of Christianity have made it easy to ignore evidence that does not contribute to the process of Christianization.¹⁴ Even in Collingwood and Richmond’s work, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain*, it is difficult to find information that would help to explain the Romano-pagan elements that were a part of the Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone villas.¹⁵ Instead, the Chi-Rho alone appears to be all one needs to know about them. Only a few have recognized that this is not necessarily the case, but even then the conversations have not progressed much past the call to action. For example, Catherine Johns and T.W. Potter, in a 1992 history of Roman Britain

¹³ Frere, 1987: 323.

¹⁴ Henig, 1984: 121.

¹⁵ Collingwood and Richmond, 1930; [repr.] 1969: 208-209. The villas get one sentence: “Later, the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ is not uncommon. In structures it occurs on mosaic pavements at Frampton and Hinton St. Mary, both in Dorset, and is associated with a head of Christ upon the latter floor. [...] while at Lullingstone villa a wreathed Chi-Rho is thrice repeated on the walls of the house-church.”

acknowledged the manifestations of Christian belief in the villas, but then delegated further investigation to future scholarship, saying, “[O]ne day there must be further study of these precious survivals from the early Christian past.”¹⁶

The “precious survivals” from the villas cannot be understood without placing them within the context of Romano-British cult practices, especially that of syncretism. Syncretism is the process by which two similar, but foreign, deities are equated. It is manifested through a combination of signs and symbols referring to the deities involved, or by inscriptions that refer to one god or goddess by two names, a practice known as *interpretatio*. When it comes to syncretism involving Christian images and symbols, most scholars have tried to explain the surrounding pagan images in terms of the Christian elements, and not the other way around. This type of approach (which is biased towards the Christian evidence) was attributed by Jane Webster to European “Othering and positive imperialism” inherited from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. This process led to a trend in Classical scholarship to describe syncretism, as seen in Christianity, as an inevitable progression that was cast as a *neutral* process: “In this context, archaeological interpretations of syncretism within the Roman Empire have been strongly influenced by one of the long-lived ‘Othering’ strategies by which the West has categorized its colonial Others—the opposition Christian : pagan.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Johns and Potter, 1992: 207.

¹⁷ Webster, 1997: 330-331.

2. Syncretism in Roman Britain

It is limiting to discuss material evidence from the fourth century as being either “pagan” or “Christian” before considering the processes of syncretism and *interpretatio* in Roman Britain. From a strictly aesthetic point of view, many of the artefacts from Roman Britain during the fourth century have Celtic, Classical Greco-Roman, Roman-Christian, and Eastern designs, motifs, themes, and symbols.¹⁸ The most frequently cited example comes from Bath, where the Roman goddess, Minerva, was identified as the local water goddess *Aquae Sulis*; thus, at Bath there is a temple dedicated to *Sulis-Minerva*, and a number of other artefacts from the site bear this *interpretatio*.¹⁹ Additionally, a relief carving found in Bath portrays the three Mother Goddesses with abstract features that are not thought to be Roman.²⁰

These phenomena should not be attributed to a natural process of fusion; many examples (some dated well into the fourth century) appear as distinctly Roman or distinctly Celtic works of art, which illustrates that Romano-Britons were conscious of the difference between “local” and “foreign” styles and designs.²¹ We can therefore assume that any decision to blend Roman, Celtic, and potentially other designs and

¹⁸ Salway, 1993: 469-529.

¹⁹ Frere, 1987: 318; Richmond and Toynbee, 1955: 97-105; Salway, 1993: 487.

²⁰ Millett, 1990: 115.

²¹ Elsner, 1998: 217-220.

symbols was deliberate. For this reason, it is just as important to notice the combinations in designs and symbols as it is to highlight a single symbol such as the Chi-Rho.

As it stands there are few finds from Roman Britain from the fourth century that can be considered to have purely “Christian” designs. For example, the silver hoard from Water Newton (c. 350) has been considered the earliest set of dish-wares designed and used for liturgical purposes.²² The reason for this designation is the repeated inscription of the Chi-Rho monogram flanked by an alpha and omega on the vessels, in addition to a significant absence of any other designs and symbols [IMAGE 1]. However, as Johns and Potter note, half of the Water Newton items are “votive leaf-shaped plaques of pagan type, half of which bear chi-rho monograms.”²³ The votive plaques with the Chi-Rho illustrate that Romano-British Christians were open to manipulating Romano-pagan items for their own purposes [IMAGE 2]. The form of the other vessels from the hoard does not communicate any special Christian use outside of the inscriptions.²⁴

The counter example to Water Newton is the Mildenhall Treasure from Suffolk [IMAGE 3]. It was believed by Cummins to have been imported from Gaul or elsewhere in the Mediterranean, and he estimates that it dates from as early as the late third century, to as late as the mid-fourth century.²⁵ The collection is known for the elaborate silver

²² Johns and Potter, 1992: Plate IX.

²³ Johns and Potter, 1992: 209.

²⁴ Salway, 1993: 515.

²⁵ Cummins, 1995: 66-73.

plates decorated with Dionysian images in relief; but also with the hoard was a number of silver spoons with the Chi-Rho inscribed [IMAGE 4].²⁶ The sheer size of the hoard and the detail of the “Great Dish” and accompanying plates often overshadow the fact that the items from the collection hoard communicate different meanings as a collection versus when each item is considered separately. Likewise, since the items were found together, scholars tend to interpret them as a set that once held a singular function for the owner,²⁷ although the fact of their burial at the same site does not mean that the hoard was a set in itself.²⁸ This uncertainty should make us cautious in interpreting the designs and symbols of the Mildenhall Treasure as intercommunicative: unlike the villas, the Chi-Rho appears on separate objects and should not be interpreted alongside the other pieces from the hoard.

However, individual pieces from the hoard provide insight into the decorative styles of the time and the extent to which syncretism played a part in how some deities were represented. For example, the central figure of the Great Dish, which Toynbee

²⁶ Johns and Potter, 1992: 129. Similar spoons have been found in the hoards from Traprain Law and Thetford.

²⁷ For example, three out of the eight spoons discovered from the Mildenhall Treasure have the Chi-Rho monogram flanked by Alpha and Omega, and another two are engraved with the names *Papittedo* and *Pacentia* and the motto *vivas*. The remaining three spoons have foliate designs. This evidence has been enough for some to conclude that a least parts of the hoard, like that from Water Newton, were used for Christian liturgical practices (Henig, 1984: 133; Painter, 1971: 162). However, as with the dining wares from Water Newton, it is just as likely that the hoard- if it indeed belonged to one owner and was assembled from different sources over a period of time- was used for regular dining practices.

²⁸ Cummins, 1995: 66. Cummins suggests that the hoard was probably hidden from invading Picts, or were already stolen items that were buried for safe-keeping.

identified as Oceanus,²⁹ is extremely similar to the gorgon-head depicted on the central shield of the pediment of the Temple of Sulis-Minerva at Bath [IMAGE 5].³⁰ The hair on each figure extends in waves, but these turn into snakes and wings on the pediment, whereas on the Great Dish dolphin heads sprout from between the figure's thick tresses [IMAGE 6]. Two fourth-century mosaics, one from Withington and the other from Frampton, depict a similar water deity with dolphins sprouting from its head [IMAGES 7 and 8].³¹ The figure in the Great Dish and the mosaics is typically identified as Neptune or Oceanus, but the influence of a Celtic water deity such as Nodens should not be ruled out.³²

The examples above remind us that syncretism extended beyond ideological *interpretatio* to the visual portrayals of deities. This, I argue, was the same case for symbols.

3. The Chi-Rho and Symbolic Syncretism

While the origin of the Chi-Rho symbol is unclear, a *terminus post quem* for the appearance of the form is marked by two early examples from the third century: one from

²⁹ Toynbee, 1964: 308.

³⁰ Frere, 1987: 318; Richmond and Toynbee, 1955: 97-105.

³¹ Painter, 1971: Plates LXXI and LXXII.

