

4.6 IVY

Ivy was used before Christianity primarily as a Dionysian symbol (Dionysius is usually depicted wearing a crown/garland of ivy). The symbol was also used in Egypt. As an evergreen plant, ivy has become a Christian symbol of immortality and eternal life.

Ivy branches are engraved on sarcophagi and tombstones. In mosaics, ivy leaves are most often used as borders (Fig. 4.6.1), or enclosing images and inscriptions, giving them the meaning of immortal, “reserved for eternal life”. Fig. 4.6.2 shows a mosaic panel from the floor of St Stephen's Church, Umm ar Rasas, Jordan. The panel contains a central image (destroyed during the iconoclastic period), 4 medallions with inscriptions (arranged in a Cross-like form) and 4 mandorlas forming a diagonal Cross. Between them are ivy leaves (8 in total). There is a similar panel at Beit Mery, Lebanon.



Fig.4.6.1 Ivy border, floor mosaic (detail), above: 6th century, M. Nebo Jordan; bottom: 4th century, Butrint, Albania



Fig. 4.6.2 Ivy leaves around the Cruciform composition with text and mandorlas, floor panel (detail), 6th-8th century, Church of St Stephen, Umm ar Rasas, Jordan

The shape of the ivy leaves is close to the shape of a bunch of grapes (the vine and the wine symbolize the blood of Christ - see 5.18), creating a symbolic link between the two images and sometimes they are used together (in Fig. 4.6.3 they are on one branch). The symbols in Fig. 4.6.3 are part of a rinceau-type ornament (see article 4.7 Acanthus). Ivy sometimes replaces the vine in complex symbols (see Fig. 2.13.1 and Fig. 2.13.3 - together with chalice). Fig. 4.6.4 shows a panel with ivy leaves and Cross-like figures, surrounded by Cross-like frames (in brown and yellow colours).

A combination of an ivy leaf with a Christogram * (IX) is shown in Fig. 2.2.2. b and 2.7.2.

According to ancient understanding, the heart was the seat of the soul. For this reason, during mummification in Egypt, the organs were removed from the body, but not the heart (so that the soul in the heart could later be judged for the person's deeds). The connection of the ivy leaf with immortality and the connection of the heart with the “immortal soul” led to the later use of the shape of the ivy leaf as a representation of a heart - ♥.

The ancient understanding of the heart as a special place in the body connected to the soul led to the medieval tradition of burying the hearts of some monarchs separately

from the body. The heart was buried in a place closely associated with the monarch. For example, the body of Richard I the Lionheart was buried in Anjou, France (Fontevraud-l'Abbaye), along with his father Henry II. His heart, however, is buried in Rouen, France (Cathédrale Notre-Dame de l'Assomption de Rouen), which was then the principal city of Normandy (under the English crown).



Fig. 4.6.3 Border of ivy branches with leaves and grapes (rinceau type), floor mosaic (detail), 4th century, Episcopal Basilica, Plovdiv, Bulgaria.



Fig. 4.6.4 Ivy-leaf panel with Cross figures, floor mosaic (detail), 6th century, Moses Memorial, Mount Nebo, Jordan

In the 14th century, Pope Innocent VI established in the Catholic Church a service associated with the Sacred Heart as an expression of the love of Jesus Christ for people. This further enriches this symbolism. There are many churches dedicated to the **Sacred Heart**, but the most famous is the relatively new *Sacré-Cœur* Basilica in Paris, France, which has become one of the symbols of the city. Its enormous new apse mosaic of Christ in Glory is one of the largest in the world. On the mosaic, Christ has a heart of gold (the new symbol), but on the arch above Him is depicted a Christogram (the old symbol).

4.7 ACANTHUS

The Acanthus plant is found mainly in the Mediterranean region. Since ancient times it has been used as a symbol of eternal life and as a symbol of overcoming hardships. According to legend, the ancient Greeks placed it on the graves of heroes. The beautiful spiked leaves of the acanthus have become an element in the decoration of Corinthian column capitals.

The prickly acanthus was used by early Christians as a symbol of Christ's suffering and as His triumph over torture. Many church mosaics have borders of acanthus (the graphic depiction of acanthus leaves has slight variations). Often symbolic birds or animals are depicted within this border - Fig. 4.7.1. Acanthus is also used in floor panels - enclosing symbolic images - Fig. 4.7.2 (see also Fig. 3.9.1 and Fig. 2.8.6).

The typical arrangement of the acanthus in Fig. 4.7.1 - in wide spiral braids with figures in between - is called **rinceau** (from French – undulating vine branch with tendrils) and also **Inhabited scroll**. This ornament with symbols and images has been used in the East since ancient times. Later it crossed the Eastern Mediterranean to Ancient Greece (during the Hellenistic period) and became widespread in the Roman Empire. The ornament is used in both mosaics and architecture. The decoration of churches

with these spiral branches (with various symbolic representations between the spirals) is most often executed with acanthus or vine, but also with ivy or other green branches (see Fig. 4.6.3 and 4.10.6). Thus, the popular rinceau/inhabited scroll ornament is actually a type of representation of the acanthus and vine symbols, combining them with other symbols.



