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# THE VISION OF CONSTANTINE

by

JAN N. BREMMER

Can one still say something new about the vision of Constantine and his conversion? Already in the middle of the 1950s, Kurt Aland (1915-1994), who was a reputable church historian in addition to being editor of the Greek New Testament, wrote that he had composed a bibliography of more than 1500 titles on Constantine, and since those years several hundreds more have appeared. Whereas recent decades have enriched our understanding of the chronology and political developments of Constantine's era, there has not always been attention to the fact that (1) the history of mentalities has sharpened our sensitivity to the interpretation of private and collective experiences through the ages, that (2) the sociology of religion has developed new ideas about conversion and that (3) historiography has shown that historians not always reproduce facts and their interrelationship but often construct them.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore perhaps possible to advance our insight into Constantine's vision and conversion by taking these three factors into account. We will limit our discussion mainly to the most recent literature;<sup>2</sup> in part because the publication in the last decades of new coins, papyri and inscriptions has made many earlier analyses obsolete. But in our case the interpretation of the sources and the right methodological approach sometimes matter more than the presentation of new facts, as Aland already observed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the way in which the best modern study of Constantine, T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge Mass., 1981), presents the facts, insufficiently takes this into account, cf. Av. Cameron, 'Constantinus Christianus', *JRS* 73 (1983) 184-90 and 'Eusebius of Caesarea and the Rethinking of History', in E. Gabba (ed.), *Tria corda. Scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano* (Como, 1983) 71-88.

<sup>2</sup> M. Clauss, *Konstantin der Grosse und seine Zeit* (Munich, 1996) and H.A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine* (London and New York, 1996, 2004<sup>2</sup>) do not much advance our understanding of Constantine, cf. T.D. Barnes, 'Constantine and Christianity: Ancient Evidence and Modern Interpretations', *Zs. f. Ant. Christ.* 2 (1998) 274-94. Much better, B. Bleckmann, *Konstantin der Grosse* (Hamburg, 1996); K.M. Girardet, 'Die konstantinische Wende und ihre Bedeutung für das reich', in E. Mühlberg (ed.), *Die Konstantinische Wende* (Gütersloh, 1998) 9-122; H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore, 2000); G. Weber, *Kaiser, Träume und Visionen in Prinzipat und Spätantike* (Stuttgart, 2000).

1. *Constantine's vision as reported by himself*

Let us start with the canonical version of the vision as reported by Constantine himself. In his biography by Eusebius, he provides the following version of the events concerning his vision and conversion.<sup>4</sup> After he had heard that a 'tyrant' (Maxentius) had taken possession of Rome and several attempts at defeating him had failed, he saw it as his duty to overthrow the 'tyranny' (VC 1.26). As the magical devices of his opponent could not be countered by purely military measures only, he looked for 'divine assistance'. When wondering which god to chose, he realised that all previous emperors had met an unwelcome end despite their cultivation of the pagan gods. Only his own father, who had worshipped God and had found him a 'saviour and guardian of his Empire', had been saved. On the basis of these considerations 'he decided that he should venerate his father's God alone' (VC 1.27.3).

Subsequently, 'he began to invoke this God in prayer, beseeching and imploring him to show him who he was, and to stretch out his right hand to assist him in his plans'. During these prayers 'there appeared to the Emperor a most remarkable divine sign. If someone else had reported it', Eusebius continues, '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?' (VC 1.28.1).<sup>5</sup> The sign was as follows: 'About the time of the midday sun, when the day was just turning (...) he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said: "By this conquer". Amazement at the spectacle seized both him and the whole company of soldiers which was then accompanying him on a campaign he was conducting somewhere, and witnessed the miracle' (VC 1.28.2).

Whilst Constantine was wondering about the significance of the manifestation, 'as he slept, the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged

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<sup>3</sup> K. Aland, *Kirchengeschichtliche Entwürfe* (Gütersloh, 1960) 202, 204.

<sup>4</sup> I quote from the new translation by Av. Cameron and S.G. Hall, *Eusebius, Life of Constantine* (Oxford, 1999) 67-182. Note also the Spanish translation with a good introduction and notes by M. Gurruchaga, *Eusebio de Cesarea, Vida de Constantino* (Madrid, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> As Eusebius claims to report Constantine's very own words, the story should not have been omitted by H. Dörries, *Das Selbstzeugnis Kaiser Konstantins* (Göttingen, 1954), who carefully collects and analyzes all Constantine's utterances about the faith; see also P. Silli, *Testi Costantiniani nelle fonti*

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' (VC 1.29). The next day Constantine summoned goldsmiths and jewellers, and he instructed them to copy this sign in gold and precious stones.

This was the version as told by the Emperor in, possibly, about AD 325 but more probably, as we will see (§ 3), in about AD 335. However, the event itself took place in 312 and we have four more or less contemporary sources for this vision. Surely, a sound historical approach first looks at contemporary sources and only then proceeds to analyse later versions. So what did happen in 312?