³² Watts, 1998: 9. Nodens was not only associated with Neptune, but also Mars and Silvanus. Salway, 1993: 486-487. Salway believes that the water deity from Bath likely had Celtic origins.

graffiti in the Vatican,³³ and one from the Bodmer papyri (ca. 250).³⁴ In these examples the symbol appears in different forms. In the graffito it is the familiar Chi (like a St. Andrew's cross) cut down the center by Rho: , but in the Bodmer papyri, it has a perpendicular formation: .

The Chi-Rho appears in the  form in each villa, a form which resembles another symbol that had Christian and non-Christian associations. The symbol is referred to as the “IX symbol,” which looks like: . On the one hand, this symbol could denote “Jesus Christ,” with the vertical “I” representing the iota in *Iῆσους*, and the “X” representing the Chi in *Χρῖστος*.³⁶ On the other hand, the IX symbol could be used to represent the Romano-pagan god Sol. The symbol for Sol was a simple crossing of lines to represent the rays of the sun, thus: .

The cult of Sol had eastern origins, but after Aurelian made the cult an official part of Roman religion in 274, Sol as Sol Invictus, the “Unconquered Sun,” began to regularly appear on the imperial coinage with emperors [IMAGE 9].³⁷ This is evidence of how the sun god became an important associate of later Roman emperors, and this was

³³ Guarducci, 1960: 111.

³⁴ Black, 1970: 319.

³⁵ Black, 1970: 320-324. The perpendicular form is believed to have originated *not* from the Chi and Rho in *Χρῖστος*, but the Tau and Rho in *σταυρός*, meaning “cross.” This form, called the “staurogram,” visually imitates the word it represents, as the overlap of Tau with Rho produces a cross-like symbol. Black suggested that the simplicity of the staurogram, and then the cross alone, inspired its wider use in Christian communities after the mid-fourth century.

³⁶ Black, 1970: 320.

³⁷ Henig, 1984: 214.

publicized throughout the empire through the minting process. It is even possible that stamps were created depicting Sol for imperial purposes. A late-third century bronze cube from Kingscote, Gloucestershire, has intaglios on each side, all of which depict legends of Sol, but one side in particular is almost identical to coin representations of emperor's wearing Sol's crown of rays [IMAGE 10].³⁸

It was not uncommon for Sol to be equated with a number of other gods. After all, many religions had some sort of god for the sun. In Greece and in Rome, that god was Apollo, or Helios. In Britain, Sol was often equated with the god Mithras (of Persian origin), who was a "god of light."³⁹ A dedication (c. 307-308), possibly on behalf of the imperial tetrarchy, from the London Mithraeum, illustrates the close association:

[Pro salute d(ominorum) n(ostorum) Au]g(ustorum) |
 [et nob(ilissimi)C ae(aris) | *deo Mithrae et Soli*] *Invicto*
 | [*ab oriente*] *ad* [occid]entem

"On behalf of the welfare of our August Emperors and our most noble Caesar, to the god Mithras and the Unconquered Sun from the East to the West."⁴⁰

³⁸ Henig, 1984: 215, 105.

³⁹ Henig, 1984: 97-98.

⁴⁰ *R.I.B.* 4. My translation.

In Roman Britain Mithras was commonly referred to as “the god,” but sometimes the epithet, “Invictus,” was applied to both deities.⁴¹ An example of this comes from an altar inscription from the Carrawburgh Mithraeum, which equates the two deities under the single title of “Sol Invictus Mithras,” who is represented as a single deity with sun rays behind his head [IMAGE 11].⁴² There are many examples of Greco-Roman deities being equated with provincial deities, but the Carrawburgh is an example of syncretism occurring between two cults of Eastern origin within a Western Province in a Roman dedication.

Christianity also had Eastern origins, and sometimes even Christ was represented as a sun god. In Rome, one of the earliest depictions of Christ comes from a third-century tomb vault from the Vatican cemetery under St. Peter’s. The Christian deity looks just like Sol riding in his sun chariot, and even has rays behind his head [IMAGE 12].⁴³ Likewise, a roundel from a lamp found at Dinas Emrys, Wales (c. 4th-6th cen.) offers a visual combination of the Tau-Rho encircled with sun rays, inside of which are the moon, Alpha, Omega, and Sun [IMAGE 13].⁴⁴

⁴¹ Henig, 1984: 120; 214-215.

⁴² *R.I.B.* 1546.

⁴³ Walter, 2006: 23.

⁴⁴ Thomas, 1986: 110, 196. Although the vessel was found in Wales, it was probably imported from the Mediterranean.

In Roman Britain there was also a cult to a Celtic god, Taranis, whose symbol looks like a wheel [IMAGES 14-15].⁴⁵ The shape of the wheel and the number of spokes vary in the archaeological evidence, but the circular symbol resembles versions of the Chi-Rho that are enclosed with a circle, or a wreath, and the spokes of the wheel are very much like the rays of the sun-symbol for Sol. Taranis was a god of the sky; when figuratively represented, he often holds a thunderbolt in one hand, and a wheel in the other. Taranis was equated with the Romano-pagan sky-god Jupiter, but unlike the Roman deity, Taranis' wheel is evocative of the sun. Many items with the wheel of Taranis have survived from Roman Britain, most in the form of jewelry. One is a head-piece with the wheel symbol on top [IMAGE 16]. There are a number of lead tanks with the Chi-Rho from Roman Britain, but one of them has a wheel symbol on it instead [IMAGES 17-19].

4. Emperors and Sun Gods

Roman Britons who were confronted with this symbol could have identified it as a symbol of Christ and, by extension, Christianity; however, the placement of the symbol could also denote individuals besides Christ, such as figures that were either perceived as or wanted to seem "Christ-like." One individual was Emperor Constantine.

⁴⁵ Green, 1984.

Constantine went to Britain with his father, Constantius Chlorus, in 303. When Constantius died at York in 306, his forces proclaimed Constantine as their new *Augustus* by birthright.⁴⁶ Constantine initially rejected the title, since the hereditary inheritance of office had been outlawed by Emperor Diocletian in 285 with the creation of the tetrarchy. Instead, he accepted the title of Caesar from Galerius,⁴⁷ but in the following year was promoted to Augustus anyway by Maximian, and also the latter's daughter Fausta. In 307 Constantine appears to have visited Britain again, after a campaign against the Franks.⁴⁸ Sometime in between these events Maximian retired, and raised his son Maxentius to Augustus in his stead. However, in 310 Maximian returned from retirement in force against Constantine. On his way to meet Maximian, Constantine is said to have had a vision at Grand (in the Vosges) of Apollo offering him victory. When Constantine met his foe at Marseilles, Maximian soon surrendered and then committed suicide. Constantine was in Britain again later in 310.⁴⁹

As expected, Maxentius declared war on Constantine to avenge his father's death. The two parties met at the Milvian Bridge in 312. The story of the battle is told by two contemporary sources, Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263 – 339) and Lactantius (c. 240-320).

⁴⁶ Constantius had been proclaimed Augustus along with Galerius after the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian in 305.

⁴⁷ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, Book 1. 28-31. Also recounted in Lactantius' *De Laudibus Constantini*, 44.5.

⁴⁸ Casey, 1978: 183-184. Constantine's visits to Britain are presumed by the London minting of *adventus* coins in 307, and again in 310.

⁴⁹ Casey, 1978. 184-188.

According to both, Constantine was paid a divine visit the night before the battle, just like he allegedly was before he defeated Maximian. In the *Vita Constantini* of Eusebius, the Christian god came and showed him the Chi-Rho. In response to the dream Constantine inscribed the Chi-Rho on his armor and ordered his soldiers to do the same. Constantine not only defeated Maxentius, but later entered Rome with Maxentius' head on a pike.⁵⁰

As Toynbee notes, "From that moment [AD 312] onwards the monogram became ubiquitous in Christian inscriptions, on Christian works of art, and as an emblem on the coins, medallions, etc., of *Christian emperors*."⁵¹ Every time Constantine associated himself with the symbol, he reminded the people of the moment when the Christian God sanctioned his victory over Maxentius, just as Apollo had done before his engagement with Maximian.

