

A MINI RESEARCH REPORT ON THE CONVERSION OF EMPEROR CONSTANTINE

Introduction

Flavius Valerius Constantinus, commonly known as Constantine I or Constantine the Great, was Roman emperor for thirty-one years from 306 to 337 AD.¹ Although he lived the majority of his life as a follower of the Roman polytheistic religion, Constantine became an extremely important figure in the history of Christianity due to his tolerance of the religion and his apparent, though debated, later conversion to Christianity and baptism.² Prior to Constantine, and especially under his predecessor Diocletian, Christians were persecuted severely through the removal of their legal rights, forced sacrifices to Roman deities, torture and, in some cases, martyrdom³. Constantine's actions, including the convocation of the First Council of Nicea in 325 AD, were crucial factors in Nicene Christianity becoming the official religion of Rome under his successor Theodosius I.⁴ However, the nature of Constantine's conversion to Christianity has been debated by historians and theologians due to a paucity of primary evidence and the likely biases of contemporary reports.⁵

Historical Background and Primary Sources

There are two primary textual sources which provide evidence of Constantine's conversion, written by the bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260-339) and Lactantius (Lucius Caecilius Firmianus, c.250-325).⁶ Both of these authors were Christian contemporaries of Constantine who knew him personally as advisors,⁷ and both of their accounts describe a divine experience

¹ Charles Odahl. *Constantine and the Christian empire*. (Routledge, 2010) ,p.47

² Susan Bauer, *The history of the medieval world: From the conversion of Constantine to the first crusade*. (WW Norton & Company, 2010), p.55

³ H.A. Drake, 'The Great Persecution: A Historical Re-Examination by Min Seok Shin.' *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2021), pp.447.

⁴ Bruno Bleckmann, 'Constantine, Rome, and the Christians.' *Contested Monarchy: Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD* (2015), p.309.

⁵ Richard Flower, 'Visions of Constantine.' *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 102 (2012): p.287.

⁶ Ilaria Ramelli, 'Constantine and the legal recognition of Christianity: what changed, and some historical forerunners.' *Vox Patrum*, 61.1 (2014), p.55.

⁷ Richard Flower, 'Visions of Constantine.' *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 102 (2012), p.290

during the Battle of the Milvian Bridge as the tipping point in Constantine's conversion.⁸ At the time of Constantine I's birth, the Roman Empire was ruled by a tetrarchy with two emperors and their two successors, a system which had been instituted by the emperor Diocletian in 293 AD. By the time of Constantine, there was a usurper, Maxentius, in Rome, whom Constantine defeated at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge to become Augustus in the West.⁹

Eusebius' Vita Constantini

Eusebius' *Life of Constantine the Great* (*Vita Constantini* or *Βίος Μεγάλου Κωνσταντίνου* in the original Greek) is a panegyric¹⁰ written in praise of Constantine.¹¹ Across the four books of the *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius describes his early life and military life as emperor, followed by an account of Constantine's apparent conversion to Christianity and later rule as a Christian emperor. As a panegyric, the text cannot be read as a strict history due to the conventions of this literary genre, which was used to publicly praise a living person in a speech. In its Greek origins, the panegyric was a means to laud the individual as a role model for others on account of their deeds and honour, rather than their virtue¹². This praise became hyperbolic in the later Roman Empire and began to stress the virtue of the emperor and their achievements as a leader. In contrast with the panegyric tradition which preceded him, Eusebius chose to emphasise Constantine's piety as a Christian and his divine right to be emperor, which was the will of God.¹³ When using the *Life of Constantine* as a historical source, these biases and literary conventions must be kept in mind.

The account given by Eusebius of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 AD is significant when considering the nature of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. In Chapters 27-32 of the *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius describes how the emperor was preparing for battle against his

⁸ Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge*. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.90

⁹ Sven Betjes and Sam Heijnen. "'THE USURPING PRINCEPS': MAXENTIUS' IMAGE AND ITS CONSTANTINIAN LEGACY.' *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology*, 5.3 (2018) p.42.

¹⁰ A public speech or published poem in praise of something or someone.

¹¹ A. Cameron and S. Hall, *Eusebius' Life of Constantine*. (Clarendon Press, 1999).

¹² Rees, Roger. 'Panegyric,' in McGill, S. and Watts, E. (eds.), *A Companion to Late Antique Literature* (Brill, 2018), p.210.