## 2. *Contemporary reports of the vision*

After a short rest on the political front, the year 312 witnessed the confrontation between Constantine, whose power base was Gaul, and his competitors Maxentius in Italy, Licinius on the Balkans, and Maximinus in the East. The next two decades Constantine would slowly but surely eliminate this competition, but that result was not yet foreseeable when he crossed the Alps in the spring of 312. Having mastered Northern Italy in a *Blitzkrieg* he slowly advanced to Rome where Maxentius had withdrawn behind its safe walls. However, for obscure reasons he felt obliged to confront the enemy and on October 28 he crossed the Tiber via a pontoon bridge. The Battle of the Milvian Bridge was short but decisive. Maxentius had to withdraw in disorder and, heavily armed as he was, drowned together with his horse in the Tiber.<sup>6</sup>

The events of this decisive confrontation are described by four contemporaneous sources, two of which, Lactantius and Eusebius, provide more detailed information about a divine intervention preceding the battle. The earliest, often most detailed mention of the battle and the preceding campaign we find in a panegyric pronounced in the presence of Constantine in Trier in the late summer or autumn of 313.<sup>7</sup> In this oration the *panegyricus* says: 'You must

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*letterarie* (Milan, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> For the events before the battle see Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 41-3; for the battle itself, W. Kuhoff, 'Ein Mythos in der römischen Geschichte. Der Sieg Konstantins des Grossen über Maxentius vor den Toren Roms am 28. Oktober 312 n. Chr.', *Chiron* 21 (1991) 127-74; W. Raeck, 'Ankunft an der Milvischen Brücke: Wort, Bild und Botschaft am Konstantinsbogen in Rom', in J. Holzhausen (ed.), *Psukhe - Seele - anima : Festschrift für Karin Alt zum 7. Mai 1998* (Stuttgart, 1998) 345-54.

<sup>7</sup> J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford, 1979) 285-88; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 46-7; C.E.V. Nixon and B.S. Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1994) 289-90. For these panegyrics see now M.-C. L'Huillier, *L'empire des mots: orateurs gaulois et empereurs romains, 3e et 4e siècles* (Paris, 1992).

share some secret with that divine mind, Constantine, which has delegated care of us to lesser gods and deigns to reveal itself to you alone'. And Constantine's victory in spite of a superior opponent (*tam dispari contentione*) leads him to the rhetorical question: 'tell us, I beg you, what you had as a counsel if not a divine power?' (tr. Nixon and Rodgers).<sup>8</sup> Noticeable in these words is the stress on the private character of the communication of the emperor with the highest divinity, but also the absence of any mention of the Christian God, a vision or a conversion.

Our second source is the already quoted Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, who in the ninth book of the first edition of his *Ecclesiastical History* described the events of 311-313 and published them in Caesarea in 313/4.<sup>9</sup> Eusebius mentions divine assistance (εὐθεῖα) and reports that shortly after the Battle Constantine erected a statue of himself with in his hand the 'victorious trophy of the saving suffering' and an inscription mentioning 'this saving sign' (9.9.10-11).<sup>10</sup> The connection between a trophy after a battle and the cross may surprise us, but it was often made by the early Christians.<sup>11</sup> Several prominent Constantinian scholars, such as Andreas Alföldi (1895-1981), Joseph Vogt (1895-1986) and Tim Barnes, explain this sign as the later imperial standard in the shape of a cross, the so-called *labarum* (§ 3).<sup>12</sup> For this interpretation they appeal to Eusebius' Latin translator Rufinus, who, curiously, does not speak of a 'saving' but a 'special sign' (*singulari signo*).<sup>13</sup> However, anyone who looks at the Rufinian

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Note that Weber, *Kaiser, Träume*, 284-85 still follows older scholars and opts for 315 or shortly afterwards.

<sup>8</sup> *Pan. Lat.* XII.2.5 *Habes profecto aliquod cum illa mente divina, Constantine, secretum, quae delegata nostri diis minoribus cura uni se tibi dignatur ostendere; 4.1 ... dic, quaeso, quid in consilio nisi divinum numen habuisti?*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. Louth, 'The Date of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *J. Theol. Stud.* 41 (1990) 111-23 and R.W. Burgess, 'The Dates and Editions of Eusebius' *Chronici Canones* and *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *J. Theol. Stud.* 48 (1997) 471-504 against Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 158-62 and *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge Mass., 1982) 67-8.

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius often uses this expression for the cross, cf. *LC* 9.14.16 and *VC* 1.31.3, 1.37.1, 4.21.