We cannot with accuracy say what the reaction from Roman Britons was to Constantine's acceptance of the title of *Augustus* in AD 306. However, it is likely that the people were supportive; after all, Constantine's father had provided them with security, and Constantine provided his supporters with public and private gifts inscribed with his name or his portrait.⁵² As seen above, we know that Constantine frequently visited the province in the initial years after his father's death, and contributed to numerous road

⁵⁰ Cameron, 2006: 24.

⁵¹ Toynbee: 1964. 10-11. My italics.

⁵² Hartley, 2006: 15-16.

repairs in the province within the initial months of his time as Caesar.⁵³ At York, a stone statue was erected in his honor (only the head survives), possibly as early as 306.⁵⁴ Between the years 315 and 318, Constantine acquired the title *Britannicus Maximus*. Frere says that the circumstances under which this title was gained are unknown, since there is no evidence, of a military campaign in Britain that would have substantiated it.⁵⁵ Perhaps the campaign in question was the Battle at Milvian Bridge, and the title an expression of solidarity and pride.

Although it is impossible to know Constantine's personal religious convictions, the imperial symbols employed by Constantine help us gauge the extent of his religious and political agendas. As seen previously, it was common during and after the third century for emperors to appear on Imperial coinage with solar crowns, or with the god Sol on the reverse of the coin. These coins not only suggest places that the emperor visited, depending on when and where they were minted, but also the images and symbols with which the emperor chose to associate himself.⁵⁶ Many coins minted after 312 have the Chi-Rho on the reverse side, sometimes in the form of the labarum, other times on its own, or within a wreath. These versions continued to be used by emperors after Constantine, as by Constans (Constantine's son), Magnentius, Valentinian II, and

⁵³ Frere, 1987: 336. Six new milestones were added while Constantine was Caesar, which were accompanied by restorations to the forts.

⁵⁴ Collingwood and Richmond, 1930; [repr.] 1969: 20. Only the head survives.

⁵⁵ Frere, 1987: 336.

⁵⁶ See note 44.

Gratian [IMAGES 20-26]. These examples show how the symbol, as a result of Constantine's implementation of it, came to be strongly associated with the title of emperor. Even Julian the Apostate minted coins at Rome (c. 355-360) that had the familiar sun symbol on the reverse [IMAGE 27].

The Chi-Rho was not the only sign Constantine associated himself with. Constantine is often depicted on his coins wearing a solar or laureate crown. In addition to the Chi-Rho, or the labarum, these are coins that have various reverse sides that depict Sol Invictus, Victory, or Constantine overcoming an enemy [IMAGES 28-35]. One gold solidus minted in Ticinum (c. 316) has the emperor facing forward with a nimbus behind his head on the obverse, and the four seasons depicted as small boys on the reverse with the inscription: FELICIA TEMPORA [IMAGE 36].⁵⁷

A copper coin minted in London depicts a cuirassed bust of Constantine with a laureate crown, and the reverse side depicts Sol Invictus holding a globe in his left hand with a sun symbol under his raised right hand [IMAGE 37]. The coin is dated to c. 312-313, just after the battle at the Milvian Bridge. A similar coin dated to c. 317 was also minted in London. Together, these coins not only suggest that Constantine was present in Britain, perhaps in two separate visits, after his victory over Maxentius, but also that coins were still being minted with the god Sol Invictus after the date that many like to believe Constantine had fully converted to Christianity.

⁵⁷ Hartley et al., 2006: 144, 145, no. 90.

In addition to the numismatic evidence, there are a number of other instances where Constantine demonstrated a connection to the sun god while also employing the Chi-Rho and supporting Christian establishments. For example, Sol Invictus appears as ascending on a sculpted medallion from the Arch of Constantine, right above a processional frieze of Constantine leaving Milan [IMAGE 38]. The sister design to this panel depicts Luna in the roundel descending over a procession of Constantine entering Rome [IMAGE 39].⁵⁸ Although defenders of Constantine's faith point out that the arch was commissioned by the Senate, the composition of the arch likely would have needed approval from the emperor himself. There is definitely a specific program being laid out in the arch that seeks to pay tribute to the "good emperors," given the reuse of panels from the arches of Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius.⁵⁹ Constantine wanted to be perceived as a "good emperor" himself who was victorious over his enemies. There are no Christian images on the arch, not even on the panel displaying the Battle at Milvian Bridge.

As seen above, it appears that Constantine went back and forth between utilizing the labarum or the Chi-Rho on its own, while also presenting himself as or in the presence of Sol Invictus. The conglomeration of these images on contemporary coins, art,

⁵⁸ Walter, 2006: Images 13 and 14.

⁵⁹ Hartley, 2006: 16.

and architecture shows that the emperor did not consider it a problem to use both Christian symbology and Romano-pagan symbols and images.

5. The Villas

At the same time that Constantine was reshaping the political and religious landscape of the empire, Britain was also experiencing a radical change in its urban and rural areas. There was a sudden increase in villas across its southern and south-eastern regions, while public buildings in urban areas, such as baths and amphitheaters, were going out of use.⁶⁰ The villas and their artefacts paint a picture of economic prosperity in the countryside, as measured by elaborate mosaics, wall paintings, and luxury objects such as jewelry and silverwares.⁶¹ These surviving objects tell a story of wealthy provincials moving from urban to rural areas in the fourth century, although who these individuals were is not always clear, and neither are their motivations for how they chose to decorate their new rural estates.

The villas at Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone are focal points in the material evidence that survives from this period, and consistently draw the attention of scholars because the Chi-Rho monogram appears in each.⁶² At the same time, it must be noted that the presence of the Chi-Rho alone does not mean that the inhabitants of the villa were Christian, as many have liked to believe. As seen above, the Chi-Rho itself

⁶⁰ Johns and Potter, 1992: 198-200.

⁶¹ Johns and Potter, 1992: 203.

⁶² Neal, 1981: 88, 92-96; Pearce, 2008: 193-218; Perring, 2003: 97-127; Toynbee 1964b: 12-13.

appeared in many forms in the province, and readings of the symbol are not as straightforward as one would like, as the symbol was not devoid of influence from Celtic and Romano-pagan deities like Taranis, Sol, and Mithras, particularly in Britain. It was also not separated from the person of Constantine himself, who spent a significant amount of time in the province, and appeared on the coins minted in Britain accompanied by the Chi-Rho monogram. With this evidence in mind, one should not interpret the Chi-Rho in these villas without acknowledgement that the historical and aesthetic contexts of the symbol and the villas themselves do not easily conform to a strict Christian interpretation.

I have selected the villas because the Chi-Rho appears in semi-permanent contexts, which leads me to believe that the commissioners of the mosaics and wall-paintings in which they appear were invested in how they appeared and were intended to be interpreted. In the following pages I illustrate that each villa is unique in its own right concerning the mosaics and wall-paintings in which the Chi-Rho appears, which further suggests that individual preference played a large role in how the Chi-Rho was incorporated into each decorative scheme.

5.1 Hinton St. Mary

The Villa at Hinton St Mary was discovered and excavated in 1962, and its mosaic pavement was revealed in 1963. The mosaic stretches across a bipartite room, the

division of which is marked by two short walls [IMAGES 40 and 41]. This partition is emphasized in the pavement by a rectangular band with a peltae pattern. The smaller half of the mosaic, where the entrance to this room was located, is rectangular, with an entrance on one of the shorter sides. The mosaic design is broken up into three parts: in the center is a roundel with the scene of Bellerophon slaying the Chimaera. The roundel itself is made up of an acanthus scrolls design, and is enclosed in a square. The corner spaces of this square depict four canthari with spiral designs swirling out from the handles. The square is flanked symmetrically by two rectangular panels that run parallel to the longer axis of the room itself. Within these rectangles are scenes of the hunt: a collared dog chases a stag in one, and another collared dog chases a stag and a hind in the other. Trees decorate the background of these scenes.

