

Objects in Motion:  
The Circulation of Religion  
and Sacred Objects in the Late  
Antique and Byzantine World

Edited by

Hallie G. Meredith

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*Objects in Motion: The Circulation of Religion and Sacred Objects in the Late Antique and Byzantine World*

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# Christianizing Constantine: Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* as a Late Antique Social Canvas<sup>1</sup>

Hallie G. Meredith

## INTRODUCTION

In brief, this paper argues that textual accounts of the act of viewing objects in circulation created a history for those objects and used those objects as 'social canvases' – instruments upon which socially-constructed meaning is projected – to fix meaning.

In ancient texts, religious objects are portrayed as having agency. If religious objects are often everyday objects transformed – *how* do they become holy? As a kind of Late Antique chicken-and-egg paradox, a partial answer is that they become holy in the meaning attributed through the retelling. Thus, the divinely inspired idea for the object is what gives it the power of protection. The underlying idea for its creation is sacred. In this case, divine revelation conveyed the meaning of a symbol to Constantine, the first Christian emperor, who then created physical expressions of a hybrid divine-imperial symbol of protection for Christian Romans against non-Christian Romans.<sup>2</sup> Textual recounting projected meaning onto those objects. Today we can approach these interpretations – social canvases – as a way to gain access to 'the period eye'.<sup>3</sup>

A pivotal description of a significant holy object is Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea's retelling of the life of Emperor Constantine in which Eusebius portrays the Emperor's creation of a Christian battle standard as a holy object recast as a social canvas.<sup>4</sup> The description of

Moses' staff and the Ark of the Covenant, both from the book of Exodus, served as models for Eusebius' narration of events framing Constantine's divine revelation.<sup>5</sup> Such miraculous social canvases were central to Eusebius' representation of Constantine's Christian life to imperial successors. Constantine is cast in the role of Moses, but instead of bringing the Law in the form of tablets, the Emperor is urged to have man reproduce a divine symbol to protect Christian Romans.

According to Eusebius, fourth century Romans – in particular, imperial heirs – are meant to view and interpret Constantine's battle standard as tangible proof of Christianity's apotropaic nature.<sup>6</sup> Constantine's battle standard was divinely inspired and its material form was considered, by Eusebius, as a testament to this fact. Its origination and sacred character, therefore, impart onto Constantine the role of intermediary between (a

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Authentizitätsprobleme der *Vita Constantini*", *Klio* 40, 1962, 187-243. Whilst there is very little about its written form that is not debated among ancient historians, such debates would be the subject of another paper. This work addresses the conceptual description of the vision and the divinely revealed object rendered before the minds' eye – also known as *ekphrasis* – both the notion of the vision itself, and the physical object produced – are fourth century in origin. For Lactantius' account, see Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44; ed. and trans. J.L. Creed, Oxford, 1984. For alternative pagan accounts of Constantine's conversion, see Cameron and Hall 1999, 206; N. Lenski, "Evoking the Pagan Past: *Instinctu divinitatis* and Constantine's Capture of Rome", *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, 2, 2008, 204-57. Literature on Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* is vast. For a comprehensive bibliography on the *Vita*, see Cameron and Hall 1999. For more recent scholarship, see M.S. Williams, *Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography: Between Eusebius and Augustine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> For scholarship on the life of Moses, see J. Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism*, Nashville, TN., Society of Biblical Literature, 1972; G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978; "Moses" *A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion*, L. Jacobs, Oxford University Press, 1999. Accessed at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t96.e473>, 4 January 2011.

<sup>6</sup> After Constantine's death, there is evidence that Eusebius revised his imperial biography so the heirs and successors of the Roman Empire would continue to be Christians. See T.D. Barnes, "Lactantius and Constantine", *JRS* 63, 1973, 29-46; *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA., 1981; "Panegyric, History and Historiography in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*", in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams, Cambridge, 1989, 94-123; "The Two Drafts of Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*", in *From Eusebius to Augustine*, ed. T.D. Barnes, Aldershot, 1994.

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<sup>2</sup> For the Greek text, see F. Winkelmann, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantins*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1975, rev. 1992. For a recent English translation, see A. Cameron and S.G. Hall, eds., *Eusebius: Life of Constantine*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999. All translations are from Cameron and Hall 1999.

<sup>3</sup> For the pioneering work on this subject, see M. Baxendall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A primer in the social history of pictorial style*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> The terms *Life of Constantine* and *Vita Constantini (VC)* will be used interchangeably to refer to Eusebius text in its present form. It is by no means certain that the extant imperial biography credited to Eusebius has indeed been preserved in the version that remains today. On this debate, see F. Winkelmann, "Zur Geschichte des

monotheistic) God and the people of the Roman Empire. By including a miracle as evidence of divine authority, Eusebius provided an early Christian model for hagiographies. This essay will examine how Eusebius' retelling of Constantine's battle standard renders the representation of the object as a social canvas influenced by key objects, and highlight users from the monotheistic Jewish tradition, such as Moses and his staff as portrayed in the book of Exodus.

## I. LATE ANTIQUE OBJECTS IN USE AND THE SOCIAL CANVAS

Why are objects in use important? The instrumental nature of usable or functional material culture allows it to be manipulated by a user, creating a subject-object relation.<sup>7</sup> The subject is the person capable of sensory experience, absorbing information through sight and touch in order to make sense of the object before him. Instrumental agents are not necessarily material. For example, in addition to a ceremonial vessel, or a death shroud, consider a vicar entrusted with the power of his office and thus able to officiate at a wedding as an agent of the state. He, like these other agents, is by definition serving a purpose.<sup>8</sup> As such, they or their roles were created at a particular time in order to fulfil one or more particular aim. As instruments with a specific social context, such objects are used by an agent in order to perform an action or a purpose. When objects are shown in use – 'in motion' – or explained, the account reveals what contemporaries found compelling about the object and the ideas embodied in its presentation, circulation and display.

Textual accounts of viewing key objects of visual culture – those which Late Antique authors highlighted as significant, or which several Late Antique authors commented on, implicitly underscoring their import – created a history for those objects. The ephemeral experiences in question are long gone. Many of the original objects are absent as well, and of those that remain we have little chance of determining which, if any, might correspond to textual descriptions.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, what the visual descriptions provide us with are synchronic views of individual responses to the matters of daily Roman life using specific objects as social canvases upon which to fix meaning. Like a *tabula rasa* or modern film screen, a 'social canvas' is a primed

surface upon which period-specific social meaning can be projected.

Such snapshots of Roman life on the 'social canvas' of objects provide a Roman perspective about objects in use. It is through those textual accounts of visual culture in use that, even without the objects before us, we can access period-specific interpretations and responses.

Anthropologists gather data and construct theories derived from information to do with objects in motion.<sup>10</sup> Anthropologists and social theorists who have developed theories concerning usable material culture in use have a great deal to contribute to our understanding of miraculous Late Antique visual culture. B. Brown's *thing theory*,<sup>11</sup> I. Kopytoff's notion of a *cultural biography*,<sup>12</sup> and A. Gell's *theory of art nexus*<sup>13</sup> will be considered as each relates to the social production of Constantine's battle standard (*labarum*).<sup>14</sup> Material culture devoid of its social context is like a curious museum object without a label explaining what it originally did and for whom. Its original significance is missing or unknown. It is *that* original meaning, or at least glimpses of it, which when brought into focus offers a clearer picture of how Late Antique viewers understood their world and interpreted their material culture.

Before addressing theoretical implications concerning Constantine's battle standard, let's first consider the evidence, i.e. the standard as a Late Antique example of miraculous material culture. According to Eusebius, what was essential information concerning Constantine's battle standard, and why?

<sup>10</sup> In his introduction to *The Social Life of Objects*, A. Appadurai begins by making it clear that the focus of his introduction to the volume is 'things that are exchanged,' directly contrasted with production or consumption, Appadurai 1986, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Supra* note 7.

<sup>12</sup> I. Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process", in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai, Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1986, 64-94.

<sup>13</sup> A. Gell, *Art and Agency, an Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> In the fourth century CE, battle standards were referred to by the Latin term *signa militaria*. Whilst the term *labarum* is commonly used to refer specifically to the imperial Christian standard adopted by Constantine after his Christian vision of 312 CE, this term is of unknown origin, see H. Grégoire, "L'étymologie de 'Labarum'", *Byzantion* 4, 1929, 477-82. *Battle standard, signa militaria and labarum* will, therefore, be used interchangeably. For Late Antique representations of the *chi-rho*, see a silver *largitio* dish in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad; see the *chi-rho* on a shield held by a guardsman with Constantius II on horseback, accompanied by the figure of Victory bearing a laurel wreath, N. Lenski, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, fig. 39. Also see the procession of Emperor Justinian, the Archbishop and attendants in a mosaic from San Vitale, Ravenna. Demonstrating continuity in the Late Antique manner of depicting the role of emperor, the *chi-rho* is once again on a conspicuous shield positioned on the left of the pictorial space and held by a guardsman. The Emperor Justinian is centrally placed, this time with Archbishop Maximian and attendants in the place occupied by Victory on the silver *largitio* dish, M. Maas, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, plate IV.

<sup>7</sup> In contrast to paintings, for example, which as a whole are without an essential interactive element. On the subject-object relation, see B. Brown, "Thing Theory", *Critical Inquiry*, 28, Autumn 2001, 1-21.