<sup>11</sup> P. Franchi de' Cavalieri, *Scritti agiografici* II (Rome, 1962) 207, 260; R. Storch, 'The Trophy and the Cross: Pagan and Christian Symbolism in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries', *Byzantion* 40 (1970) 105-17.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. Alföldi, 'Hoc signo victor eris', in K. Kraft (ed.), *Konstantin der Grosse* (Darmstadt, 1974) 224-46 (1939<sup>1</sup>) at 234; J. Vogt, 'Die Bedeutung des Jahres 312 für die Religionspolitik Konstantins des Grossen', in Kraft, *Konstantin der Grosse*, 246-72 (1942<sup>1</sup>) at 254-5; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Rufinus, *HE* 9.9.11, cf. Th. Grünewald, *Constantius Maximus Augustus. Herrschafts-propaganda in der zeitgenössischen Überlieferung* (Stuttgart, 1990) 70f. For Rufinus' translation see now F. Heim, 'Constantin dans l'"Histoire ecclésiastique" de Rufin: fidélités et infidélités à Eusèbe', *Euphrosyne* 29 (2001) 201-20.

passage in more detail soon notices that Rufinus not only translates the Eusebian passage but in his translation also includes the vision of the later Eusebian *Life of Constantine*. The latter Eusebius, as we will see shortly (§ 3), indeed mentions the *labarum*, but the earlier one does not.<sup>14</sup>

In 314-5, the Christian Lactantius presents a more detailed report in his *De mortibus persecutorum*, a dramatic history of the persecutors written under the immediate impression of the death of the last pagan emperor, Maximin Daia. As the treatise is not entirely favorable to Licinius, it was probably (nothing in this matter is certain!) published in Constantine's part of the empire, but its general reliability is guaranteed by coins, papyri and inscriptions of the period.<sup>15</sup> According to Lactantius, the following happened at, presumably, the eve of the Battle: 'Constantine was advised in a dream to mark the heavenly sign of God on the shields of his soldiers and then engage in battle.<sup>16</sup> He did as he was commanded and by means of a slanted letter X with the top of its head bent round, he marked Christ on their shields' (44.5-6, tr. Creed).<sup>17</sup> Earlier scholars were unable to understand his description, but this changed when since the 1960s it was recognised that already in the beginning of the third century the Greek word for cross, *stauros*, was abbreviated with the sign as described by Lactantius.<sup>18</sup> This sign, the so-called staurogram ( ), has to be distinguished from the much better known Christogram ( ), which stands for Christ Himself. Papyri and comparable expressions for the cross in Lactantius' work, such as 'immortal sign' (*immortale signum*: 10.2), demonstrate that Lactantius' expression, 'the heavenly sign of God', indeed means the cross.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This argument was already put forward by me in the Dutch version of my contribution (see note 80) and is accepted by Weber, *Kaiser, Träume*, 285.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 13-4 (who sees Nicomedia as place of publication); J.L. Creed, *Lactantius, De mortibus persecutorum* (Oxford, 1989<sup>2</sup>) XXV-XXXV (Constantine's part of the empire); similarly, E.D. Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca, 2000) 171.

<sup>16</sup> For the belief by Constantine and his contemporaries in the magical efficiency of these and other signs see R. MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire* (Princeton, 1990) 107-11, 312-6; note also the brief observations by R. Syme, *Roman Papers VI* (Oxford, 1991) 120.

<sup>17</sup> *Commonitus est in quiete Constantinus, ut caeleste signum dei notaret in scutis atque ita proelium committeret. Fecit ut iussit est et transversa X littera, summo capite circumflexo, Christum in scutis notat.* For parallels of the expression *caeleste signum dei* see P. Franchi de' Cavalieri, *Scritti agiografici*, 2 vols (Rome, 1962) II.220.

<sup>18</sup> The fullest survey is G.H.R. Horsley and E.R. Waterhouse, 'The Greek *Nomen Sacrum* XP-', *Scriptorium* 38 (1984) 211-30.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. L. Traube, *Nomina sacra* (Munich, 1907) 118-20; M. Black, 'The Chi-Rho Sign - Christogram and/or Staurogram?', in W.W. Gasque and R.P. Martin (eds.), *Apostolic History and the Gospel*

The evidence of Lactantius has repeatedly been rejected because Constantine himself, according to his own words in Eusebius' version (§ 1), used the Christogram; he has been accused of a mistake, and the suggestion has even been made to remove the description of the staurogram from the text as an interpolation or gloss.<sup>20</sup> However, this is most unlikely, since the Latin text is correct, and Lactantius evidently went into some detail to describe the cross to his readers, whom he clearly considered to be unfamiliar with the sign. It is also most improbable that a later interpolator would have inserted a description of the staurogram, when Constantine himself used the Christogram and the staurogram already became less popular in the course of the fourth century, although it still occurs on one of the Emperor's coins of 336/7.<sup>21</sup> According to Barnes, the version of Lactantius need not have been more than rumour, since the latter assimilates the conversion (Barnes' not Lactantius' term) of Constantine to one of the 'most familiar of ancient religious stereotypes - action in response to a dream'.<sup>22</sup> This is typically a case of special pleading, since Barnes can only adduce Eusebius' later version in support of his scepticism and elsewhere considers Lactantius a trustworthy historian. Moreover, the cross also better fits Eusebius' description (above), which points to a simple object in the hand of the imperial statue rather than to the Christogram or the imperial standard.<sup>23</sup>