The second half of the room is longer in length, but about equivalent in width to the Bellerophon panel. There is a large roundel in the center of the mosaic, within which is a male figure wearing a pallium and tunica. The Chi-Rho monogram is inlaid behind his head, and two pomegranates “float” on either side. Four concentric circles border this center roundel in wave, single plait, fret, and guilloche patterns. Half-circles with guilloche borders appear above, below, and to the sides of the central roundel and are further marked by a fret border within. Collared dogs chase either a stag or a hind in these sections, though in one there is only a tree. Quarter circles inhabit the corner spaces of the panel, and each depicts a bust with the left arm hanging down, and the right arm bent

under a tunic, concealing the right hand. Two of the busts are flanked by “floating” flowers, while the other two are flanked by “floating” pomegranates. Within the remaining space of mosaic—in the cross-sections extending from the central roundel to the quarter-circles—there are eight guilloche-bordered “boat” frames that enclose acanthus scrolls.

Since its discovery this pavement has been the highlight of publications on the site. Many scholars consider the Hinton St. Mary mosaic particularly special because, in the words of Toynbee, “[...] Hinton St. Mary would seem to enjoy the distinction of having yielded the earliest representation of Christ so far known to have been made in Britain.”⁶³ The obvious support for this statement is the Chi-Rho monogram, but Toynbee had other reasons for identifying the figure as Christ as well. Much of her evidence was comparative and dated to the fifth century, but she also cited one fourth century glass medallion from Rome which depicts a figure, the inscription CRISTUS, and four surrounding figures, which Toynbee equated with the Four Evangelists [IMAGE 42]. Toynbee compared this design to the Hinton St. Mary bust with the four busts surrounding it, even noting that the small “dots” of the medallion appear to mirror the floating flowers and pomegranates in the mosaic.⁶⁴

⁶³ Toynbee, 1964b: 14.

⁶⁴ Toynbee, 1964b: 13, Plate VII.

Although the design of the medallion from Rome is very similar to the Hinton St. Mary pavement, the overall scheme of the design is not inherently Christian. For example, the mid-fourth century “Venus” mosaic from Rudston also has a design with a central figure (in this case *figures*) surrounded by four additional figures in each corner [IMAGE 43].⁶⁵ Another example is the fourth century “Charioteer” mosaic, also from Rudston, which portrays a figure on a four-horse chariot in the central roundel, and four figures in each of the four corners of the panel [IMAGE 44]. The identity of the charioteer is unclear, but the surrounding figures on the charioteer mosaic have been identified as the four seasons (“Autumn” does not survive) on account of iconographic details such as a bird perched on the shoulder of what is probably Spring, and a crown of flowers for Summer.⁶⁶

The mosaics from Rudston illustrate that there is no reason to assume that the four figures surrounding the bust in the Hinton St. Mary pavement are in fact the Four Evangelists, as Toynbee claims, even if the figure *is* Christ. Toynbee herself admitted that the “Four Evangelists” are depicted as “played down” versions of wind personifications,⁶⁷ and Neal also identified them as personifications of the four winds, even though he identifies the central figure as Christ: “Their hair is in an upstanding and windswept style, and consequently the figures have been interpreted as representing

⁶⁵ Neal, 1981: 92-93, Plate 66.

⁶⁶ Neal, 1981: 95-96, Plate 69.

⁶⁷ Toynbee, 1964b: 14.

Wind Personifications, rosettes and pomegranates on either side of them being emblems of life and immortality.”⁶⁸ Pearce too, who does not believe that the central figure is Christ, says that the four figures represent the four winds, as they are almost identical to the wind personifications that appeared in the south-eastern mosaic from the Frampton villa [IMAGE 45].⁶⁹

Given the ambiguity of the four surrounding figures in the Hinton St. Mary mosaic, it is reasonable to assume that there is room for ambiguity concerning the figure in the central roundel. Instead of Christ, the figure could easily represent Constantine, as Susan Pearce proposes.⁷⁰ Pearce argues that if Constantine visited Britain several times before and during his time as emperor, it is likely that many Britons had the opportunity to get a glimpse of the imperial family well enough to identify his features. Coins from the London mint could have also helped the emperor’s image spread throughout the province. The reasoning behind the mosaic’s commission could be that the bipartite room was used for imperial cult worship. Constantine’s special place in the hearts of Roman Britons is also reflected in later British history, when the name “Constantine” was used to enhance one’s lineage or to show a high pedigree of birth; Pearce argues that a similar esteem could have inspired the portrait of the emperor upon the floor of the villa.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Neal, 1981: 88.

⁶⁹ Pearce, 2008: 204, 208.

⁷⁰ Pearce, 2008:193-218.

⁷¹ Pearce, 2008: 194-196.

Although Toynbee entertains the idea that the central figure could be an emperor, she rejected possibility on the grounds that the surrounding images do not recreate the political setting in which other emperors depicted with the Chi-Rho are typically found, nor does the bust have any imperial insignia (globe, victory, wreath, etc.) or the proper dress of an emperor. In addition, she says that the pomegranates were not common in depictions of emperors, floating or otherwise.⁷² In addition, the central figure looks very much like the clean-shaven Christ in the CRISTUS medallion.

Pearce counters Toynbee's claim by arguing that the figure's facial features bear a closer resemblance to Constantine than Christ, especially when one looks at the marble colossus head of Constantine from Rome.⁷³ In fact, representations of the Constantine not only far outnumber representations of the Christian deity, but there is also a greater consistency in representations of Constantine that depict him as clean-shaven with cropped hair. The reasoning behind this style was political: Constantine's reign was intended to mark the beginning, or revival of a new age for the empire. Constantine's preference for a clean-shaven face was undoubtedly inspired by the iconography of Augustus, and the visual representation in turn signaled that Constantine intended to establish a legacy of the same weight.

⁷² Toynbee, 1964: 11, Plate VI. Her example is a silver plate with Valentinian I/II in military garb with the Chi-Rho in a nimbus behind his head. The emperor is also surrounded by his bodyguard.

⁷³ Pearce, 2008: 207. The colossus was initially carved for Maxentius, but was re-carved for Constantine after his victory at Milvian Bridge.

However, most depictions of the emperor do not come from private households where representation could be influenced by individual preference and choice. Whether or not the commissioners of the mosaic had seen the emperor in person, his likeness could have been taken from local coins, and then modified by replacing the emperor's cuirassed clothes with a simple pallium and tunic. Under these circumstances, we do not have to dismiss the figure as Constantine because he is not in his cuirass, but instead ask ourselves why the cuirass has been replaced in this setting. It is possible that a cuirassed emperor was considered irreverent in the context of imperial cult worship, or that the tunic was better suited for a private household in a rural setting.

An alternative explanation is that the commissioners intended for the emperor to appear in a similar form as Sol-Mithras on the altar from the Carrawburgh Mithraeum, except with the letters of the Chi-Rho taking the place of sun-rays. This subtle reference to Sol not only coincides with what we know about Constantine's own affiliation with the sun-cult, but also fits thematically with the surrounding four busts if they are read as the four winds. If this is the case, then the design shows that some Roman-Britons were familiar with the sun-cult aspects of the emperor's imperial iconography.

The hunting scenes complement the Sol-like bust and four winds scheme by adding a chthonic aspect to the otherwise ethereal panel. With regards to the lone tree depicted under the central roundel, Neal agreed with Toynbee that it represents the Tree

of Life.⁷⁴ However, in a separate work, Cosh and Neal noted that hunting scenes with dogs and trees were very popular in Britain, and were also a popular motif for the Durnovarian school of mosaicists that constructed the Hinton St. Mary mosaic.⁷⁵ It is therefore possible that the hunting scenes were chosen as the best fit from a set of existing mosaic patterns offered by the Durnovarian school to fill the empty spaces in the mosaic.⁷⁶ They not only occupy the side spaces in the larger half of the panel, but also the side portions of the panel depicting Bellerophon slaying Chimaera.