<sup>8</sup> On agents, see *Constantine's Battle Standard as a Social Agent*.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: the Transformation of Art from the Pagan world to Christianity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; J.A.W. Heffernan, "Speaking for pictures: the rhetoric of art criticism", *Word and Image*, 15, 1999, 19-33; R. Webb, 1999, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: the Invention of a Genre", *Word and Image*, 15, 1999, 7-18; J.P. Small. *The Parallel Worlds of Classical Art and Text*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; R. Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2009.

## II. MODEL DESCRIPTIONS OF DIVINELY INSPIRED OBJECTS

### Constantine's Battle Standard in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*

Roman Emperor Constantine had a Christian vision in 312 CE. According to Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea's account, during the day Constantine and his soldiers witnessed a shared vision in which the *chi-rho* monogram appeared joined with text that said "By this conquer".<sup>15</sup> Later that night, Constantine alone was visited by Christ, who revealed the same sign – one which Eusebius referred to as a "saving sign" (*τρόπαιον*).<sup>16</sup> Constantine was then urged to make copies of the divinely revealed symbol in order to lead his Christian Roman army against Emperor Maxentius, his former co-emperor.<sup>17</sup> History remembers Constantine as the first Christian emperor.<sup>18</sup> Before Constantine's rule, under Diocletian, the Great Persecution literally drove Christians underground.<sup>19</sup> The Roman Empire had been pagan for over one thousand years. Yet Constantine's imperial battle standard was

<sup>15</sup> VC I.28.2.

<sup>16</sup> VC I.31.3. Cameron and Hall note that "'Trophy' (*tropaion*) is a favourite word with Eusebius, used both generally and (particularly) of the cross; cf. e.g. 37.1 where the 'victorious trophy' of Christ is glossed by 'Saviour's sign' or 'saving sign' (*soterion semeion*); the same terminology in LC, e.g. 9.14, 16 (again the two words juxtaposed), and see on IV.21... For Eusebius, and in later eastern tradition, the cross represented victory rather than suffering". For additional Roman period sources expressing this idea, see Cameron and Hall 1999, 207. For coins with the Christian standard, see for example, Constantinople no. 19 in P. Bruun, ed., *Roman Imperial Coinage*, VII: Constantine and Licinius AD 313-337, London, 1966. See Cameron and Hall's commentary on their translation of the *Life of Constantine*, esp. 207-208. On Constantine's Christian coins more broadly, see P. Bruun, "The Disappearance of Sol from the Coins of Constantine", *Arctos*, NS 2, 1958, 15-37; "The Christian Signs on the Coins of Constantine", *Arctos*, NS 3, 1962, 5-35.

<sup>17</sup> The importance of the Roman battle standard can be traced throughout the Roman imperial period from Augustus through to Constantine's divine exhortation to make and display imperial Christian battle standards. In military contexts, the standards were essentially equivalent to a modern day flag, a patriotic emblem. For example, the breastplate on the well-known Prima Porta Augustus – an imperial statue copied and disseminated throughout the Roman Empire – commemorated the Emperor's successful recapture of Roman standards from Parthia. See R.R.R. Smith, "Typology and Diversity in the Portraits of Augustus", *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 9, 1996, 31-47; N.H. Ramage and A. Ramage, *Roman Art: Romulus to Constantine*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed, Englewood Cliffs, NJ., Prentice Hall, 2008, fig. 3.19. Beyond such public commemorations of civic events, the Roman standards also played a role in subsequent honorific imperial sculpture and reliefs. In one of the earliest recorded double imperial *apotheoses*, those of an emperor and empress, battle standards were – literally – central in the visual record. From *circa* 161 CE, a double imperial funerary *decursio* scene on the Antonine column base in Rome honours Antoninus Pius and Faustina. They are shown ascending in union on an adjacent relief. *Ibid.*, fig. 8.20.

<sup>18</sup> On emerging notions of Christianity, see *Codex Theodosianus*; For an English translation, see C. Pharr, T.S. Davidson and M.B. Pharr, eds. and trans., *The Theodosian Code, and Novels and Sirmondian Constitutions*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1952. See also J. Elsner, "Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and early Christian Art", *Journal of Roman Studies*, 93, 2003, 114-128.

<sup>19</sup> According to imperial edicts, the Great Persecution began in 303 CE. It was not until 311 CE, that the Edict of Toleration formally ended the empire-wide persecution. On material culture from this period, or the lack thereof, see G.F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, Macon, GA., Mercer University Press, 2003.

explicitly Christian, inaugurating over one thousand years as a Christian Roman Empire.

The early Church fathers were keen to make Constantine's conversion known to contemporaries, and to offer the first Christian emperor's Christianity as a model. Unlike Constantine's original battle standard, Eusebius' account of the vision remains to this day. How did the description of this imperial object contribute to the Christianisation of the Roman Empire? How did contemporary Romans interpret an overt symbol of Christianity, the emperor's battle standard?

Constantine's battle standard is rendered in textual form in the extant pages of an imperial biography attributed to Eusebius.<sup>20</sup> According to Eusebius' text, it has a complex chronology. The battle standard was first seen in the form of a mass vision. Then Christ visited Constantine in a dream, once again, revealing the vision to Constantine; but this time the Emperor was alone. These earliest versions of the divine sign were circulated by word-of-mouth and, therefore, were all ephemeral visions. In his dream, Christ asked Constantine to replicate what he had seen. The first tangible, physical battle standard was produced after two interconnected visions of Christ's sign. The first was a mass vision which reportedly took place on the day before the battle against Maxentius in 312 CE, and the second occurred the night before the battle when Constantine was visited in a dream.<sup>21</sup> According to the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius, since the battle standard was said to have been successful in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge of 28 October 312 CE, the first physical saving sign must have been made in 312 CE. Finally, Eusebius produces a textual account of the history of Constantine's Christian battle standard. The text itself provides an account of the reported origins of the Christian *labarum* which includes a textual version rendered before the mind's eye (*ekphrasis*).

In the text, the highlighted instrument of the Christian battle standard is first portrayed as a vision, then relayed as a concept, and finally as an image – reportedly based on the act of Eusebius witnessing a physical object and then rendering it before the mind's eye. The written

<sup>20</sup> On the current state of the text and the problems inherent in attributing the surviving text to Eusebius, see Winkelmann "Zur Geschichte des Authentizitätsproblems der *Vita Constantini*", 1962.

<sup>21</sup> Lactantius produced a brief but account of Constantine's vision (*circa* 317/318 CE) that predates Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*. Eusebius revised his biography after Constantine's death in 337 CE with an eye towards his new imperial audience, Constantine's heirs. Constantine's Christian vision was omitted entirely from Eusebius' earlier *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Lactantius' account, although earlier than Eusebius' account in the VC and thus closer to the original event of 312 CE, is shorter. Lactantius reported the divine symbol took the form of a *staurogram* or *cross-monogram* (the Greek letter *rho* superimposed upon a *tau* or cross-shape), as opposed to Eusebius' identification of the symbol as the *chi-rho* or *christogram* (the Greek letters *chi* and *rho* from the word *Christos*, meaning 'the anointed' superimposed). On the *staurogram*, see L.W. Hurtado, "The Staurogram in Early Christian Manuscripts: The Earliest Visual Reference to the Crucified Jesus?" in *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Text and Their World*, eds. T.J. Kraus and T. Nicklas, Leiden, Brill, 2006, 207-26.

narrative within which Constantine's battle standard was interpreted remains the means by which scholars today frame early Christian perspectives on the object's significance (Fig. 1).<sup>22</sup> Focusing on the conception and verbal treatment of the religious object at the centre of the vision – emperor Constantine's *labarum* or battle standard – the underlying question is: How is this particular material object shown becoming holy?

Before presenting a brief overview of the conceptual breakdown of this well-known text, let's start with an abbreviated description of the Christian saving sign<sup>23</sup>:

This was something which the Emperor himself once saw fit to let me also set eyes on, God vouchsafing even this. It was constructed to the following design. A tall pole plated with gold had a transverse bar forming the shape of a cross. Up at the extreme top a wreath woven of precious stones and gold had been fastened. On it two letters, intimating by its first characters the name 'Christ', formed the monogram of the Saviour's title, *rho* being intersected in the middle by *chi*. These letters the Emperor also used to wear upon his helmet in later times.<sup>24</sup>

From the transverse bar, which was bisected by the pole, hung suspended a cloth, an imperial tapestry covered with a pattern of precious stones fastened together, which glittered with shafts of light, and interwoven with much gold, producing an impression of indescribable beauty on those who saw it. This banner then, attached to the bar, was given equal dimensions of length and breadth...below the trophy of the cross and near the top of the tapestry delineated, carried the golden head-and-shoulders portrait of the God beloved Emperor, and likewise of his sons.<sup>25</sup>

Essentially, Eusebius provides a description of the saving sign. This description underscores the important elements of the hybrid sign as a cross-shaped backbone upon which a divine sign (seen in the vision) and the two-part imperial sign are joined. Christ's sign consists of a wreath with the *chi-rho monogram*. Below the horizontal bar of

the cross are two imperial signs which complete the tripartite saving sign described by Eusebius (Fig. 2). Moving downwards, the imperial images are a tapestry and a portrait of Constantine and his sons. Eusebius' description of the imperial battle standard is an interpretation of the divine sign – above – coupled with that of the emperor, visually positioned as the intermediary between God and man.