The fourth mention dates from somewhat later. Once again we have a panegyrist, this time probably speaking at Rome in 321, but, unlike the earlier one, not in the presence of Constantine.<sup>24</sup> It is rather striking to note the changes compared to earlier reports: 'Finally it is the talk of all the Gauls that armies were seen which let it be known that they had been divinely sent (. . .) Their flashing shields were aflame with something dreadful; their celestial weaponry was ablaze with a terrible glow; for they had come in such a form that they were believed to be

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(Exeter, 1970) 319-27, who also compares Lact. *Inst. Div.* V.26, 42; 27.2, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Contra H.R. Seeliger, 'Die Verwendung des Christogramms durch Konstantin im Jahre 312', *Zs. f. Kirchengeschichte* 100 (1989) 149-68 (mistake); J. Rougé, 'A propos du manuscrit du "de mortibus persecutorum"', in *Lactance et son temps* (Parijs, 1978) 13-22 (gloss), enthusiastically, albeit without arguments, followed by T. Barnes, 'The Conversion of Constantine', *EMC/CV* 29 (1985) 371-91 at 383-84, reprinted in Barnes, *From Eusebius to Augustine* (Aldershot, 1994) Ch. III; Weber, *Kaiser, Träume*, 282 note 215 ('Randglosse').

<sup>21</sup> P. Franchi de' Cavalieri, *Constantiniana* (Rome, 1953) 74-5 (text); J. Vogt, *Gnomon* 27 (1955) 46-7; idem, in Kraft, *Konstantin der Grosse*, 363f.

<sup>22</sup> Barnes, 'Conversion', 384.

<sup>23</sup> Alföldi, 'Hoc signo victor eris', 238. This is even, albeit grudgingly, admitted by Franchi, *Constantiniana*, 27, who attaches much weight to the later Eusebius.

<sup>24</sup> See the discussion by Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, 338; Weber,

yours. This was their discourse, this was the speech they composed in the midst of their hearers: “We seek Constantine, we go to help Constantine.” (. . .) Your father Constantius, I believe, was their leader, who had yielded earthly triumphs to you, greater than he, and who, now deified, was enjoying divine expeditions’ (*Pan. Lat.* IV.14, tr. Nixon and Rodgers). As late as 321, then, an orator publicly could describe the divine help to Constantine without any mention of a clear Christian aspect or, for that matter, a conversion.

What, then, can we conclude so far? Before the Battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine was clearly thought to have had a dream about the assistance of the Christian god and to have ordered (some of?) his soldiers to attach to their shields a Christian sign. The dream was originally not spectacular but, as the later panegyrist shows, a tendency to exaggeration soon seems to have developed. However, neither Lactantius or Eusebius nor the pagan panegyrists mention a conversion of Constantine. We conclude from these silences that, at least for his contemporaries, 312 does not seem to have been an important year in Constantine’s personal religious development.<sup>25</sup>

We will end this section with another dream. In the winter of 313, Maximinus marched from Syria and threatened the power base of Licinius on the Balkans. The latter had just received Constantine’s sister Constantia as bride in Milan in February and hastily returned with a small number of troupes. Near Adrianople, on April 30, it came to a confrontation, with Licinius having less than half of his opponent’s number of soldiers. At this critical moment, as Lactantius (*Mort.* 46.3) relates, ‘an angel of God stood over him,<sup>26</sup> telling him to arise quickly and pray to the supreme God with all his army; the victory would be his if he did this’. Licinius followed the divine advice and indeed gained the victory. The parallel with Constantine is too

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*Kaiser, Träume*, 285-88.

<sup>25</sup> This is debated, as appears from the differing views of G. Bonamente, ‘Eusebio, *Storia Ecclesiastica* IX 9 e la versione cristiana del trionfo di Costantino nel 312’, in L. Gasperini (ed.), *Scritti sul mondo antico in memoria di Fulvio Grosso* (Rome, 1981) 55-76; F. Paschoud, ‘Ancora sul rifiuto di Costantino di salire al Campidoglio’, in G. Bonamente and F. Fusco (eds.), *Costantino il Grande dall’antichità all’umanesimo*, 2 vols (Macerata, 1992-3) II, 737-48; G. Fowden, ‘The Last Days of Constantine: Oppositional Versions and Their Influence’, *JRS* 84 (1994) 146-70; A. Vecchio, ‘Alla ricerca delle cause della conversione di Costantino: realtà e convenzioni letterarie (306-312 d.C.)’, *Salesianum* 60 (1998) 97-123; R. van Dam, ‘The Many Conversions of the Emperor Constantine’, in K. Mills and A. Grafton (eds.), *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Rochester, 2003) 127-51.