Depictions of Bellerophon slaying Chimaera were common in mosaics, and they appear at Hinton St. Mary, Frampton, and Lullingstone, as well as another fourth-century mosaic from Croughton [IMAGE 46].⁷⁷ The Croughton panel is similar in form to the one from Hinton St. Mary, with a few variations. For one, there are no other figures in the side panels of the Croughton mosaic, and the central roundel is framed by interlocking square guilloche borders. The four central corners have a single heart-shaped leaf in each with extending vines. In the center, Bellerophon rides Pegasus and spears Chimaera in its lion-head, whereas at Hinton St. Mary the spear is directed towards the goat-head on the

⁷⁴ Neal, 1981: 88.

⁷⁵ Cosh and Neal, 2006: 209.

Toynbee, 1964a: 143, 376-377, 410. Some non-mosaic examples are a stone relief carving from Bath of a man with a hound chasing a hare as it jumps over a tree trunk (PLATE XXXVIII *b*), a glass bowl from Wint Hill depicting a man on horseback leading his hunting dogs as they chase a hare into a net (PLATE LXXXVI), and a pot from Verulamium of a hound chasing a hare through foliage and possibly water (PLATE XCIII *a* and *b*).

⁷⁶ Smith, 1965: 95-116. The Durnovarian school was identified through recurring border patterns and motifs that likely came from pattern books. These books were shown to patrons

⁷⁷ Dawson and Neal, 2010: 313-317.

creature's back (the goat-head also faces different direction in each mosaic). Unlike the Hinton St. Mary panel, in the Croughton mosaic there is a trail of five star-like signs which arch around Bellerophon's head and almost reach the raised hoof of Pegasus. Dawson and Neal suggested that these could refer to the apotheosis of Pegasus if they are stars, or they could represent droplets of water in reference to the sacred spring Pegasus drank from. Another explanation is that the panel was inspired by contemporary coinage, and the star-symbols serve as placeholders for where a shield would have been.

Late Antique representations of Bellerophon slaying Chimaera are popularly interpreted as allegorical representations of the triumph of good over evil, with Bellerophon representing Christ and Chimaera all that is wicked in the world.⁷⁸ In an argument against this interpretation for the Hinton St. Mary panel, Huskinson claimed that the Bellerophon mosaics and representations were popular for centuries, and that this one likely came from a pattern-book. This does not mean that the mosaic is free from Christian interpretation, but that the past popularity of this myth in the material record suggests that Bellerophon was not a Christ-figure at this time.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Painter, 1971: 164; Toynbee, 1964b: 14.

⁷⁹ Huskinson, 1974: 77.

Huskinson also dismissed imperial interpretations of Bellerophon, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the rider could also be interpreted as Constantine, as argued by Pearce:⁸⁰

Bellerophon on Pegasus using his spear to kill the chimaera is easy to see as a divine type of Constantine the Great and his successors, who were regularly shown on their coin reverses in a similar pose, on horseback, with their spear slanting down to kill a captive, or barbarian, on the ground. [...] The image of Bellerophon, on the other hand, as a young hero on horseback killing the evil beast of chaos, was well suited to stand for an emperor, or his successors, who defended the Empire, and whose horse, with the Crucifixion Nail in its tack, could be seen as at least as special as Pegasus.

Some of the coins alluded to by Pearce that depict Constantine in a Bellerophon-like pose have already been mentioned [see IMAGES 33-35]. The pose is one of ultimate superiority over one's enemies, and coins were a quick way to spread such propaganda for rulers across the empire. Even the Belgic King Tincommius in Britain had coins

⁸⁰ Pearce, 2008: 211.

minted in this style, with Tincommius holding a spear on horseback and a large IX or star symbol above [IMAGE 47].⁸¹

There is reason to believe from the reassessment of the Hinton St. Mary mosaic that there is even more support for an imperial argument than previously realized; for not only do we have an imperial reading for the Chi-Rho and the figure it accompanies, but also for the Bellerophon mosaic.

5.2 Frampton

The mosaics from the Frampton villa were discovered in 1794. By 1903 no surviving traces of the mosaics were found, and so we are reliant upon Lysons' colored drawings of them from when they were first discovered.⁸² At that time, mosaic pavements had survived in three rooms and one hallway, but the one we are chiefly interested in was in the south-west corner of the property [IMAGE 48]. This was a single-apse bipartite room, with its entrance on the northern end of the smaller half of the room. The smaller half hosted a rectangular pavement with three panels: one large square panel in the center, and two smaller rectangular panels on each side. In Lysons' drawing, the smaller rectangles show scenes of the hunt: one depicted a man hunting a lion, and the other a man and a dog running. Both have trees in the background. The square panel in the middle has three concentric circles with guilloche, acanthus scroll, and single plait

⁸¹ Toynbee, 1964a: Image Appendix, 2, *g-h*.

⁸² Lysons, 1813.

designs. The central circle was damaged upon discovery, but it likely depicted Bacchus riding a leopard.⁸³ The remaining spaces in the corners of the square panel hold plants with scroll-like leaves.

The bipartite divide is decorated with a narrow mosaic band with a peltae pattern.⁸⁴ Upon entering the second half of the room, which is square-shaped, one is confronted by two lines of Latin text, facing inward. In the middle of the text a cupid appears as part of a separate border of dolphins. The lines of text next to the cupid, which are in verse, were reconstructed by Lyons as follows:⁸⁵

[NEC MU]NUS PERFICIS ULLUM| [SI DI]GNARE
CUPIDO
“Nor do you perform any service, if it befits you,
Cupid.”

The dolphin border continues until the apse, where the head of a water deity intrudes upon two more lines of text. The lines before the apse read:⁸⁶

⁸³ [CITE]

⁸⁴ Perring, 2003: 106. It is possible that a curtain might have hung in the frame of this liminal space so that the owner could have the flexibility of using the area as a single or double room.

⁸⁵ For textual reconstruction see note 79, also *RIB* 2448.8. The translations are mine. Ling, 2007: 80-81. All of the lines of text in the Frampton mosaic are in meter, but which meter is unclear. Toynbee suggested heptameters, whereas Ling proposed that they are all “botched” hexameters.

⁸⁶ Again, my translation. Although the text next to the water deity indicates that the head is Neptune, it could also be Oceanus, judging from the claw-like protrusions on the top of its head and the absence of Neptune’s trident. Another possibility, and one that has not been raised yet, is that the head is, as the text

NEPTUNI VERTEX REG[I]MEN| SORTITI|
 MOBILE VENTIS| SCUL[P]TUM CUI C[A]ERULEA
 [EST] | DELFINIS CINCTA DUOB[US]

“The head of Neptune, the one allotted the domain
 fashioned by the movement of the wind, for whom
 there is the sea girdled by twin dolphins.”

Behind the head of Neptune, in the middle of the larger panel of the bipartite room, is a central roundel with a frilled border. The central design was damaged almost beyond recognition, but likely portrayed Bellerophon slaying Chimaera. A guilloche border surrounds the remaining panels in the mosaic, four of which are square panels in each corner of the pavement. These have an additional interior border of arrows, and contain scenes from Classical mythology: two of these scenes are intact, another one only partially, and the last one was damaged beyond recognition. Half-circle panels fall in between the corner panels. They had spelt and guilloche borders, but the designs inside did not survive. Flowers occupy the eight remaining spaces that surround the central roundel.

reads, Neptune, but with the features of Neptune-Nodens [see IMAGES 5-8], but the text does not indicate any conscious equation of the Celtic and Roman water deity, suggesting that Neptune’s iconographical features in this context could have become a standard of representation which was unique to Roman Britain.