Fig.4.7.1 Mosaic border with acanthus (birds in it) - rinceau type, floor mosaic (detail), 4th century, Basilica Patriarcale di Santa Maria Assunta, Aquileia, Italy



Fig. 4.7.2 Mosaic panel with images surrounded by acanthus leaves (here the focus is on a lamb and fish), floor mosaic (detail), 6th century, Mount Nebo, Jordan



Fig. 4.7.3 Acanthus ornaments around the image of the Council of Serdica and an acanthus scroll above it, wall mosaic (detail), 12th century, Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem

Fig. 4.7.3 is from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Palestine, and shows a stylized image of Sardica (Serdica, now Sofia in Bulgaria) with an inscription above it, emphasizing the Council of Serdica (342-343). This Council was intended to be the Second Ecumenical Council of the church, but after many disputes the clerics split and some of them went on to form a counter-Council in nearby Trimontium/ Philippopolis (now Plovdiv, Bulgaria). To the left of the mosaic depiction of Serdica is an image of Antioch (also associated with a Church Council - see Fig. 2.7.3). In between are vertical acanthus ornaments (in the form of “candlesticks”), linking Christ's passion and triumph to the Councils of the Church. Above these depictions there are acanthus spirals (rinceau).

The famous 4th century mosaic panel at Hinton St Mary, England (now in the British Museum) depicts Christ (with the Christogram) in a circular frame set in the centre of a large Cross. The arms of the Cross are decorated with acanthus leaves, probably to emphasise Christ's suffering on the Cross and His triumph.

4.8 PELTA AND LABRYS

The image of the Thracian shield “**pelta**” is used in many mosaics. The shield is associated with the Thracian warriors *peltasti* as well as with the Scythians and the Amazons. In his *Lexicon*, Hesychius of Alexandria (5th-6th century) states that the Pelta was a Thracian weapon. A mosaic from Antioch, 4th century (now in the Louvre) shows an Amazon-woman with a pelta shield and a double axe - **labrys**.

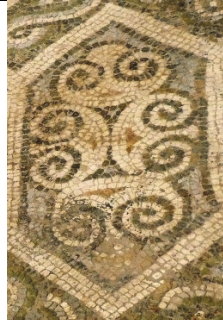


Thracian warriors with pelta and labrys are depicted in the decorated Thracian tomb near Alexandrovo, Bulgaria. Both symbols occur frequently in Christian mosaics. Fig. 4.8.1.a. shows a hexagonal panel with stylized peltae enclosing a shield (a symbol of the Divine light - see 3.15.8) - in the Episcopal Basilica of Plovdiv (the middle of each pelta resembles a labrys axe). Fig. 4.8.1.b shows a mosaic floor of an early Christian church with peltae and swastikas (Plaoshnik – the church St Clement's was built next to this church, 9th century).



In all likelihood, the shield form entered Christian mosaics as a symbol of protection - the shield/pelta “protected” from evil forces the symbol with which it was combined or the space where it was located.




A typical example of a symbol surrounded by peltae is Solomon's Knot (a covert symbol of the Cross), thus forming a dynamic swastika - see Fig. 2.12.5. As mentioned before, these links to pre-Christian beliefs of “protection” were used extensively during the transitional period of Christian dissemination. The lower layer of the mosaic of the Episcopal Basilica in Plovdiv (4th century) has a border of Solomon's knots with peltae. The pelta is used both as a border and as a panel. In this case, some specialists believe that an additional figure is formed between the peltae - a heart/leaf of ivy (Fig. 4.8.2).

When depicting the pelta, a small additional symbol can be placed in the middle part of the pelta - for example, a cross (Fig. 4.8.3), a vine leaf, a three-leaf calix (Fig. 4.8.4), etc. A border of peltae is often arranged around a wave (symbol of strength), thus reinforcing the protective meaning of the symbol. Fig. 3.7.1 (top) shows peltae forming a Cross above a donation inscription.

The double axe labrys has been used since ancient times. Plutarch identifies the word as Lydian. In Thrace the labrys was used as a weapon, but mainly as an attribute of power. Labrys occurs frequently in depictions from Minoan culture. The oldest double axe labrys was found near Pazardzhik, Bulgaria - from the Bronze Age.

		
<p>Fig. 4.8.1. a) Panel with 4 stylized Peltae, floor mosaic (detail), 4th century, Episcopal Basilica, Plovdiv, Bulgaria</p>	<p>Fig. 4.8.1.b Peltae (up) and swastikas (below) on church floor (next to the Church of St St Clement and Panteleimon), floor mosaic (detail), ?4th century, Plaoshnik, Rep. North Macedonia</p>	<p>Fig. 4.8.2 Peltae mosaic panel, floor mosaic (detail), 6th century, Basilica di Sant'Eufemia, Grado, Italy</p>

	
<p>Fig. 4.8.3 Peltae border with crosses around the main Eirini panel (the peltae are arranged around a wave, a symbol of strength), floor mosaic (detail), 3-4th century, Eirini house, Plovdiv, Bulgaria</p>	<p>Fig. 4.8.4 Border of peltae with trefoil flowers combined with cross-shaped flowers in a circle - above the apse mosaic of a throne with the dove of the Holy Spirit, wall mosaic (detail), 5th century, Church San Prisco, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Italy</p>

		
<p>Fig. 4.8.5 Mosaic panels with double-sided axes labrys, floor mosaic (detail): a) 4th century, Episcopal Basilica of Plovdiv; b) 6th century, Basilica di Sant'Eufemia, Grado, Italy</p>		<p>Fig. 4.8.6 Crossed 2 labryses and pelta together with chalices (plus a single labrys below), floor mosaic (detail), 6th century, Constanta (Tomis), Romania</p>

It is likely that mosaic panels with a double axe **labrys** were also made to “protect” the space in which they were located - Fig. 4.8.5 shows panels from the basilicas in Plovdiv and Grado. The labrys was also used in conjunction with other Christian symbols. Fig. 4.8.6 from Constanta, Romania shows two crossed labryses and a pelta, together with images of chalices with ivy branches (another part of this mosaic is in Fig. 2.13.4).