Neither Constantine's original description of his divine vision nor the physical object he produced survive, but we have nearly contemporaneous presentations of both in the form of Eusebius' retelling of the vision (Fig. 1). The text produced a history not only of the battle standard, but of Constantine as the first Christian emperor. The description of Moses found in the text of the book of Exodus served as a model for Eusebius' portrayal of Constantine. In the imperial biography (echoing events in Exodus) first, the idea behind the battle standard is revealed by Christ to Constantine, moving chronologically forward in time, next the physical standard comes into existence, and finally, battle standards are used and displayed in battle. After the circulation of Christian battle standards in the pursuit of military aims, Eusebius produced a text which provided a history for the circulating object. Eusebius offered a description of the battle standard in his polemical imperial biography.

According to Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, two underlying ideas explain how the standard becomes holy. First, the concept – that of the underlying symbol of the *chi-rho* – is holy. This concept contrasts with the classical world view in which following the monotheistic world view, gods no longer inhabit naturalistic pagan statues.<sup>26</sup> The change from representational to symbolic is, therefore, indicative of a transformation in the Christian world view.

Second, the history of the object's use, that of battle standards in general, demonstrates its holiness. Constantine is known to have circulated public images of himself bearing the divinely revealed symbol<sup>27</sup> before *The Life of Constantine* subsequently presented Constantine commanding the physical object 'to lead all his armies'.<sup>28</sup> Eusebius' text offers a testament to readers, projecting the holiness of the divinely inspired object in circulation.

As was said earlier, Eusebius' portrayal of Constantine was clearly influenced by the representation of Moses in

<sup>22</sup> Lactantius' – earlier – abbreviated description of the revealed sign (*staurogram*) renders the subject differently than Eusebius' – later – edited description of the saving sign (*christogram*). Eusebius' text survives, however altered, and succeeding emperors followed Constantine's use of the *chi-rho* as recounted by Eusebius. This suggests that Late Antique emperors use of the *chi-rho* continued established conventions.

<sup>23</sup> Eusebius uses this term to refer to the three parts which made up Constantine's battle standard. See Fig. 1B.

<sup>24</sup> An extant medallion minted in 315 CE in Ticinum (Lombardy, northern Italy), now in the Staatliche Münzsammlung in Munich shows Constantine with a small roundel above his head bearing the *chi-rho monogram*. The inscription on the *obverse* reads as follows: IMP(erator) CONSTANT-INVS P(ius) F(elix) AVG(ustus) (Emperor Augustus pious and fortunate Augustus); *reverse*: SA-LVS REI-PUBLIC-AE (the safety of the state). Accessed at [http://www.staatliche-muenzsammlung.de/highlights\\_06.html](http://www.staatliche-muenzsammlung.de/highlights_06.html), 4 January 2011.

<sup>25</sup> VC 1.28-32.

<sup>26</sup> On pagan *versus* Christian conceptions of religion in texts, see Elsner *Art and the Roman Viewer* 1995. An interesting question is to what extent was this view shaped by the second commandment, outlined in the book of Exodus. All translations are from *New International Version*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1987. For discussions on the prohibition of images in Roman imperial period Judaism and Christianity, see M. Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1992; H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott, Chicago, IL., The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> See *supra* note 21.

<sup>28</sup> VC 1.31.3.

the book of Exodus. According to Exodus, Yahweh taught Moses how to use his magic staff. Focusing on model descriptions of divinely inspired objects in both Exodus and the imperial biography raises the question: to what extent is Constantine's battle standard performing a role similar to that of Moses' staff?

### Moses' Staff and Constantine's Battle Standard

Just like the first vision in Eusebius' version of Constantine's Christian vision, Yahweh does not appear to Moses in physical form. Instead, he offers miraculous signs as visual proof of divine communication.<sup>29</sup> The material object chosen by God – as the instrument with which to perform miracles before the eyes of Moses and the Jewish people – is the staff of Moses. This is illustrated directly in the book of Exodus:

the Lord said to him [Moses], "What is that in your hand?" "A staff", he replied. The Lord said, "Throw it on the ground." Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. Then the Lord said to him, "Reach out your hand and take it by the tail." So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. "This", said the Lord, "is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has appeared to you".<sup>30</sup>

Later, Moses is shown showing Aaron how to perform the same miracle in front of Pharaoh. Moses then takes the role of Yahweh, and Aaron takes Moses' place.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> On the importance of vision in relation to the other senses, see L. James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996; G. Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, CA. and London, University of California Press, 2000a; L. James, "Senses and Sensibility in Byzantium", *Art History*, 27, September 2004, 522-37. In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is most often represented in the form of fire. Moses 'sees' his God as the miraculous Burning Bush, rather than as an anthropomorphic figure. Following the second commandment, Yahweh is not to be seen (*Exodus* 33, 19-23) or depicted by man: "You shall not make yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (*Exodus* 20, 4-5). The text follows this visual prohibition. Invoking fire to indicate divine presence, no visual form serves to represent God, nothing serves as a substitute for the voice of God. In contrast, according to Eusebius, the visitation of the post-resurrected Christ to the Emperor in a dream may have revealed a vision of the incarnate Christ. The text does not comment on Christ's physical form. If, however, Eusebius as a Church Father was following the tradition established in the New Testament, the familiar post-Resurrection figure of Christ was most likely shown to the Emperor. In the *Life of Constantine*, the first vision of the divine sign is shown to Constantine's Roman army devoid of explanation. Viewers are uninitiated. Thus, this vision – of a symbol – is unclear to those who see it, *VC* I.29 and I.32.1-2. Presenting seeing without comprehension is an idea in circulation throughout the Graeco-Roman period. See, for example, the shield of Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid* from the first century CE, *Aeneid* esp. 8.619-731.

<sup>30</sup> *Exodus* 4, 2-5.

<sup>31</sup> For an unambiguous image of the staff of Moses as an instrument of holy power: *As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, [when the staff was*

When Egyptian magicians are called upon and reply in kind with the same feat, Aaron's miracle gets the better of the sorcerers who are only playing tricks, as Aaron's staff triumphs by swallowing theirs.<sup>32</sup> Previously, the text has made it clear that Moses typically receives specific instructions from Yahweh. With this story, however, the implication in the narrative account does not include instructions for Moses regarding the execution of the culminating miracle. The divinely chosen staff is an instrument and external marker. Without any intervention from Moses or Aaron, their staffs swallow those of the sorcerers. The reader is thereby left to decipher the overlapping roles played by Moses and Aaron. Their staffs are divinely selected instruments which serve to communicate a moment of divine intervention. It is, therefore, implied that Yahweh responded with this concluding move.<sup>33</sup>

The staff and Moses' hand are somewhat interchangeable, suggesting that it was not only Moses' staff, but also the person of Moses that was chosen as the instrument through which Yahweh's power or gifts were manifest on earth.<sup>34</sup> Crossing the desert, Yahweh said to Moses, "Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground".<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, when Moses parts the Red Sea, 'hand' is substituted for 'staff'. Thus, both are used synonymously as instruments for Yahweh's power to manifest itself on earth.

Christ's magic was given historical validity and authority due to an inheritance in the tradition of magic found in the stories of Moses, Daniel and the Magi.<sup>36</sup> The

lowered, i.e. without God's help, the Israelites were defeated]...the Lord said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered..." (*Exodus* 17, 8-17, esp. 11 and 14).

<sup>32</sup> *Exodus* 7, 8-12.

<sup>33</sup> In a later passage, Yahweh is given the credit for the miracles, *the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh...that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord"* (*Exodus* 10, 1-2).

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Moses with a staff in his hand as he is shown crossing the Red Sea, see R. Du Mesnil du Buisson, *Les peintures de la synagogue de Doura-Europos, 245-256 après J.-C.*, 1939, XV-XVII; A.J. Wharton, "Good and Bad Images from the Synagogue of Dura Europos: Contexts, Subtexts, Intertexts", *Art History*, 17, 1994, 1-25.

<sup>35</sup> *Exodus* 14, 16. Compare the interchangeable use of 'hand' and 'staff' in *Exodus*, cf. 10, 12-13; 14, 21 and 14, 26-27.

<sup>36</sup> Moses was one of the most widely known figures from the Pentateuch, and the story of the serpent-staff miracle was familiar to pagan authors, Gager 1972, 21. The well-known event of the Crossing of the Red Sea occurs on at least 29 Roman sarcophagi, see Gager 1972; T.F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1993, 54-91. Not only was this particular episode popular, but by the fourth century CE, it was the only narrative subject to occupy the entire face of any sarcophagus, see Mathews 1993, 72 and 75. On images of Moses and Christ in late Roman art, with and without a staff, see Mathews 1993, figs. 50-54 for depictions of Moses. For illustrated moments from the life of Moses in late Roman art, see the mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore, Rome. See S. Spain, "The Promised Blessing: The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore", *Art Bulletin*, 61, December 1979, 518-40; M.R. Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews", *Harvard Theological Review*, 86, April 1993, 155-75.

ideological link is made visible by the inclusion of a staff/wand in early Christian art. Christ's miracles gain credibility from Moses' miracles "since Moses had predicted them. The repeated appearance of Christ working miracles with the wave of his wand was meant to establish this parallel to Moses whose words he fulfilled".<sup>37</sup> Just like Moses and Aaron bested the sorcerers at their own game, with Yahweh as the divine source of their authentic power, so too Christ performs his wonders by wielding his staff as an instrument of his authentic power. In response to attacks on Christianity, supporters did not seek to differentiate Christ from magicians: "The magic of Christ was presented more effectively in art than the magic of his rivals".<sup>38</sup> The staff of Moses and depictions of magic represented by monotheism – in the form of miracles – provide continuity between the wands used by Moses and Christ.