The entrance of the apse is marked by a thick border with a central circle containing the Chi-Rho monogram flanked by three circles of acanthus scrolls. A further band inside the apse has a polychrome net design. The curved portion of the apse is bordered with two thin bold lines, a sun-ray pattern, and a guilloche border. The remaining spaces contain knot and triangle patterns. At the end of the apse there is a smaller rectangle containing a cantharus.⁸⁷

This mosaic was constructed by the Durnovarian school, as at Hinton St. Mary, but is cited and described less often, presumably because the Chi-Rho holds a less than prominent position in the overall design.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the combination of Greco-Roman pagan scenes with the Chi-Rho makes it unlikely that the mosaic was intended exclusively for Christians, but this does not mean that a Christian reading can be ruled out. Under a Christian interpretation, many features of the mosaic easily fall into place: the cantharus in the apse is a reference to the Christian Eucharist, Dionysus and the water deity represent the mixing of wine and water for the Eucharist, and Dionysus and Bellerophon are allegorical representations of Christ.⁸⁹ However, the remaining features of the mosaic- the hunting scenes, lines of text, and the square panels with unidentified Classical scenes- do not conform as easily to a Christian reading. Perring tried to make sense of the combination of images within a Gnostic framework, but his argument does

⁸⁷ CLARIFY THAT APSE DOES NOT NECESARILLY MEAN CHX

⁸⁸ Neal, 1981: 88. Cf. Smith, 1965: 99; 1969: 109.

⁸⁹ Perring, 2003: 105-112.

not take into account how the lines of text serve a Christian purpose, even a Gnostic one.⁹⁰

In response to noncritical Christian interpretations of the Frampton mosaic on account of the Chi-Rho, Huskinson said, “[I]n both mosaics [at Frampton and Hinton St. Mary] it is these Christian features that seem out of place, as the setting is otherwise conventionally pagan, and that they must therefore be explained in the light of the surrounding pagan motifs, not vice-versa.”⁹¹ Since there is not enough evidence to propose a strict Christian reading of the Frampton mosaic as a whole, some scholars have attributed some of its features, such as the hunting scenes, to pattern books, and the rest are explained as choices that were meant to show off the education of the villa owner(s).⁹²

Given the parallels to Hinton St. Mary, it is possible that similar interpretations may be applied to the Chi-Rho monogram and the Bellerophon and Chimaera panels of the Frampton mosaic. For example, the panel with Bellerophon and Chimaera could have been inspired by the connected imperial iconography that appears in the numismatic evidence. The Chi-Rho monogram also resembles the symbol as it appears on the helmet

⁹⁰ Perring, 2003: 98, 111 (Fig. 3). Perring’s thesis was that the room was designed to be toured in a specific order that was intended to reflect the journey of the soul from human mortality to the afterlife.

⁹¹ Huskinson: 1974. 76; cf. Brandenburg, H. 1968, 1969.

⁹² Ling, 1997: 266, 278; Barrett, 1978: 309, 313. Although the scenes in the square panels are unknown, they likely display literary references. Perring guessed that one displayed Sagaritis and Attis, another Venus and Adonis, and the partially destroyed one Venus and cupid. Barrett, however, believed that the scene Perring identified as Venus Adonis was really Venus watching as Aeneas receives the Golden Bough.

of Constantine on a medallion from Constantinople (c. 315) [IMAGE 49]. Even so, although the parallels between Frampton and Hinton St. Mary may have been inspired by imperial iconography, this does not mean that the Bellerophon panel and the Chi-Rho were intended to make a political statement. Henig proposed that the Chi-Rho could have been inherited by locals from Constantine as a “powerful amulet,” in which case its function at Frampton was probably apotropaic.⁹³

The shape of the Chi-Rho formally resembles the wheel symbol of the sky-god Taranis:⁹⁴ it is circled like the wheel, and even the acanthus scrolls on either side convey a revolving motion like a wheel turning. This movement is in turn mimicked by the wave-like pattern created by the dolphins that border the panel opposite the apse. Similar to the Hinton St. Mary mosaic, the juxtaposition of the symbol with the head of Neptune creates a thematic contrast between the sun, as represented by the Chi-Rho,⁹⁵ and the earth, as represented Neptune, the dolphin border, and the hunting scenes of the mosaic.

The Chi-Rho from Frampton still evades singular interpretation. The Christian connotations of the mosaic do not extend to every aspect of it, and neither does any imperial connotation or hint of symbolic syncretism. It is still not clear if all of the panels in the bipartite room were even intended to be read together. This does not mean that

⁹³ Perring, 2003: 102.

⁹⁴ See page 9.

⁹⁵ Perring, 2003: 109. Perring went so far as to interpret the Chi-Rho and its flanking circles as planets: “Since the *chi-rho* monogram was a Christianised version of the solar symbol, it is just possible that these seven spheres hinted at the planetary bodies recognized in ancient cosmographies: a reminder of the cosmos through which the soul must pass in ascending to the seventh heaven.”

interpreting the Frampton mosaic as a whole is a lost cause, but rather that the variation in designs and the history of these designs ought to be given due consideration before any sweeping conclusions about the mosaic and the owners of the villa are made on the basis of a single symbol.

5.3 Lullingstone

Lullingstone villa was first constructed c. A.D. 100, and met its end at c. 390 when a fire destroyed the building. Over nearly three hundred years, the villa underwent multiple phases of occupation and abandonment, as well as multiple phases of transformation. According to Painter, the villa was occupied c.100, reoccupied c.180, abandoned c.200, and reoccupied at least two more times c.290 and c.300-350.⁹⁶ Sometime between 300-350, the mosaic floors were constructed, and around 350 the north wing of the villa was converted into an early chapel. When the chapel was built, the north wing was closed off from the rest of the villa and a separate entrance for the chapel was added. The north wing consisted of two floors. It is believed that the bottom floor was used as a storage area, because several unidentified marble busts were discovered there. The walls of the bottom floor had a dado painted with marble imitation designs and alternating diamond and square patterns. The upper zone, as far as we can tell, was plain,

⁹⁶ Painter, 1969: 135. These occupational periods were defined by the chronology of modifications made to the villa, including patterns of cultivation on the surrounding farm land.

with large panels sectioned off by painted frames.⁹⁷ The upper floor was more elaborate. Painted wall plaster fragments survived from one hallway, or antechamber; the design divided the wall into two zones: the lower zone has not been reconstructed, but a border of repeating chevrons lined the top and bottom of the upper zone. Within the upper zone, a large wreath was painted in the center of the panel. The Chi-Rho monogram was painted inside the wreath flanked by the Greek letters alpha and omega [IMAGE 50].

From this hallway, one would have turned right into the chapel room. Another wreathed Chi-Rho with an alpha and omega was painted on the wall facing the doorway. The lower zone of this wall was decorated with a marble pattern and had two unornamented borders. The upper zone was divided into three panels by four painted columns. The central panel held the Chi-Rho. On either side of the wreathed Chi-Rho were birds.

The final surviving painted wall was on the west side of the chapel. The lower zone of the plaster was decorated with a floral pattern with swirling foliage [IMAGE 51]. Another thick, but plain, border enclosed the lower zone. The upper zone had a plain lower border as well, but an upper border divided into two string courses with horizontal rhombuses that alternated color. The upper zone was divided by seven painted columns to form six equal panels. Between the columns robed figures appear to float in mid-air with their arms raised.

⁹⁷ Painter, 1969: 138, Fig. 6.

Formally, the Chi-Rho is placed within a wreath of victory. A similar design has already appeared on the coin evidence mentioned above [see IMAGES 26, 27, and 32]. The victory wreath design, either as a *corona laurea* or as a larger processional piece, was traditionally associated with scenes of triumphal victories, and several such wreaths appear on the Arch of Constantine. Here we see the Christian appropriation of a traditionally political symbol of triumph. This does not indicate that the meaning of the victory wreath changed because of Christianity, but rather that Christians saw it fit to adopt imperial symbols and adapt their initial meanings to suit their religious needs. The Chi-Rho itself was a symbol for victory with Constantine, and its appearance in the victory wreath with the alpha and omega make it the only villa example of a real depiction of a Christian triumph in the imperial sense.