<sup>26</sup> For this traditional motif see Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton and London, 1983) 19.



striking to be pure chance: in both cases a dream takes place at the eve of a decisive battle against a pagan, and victory is gained by intervention of the Christian God. Moreover, both dreams happen shortly after one another. At the same time, this dream is indirect proof of the fairly modest character of Constantine's dream, since it would be difficult to imagine that Licinius had reported a simple dream after a spectacular vision of the competition.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. *Eusebius and Constantine's vision*

Having looked at the contemporaneous reports it is now time to take a closer look at the report by Constantine himself. Unfortunately, we cannot be totally certain when Eusebius heard this version from the Emperor. We know that after Constantine's death, on 22 May 337,<sup>28</sup> Eusebius resumed working on his *Life of Constantine*, the biography of the emperor that he had started after the Council of Nicaea of 325.<sup>29</sup> However, Eusebius died in (probably) May 339 before completing the project and the book was published unfinished.<sup>30</sup>

According to Tim Barnes, the result is 'tendentious, passionate, partial, deliberately lacunose, but not knowingly mendacious',<sup>31</sup> but this might be too favourable a judgment,<sup>32</sup> as the following example illustrates. In his biography the bishop creates the impression that he was a close confidant of the emperor, which is demonstrably untrue. In fact, he met the emperor only four times, including an episode in 301/2 when Constantine accompanied Diocletian to Palestine (VC 1.19).<sup>33</sup> So, when did Eusebius hear this story from the Emperor? Possibly, it was already at the Council of Nicaea at 325, when Constantine addressed the bishops. Yet, in that case one would have expected the story to be much wider known.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Eusebius' words

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<sup>27</sup> For Licinius' dream see also F. Corsaro, 'Sogni e visioni nella teologia della vittoria di Costantino e Licinio', *Augustinianum* 29 (1989) 333-49; Weber, *Kaiser, Träume*, 294-96.

<sup>28</sup> R.W. Burgess, 'Achyron and Proasteion: the location and circumstances of Constantine's death', *J. Theol. Stud.* 49 (1998) 685-95.

<sup>29</sup> Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius, Life of Constantine*, 9-12.

<sup>30</sup> For the authenticity of the work see F. Winkelmann, 'Zur Geschichte des Authentizitätsproblem der Vita Constantini', *Klio* 40 (1962) 187-243; Barnes, *From Eusebius to Constantine*, Ch. XI (note 29) and Ch. XII ('The Two Drafts of Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*).

<sup>31</sup> Barnes, *From Eusebius to Augustine*, Ch. XII ('Panegyric, history and hagiography in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*', 1989<sup>1</sup>).11; differently, T.G. Elliott, 'Eusebian Frauds in the *Vita Constantini*', *Phoenix* 45 (1991) 162-71, who goes much too far in claiming all kinds of frauds.

<sup>32</sup> See the considerations of R.W. Burgess, *Studies in Eusebian and Post-Eusebian Chronography* (Stuttgart, 1999) 70.

<sup>33</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 266-7; Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Contra* Barnes, 'Conversion of Constantine', 385 and the fascinating, albeit all too pro-pagan, R.

suggest that he had been acquainted with the Emperor for some time already – which certainly was not the case during the Council. On the other hand, in an oration held in the presence of Constantine at the occasion of the dedication of the Holy Sepulchre in 335, Eusebius addresses the emperor as follows:<sup>35</sup> ‘You yourself, Emperor, if time permitted, could tell us, if you so wanted, of the many manifestations of our Saviour and His numerous personal visions in your sleep’.<sup>36</sup> These words seem to prefigure the report of the vision in the *Life of Constantine*. As its Book IV, which was written after the visit to Constantinople in autumn 335 in order to deliver his oration on the Holy Sepulchre, clearly demonstrates, contacts between the Emperor and the bishop had intensified after that visit. It is much more likely, then, that Constantine had told his version around that time when Eusebius delivered several orations before the Emperor than supposing a *tête-à-tête* during the Council of Nicaea.

Yet the question must be posed: is Constantine’s version more credible than those of the earlier reports? Evidently, Eusebius himself had expressed some doubts or amazement, since otherwise it is hard to see why the Emperor would have confirmed his story with oaths. Recent studies of the vision even appeal to these oaths for the trustworthiness of Constantine’s version,<sup>37</sup> but to take politicians on their word suggests an uncommon degree of credulity for a historian. Moreover, the oaths also strongly suggest that Eusebius did not yet know this version, which flatly contradicts his own from about 313, when he did not yet know about the cross in the sky and the making of the imperial standard.

When two versions of an event contradict one another, one can of course try to harmonise them. This is done by Robin Lane Fox, who argues that both versions ‘should be combined, not contrasted, and their common core of truth can be detached in each case from

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Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth, 1986) 614.

