

Christian Soldiers

Portraying a Christian around 400 A.D. (Part I)

by Stephen Kenwright

"Christians are not different because of their country or the language they speak or the way they dress. They do not isolate themselves in their cities nor use a private language; even the life they lead has nothing strange.

Anon *Letter to Diognetus*,

The archaeological record and surviving writings include some examples of Christian appearance and symbology. How can the evidence inform our impressions?

Let us then, men and brethren, with all energy act the part of soldiers.

Clement of Rome

The Late Roman army was officially Christian. As Vegetius records, legionaries now swore the *sacramentum* military oath by God, Christ and the Holy Spirit as well as the emperor (Milner 1993). Faulkner (2000) likens avowing Christianity within the military at this time to holding a party card: a token of loyalty to the regime useful, if not necessary, for advancement. However, it wasn't until the codes of 415 A.D. that pagans were specifically banned from service simply for their belief, suggesting that 'Christianisation', was advanced, but not yet total.

Towards the end of the century, Gratian and Theodosius I had systematically transformed Christianity from one personal religious option amongst many into an expectation of the state, in much the same mould as the imperial cult in earlier times. Penalties escalated against animal sacrifice, making or visiting altars, and divination became equated with treason and punishable by death. By the year 400 A.D., the empire had been ruled by nominally Christian emperors for thirty seven years (since Julian's brief reign) and, while the Goths were staunchly Arian and the bishops continued to wrangle over the theology, the Trinitarian Christianity of the Nicene Creed had been the official religion of the Roman state for twenty years. Pagan worship had been illegal for eight.

The Battle of Frigidus in 394 A.D. is often portrayed as the last clash with paganism, but even Eugenius was himself a Christian, albeit a tolerant one pliant enough to be persuaded even to sponsor the traditional shrines, because Arbogast needed a puppet who was credible emperor material.



The practise of Christianity had also changed a great deal since the first century writings which expected Christians to refuse orders to kill during military service, the soldier martyrs of the persecutions who refused to fight, and even St. Martin who was apparently jailed for cowardice as late as 336A.D.. The version of Christianity promoted by the emperors was militaristic and triumphalist where the original had been pacifistic and meek. What better religion could support ultimate imperial authority against civilisation's enemies and legitimise hereditary succession than a monotheism which stressed constant vigilance against evil and obedience to a divine son? What I'd call 'Imperial Christianity' had little in common with the quietly spreading quest for a spiritual life shared by small groups meeting in houses, or with the Zen-like and sometimes violent asceticism of the desert fathers. Imperial Christianity was not necessarily unpopular with the troops: Valentinian was an established Christian officer selected as emperor by a council of senior military and civil officials. When the *Comes Britanniae*, Magnus Maximus, was acclaimed emperor by his men in 383 A.D., they elevated one devout Nicean to campaign against another, Gratian.



There were bishops like John Chrysostom prepared to speak against militarism. There were no chaplains amongst the the army until well into the c5th and the 'Apostolic' Canons specifically prohibited clergy from serving, but apsidal buildings have been identified fairly confidently as churches incorporated into the fort at Richborough and right in the *praetorium* courtyard at Vindolanda, arguably in a sub-Roman context at Housesteads, South Shields, and more tenuously at Birdoswald (Birley 2002, Crow, 2004, Wilmott, 2001).

Background

Christianity was firmly established in northern Britain, York having contributed a bishop to the Council of Arles as early as 314. Most evidence comes from town sites south of the Humber (Ottaway 2004), so actively Christian personae are perhaps more likely come from urban rather than rural backgrounds. A number of 4th century villas were decorated with Christian symbols, held lead tanks inscribed with the 'Chi-Rho' *labarum* like Walesby in Lincolnshire and some appear to have had chapel-rooms like Lullingstone, so wealthier characters might also easily be devout.

Appearance

“What did you go out into the desert to see? ... A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.”
Matthew 11:7-8

No specific dress marked out the Christian; even clergy are only beginning to have worn special clothing for services, although their steadfast retention of the late *paenula* as it faded from secular fashion might suggest its popularity amongst them now. Tertullian's advocacy, in *De pallio*, of the simple and practical philosopher's pallium over the ostentatious and impractical toga gives a hint of an emerging Christian style. Obviously, the church



fathers promoted modesty and moderation in dress for both sexes.

“Woman and man are to go to church decently attired”

Clement of Alexandria



Monks in the East had started to shave their heads or take a tonsure, but monasticism took time to reach Britain. They advocated short hair for men, (at least short enough not to get in the eyes or be confused with girlish ringlets) but both their insistence and depictions in art might indicate some long haired resistance. Christ is sometimes shown with long hair (e.g. a sarcophagus ca. 370 A.D. Rome, Sant' Agnese fuori le mura) and, more to the point, the champion of orthodoxy, Theodosius, shows his guard with collar length curls on both his silver missorium at Madrid and his obelisk at Constantinople. The earlier Kerch Missorium of Constantius II shows an even more relaxed approach.

Despite the numismatic association with clean shaven Christian emperors, beards are often sported in Christian art. Tertullian approves and Clement is a positive fan: “But the hair on the chin is not to be disturbed, as it gives no trouble, and lends to the face

dignity and paternal terror” (Paedagogus, Book III: 1). The fourth council of Carthage had apparently just required clergymen to wear beards. Aside from Peter and other Apostles sporting the ‘philosopher’s beard’, on late c4th sarcophagi one of the legionaries arresting Peter often has a close beard along with his Pannonian cap and sagum, for example, the ‘Dogmatic Sarcophagus’ at the Vatican, whose soldier appears closely modelled on those from the Arch of Constantine and one in the Musée d'Art Chrétien, Arles.



The church fathers often repeated guidance for Christian women to dress modestly, but this seems to have allowed for the decorated clothes, earrings and necklaces portrayed in art.

“Let your dress be neither elegant nor slovenly, nor conspicuous by any strangeness that might attract the notice of passersby and make people point their fingers at you....”

Jerome

Catacomb paintings of the 3rd and 4th centuries show Christian women praying (*orantes*) with unbelted *dalmatica* tunics, some of the shorter kind (showing the ankles), often with two full length clavi. As belts were usually worn for

practical work, they may have unbelted their tunics specifically for prayer. In contrast with the secular representations of free ladies such as the Piazza Armerina mosaic or even the Projecta casket, they are not usually shown wearing mantles - Veneranda is an exception, seemingly shown praying 'on the road to Heaven' with Saint Petronella.

Where visible, their hair appears in the fashionable styles of the day, but the *orantes* wear small shawls or veils over their heads (not faces). This was fairly common for any respectable Roman lady out of doors, but Croom (2000) claims that Christian women were now covering their heads indoors as well because Paul insisted upon it as a sign of male authority over women in 1 Corinthians 11:10 (the passage is the origin of men traditionally taking their hats off in church, whilst women can wear big hats). I am, however, at a loss as to why she draws this conclusion, as the chapter in question repeatedly states that covering the head is specifically recommended for prayer, just as the *orantes* demonstrate. The *presumably* Christian Projecta portrayed with her bridegroom on 'her' casket appears bareheaded as do the female attenders of the *agape* feasts in other c4th catacomb paintings and on the great Sevso plate, with its *labarum* on the rim, and even the holy Petronella wear no veil. I suggest that the evidence presented indicates that ladies covered their heads to pray and in the streets, rather than at all times.

Part II will examine the typical Christian decoration of possessions.

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