The figures raising their hands have not been identified, but their position communicates that they are performing a ritual gesture. Barasch proposes that depictions of *elevatio*, or the act of raising one's hands, were once used in order to materialize an important action.⁹⁸ In Roman contexts, *elevatio* typically involved raising an object of significance, such as a victory wreath, laurel branches, or, as on the statue of Augustus

⁹⁸ Barasch, 2003: 44.

from Primaporta, the standard of Rome.⁹⁹ The figures here, however, raise their hands only, possibly in prayer, which is why they are frequently referred to as *orantes*.¹⁰⁰

To date, there is still uncertainty about the relation of the mosaics from Lullingstone to the wall-paintings in the adjacent north wing: were the “pagan” mosaics intended to be part of a hidden Christian agenda, or were they commissioned by Romano-pagans, and preserved by later Christians out of convenience? A closer study of the mosaics and the wall-paintings reveals that a similar message is being conveyed in this villa as at Hinton St. Mary and Frampton, simply in a different form. For we still have the presence of the Chi-Rho and Bellerophon slaying Chimaera, and yet the two are markedly separated. It will become clear in the following pages that the Lullingstone villa mosaic proves that Bellerophon is not a Christian allegorical figure of Christ. The Chi-Rho is, on the one hand, argumentatively stronger in its Christian aspects due to the compresence of alpha and omega; on the other hand, the depiction of the symbol is still reminiscent of the same imperial iconography we have already seen. The wall paintings in the Lullingstone villa were constructed at a later date than the mosaics at Hinton St. Mary and Frampton, and are clear evidence of the fast changing meaning of the Chi-Rho monogram in Roman Britain over a roughly fifty-year period.

⁹⁹ Barasch, 2003: 46-51.

¹⁰⁰ Painter, 1969: 140, Fig. 8.

The surviving mosaics start in the main reception room of the villa and extend into an apsidal dining room [IMAGES 53-55]. The apse and the reception area face the main entrance to the villa, which lies on the east-west axis of the villa, and faces east (or slightly south-east).

The reception room pavement is oriented towards those entering the villa. From this perspective, the mosaic is square-shaped, takes up most of the reception area, and can be divided into three main parts: there are two thick u-shaped borders and one central (but not centered) square with figural designs. The first border follows the lines walls of the reception area (between this border and the walls are plain tesserae), but does not line the space before the apse to complete the square. This border is filled with a double-swastika meander design that is black on white ground. Before the apse is a thick rectangular band with an array of geometric designs (hearts, single swastikas, spades, checkered squares, etc.), and two other rectangles extend inwards against the designs lining the side-walls. One of them has an alternating pattern of triangular crosses with either white on black ground, or black on white ground. The other side has linear squares that are divided into two parts diagonally by black and white triangles. The remaining space creates a square in which the dominating scene is Bellerophon riding Pegasus as he slays the Chimaera. This scene is bordered by a diamond-shaped band with curved points and curved-in sides; it contains a white guilloche pattern on a black ground. In the surrounding four corners are busts facing inwards, one for each season of the year. The

busts are contained by thin, black circular borders. The seasons are can be identified by the iconography of each figure: a hood for Winter, a bird on the shoulder of Spring, wheat on the head of Fall, and then Summer, which no longer survives.¹⁰¹

The apse portion of the mosaic is oriented towards the curved portion of the apse, and probably designed for those dining in this area. The design has a double border lining the curve of the apse. The outer border is just dark ground tesserae. The inner border is thinner, with a white pattern on a black ground depicting two lines overlapping in circular loops, with the circles themselves filled with alternating colors of tesserae. The central scene depicts Europa being carried away by Zeus as a bull across a white and blue-ground background, intended to represent the sky and sea respectively. The couple is attended by two cupids, and two lines of text appear above the scene. Some of the text did not survive the fire, but here is a common reconstruction of the text:¹⁰²

INVIDA SI TA(VRI) VIDISSET IVNO NATATVS|
IVSTIVS AEOLIAS ISSET ADVSQVE DOMOS.

"If jealous Juno had seen the bull swimming, she would have gone to the home of Aeolus with more justification."

¹⁰¹ Painter, 1969: 143.

¹⁰² Barrett, 1978: 311. My translation.

As stated above, this mosaic pavement in the apse and reception area is typically interpreted either separately from the other decorative remains from the villa, or allegorically in connection with the overtly Christian north wing. We will treat the mosaic irrespectively, and then in respect to the possible Christian interpretations that have been posed for its interpretation. Ultimately, it will become clear that the mosaic was devoid of Christian meaning before and after the conversion of the north wing, and that the reason for this is that Bellerophon slaying the Chimaera is a motif that has been employed to serve an allegorical purpose that is related to Roman imperialism more than the Christian religion. Likewise, the Europa pavement is linked to long standing pretensions among the elite concerning their level of education in the literary classics.

Frend and Painter agree that Europa and the accompanying text were meant to ward off the Evil Eye (*invidia*).¹⁰³ Frend further proposes that Bellerophon slaying the Chimaera: Bellerophon is an apotropaic scenes, and the seasons are symbols for the continuance of life.

Unlike the villas at Frampton and Hinton St. Mary, the mosaics and wall-paintings from Lullingstone were decorated by different workshops. As stated before, although the Chi-Rho appears on the walls instead of the mosaic floor pavements, this

¹⁰³ Frend, 1955: 6.
Painter, 1969: 143.

does not hurt our discussion if we interpret the Chi-Rho in terms of domestic space; in fact, a variation in medium adds more than it subtracts to our arguments.

Conclusion

This goal of this thesis was to dispel the notion that the Chi-Rho monogram unlocks the meaning of an object despite the other images and symbols that appear on a given artefact. I hope that I have shown how parallels between Sol, Mithras, Taranis, Christ, and Constantine help to inform us on the complexity of the cultural climate that surrounded the Chi-Rho monogram during the fourth century in Britain. This study has shown that the Chi-Rho was as much a political symbol as it was a Christian one, and even in the context of religion it was not free from processes of syncretism with the symbol for Sol or the wheel symbol of Taranis.

From an imperial perspective, the Chi-Rho was at a time almost synonymous with Emperor Constantine himself, and the subsequent adoption of the symbol by later emperors makes it highly likely that the central figure at Hinton St. Mary is Emperor Constantine or some other imperial figure.

This historical context of the symbol leads us to conclude that Roman Britons who encountered the symbol were viewing it within the context of multiple layers of meaning and a variety of associations- some Christian, some political- some of which might have been more personal than others.

The intrigue of the villas amongst scholars has always laid in the potential to label them as early house-churches, but it has now been established that the presence of the Chi-Rho does not necessitate that we interpret the objects on which it appears as Christian, especially in the villas. Each villa mosaic and wall-painting has its own, unique design, and singular interpretation is the first step to producing a more contemporary reading of them.

Although much can be gained from treated the villas separately, this does not mean that the parallels between the villas have nothing to offer; we can still draw generalizations from repeated images such as Bellerophon slaying Chimaera. Given the visual similarities in form, it may well be the case that the Bellerophon and Chimaera mosaics from each villa came from pattern books, or that they were inspired by imperial depictions of rulers overcoming their enemies. The impetus for choosing this panel could have been personal, political, or religious- the point is that the former two should not be ruled out on account of the Chi-Rho in the villas.

We cannot know what the commissioners of the mosaics and wall-paintings at the villas were thinking, so I propose a *lectio difficilior* approach to the material in the sense that the combination of Christian and pagan images at this time was more likely to have been viewed and interpreted by Roman Britons according to older Romano-pagan and

local traditions than according to arguments about Christian allegory that have not been proved to have existed at this time, though they are appealing to the modern eye.

Although many agree that on the continuation of syncretism and non-Christian forms of worship in Roman Britain throughout the fourth century, there is more to be said about the extent to which the Chi-Rho was a part of syncretistic processes, whether in relation to a sun deity or the divine emperor himself. The evidence laid out in this paper proposes a wider range of interpretive possibilities of the Chi-Rho, and calls for greater skepticism of the practice of using the Chi-Rho to measure the presence of Christians in Roman Britain. Ultimately, it is clear that this symbol was more complicated than it has previously been treated, and therefore deserves to be treated as such.

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Appendix- IMAGES

1.

**Water Newton Hoard***© Trustees of the British Museum.*

2.

**Water Newton Hoard: Votive Plaques***© Trustees of the British Museum.*

3.