<sup>35</sup> This oration has been handed down in our manuscripts as the second part of the *Oratio de laudibus Constantini*, as has been shown by H.A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1976) 30-45, who also gave it the title *De sepulchro Christi*; see also T.D. Barnes, ‘Two Speeches by Eusebius’, *GRBS* 18 (1977) 341-5; P. Maraval, ‘Sur un discours d’Eusèbe de Césarée: ‘(Louange de Constantin, XI-XVIII),’ *REAug* 43 (1997) 239-46.

<sup>36</sup> Eusebius, *De sepulchro Christi* (zie noot 33), 18, cf. Cameron, ‘Eusebius of Caesarea’, 78. Several later sources know of many more visions, but these are hardly credible, cf. B. Bleckmann, ‘Die Chronik des Johannes Zonaras und eine pagane Quelle zur Geschichte Konstantins’, *Historia* 40 (1991) 343-65 and ‘Pagane Versionen Konstantins in der Chronik des Johannes Zonaras’, in Bonamente and Fusco, *Costantino il Grande* I, 151-70; Fowden, ‘The Last Days of Constantine’, 159; H. Chantraine, ‘Die Kreuzesvision von 351 - Fakten und Problemen’, *Byz. Zs.* 86-7 (1993-4) 439-41.

error'.<sup>38</sup> In his case, he reaches this harmony by unreservedly swallowing Constantine's version, but also by ascribing certain details, which are evidently wrong, to errors of Eusebius. Such an approach is arbitrary. A methodologically more responsible analysis must always take into account the nature and chronology of the material and begin with the contemporary sources. Later versions should be analyzed subsequently, and differences with earlier versions should be noted and, if possible, explained.

So let us now look more in detail at Constantine's own version. There are a number of arguments, which all point in the direction of a later refashioning of the events of 312 by Constantine himself. First, it is of course highly unlikely that, a quarter of a century after the event, Eusebius, who was one of the most erudite scholars of his time, had never heard of Constantine's version. That by itself should already be proof of later tinkering. Second, the event is not located in time and place. It took place 'on a campaign he was conducting somewhere' (VC 2.28.2), even before his campaign against Maxentius (2.32.3, 37.2). Such vagueness never points to authenticity, and even less so when we realize how detailed Constantine's version is in comparison with Lactantius' much more sober version.

Third, divine intervention in a critical situation was a standard feature of ancient descriptions of battles, and the saving intervention of saints is well attested until the Great War.<sup>39</sup> However, in all these descriptions there is a clear moment of crisis requiring divine intervention, whereas such a moment is lacking in this particular version. Moreover, the vision appears 'about the time of the midday sun', which was the traditional moment of the appearance of gods and ghosts in antiquity, just as in modern times ghosts tend to appear at midnight. This seems to point to a literary cliché rather than to an authentic experience.<sup>40</sup> There is also a clear

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<sup>37</sup> Barnes, 'Conversion of Constantine'; Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 612-21.

<sup>38</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 616.

<sup>39</sup> F. Graus, 'Der Heilige als Schlachtenhelfer - zur Nationalisierung einer Wundererzählung in der mittelalterlichen Chronistik', in K.-U. Jäschke and R. Wenskus (eds.), *Festschrift für Helmut Beumann* (Sigmaringen, 1977) 330-48; D. MacDonald, 'The Vision of Constantine as Literary Motif', in M.A. Powell Jr and R.H. Sack (eds.), *Studies in Honor of Tom B. Jones* (Kewlaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1979) 289-96; W. Speyer, *Frühes Christentum im antiken Strahlungsfeld* (Tübingen, 1989) 269-91, 499-501; D. Clarke, *The Angel of Mons* (Chicester, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> R. Caillois, 'Les démons de midi', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 115 (1937) 142-73 and 116 (1937) 54-83, 143-86; J.B. Friedman, 'Euridice, Heurodis and the Noon-Day Demon', *Speculum* 41 (1966) 22-9; N. Fernández Marcos, *Los Thaumata de Sofronio* (Madrid, 1975) 39-40; N.J. Perella, *Midday in Italian Literature* (Princeton, 1979); E. Livrea, *Gnomon* 58 (1986) 707; G. Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, ed. R. Damiani, vol. 2 (Milano, 1990<sup>2</sup>) 705-12 (probably written in 1817); Bremmer, *The Rise*

redundance in the story: first a vision and then a dream. Now dreams and visions are repeatedly mentioned in antiquity as media for conversions, important decisions and special revelations: Thessalus, Perpetua, Apollonius of Tyana, Mani, Augustine – we have plenty of examples.<sup>41</sup> However, I would not know of any combination of the two in one story. Clearly, Constantine felt the need to stress divine contact as much as possible.<sup>42</sup> As we will see momentarily, this attitude fits in with the general tendency of the *Life of Constantine*, but does not inspire confidence in the report.