How does the representation of Moses' staff in Exodus and Christ's staff relate to Constantine's battle standard? First, just as Moses' staff and hand signal divine intervention, Constantine's battle standard serves an instrumental role in identifying which Romans were granted divine protection. Second, just like Moses, Eusebius' representation of Christ's hand and wand also "are presented as parallel instruments".<sup>39</sup> Following conventions established in the Hebrew Bible, in early Christian art the staff of Christ effectively worked like a magic wand, a gesture indicating a miracle.

Finally, not only did a number of well-known passages from the book of Exodus serve as a model for Eusebius' manner of reporting Constantine's Christian *labarum*, but the portrayal of Moses also served as a model for Eusebius' portrayal of Constantine himself.<sup>40</sup> Moses was instructed to perform specific actions with his staff, or Aaron's, which Yahweh would then use to mark a miraculous event. Moses is told to use his staff to turn the water in the Nile into blood,<sup>41</sup> to stretch out his hands towards the sky in order to bring a plague of hail,<sup>42</sup> then to use the same gesture to bring a plague of darkness,<sup>43</sup> and in response to a request for guidance, he is instructed: "take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for

the people to drink".<sup>44</sup> In the book of Exodus, the staff used by Moses<sup>45</sup> is chosen by Yahweh to signal miracles. Yahweh, however, makes it clear that he will be present to perform the wonder-working. Thus, it is unambiguous – Moses and his staff, and subsequently Christ and Constantine's Christian battle standard, are each instruments for the transmission of divine power.

### The Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle and Constantine's Battle Standard

Unlike the staff of Moses, which according to the text was a functional object already in use before it was shown selected by God,<sup>46</sup> the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle were made exclusively for, and as a result of, Yahweh's divine plan. The description of objects in the book of Exodus presents their origin and role as central to the life of the prophet Moses. This section considers a number of related aspects concerning the representation of miraculous material culture which set the stage for Eusebius' re-presentation of Constantine and his Christian battle standard. This discussion of Eusebius' version of Constantine's battle standard in relation to the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle addresses monotheistic parallels concerning divine visions, divinely revealed instructions, cultural processes for making material culture holy and writing as a form of remembering.

### A. DIVINE VISIONS

As a precursor to the lives of Christian saints, biographies of prophets contained histories of divinely inspired material culture.<sup>47</sup> Many divinely revealed functional objects exhibit agency. Explanations concerning use and agency are disseminated through the circulation of an appended history, typically in the form of a holy figure's biography. For example, as a parallel to Moses who saw the Burning Bush before communicating with God, Constantine also witnessed a divine sign; both figures' visions preceded the unique experience of a direct encounter with God. The inclusion of a miraculous vision presaging a divine exhortation is one of a number of references to Moses in Eusebius' re-presentation of Constantine and his battle standard. In both biographical accounts of Moses and Constantine, the sequence of events and central roles ascribed to miraculous material culture serve as testaments to the ephemeral transformations experienced.

<sup>37</sup> Mathews 1993, 77.

<sup>38</sup> Mathews 1993, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Eusebius' contemporaries made a direct connection between Moses and Christ, as is clear by the inclusion of a wand or staff in some of the earliest depictions of Christ. For a discussion of the archaeological evidence, such as sarcophagi and frescoes, see Mathews 1993, esp. 64. Although Christ's staff was included in some early images, thereafter, the staff does not typically feature in depictions of Christ.

<sup>40</sup> See A. Cameron, "Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* and the Construction of Constantine", in *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, eds. S. Swain and M. Edwards, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, 145-174, esp. 158-163.

<sup>41</sup> *Exodus* 7, 15; 17 and 19. Aaron's staff called forth a plague of frogs and gnats, *Exodus* 8, 5-6 and 8, 16-17, respectively.

<sup>42</sup> *Exodus* 9, 13-35.

<sup>43</sup> *Exodus* 10, 21-29.

<sup>44</sup> *Exodus* 17, 5. Certain miracles occur without the intermediary of the staff. Yahweh alone calls forth the plague of flies and plague on livestock, see *Exodus* 8, 20-32 and 9, 1-7, respectively.

<sup>45</sup> It is explicitly stated that the staff used by Aaron is directed by Moses in a relationship which parallels that of Yahweh and Moses. By means of the instrumental staff of Moses, Yahweh is the agent or subject and Moses the recipient or object. Similarly, via the instrumental staff of Aaron, Yahweh tells Moses that he will occupy the agentive role of subject and Aaron will occupy that of object. Thus, the text implicitly calls attention to the subject-object relation and the different roles assigned to Moses.

<sup>46</sup> In the book of Genesis, the staff denotes kingship (*Genesis* 38, 18).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. A. Cameron 1997, 145-174, esp. 173.

## B. DIVINELY REVEALED INSTRUCTIONS

How closely did the specific instructions for offerings of the Tabernacle serve as a prototype for Eusebius' description of Constantine's divine revelation? To what extent was Constantine's hybrid divine-imperial saving sign (see Fig. 2) produced in accord with divine will and instruction? As conveyed in the book of Exodus and subsequently reiterated in works like the *Life of Constantine*, understanding overlapping themes such as divinely inspired material culture, and the portrayal of a prophetic leader provides a clearer understanding of how pivotal objects became holy through accounts of their origins.

Exodus contains specific, divinely revealed instructions concerning how to make material culture exclusively for religious use. Resonating with the Old Testament text, Eusebius presents the first Christian emperor similarly, receiving divinely revealed instructions concerning how to make material culture for use against non-Christian Romans. Before addressing these issues, however, it is necessary to consider key passages from Exodus, for both Exodus and the *Vita Constantini* contain a description of the divine origins of a miraculous object.

The book of Exodus not only provides a biography of the life of Moses, but also recounts the origins of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle.<sup>48</sup> Both texts focus on divinely inspired material culture physically produced by human craftsmen closely following a predetermined divine plan. The account presented in Exodus outlines a divinely inspired dwelling designed for Yahweh, complete with a carefully enumerated sequence of production, so that the Jewish people can then make a physical place for God to inhabit among his chosen people. A description of the design and production of the Tabernacle occupies a majority of the final part of the book.

In his role as intermediary Moses is singled out as the liaison between God and man, the religious leader responsible for realizing a divinely inspired idea by the hands of believers. The revelation and construction of the Ark and the Tabernacle thus represents a culminating achievement in the life of the prophet Moses. The divinely revealed plan is of such significance that the same instructions are repeated, first as the prophet Moses, the original recipient, receives them from Yahweh, and again a second time when Moses repeats the list to his followers.<sup>49</sup> Yahweh provides Moses with a clear sequence of steps which he subsequently relays to his people to fabricate the material objects for worship. In the description of offerings for the Tabernacle, materials are specified.<sup>50</sup> Yahweh says:

have 'them' make a sanctuary for me, and I shall dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings, like the pattern I will show you.<sup>51</sup> ...make them [lampstand, tabernacle and bronze altar] according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.<sup>52</sup> All the other articles used in the service of the tabernacle, whatever their function ... are to be of bronze.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, according to Exodus, Yahweh ensures that the two pairs of human hands entrusted with the creation of his dwelling were inspired by God himself:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "See I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you: ... They are to make them just as I commanded you."<sup>54</sup>

God makes it known that he has selected the craftsmen responsible for making the Ark, and that he has seen to it that they are filled with sufficient skill, ability and knowledge to produce the sacred objects for use. Echoing both the central role of Moses and the specific nature of a divinely revealed design, the *VC* presents Constantine and events in his life in a manner which directly parallels Moses' life. Eusebius also elects to portray Constantine as intermediary between God and craftsmen, outlining the materials to be used by human hands in order to execute usable material culture from a divine design. Eusebius closely follows the model of the making of the Ark of the Covenant by showing the Emperor relaying the divinely conceived design to craftsmen.<sup>55</sup> Whilst the *Vita* does not detail divine intervention on behalf of the craftsmen, the narrative indeed outlines the process of making a divinely conceived object.

Divine instruction is portrayed as direct communication between God and a living leader. In each case, the message is a specific sequence of events called for by God in order to manifest his power on earth. In Exodus, the implication is that God wants the Jewish people to play a pivotal part – not only in creating the physical space Yahweh is to inhabit, but in choosing to enter into this decision.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in the *Vita Constantini*,

<sup>48</sup> Exodus 24-40.

<sup>49</sup> Exodus 25-31, then again in 35-40.

<sup>50</sup> Exodus 25, 3-7. Cf. the second time Moses recounts Yahweh's precise instructions Exodus 35-40.

<sup>51</sup> Exodus 25, 8-9. Also see Exodus 35, 4-19.

<sup>52</sup> Exodus 25, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Exodus 27, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Exodus 31, 1-6 and 31, 11.

<sup>55</sup> VC 1.30.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. the presentation of Achilles' decision to enter into battle in the Trojan War, a turning point crystallised by a parallel *ekphrasis* on a divine creation of a key physical object – the Shield of Achilles. See, for example, A.S. Becker, "The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of

Eusebius describes Constantine considering the divine message he was chosen to receive. Moreover, Eusebius deftly highlights the very moment when Constantine chooses to adopt the revealed Christian symbol, thus the impetus behind Constantine's conversion to Christianity – in which the emperor relays the divinely revealed design.