**Mildenhall Treasure***© Trustees of the British Museum.*

4



Mildenhall Spoons

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5

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Bath Gorgon Head

(Salway, 1993)

6



Mildenhall Great Dish (Close-up)

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7



Neptune/Oceanus, Withington Mosaic

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- 8 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Frampton Neptune (Nodens?) close-up
(Toynbee, 1962)
- 9 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Coin: AURELIAN. 270-275 AD.
(Walter, 2006)
- 10 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Lead cube, Cerecester
(Henig, 1984)
- 11 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Altar with Sol and Mithras Dedication, Carrawburgh Mithraeum
(Toynbee, 1962)
- 12 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Christ as Sol, Vatican, tomb vaults
(Walter, 2006)
- 13 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Dinas Emrys lamp, Wales
(Thomas, 1986)

14



Taranis Wheel, Flemingham Hall Hoard

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- 15 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Taranis wheel formations
(Green, 1984)
- 16 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Taranis head set
(Salway, 1993)
- 17 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**

Lead tank with "wheel"

(Salway, 1993)

18 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**

Lead tank with IX

(Toynbee, 1962)

19



Icklingham lead tank with Chi-Rho, alpha, and omega

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20



Copper alloy coin.(obverse) Laureate head of Constantine. (reverse) Labarum.
(327CE). Mint: Constantinople

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22



Silver medallion.(obverse) Diademed Constantine, draped bust, right, representing Constantine. (reverse) Emperor standing left, holding labarum, and a reversed spear in left hand. (338 CE) Mint: Siscia

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23



Bronze coin.(obverse) Bare headed, draped and cuirassed bust of Magnentius, right. (reverse) χ -flanked by alpha and omega. (c. 350-353 CE) Mint: Amiens

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24



Copper alloy coin.(obverse) Bareheaded bust of Magnentius, right, draped and cuirassed.(reverse) Christogram flanked by alpha and omega. (c. 351-353 CE) Mint: Trier.

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25



Silver coin.(obverse) Valentinian II bust, diademed, draped and cuirassed, right. (reverse) Emperor standing, left, holding labarum and shield.(c. 389-390 CE). Mint: Lyon.

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26



Silver coin.(obverse) Bust of Gratian, diademed, draped and cuirassed, right.
(reverse) Oaths of office within wreath; wreathed topped with encircled Chi-Rho. (c. 367-383)
Mint: Siscia

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27



Silver coin.(obverse) Julian, bare headed, cuirassed bust, Julian, right. (reverse) IX
symbol within wreath. (c. 355-360CE). Mint: Rome

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28

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Constantine as Sol (c. 326 CE). Mint: Antioch.
(Walter, 2006)

29



Copper alloy coin.(obverse) Draped, Cuirassed bust of Constantine I, laureate, right.
(reverse) Sol standing left, chlamys draped over left shoulder, right arm raised, left
hand holding up globe. (c. 312-313 CE) Mint: London

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30



Gold coin.(obverse) Bust of Constantine I, draped, cuirassed, head, laureate, right. (reverse) Sol, radiate, crowning Constantine I, in military dress, holding spear in right hand and globe in right. (321 CE) Mint: Sirmium

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31



Gold coin.(obverse) Jugate busts Sol, radiate, and Constantine, laureate, cuirassed, raising right hand and holding globe in left, facing left. (reverse) Liberalitas, draped, holding abacus in right hand and cornucopiae in left. (316 CE). Mint: Ticinum

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32



Gold coin.(obverse) Head of Constantine I, laureate, right. (reverse) Sol, radiate, draped, raising right arm, with Victory holding wreath up in right hand and palm, upright, in left, in spread quadriga, with two horses left, and two horses right. (313 CE) Mint: Ticinum

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33



Gold coin.(obverse) Head of Constantine I, laureate, right. (reverse) Constantine, in military dress on horse galloping right, shield in left hand, brandishing spear in right hand at enemy, on ground, right: under horse, another enemy, with shield (c. 326-27 CE). Mint: Trier

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34



Copper alloy coin.(obverse) Cuirassed bust of Constantine I, laureate, right.(reverse) Constantine I riding, left, captive under horse. (307 CE) Mint: London

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35



Copper alloy coin.(obverse) Laureate draped and cuirassed bust of Constantine, right. (reverse) Constantine riding right, wounded lion below. (c. 312-13 CE) Mint: Rome

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36

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Gold Solidus. (obverse) Head of Constantine I. (reverse) FELICIA TEMPORA. (316 CE). Mint: Ticinum.

(Hartley *et al.*, 2006)

37



Copper alloy coin.(obverse) Cuirassed bust of Constantine I, laureate, right. (reverse) Sol standing left, chlamys across left shoulder, raising right hand, globe in left hand. (c. 317 CE). Mint: London

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38

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Arch of Constantine- Solar Tondo

(Wheeler, 1964)

39

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Arch of Constantine- Lunar Tondo

(Wheeler, 1964)

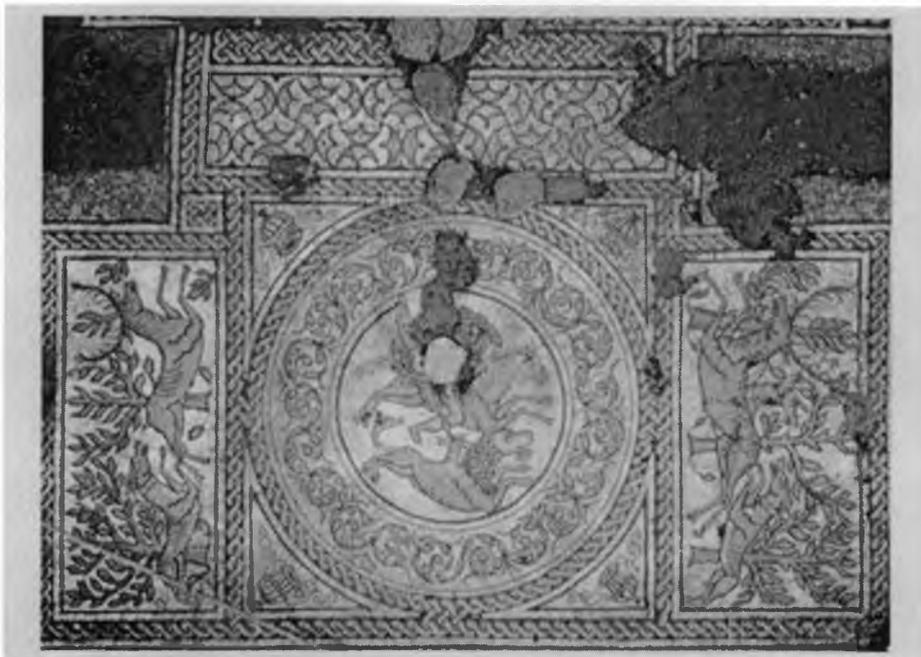
40



Hinton St. Mary Mosaic, Large Panel

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41



Hinton St. Mary Mosaic, Small Panel

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42



CRISTUS Medallion (c. 4th cen. CE)

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43

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- Venus Mosaic, Rudston
(Neal, 1981)
- 44 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Charioteer Mosaic, Rudston
(Neal, 1981)
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Frampton Winds Mosaic
(Lysons, 1813)
- 46 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Croughton mosaic
(Dawson and Neal, 2010)
- 47 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Tincommius coin
(Toynbee, 1964a)
- 48 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Frampton Mosaic with Chi-Rho
(Lysons, 1813)
- 49 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Constantinople Medallion (315 CE)
(Walter, 2006)
- 50 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Lullingstone Chi Rho reconstruction
(Painter, 1969)
- 51 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Lullingstone *Orantes*
(Painter, 1969)
- 52 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Arch of Constantine, Victory Wreath- Panel (From Arch of Marcus Aurelius)
(Wheeler, 1964)
- 53 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Lullingstone mosaics
(Painter, 1969)
- 54 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Lullingstone Bellerophon Mosaic
(Painter, 1969)
- 55 **Image omitted due to Copyright restrictions**
Lullingstone Europa Mosaic
(Painter, 1969)