Fifth, the vision clearly suffers of at least two anachronisms. The standard is always pictured with a Christogram, but this sign is not attested before 315 on a coin with Constantine's helmet.<sup>43</sup> Lane Fox ascribed this error to Eusebius, but the bishop clearly reports the detail as deriving from Constantine himself.<sup>44</sup> The question is more serious as to when Constantine introduced the *labarum*. Eusebius had seen this standard with his own eyes, as he tells us, and he indeed supplies a detailed description of the imperial standard. Yet hardly any recent discussion seems to ask when we first hear about this standard, of which Eusebius adds, in a usually overlooked observation, that its use as a standard in battle 'was, however, somewhat later' (VC 1.32.1). In other words, the bishop explicitly notes that the standard came later into the open than the moment it was supposed to have been made. Evidently, he, or the Emperor, felt a problem in connecting the standard all too directly with the moment of the vision, since it must have been common knowledge that the standard was of a much later date. In fact, the standard only starts to appear on coins in 327, and it fits in with this date that the standard contains the portraits of the Emperor and only two sons, since his eldest son,

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*and Fall of the Afterlife* (London and New York, 2002) 128.

<sup>41</sup> A.D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, 2 vols, ed. Z. Stewart (Oxford, 1972) 1.368-74 (visions); J. Le Goff, *L'imaginaire médiéval* (Parijs, 1985) 265-316 (important study of dreams from the second until the seventh century, but unsatisfactory in its analysis of Constantine's dream and vision: 301).

<sup>42</sup> The combination of dream and vision is absent in *Acts of the Apostles* 10.10-16, 19-20 and *Hermas* 1.4-2.1, 2.2-4, 3.

<sup>43</sup> The value of the informative survey of staurogram and Christogram by E. Dinkler and E. Dinkler-von Schubert, in *Reallexikon zur Byzantinischen Kunst* 5 (1991) 34-44, is impaired by their statement that the Christogram appeared on Constantine's helmet already in 313; similarly, M.-R. Alföldi, *Gloria Romanorum* (Stuttgart, 2001) 93 (1989<sup>1</sup>). The date of 315 is now generally accepted by numismatists, cf. K. Kraft, 'Das Silbermedaillon Constantins des Grossen mit dem Christusmonogramm auf dem Helm', in Kraft, *Konstantin des Grossen*, 297-344 (1954/5<sup>1</sup>), reprinted in Kraft, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zum antiken Geldgeschichte und Numismatik*, 2 vols (Darmstadt, 1985) II.95-142.

Crispus, was executed in 326.<sup>45</sup>

If we take all these observations into account, the conclusion must be that Constantine's own version does not square with the contemporaneous reports of the vision of 312 and shows all the hallmarks of a later *bricolage* of fact and fiction. That is probably also why the Emperor dates his own report to a moment before the campaign against Maxentius. He must have known that the vision of 312 was too well attested to be supplanted by a completely new version.

This conclusion immediately raises the question as to why Constantine presented this particular story as he did. So let us look again at Constantine's report but now ask what he may have intended with his version. When we read it, we cannot be but struck by the fact that he presents his vision as the report of a conversion. Now few studies of his vision and religious policy have raised the question what a conversion actually entails and how it takes place. Yet sociologists of religion have done much research into this question in the last decades.<sup>46</sup> For our purpose it is sufficient to note some of their results.

First, conversions rarely happen as the result of a lightning insight, as in the case of Paul and Augustine: those are typically, what I would call, textual conversions. Normal conversions are more often the result of a rational choice, a weighing of possibilities, and take place over a period of time. Usually, converts first join their new groups and only afterwards gradually appropriate the lifestyles and doctrines of their new commitments. Second, the report of a conversion is always a report after the fact. The convert relates a story that must look credible in the eyes of his new community. In other words, it is a kind of self-presentation, which the convert may believe, but the historian need not necessarily accept.<sup>47</sup>

Both aspects, the gradualism and the self-presentation, exactly fit what we know about

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<sup>44</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 616.

<sup>45</sup> Date: P. Bruun, 'The victorious signs of Constantine: a reappraisal', *Numism. Chron.* 157 (1997) 41-59; K. Bech, "'In diesem Zeichen wirst Du siegen!': erste christliche Zeichen auf römischen Münzen", *Numism. Nachrichtenblatt* 48 (1999) 143-45. Number of sons: Bleckmann, *Constantin der Grosse*, 61 also notes that in 312 the Emperor had only one son. Either way, the standard of 327 does not fit the date of 312. These anachronisms also refute the rationalising interpretation of P. Weiss, 'The vision of Constantine', *J. Rom. Archaeology* 16 (2003) 237-59.