### C. MAKING MATERIAL CULTURE HOLY

In Exodus and the *Vita Constantini*, material culture is made holy in different ways. In contrast to Christ's exhortation that Constantine produce divinely inspired material culture for use in battle,<sup>57</sup> Moses is instructed to have his people produce divinely inspired material culture for use in worship. This is in order to produce a suitable dwelling for consecration before Yahweh could inhabit it. According to the text, once human hands had finished building the terrestrial Tabernacle, ritual purification was required before Yahweh could enter the dwelling. Thus, Moses is told which gifts must be made for dedication in proper worship. Moreover, it is made explicit that the transformation from fabrication to holy dwelling occurs by means of consecration. Moses is told: "the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate, whatever their gifts may be...[to make them] acceptable to the Lord".<sup>58</sup> Notably, both monotheistic visions – that intended for the Jewish Ark of the Covenant and the Christian Roman battle standard – include golden coverings, mention of a skilled craftsman,<sup>59</sup> and an embroiderer or work of embroidery.<sup>60</sup> These objects are also meant to be carried and used, specified as portable objects (e.g. including poles for movement).<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to the myriad of objects combined to form the Ark of the Covenant, Constantine's Christian battle standard was inherently active from the point of revelation. Since Constantine was told to use it against non-Christian co-emperor Maxentius on the eve of battle, the suggestion is that the apotropaic symbol was intended for use as part of his Christian Roman army's arsenal. According to Eusebius' description of the battle standards' fabrication, the act of anointing was not necessary, nor was an explicit invocation of Christ once the physical object was constructed. By implication the religious transfer of power, the point of origination (of becoming holy) occurred during the second vision, when Christ revealed the meaning contained within the symbolic vision (his message) directly to his chosen recipient Constantine. Unlike the objects comprising the

Ark of the Covenant, Constantine's battle standard did not need to be "activated"; it was sacred at inception.

Whereas in Exodus, the Ark and objects created exclusively for religious use are consecrated, there is no explicit moment of consecration in the *Life of Constantine*.<sup>62</sup> Why is this moment missing from the text? Christian battle standards were used by Roman soldiers in combat, presumably reproduced when an Emperor chose; thereby, divine protection was accessible through unlimited duplication. In contrast to inimitable Jewish religious objects, the text implies that Christian battle standards were intended to be reproducible,<sup>63</sup> used as a means of manifesting Christ's power and channeling it like a conduit on earth to protect the Christian Roman army charged with defending the Roman Empire.

### D. MATERIAL WITNESS: WRITING AS A FORM OF REMEMBERING

Underscored in the Exodus passage is the importance of writing as a form of remembering and honouring. This is similar to the fundamental message underlying the *Vita*, in which the *chi-rho monogram* is displayed as part of a divine sign. In antiquity, inscriptions on material culture were a means of commemorating historical events.<sup>64</sup> Establishing an important precedent with which to honour and preserve such extraordinary events, upon entering into a covenant with God, Yahweh provides the Ten Commandments as written tablets. In addition to divinely rendered tablets, God tells Moses: "[e]ngrave the names...on the two stones the way a gem cutter engraves a seal...as memorial stones...engrave on it [pure gold plate] as on a seal 'Holy to the Lord'".<sup>65</sup> The Jewish people are instructed to write on material culture as a form of memory.

Eusebius draws upon similar ideas concerning writing as a form of remembering, but takes liberties to editorialize events. Eusebius' visual description of Constantine's Christian battle standard presents a biased and strongly Christianized perspective of the Emperor.<sup>67</sup> According to

Homeric Description", *American Journal of Philology*, 111, Summer 1990, 139-53; *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis*, Lanham, MD. and London, Rowman and Littlefield, 1995.

<sup>57</sup> Implicitly – as argued after the fact by Eusebius – against non-Christian adversaries.

<sup>58</sup> Exodus 28, 38. "It will be the sacred anointing oil...You shall consecrate them so they will be most holy, and whatever touches them will be holy" Exodus 30, 25 and 29. For moments of consecration, see 28, 41; 29, 3 and 5.

<sup>59</sup> Exodus 26, 1 and 26, 31; VC I.30.

<sup>60</sup> Exodus 26, 36; VC I.31.2.

<sup>61</sup> Exodus 25, 28; VC I.31.1-31.3, explicitly for use as protection, see VC I.29.

<sup>62</sup> Although the staff is not shown in the act of consecration, it is shown in use as an instrument for Yahweh.

<sup>63</sup> Evidence from the archaeological record suggests that later Christian emperors continued duplicating the divine design well into Byzantium. See supra note 14.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, H. Meredith, forthcoming book on open-work vessels. Among the inscribed glass or metal vessels from the fourth century, some contain the emperor's name. This suggests use as imperial gifts.

<sup>65</sup> Exodus 28, 11-12; see also 28, 29-30.

<sup>66</sup> Exodus 28, 36.

<sup>67</sup> Whereas Eusebius' text gives us insight into the fourth century, his personal views on religion are apparent in the text. As one of the early Church Fathers, Eusebius presents all things pagan as deliberately excised by Constantine, root and branch, explicitly ascribing religious motivation for such actions, VC IV.14.2-28. According to contemporary sources, pagan statues were in fact moved to the emperor's new Christian capital, Constantinople, VC III.25-43.4. Contradicting Eusebius' assertions, see C.A. Mango, "Antique statuary and the Byzantine beholder", *Dumbarton Oaks papers*, 17, 1963, 55-75; S. Bassett, *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004. On Eusebius' posthumous revision of the biography with the imperial heirs as his target audience, in order

the ekphrastic treatment of the battle standard, as well as representations preserved on coinage, the inclusion of the *chi-rho* serves as a memorial, literally written onto the very fabric of the object. This is another iteration whereby the Exodus narrative served as a model for Eusebius' Christian biography.

Inscribed visual culture can memorialize an ephemeral religious experience with permanence. The inscription acts as a record of events, and the object itself serves as a witness. Thereby, material culture can directly convey a message to ever greater witnesses. The written word of God is offered as testimony – an object serving as proof or evidence of a covenant between God and his followers – both to Moses and his fellow Jews, and to Constantine and his fellow Romans. God reveals to Moses: “in the ark the testimony I will give you [the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments]”.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, by virtue of the inclusion of either the *christogram* (according to Eusebius' account) or the *staurogram* (according to Lactantius' account) as part of the fabric of the saving sign, both textual accounts incorporate and visually display divine testimony. In either case, material culture projects authority. Both divine exhortations entrust a single chosen prophetic leader with a divinely conceived plan, the means by which to realize God's vision on earth. It is through the realization of that vision that holy power has a suitable vehicle in which to inhabit and exert divine power on earth, ‘as the throne of God’.<sup>69</sup>

From divine revelation to sacred production, the metaphoric lifecycle of usable material culture is repeated in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*. In the two examples of miraculous material culture from the lives of Moses and Constantine, both were inspired by and following a divine design. The hands of the Jewish people collaboratively created a consecrated dwelling which Yahweh inhabited in order to be among his chosen people. Following a similar tradition, the hands of Roman Christians created an apotropaic symbol or ‘saving sign’ as part of the totemic Christian battle standard.<sup>70</sup> Both accounts follow the same general structure: to a chosen leader, a lone God reveals an inspired idea or concept for a material object to serve as a vehicle for holy power; that leader then serves as an instrument for God, relaying a

divine design; man then chooses to produce an object to honour one God – using human hands – following a divinely revealed design. Finally, even though the object is man-made, due to its divine origins, that object is holy, manifesting divine power on earth. This history of inception and production, which Eusebius patterned after the monotheistic model,<sup>71</sup> therefore, is based on Eusebius' incorporation of the view that holy material culture is physically made by man,<sup>72</sup> and made sacred at the point of revelation. Thus, miraculous material culture's holy power stems from revealed truth.

Whilst both miraculous objects are man-made, they are holy because their origin is divine. An examination of the paradigmatic life of Moses, his mobile miraculous material culture (the staff), and stationary miraculous material culture (the consecrated Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle) reveals the extent to which Eusebius' textual re-presentation of Constantine's Christian battle standard is directly indebted not only to the life of Moses, but also to his miraculous material culture. The question arises: what role does use play? What did the circulation and use of material culture contribute to interpreting its social meaning?

### III. CONSTANTINE'S BATTLE STANDARD: VIEWING A THING

According to one theoretical classification of visual culture, *objects* are examples of unnoticed material culture; *things* are interrupted objects in use.<sup>73</sup> Whereas we often fail to notice and look through “*objects*” – such as a windowpane, a hammer, a fork – we notice and look at the materiality of a dirty window, a hammer head that comes off, or a bent fork. Thus:

we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us...The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an objects than a particular subject-object relation.<sup>74</sup>

Applying B. Brown's terminology to Eusebius' representation of the history of Constantine's battle standard, the manifestation of the object inverts the subject-object relation. Thereby, Eusebius re-presents Constantine as a Christian *through* the ‘thingness’ of his Christian battle standard. The first tangible, physical

to promote the continued adoption of Christianity by subsequent Roman Emperors, see Cameron and Hall 1999; Williams 2008.

<sup>68</sup> *Exodus* 25, 16. See also 16, 34; 24, 12 and 32-34, 28.