¹³ Bryan Litfin, 'Eusebius on Constantine: Truth and Hagiography at the Milvian Bridge.' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 55.4 (2012), p.773.

co-emperor and rival Maxentius at a bridge over the Tiber near Rome.¹⁴ In his account, Constantine rejects the polytheism of the Roman religion and prays to Eusebius' Christian God for assistance. After this, Eusebius relates that Constantine and his entire army saw a cross of light in the heavens bearing the inscription "in this, conquer" (τούτῳ νικά), which has also been rendered in Latin as *in hoc signo vinces*, "in this sign, you will conquer" (Ch. 28). The amazement caused by the appearance of this cross is presented by Eusebius as a defining point in Constantine's conversion to Christianity. Shortly after the appearance of the sign, Constantine resolved, Eusebius relates, to worship no God other than the God of the Christians and he had a gold replica of the cross made featuring the Chi-Rho symbol to represent the name of Christ, which was to be held at the head of all his armies (Ch. 31).

From a historiographic perspective, it is notable that Eusebius takes pains in the *Life of Constantine* to provide support for this account¹⁵. He concedes that this story is difficult to believe but that it was related to him directly by the emperor and confirmed by an oath of its veracity (Ch. 28).¹⁶ As this was a public speech given in a Roman Empire which was not yet officially Christian, delivered perhaps two decades after the event being described,¹⁷ Eusebius' appeal to the character and authority of the emperor to support his evidence is understandable.

Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum*

The other account of Constantine's conversion written by a contemporary is Lactantius' *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* (*De Mortibus Persecutorum*), a mixture of historical accounts and Christian apologetics written with the aim, Lactantius claims, of showing how God manifested His power in the Roman Empire in the early 4th Century.¹⁸ This text presents a number of contrasts with Eusebius' account. Firstly, it was written in Latin rather than the

¹⁴ Cameron, A. and Hall, S., Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*. (Clarendon Press, 1999), p.87

¹⁵ Scott Johnson, 'Lists, Originality, and Christian Time: Eusebius' Historiography of Succession, in Pohl, W. and Wieser, V., *Historiography and Identity I: Ancient and Early Christian Narratives of Community*, (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 198.

¹⁶ Cameron, A. and Hall, S., Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*. (Clarendon Press, 1999), p.103

¹⁷ , Bryan Litfin, 'Eusebius on Constantine: Truth and Hagiography at the Milvian Bridge.' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 55.4 (2012), p.775.

¹⁸ J.L. Creed, *De Mortibus Persecutorum / Lactantius; Edited and Translated by J.L. Creed*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.15

Greek of the *Life of Constantine*, as Lactantius was a native of North Africa.¹⁹ Secondly, it is not a panegyric and therefore lacks the laudatory tone of Eusebius, but Lactantius has theological and political motives with the potential to introduce bias, as the work is an attempt to describe the deaths of those who persecuted Christians in the Roman Empire, such as Nero and Domitian.²⁰

Lactantius' account of the vision of Constantine prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in Chapter 64 of *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* is significantly shorter than Eusebius' account of the same event.²¹ Following a dream in which he was directed to paint a Latin cross symbol with a rounded top member on the shields of his soldiers, he did so. It appears that this is distinct from the Chi-Rho. Unlike Eusebius' account, this dream of the cross is the totality of Constantine's vision and there is no mention of the appearance of a cross in the sky or that the dream appeared to anyone other than himself. As such, the two extant accounts of this inciting incident in Constantine's conversion are fundamentally distinct, both in the facts presented regarding his vision and in the aims of each author in producing their text.

Depictions in Contemporary Art

Contemporary artistic representations of Constantine provide evidence which complicates the accounts provided by Eusebius and Lactantius. In coins minted four years after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and Constantine's supposed conversion, he is depicted as the 'companion' of the sun god Sol (Figure 1).²² As these were official representations of the emperor, they may indicate that his private conversion was kept separate from the business of the empire or perhaps that he himself was undergoing a gradual conversion. These representations may also point to a syncretistic approach to religion in which Constantine worshipped Christ alongside the gods of Roman religion.²³ Further support for this argument

¹⁹ Rajiv Bhola, 'A man of visions: a new examination of the vision (s) of Constantine (Panegyric VI, Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorum*, and Eusebius' *De vita Constantini*).', PhD diss., (Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2015).

²⁰ A. Edward Siecienski, ed., *Constantine: religious faith and imperial policy*. (Taylor & Francis, 2017).

²¹ J.L. Creed, *De Mortibus Persecutorum / Lactantius*; Edited and Translated by J.L. Creed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.37

²² V.C. Pfitzner, 'From the Invincible Sun to Christ the Pantocrator: Tracing an iconographic trajectory on Roman and Byzantine coinage'. *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 50.1 (2016), p.40.