<sup>69</sup> *Exodus* 25, 10. “Of the tabernacle furnishings, the ark is mentioned first probably because it symbolized the throne of the Lord, the great King, who chose to dwell among his people”, *NIV* 1987, editorial note, 122-3.

<sup>70</sup> The Roman battle standard carried tremendous importance. A significant example in the history of Roman imperial art was the Prima Porta Augustus. This was a larger than life-size marble statue of the emperor discovered in a villa in Rome belonging to the imperial couple. The return of the Roman battle standard became an iconic symbol of victory and was visually commemorated on the breastplate of the honorific stature. Copies of this significant imperial statue were made and circulated throughout the Roman Empire, see Smith 1996, 31-47. For a discussion of the importance of this historic scene set within a cosmic setting, see P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. A. Shapiro, Ann Arbor, MI, The University of Michigan Press, 1988, rev. 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Eusebius deliberately includes additional references to the book of Exodus and to Moses throughout the *Vita Constantini*, see for example, *VC* I.12.1 when Constantine, like Moses, is brought up in an enemy court. Cf. Cameron and Hall, 1999, commentary 192-3.

<sup>72</sup> Whereas the Ark is explicitly consecrated (*Exodus* 40, 1-33, esp. 9-11), the battle standard is not – suggesting the latter is replicable as and when the Roman emperor decides. This is borne out by the continued use of the *labarum* on the coinage of later Roman emperors. See, for example, J.P.C. Kent, *Roman Imperial Coinage, VIII: The Family of Constantine I, A.D. 337-364*, London, 1966.

<sup>73</sup> Brown Autumn 2001, 1-22.

<sup>74</sup> Brown Autumn 2001, 4.

battle standard was produced after two interconnected visions of Christ's saving sign. After that, according to Eusebius, Constantine's *labarum* became a 'thing'.

As an instrument with a specific social context, such objects are used by an agent in order to perform an action or a purpose.<sup>75</sup> In the life of Moses in Exodus, his staff and the making of the Tabernacle serve to illustrate Moses' faith and seminal role in Judaism. Reviewing the battle standard's chronology, according to Eusebius' text, the *labarum* has its origins in two divinely revealed visions. The sign was first seen as a mass vision. Then Christ visited Constantine in a dream, revealing his divine communication to him alone through a vision. These earliest recorded accounts of the divine sign, therefore, were all ephemeral. Thus, the Christian visions witnessed by Constantine draw attention to the 'thingness of objects' before they had begun to work for him as material culture. The nature of the object, as represented by Eusebius, was less about a type of functional military object and more about the construction of the Roman Emperor's Christianity – 'a particular subject-object relation'.

Constantine is portrayed as an ideal viewer, offering a model for Eusebius' audience. Constantine is represented alone seeking an interpretation of his vision. As he ponders what he saw, "night overtook him" and Christ himself appears in a second vision with the image of his sign, his exhortation and his interpretation: "Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky, and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy".<sup>76</sup> Once Constantine's saving sign is described in Eusebius' text, it continues: "stunned by the amazing vision, and determined to worship no other god than the one who had appeared, he summoned those expert in his words, and enquired who this god was, and what was the explanation of the vision which had appeared of the sign".<sup>77</sup> Thus, according to Eusebius, even before Constantine has his Christian battle standards made and successfully used them in battle,<sup>78</sup> by implication he has decided not to

worship any God other than Christ. In a parallel narrative, Eusebius underscores Constantine's intention of learning from the interpretations of Christian religious leaders, like the biographer himself.

Eusebius himself, however, acknowledges that his narrative account – and even his having set eyes upon Constantine's *labarum* – took place years after Constantine had fulfilled Christ's request and had the first battle standards made for the Roman army. In the *Vita*, Eusebius writes:

If someone else had reported it, it would perhaps not be easy to accept; but since the victorious Emperor himself told the story to the present writer a long while after, when I was privileged with his acquaintance and company, and confirmed it with oaths, who could hesitate to believe the account, especially when the time which followed provided evidence for the truth of what he said?<sup>79</sup>

Returning once again to the way that the text helps shape responses within Eusebius' ideal audience, his preparatory statements provide assurances which prefigure the salient rhetorical question: "who could hesitate to believe the account, especially when the time which followed provided evidence for the truth of what he said?" Eusebius seeks to dispel any doubts in the minds of his intended audience members from the outset. He takes two events – the Christian vision, and Constantine's victories against non-Christian adversaries – and makes one the cause and the other the effect. Starting with the tacit premise that no true Christian could mistrust the Emperor's account – or more to the point, Eusebius' own interpretation offered together with Constantine's account – Eusebius clearly draws the conclusion that by fulfilling Christ's exhortation to make Christian battle standards, Constantine's Christian Roman army was victorious against non-Christian opposition.<sup>80</sup> This is the correlation and interpretation that Eusebius seeks to disseminate far and wide by means of his imperial biography.

Eusebius' version of events also makes the *labarum* 'holy'. The fourth century narratives sought to interpret the meaning that lay behind the tangible, circulating object – thus, altering the subject-object relation. Thereby, the telling changed the object as it created it. An act of *viewing*, or interpreting, what is seen is an act of appropriating a visual image into a pre-existing set of ideas, reciprocally changing the viewer:

Viewing is always a dual process of interpretation in which what is seen becomes fitted into the already existent framework of the viewer's knowledge and thereby, very subtly, changes both the content of what the viewer knows (because something new has been added)

<sup>75</sup> Whilst a definite starting point for the hagiographic tradition is unknown, the earliest surviving and dated hagiography is Athanasius' mid-fourth century *Life of Antony*. This text is nearly twenty years later than Eusebius' revised version of the *VC*. See also P. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man*, Berkeley, CA., University of California Press, 1983; P.C. Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1994; A. Cameron 1997, 145-74; "Form and Meaning: The *Vita Constantini* and the *Vita Antonii*", in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, eds. T. Hägg and P. Rousseau, Berkeley, CA. and London, University of California Press, 2000, 72-88; P.C. Miller, "Strategies of Representation in Collective Biography: Constructing the Subject as Holy", in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, eds. T. Hägg and P. Rousseau, Berkeley, CA. and London, University of California Press, 2000, 209-54; *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity*, Philadelphia, PA., University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> *VC* 1.29.

<sup>77</sup> *VC* 1.32.1.

<sup>78</sup> It is noteworthy that the Christian saving sign was used against pagan co-ruler, Maxentius. Portraying him as a tyrant, Eusebius underscores Maxentius' inhuman actions, *VC* 1.33-38.5.

<sup>79</sup> *VC* 1.28-30.

<sup>80</sup> Maxentius is a laudable case in point. See supra note 75.

and the meaning of what is seen (because it is now framed by the viewer's knowledge).<sup>81</sup>

Whether it's called *viewing* – the change from an *object* to a *thing* – or a social canvas, the underlying idea remains one of cultural interpretation. Viewers and users interpret socially-constructed meaning rather than scrutinizing, or even noticing, the film screen or backdrop upon which meaning is appended.

Returning to Brown's terminology, looking 'through' means not noticing the screen a film is projected onto, but looking 'at' is noticing a tear in the screen and becoming aware of the screen as a tool. In the case of Constantine we see the subject-object relationship flipped. Rather than having Constantine interpret an object as Christian (subject infusing an object with agency), Eusebius uses the object to create the perception of a Christian Constantine. The act of interpreting occurs at the moment of reflection. This takes place when a viewer looks *at* rather than *through* visual culture. Implicit in this shift is "a changed relation to the human subject...[the thing refers to] a particular subject-object relation".<sup>82</sup> The subject is viewing the material object which is being looked *at*. It is this opportunity for interpretation that affords the momentary reflection on the instrument in its changed state. In this moment the *thing* changes for the user or viewer. This process is more than a mixture of vision and memory of things learned. Relying upon a sense of sight, what is seen is looked at through the lens of pre-existing knowledge and culturally constituted categories.

What allows for this shift in interpretation? In the example of objects shifting from useful to non-useful, it is 'objects asserting themselves as things' that changes the relation between the agent and the instrument.<sup>83</sup> This is one example of a transformation which prompts the user to view the instrument, whereby material culture is then looked at rather than through. Another instance is a textual narrative which incorporates material culture in order to append meaning onto it. Eusebius' *cultural biography* of Constantine's *labarum* is an example of the Roman period writer interpreting the significance of an object – which he takes great pains to demonstrate he's seen – in order to present his interpretation, primarily of the subject, as authoritative. His visual description tacitly prompts his audience to place the subject of his visual description into their pre-existing framework of knowledge, concurrently changing both the content of what the viewer knows and the meaning of what is seen. If one accepts the product of Eusebius' reported act of viewing, then the implication is that when one sees Christian battle standards carried by the Roman army, a viewer will interpret what is seen according to the meaning Eusebius sought to append to the object as instrument. The subject-object relation will be the one

that Eusebius provided (Fig. 1). Thereby, in his textual object, Eusebius constructed the *labarum* for Late Antique – and now for modern – viewers.

#### IV. CULTURAL BIOGRAPHY OF CONSTANTINE'S BATTLE STANDARD

At its core, a cultural biography of an object is a history of period-specific experiences appended to a given object. The meaning imparted onto that object is socially constructed. Just as 'art' is the result of a series of moments which create a history for an object, resulting in the classification of an object as 'art', an 'object' is fundamentally an instrument or a tool. Returning to the definition of a *thing*, a cup is a vessel made to hold liquid. If it holds liquid, it is a successful cup. If it does not hold liquid, it may be a broken cup, in which case, until it is mended, it might stay on a shelf – unusable – until it is repaired. Or if it is a cup that has been dedicated for religious purposes, the act of repair may be sacralised, part of a ritual performed with the honorand in mind. If this is the case, then it may be that the act of repair is likened to the healing of the human body.<sup>84</sup> Either way, an unusable functional object calls attention to itself and prompts the user to consider what to do with it in its unusable state. It is at that moment of attention that the object – and its developing history – can take one of several divergent paths.

A biography of a person is about someone's life; a biography of an object belongs to, or relates to the culture of a particular society, people, or period. I. Kopytoff offers a definition of what he refers to as a *cultural biography* of an object: "A culturally informed economic<sup>85</sup> biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories".<sup>86</sup> A biography is culturally constructed. So too are the interpretations given to its subject. This is true whether the subject is a person or an object. Unless and until an object is handled or used by an agent, it is effectively dormant and remains literally inactive. Its cultural meaning is acquired over the course of its history, akin to a human lifecycle. It is the cultural projection of meaning – over time, akin to accretions on a social canvas – that endows an object with a cultural biography which is both relevant to the object's use and to society as a whole.

<sup>84</sup> See Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; C.M. Booker, "Precondition to Miracle. The Construction of Discernment and its Application in the Works of Sulpicius Severus and Gregory of Tours", *Orpheus Rivista di Umanità Classica e Cristiana*, N.S. XVIII, 1997, 182-95; C. Gosden and Y. Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects", *World Archaeology*, 31, 1999, 169-78; D. Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, Berkeley, L.A. and Oxford, University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>85</sup> In his article, Kopytoff explored the notion of commoditization. The economic concerns of religious objects are the subject of another paper, and are, therefore, omitted from this discussion.

<sup>86</sup> Kopytoff 1986, 68.

<sup>81</sup> Elsner *Art and the Roman Viewer* 1995, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Brown Autumn 2001, 4.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* The instrument need not change from useful to non-useful.

When appended to an object, a cultural biography provides that object's successive users and viewers with a blueprint which they can apply to their interactions with that object. Similar to interactions with people, if one had learned from the biography of a person, a saint for example, that a particular saint heals a specific type of affliction, those with such an affliction may seek out that particular saint to request his healing touch.<sup>87</sup> If an object is renowned for its healing powers,<sup>88</sup> then potential users may seek out that object to fulfil their expectations.

Such a physical object serves a variety of social aims. The ephemeral experience is made tangible through a permanent physical form. Through its material form, the object serves as a testament to the original, mythic event which could then be borne witness to by ever greater numbers who were not present during the original event. As a vessel endowed with divine power, thereafter, miraculous material culture had the potential to serve as an agent manifesting holy power on earth. It is through the rhetoric of the narrative, the manner of the telling, that culture-specific meaning and culturally constituted categories could be – and remain – known. When an object's cultural biography is missing, what remains unknown are the culturally determined conceptual categories within which that object's meaning was constructed and its function or functions articulated.

The artefactual record has established beyond any doubt that Roman Emperor Constantine was visually represented in his own time wearing the *chi-rho* symbol, located where we might expect to see a crown, atop his head.<sup>89</sup> Contemporaries from the fourth century wrote about events reported from the life of Constantine, noting the origins of the first Christian battle standard. Two accounts remain (Fig. 1). Granted, just like today, writers had personal reasons for composing and disseminating a piece of written work; therefore, the motives of ancient writers must be considered alongside the content of their text. Such considerations aside, what these textual descriptions offer are contemporary accounts of cultural categories these fourth century writers considered meaningful in their day. Roman period perspectives on imperially circulated material culture shed light on how period-specific writers wished others to interpret and understand signs in circulation amongst them.<sup>90</sup> The work of these ancient authors formed part of the cultural biography of the Christian *labarum*. Our present-day interpretations are a composite historical artefact

composed of Constantine's construction of the physical object, and Lactantius' and Eusebius' appended histories (Fig. 1). When considered all together, texts about objects convey a socially constructed meaning that continues to inform and mediate experiences of the object. From this point of view, Roman writers successfully contributed to the cultural biography of Constantine's Christian battle standard.

## V. CONSTANTINE'S BATTLE STANDARD AS A SOCIAL AGENT

The cultural biography of an object – or *thing* – implies an agent or user. As in the case of Constantine's battle standard, an originating power as well as a distinct recipient and craftsman were distinguishable agents. With so many potential users, how did Late Antique users seek to embed evidence of the originating power in a physical artefact? What is it about material culture that has the potential to exert religious power?

A. Gell devised a typology, part of his theory of *art nexus*, in which human agents are *primary agents* and material objects – as 'instruments' – are *secondary agents*. As a particular subset within the category of agent, material culture can easily slip into the conceptual role of agent imbued with the power (or agency) of the primary agent, their user. In common usage, an *agent* is defined as "[o]ne who (or that which) acts or exerts power, as distinguished from the *patient*, and also from the *instrument*".<sup>91</sup> Thus, the person acting is the agent. An *instrument* is typically defined as "[t]hat which is used by an agent in or for the performance of an action; a thing with or through which something is done or effected; anything that serves or contributes to the accomplishment of a purpose or end; a means".<sup>92</sup> When addressing material culture, an *instrument* is "A material thing designed or used for the accomplishment of some mechanical or other physical effect; a mechanical contrivance (usually one that is portable, of simple construction, and wielded or operated by hand)".<sup>93</sup> This conceptual elision is intriguing, especially, as illustrated by Gell, when animate dolls act as secondary agents as opposed to instruments.<sup>94</sup> The problem, however, is in part to do with the underlying anthropological nature of Gell's work and thereby the premise upon which the notion of secondary agency is based. Objects are understood when in motion.<sup>95</sup> Unlike ethnographers and social scientists who might ask questions of their living

<sup>87</sup> This idea has been in circulation since Asclepius, if not before. For healing saints, such as Cosmas and Damian, see H. Delahaye, *Legends of the Saints*, trans. D. Attwater, London, G. Chapman, 1962. See also P.C. Miller, "Visceral Seeing: The Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity", *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 12, 2004, 391-411.

<sup>88</sup> See J. Wilkinson 1981; R.G. Ousterhout, ed., *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, Urbana, IL., University of Illinois Press, 1990; J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 2002.

<sup>89</sup> See supra note 21.

<sup>90</sup> Although we do not know whether they initiated it or referred to ideas already in circulation, from the Constantinian period onwards, Christian emperors chose to continue producing and circulating material culture based on this precedent.

<sup>91</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, see 'agent, n.', B.1.a. second edition, 1989; online version November 2010, earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1900. Accessed at <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/97158>, 4 January 2011.

<sup>92</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, see 'instrument, n.', 1.a. second edition, 1989; online version November 2010, earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1900. Accessed at <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/97158>, 4 January 2011.

<sup>93</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, see 'instrument, n.', 2.a. second edition, 1989; online version November 2010, earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1900. Accessed at <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/97158>, 4 January 2011.

<sup>94</sup> See Gell 1998, 17-19 and 133-137.

<sup>95</sup> See also Kopytoff 1986.

subjects – they can ask directly how objects circulate and the social network within which they operate – Roman historians do not have this luxury. Ancient historians do, however, have a wealth of visual and textual sources which can offer access to Late Antique conceptions, interpretations and responses.

The theory of *art nexus* is premised on the notion that what we refer to as ‘art’ is not distinguishable from life. This anthropological theory supports the argument that useful art objects – rendered in texts, i.e. *ekphrases* – exhibit agency. Gell argues that people and objects display differentiable agency, but that objects have agency because of their roles in social interactions.<sup>96</sup> Artefacts are *secondary agents*, referring to “the fact that the origination and manifestation of agency takes place in a milieu which consists (in large part) of artefacts, and that agents, thus, ‘are’ and do not merely ‘use’ the artefacts which connect them to social others”.<sup>97</sup> A physical object is thus an agent because it initiates a causal sequence.<sup>98</sup>

The distinguishable *primary* and *secondary* agents are defined as follows:

a distinction between ‘primary’ agents, that is, intentional beings who are categorically distinguished from ‘mere’ things or artefacts, and ‘secondary’ agents, which are artefacts, dolls, cars, works of art, etc. through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective...I describe artefacts as ‘social agents’...in view of the fact that objectification in artefact-form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the proliferation of fragments of ‘primary’ intentional agents in their ‘secondary’ artefactual forms.<sup>99</sup>

According to the definition proposed for a *secondary agent*, Constantine’s Christian battle standard functions as a socially constructed agent. Thus, as a secondary agent its meaning or ‘language’ is not fixed, rather it is relative to a primary user. Gell refutes the idea of an independent visual language; he argues that meaning is attributed to art objects linguistically, thereby strengthening the means by which visual categories are socially constructed.<sup>100</sup> Underlying this distinction is the incisive anthropological conclusion: visual meanings are dynamic and culture-specific. In a manner that parallels the definition of useful art objects offered in this study,

based on the history of *ekphrasis* of useful art objects, Gell concludes that ‘art’ is a product of social interactions.<sup>101</sup> Explaining a basic tenet of his theory, an:

anthropological theory of art cannot afford to have as its primary theoretical term a category or taxon of objects which are ‘exclusively’ art objects because the whole tendency of this theory...is to explore a domain in which ‘objects’ merge with ‘people’ by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons and persons *via* things.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, useful art objects are not exclusively ‘art’. Just as a newly married man may perform the roles of husband, brother, uncle and son all at once, an art object can also perform several roles concurrently. It is precisely because objects can have multiple, overlapping roles *via* multiple, overlapping uses and contexts of use that these objects have the potential to initiate causal sequences in relations as *secondary agents*.