²³ Angelova, Diliانا, 'Constantine's Radiate Statue and the Founding of Constantinople', *Studies in Late Antiquity*, 5.3 (2021), p.292.

is provided by the triumphal Arch of Constantine, dedicated in 315 AD to commemorate his victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (Figure 2). Alongside pagan imagery, there is the inscription *instinctu divinitatis* ("inspired by the divine"), which has been interpreted as an acknowledgement of Constantine's move towards Christianity.²⁴

FIGURE 1: CONSTANTINE I DEPICTED WITH THE SUN GOD SOL AS HIS 'COMPANION'²⁵



FIGURE 2: THE ARCH OF CONSTANTINE, ROME (315 AD), WHICH BEARS THE INSCRIPTION *INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS* ("INSPIRED BY THE DIVINE")²⁶

²⁴ Diederik Burgersdijk, 'Constantine's Arch: A Reassessment in the Light of Textual and Material Evidence', in *Emperors and Emperorship in Late Antiquity* (Brill, 2020), p.53.

²⁵ British Museum, 'Coin', *The British Museum*, (2023)
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1863-0713-1#:~:text=Constantine%20is%20shown%20and%20described,battle%20of%20the%20Milvian%20Bridge> [accessed 3 November 2023]

²⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Arch of Constantine', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2023),
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arch-of-Constantine>> [accessed 3 November 2023]



Secondary Sources

As H.A. Drake has noted, there was a greater change in the status, structure and beliefs of Christians during the thirty-year reign of Constantine I than at any previous point in its history,²⁷ but there has been significant debate in secondary sources over whether this change was the result of a true conversion by Constantine to Christianity or simply the result of greater tolerance towards Christianity.²⁸ In response to the potential conflict between the accounts by Eusebius and Lactantius and the visual evidence of continued association between Constantine and pagan deities, it has been argued that this inconsistency may seem more remarkable to modern eyes than to 4th Century Christians.²⁹ Christians living in this period were used to being both citizens of a Roman Empire which had a state religion with its pagan symbology and devotees of their private religion.³⁰ What is clear from surviving evidence is that Constantine was closely involved in the matters of the church and proactive about resolving conflicts through his involvement in the Donatist controversy, the legalisation of Christianity in the Edict of Milan and the convocation of the Council of Nicea. Drake argues

²⁷ Noel Lenski, ed., *The Cambridge companion to the age of Constantine*. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.56.

²⁸ Lauren Hobbs, 'The Religion of Constantine I: An Analysis of the Modern Scholarly Hypotheses and Interpretations of the Contemporary Evidence.' PhD diss., (Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2014), p.50

²⁹ Richard Flower, 'Visions of Constantine.' *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 102 (2012), p.290

³⁰ Edward Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation: Rome's Unexpected Path to Christianity*. (University of California Press, 2020), p.45

that Constantine's actions consistently point to an emperor who is attempting to legitimise himself in Christian eyes and to become a leader of the Church.³¹

This focus on his political role as a mediator and facilitator of Christianity, rather than someone who was vocally pious and attempted to suppress traditional Roman religion, has led some to suggest that Constantine's conversion was politically motivated.³² That is, sensing the increasing importance of Christians in the empire and with Christians including Eusebius and Lactantius as advisors, Constantine saw an opportunity to use conversion as a means of consolidating power. This viewpoint can also be considered in terms of one of the most important structural changes made by Constantine when he moved the capital of the empire from Rome to Byzantium, which was completely re-founded and rebuilt as Constantinople.³³ This was closer to the holy land, where Constantine's mother Helena had been gathering Christian relics and building churches, and became the first major Christian city in the world. It is important to appreciate that there does not necessarily need to be a distinction between a true conversion and the use of that conversion as part of his political ambitions, something which would likely seem natural to a Roman emperor who had similarly used the Roman pagan religion as a means of demonstrating and reinforcing power.

Conclusion

The story of the conversion of Constantine I following a vision or dream has been highly significant in the development of Christianity. However, the primary sources for Constantine's conversion, Eusebius and Lactantius, appear to be highly partial authors with agendas beyond providing a simple historical account. The unreliable nature of these texts, their limited scope and their conflicting accounts have presented modern historians with difficulties in determining the nature of Constantine's supposed conversion. When considering other evidence such as his late baptism and visual evidence of potential religious syncretism during

³¹ Noel Lenski, ed., *The Cambridge companion to the age of Constantine*. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.56.

³² Stutz, Jonathan 'The "Feigned Conversion of Constantine" in Early Islamic Literature.'" *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 20.1 (2020), p.5.

³³ National Geographic, 'Constantine—Facts and Information', *National Geographic* (2023) <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/constantine>> [accessed 7 November 2023]

his reign, it may be the case that Constantine's conversion to Christianity was more gradual than the primary sources suggest.

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