The physical object of the Christian battle standard is a *secondary agent* because, as stated above, it initiates a causal sequence. Conveyed in Eusebius’ text is the apotropaic nature of the divinely inspired physical agent. The role ascribed to the saving sign is to lead the Christian Roman armies in battle: “This saving sign was always used by the Emperor for protection against every opposing and hostile force, and he commanded replicas of it to lead all his armies”<sup>103</sup> “invoking his Christ as saviour and succour, and having set the victorious trophy, the truly salutary sign, at the head of his escorting soldiers and guards, he led them in full force, claiming for the Romans their ancestral liberties”.<sup>104</sup> Thus, in the telling, the protective battle standards figuratively – and perhaps even literally for the devout – led the Christian Roman armies to conquer their non-Christian opposition. The power underlying the *labarum* stems from divine inspiration. For those who knew of its divine origins, the implication is that every *labarum* made by Constantine would be ‘holy’ in the sense that it would serve as a conduit through which Christ would protect the Christian Roman army fighting for the Christian Roman people.

Artefacts as agents connect people to others socially. Returning to Constantine’s *labarum*, the artefactual Christian battle standard is a *secondary agent* by virtue of its role connecting Christian Romans to Christ. The conceptual acceptance of Christ as saviour is manifest in the form of a totemic, tangible symbol of Christianity. By giving Constantine’s adoption of Christianity physical form, the personal, experiential nature of religion is transformed into a visible presence which can be witnessed and interpreted by ever greater numbers of Romans. This was the case whether viewers witnessed

<sup>96</sup> Gell 1998, 1-50. See also A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago, IL., The University of Chicago Press, 1960; Appadurai 1986; J. Coote and A. Shelton, eds., *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992; R. Layton, “Art and Agency: A Reassessment”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute Incorporating Man*, 9, September 2003, 447-64; R. Osborne and J. Tanner, eds., *Art’s Agency and Art History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007.

<sup>97</sup> Gell 1998, 21.

<sup>98</sup> Gell 1998, 13-19.

<sup>99</sup> Gell 1998, 20-21.

<sup>100</sup> Gell 1998, 6.

<sup>101</sup> Gell 1998, 5-7.

<sup>102</sup> Gell 1998, 12.

<sup>103</sup> VC I.31.3.

<sup>104</sup> VC I.37.1.

the movable *labarum* on the battle field in the form of a celebratory trophy, viewing representations of the battle standard on the Emperor's coins as a signifier integral to the imperial image, or as an audience reading or hearing about the importance of Constantine's *labarum* in the pages of Eusebius' narrative.

## CONCLUSION

Texts circulate meaning. Whether secular or religious, biographies circulate meaning concerning the life of a figure of note. Social canvases – as instruments – circulate in two iterations. One is in tangible, physical form. The other is as a conceptual re-presentation. By blurring the boundaries between object and text, between presentation and re-presentation, the projection of meaning onto an object through its *cultural biography* and role as *social agent*, the *thing* fixes an ephemeral idea onto a physical form.

Extant textual accounts frame the act of viewing objects in circulation by creating a history for those objects and using those objects as *social canvases*. Unambiguously, Moses and his staff, and subsequently Christ and Constantine's Christian battle standard, are each instruments for the transmission of divine power. By circulating Eusebius' version of Constantine's battle standard, as it remains in the pages of the *Vita Constantini*, the agent created was a Christian Constantine via the physical and conceptual circulation of the miraculous – Christian – battle standard.

Why does this matter? Eusebius presents the battle standard as a witness to ephemeral events, to Constantine's conversion. Thereby, Constantine created a material witness which sought to evoke the understanding that the material object is a testament to Constantine's Christianity. As a corollary to this argument Constantine's heirs, and thus the Roman Empire, should remain Christian rather than return to traditional pagan practices.

Eusebius chose to elaborate on the miraculous story of Constantine's Christian vision in his biography, an event which might otherwise remain largely unknown had it not been for Eusebius' record of events as he interpreted them and wished others to interpret them. The figure of Constantine that we know today is, to a large extent, the portrait of Constantine created and circulated by Eusebius – and to a lesser extent Lactantius' comparatively brief account – which has been handed down to us. Thus, Eusebius' biography created Constantine's *labarum* – certainly for a present day audience – and appended a history onto the *labarum*; by projecting and fixing socially-constructed meaning onto a social canvas. Thereby, Eusebius also created an historical portrait of Constantine as a Christian Emperor.

More broadly, in contrast to the object-subject relation, whereby the subject creates the object, Eusebius inverts the relationship between a pivotal physical creation and the primary user by presenting a key objects' originating

source and history as a means of creating the subject. In this case, the inspired, Christian battle standard is tangible proof of Constantine's Christianity. The subject-object relation is flipped in the pages of Eusebius' biography, and the object creates the subject.

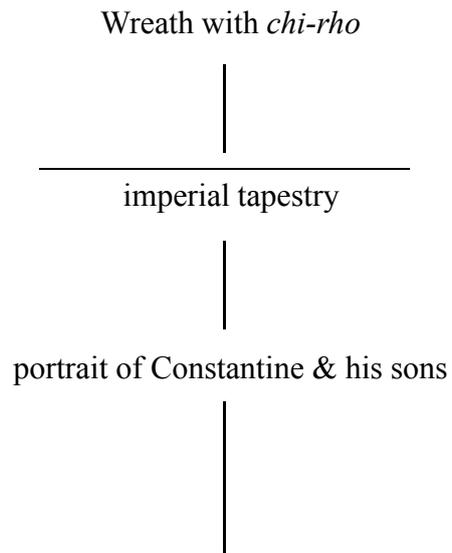
It is perhaps an ironic twist that, whereas once texts described objects, all that remains of Constantine's battle standard is Late Antique re-presentations of objects as text. But, as layered ekphrastic texts demonstrate, the lifecycle of a pivotal object in circulation does not necessarily end with the destruction of its material form. Having undergone a shift from divinely inspired idea to physical form, such material witnesses continue on a path to ever greater audiences transforming, or shaping, interpretations.

Christian biographers from the Constantinian period onward invoke miraculous material culture as evidence of a holy figure becoming holy. Whether man makes holy material culture or it is a gift from the divine, the inspiration and design are divinely revealed. The proof is the whole of the hagiographic tradition. Thus, their sacred nature is ingrained in the joining of an ephemeral experience onto a tangible, physical form – a material witness. Simultaneously, as the holy figure was rendered biographically, so too was the history of miraculous material culture – social canvases – created in the pages of the biographies of holy figures. Thus, in the hagiographic tradition, material culture became an established way to demonstrate the effects of a saint's divine gifts on earth. Familiar, everyday material culture was transformed and offered as proof of Christ's miraculous power disseminated through a chosen vessel, either a person or a thing. Holiness was demonstrated by showing it. This approach was considered a successful strategy in late antiquity. This tact, however, is not restricted to late antiquity.

By approaching texts from any period of study as social canvases, we have actual records of interpretations and perceptions from the period of study. This approach can be fruitfully applied to this and later periods as a way of accessing the period eye. As interpreted by Eusebius, Constantine's battle standard continues to function as a late Roman object in motion. Although the objects are long gone, in this sense they still circulate in society – if only in our minds.

| Time Period                               | Text  | Object  | Intended Reception  |
|---|---|---|---|
| <b><i>Constantine's Object:</i></b>       | Constantine's original oral account of his Christian vision of 312 CE<br>No text by Constantine is known                        | Physical object*<br><br>* <i>Now lost</i>   | According to Lactantius & Eusebius, a divinely revealed vision to protect the Roman army through use and display  |
| <b><i>Lactantius' Account:</i></b>        | <i>De Mortibus Persecutorum</i> (DMP), 'On the Manner in which the Persecutors Died' chapter 44<br>On Lactantius' aims (DMP, I) | Physical object and/or near contemporaneous representations (Lactantius served as tutor to Constantine's eldest son)              | A divinely revealed Christian object  |
| <b><i>Eusebius' Account:</i></b>          | <i>Vita Constantini</i> (VC), 'Life of Constantine' 1.28-32<br>On Eusebius' aims (VC 1.11)                                      | Reportedly an eyewitness account of the Emperor's <i>saving sign</i> (VC 1.30)  | A divinely revealed Christian object  |
| <b><i>Present Day Interpretation:</i></b> | Revised textual accounts of Lactantius & Eusebius   | Surviving representations, cf. imperial parallels (e.g. silver dish of Constantius II, Justinianic mosaic in San Vitale, Ravenna) | A composite historical artefact:<br><b><u>Object:</u></b> Constantine's construction of the physical object<br><b><u>Text:</u></b> Lactantius' & Eusebius' appended histories |

FIGURE 1: EVIDENCE OF CONSTANTINE'S BATTLE STANDARD AS A LATE ANTIQUE SOCIAL CANVAS



**FIGURE 2:** DIAGRAM OF CONSTANTINE'S SAVING SIGN  
ACCORDING TO EUSEBIUS' *VITA CONSTANTINI*