<sup>46</sup> For good surveys see R. Nauta, *Over bekering* (Groningen, 1989); V. Krech, 'Religiöse Bekehrung in soziologischer Perspektive', *Spirita* 8 (1994) 24-41; the contributions of S. Bruce and H. Zock to J.N. Bremmer *et al.* (eds.), *Cultures of Conversion* (Louvain, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> For fine examples see E. Lawless, 'Rescripting Their Lives and Narratives: Spiritual Life Stories of Pentecostal Women Preachers', *J. Feminist Stud. Rel.* 7 (1991) 53-71.

Constantine. As we already noted, the reports of 312 do not mention a conversion. The fact that pagan counter propaganda could locate Constantine's conversion after 326 (below) also seems to be an indication that a precise date of his conversion was not something of general knowledge. Although Constantine openly showed his Christian sympathies and privileged the Church after his victory of 312, he remained his whole life *pontifex maximus*, and forbid pagan sacrifice only in 324 after his victory on Licinius;<sup>48</sup> until 325, he even issued coins with Sol.<sup>49</sup> Constantine also transferred many statues of pagan divinities to Constantinople and not only for embellishing his new capital: a statue of Fortuna was installed in a temple.<sup>50</sup> He even employed a high official of the Eleusinian mysteries to fetch an obelisk from Egypt.<sup>51</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Constantine was baptised only on his deathbed (VC 4.62.4). This way of looking at Constantine's religiosity is of course – and we should stress this – a looking from our point of view. We cannot exclude that Constantine considered himself already converted in 314. Contemporaries must have seen his sympathy but need not have spoken of a conversion.

Modern scholars have their own ideas about this conversion. According to Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), in his still highly readable *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen* (1853), such a 'genialer Mensch' could only be 'ganz wesentlich *unreligiös*' (p. 271). Of course, this judgement entailed that Burckhardt had to consider the reports about Constantine's vision and conversion as 'nicht einmal den Wert einer Sage, überhaupt keinen populären Ursprung' (p. 275) and also had to explain the information about Constantine's sermons as 'Mittel der Macht', just as modern governments could not do without the media ('Zeitungspressen': p. 276).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Barnes, *From Eusebius to Augustine*, Ch. IV ('Constantine's prohibition of pagan sacrifice', 1984<sup>1</sup>); J. Gaudemet, 'La legislazione antipagana da Costantino a Giustiniano', in P.F. Beatrice (ed.), *L'intolleranza cristiana nei confronti dei pagani* (Bologna, 1990) 15-36 at 18-22; S. Bradbury, 'Constantine and the Problem of Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century', *CPh* 89 (1994) 120-39; J. Curran, 'Constantine and the ancient cults of Rome: the legal evidence', *G&R* 43 (1996) 68-80; M. Pérez Medina, 'Sobre la prohibición de sacrificios por Constantino', *Florilib* 7 (1996) 229-39; T. Barnes, 'From Toleration to Repression: The Evolution of Constantine's Religious Policies', *Scripta Class. Isr.* 21 (2002) 189-207; note also Ø. Norderval, 'Kaiser Konstantins Edikt gegen die Häretiker und Schismatiker: (Vita Constantini III, 64-65)', *SO* 70 (1995) 95-115.

<sup>49</sup> Alföldi, *Gloria Romanorum*, 52-59 (1964<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>50</sup> For interesting ideas about this (re-)use of pagan statues see C. Lepelley, 'La musée des statues divines', *Cahiers archéologiques* 42 (1994) 5-15.

<sup>51</sup> G. Fowden, 'Constantine's Porphyry Column: The Earliest Literary Allusion', *JRS* 81 (1991) 119-131 at 129-30; *SEG* 27.1650.

<sup>52</sup> I have used the edition in J. Burckhardt, *Gesammelte Werke* I (Basel and Stuttgart, 1978) 1-353, reprinted, with a good introduction and survey of later studies, as J. Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen. Mit einem Nachwort von Karl Christ* (Munich, 1982). For the background see W.

Whereas Burckhardt, then, denied Constantine's conversion because, in his view, the emperor never was a Christian, it has recently been argued that the emperor did not convert because he had been a Christian all of his life.<sup>53</sup> The most important argument for this surprising view is the supposed Christian origin of Constantine. Is this new approach persuasive?

To start with, the religious background of Constantine's family is certainly not crystal clear.<sup>54</sup> His own words, as reported by Eusebius, hardly leave any doubt about the fact that his father Constantius (ca. 250-306) had died as a pagan. Although he had been rather tolerant and had abstained from persecutions, he had ordered the destruction of Christian churches and driven Christians into exile.<sup>55</sup> In later times, Constantine represents him as Christian as he can, but all that he can really say is that his father invoked the 'saviour God' (VC 2.49). As regarding his mother Helena, according to Eusebius Constantine had converted her and there seems to be no reason to doubt this information.<sup>56</sup> The only Christian element in his family, then, remains the name of his sister Anastasia, who could well have changed her name after the conversion of Constantine, as there are no indications that she had a Christian background.<sup>57</sup>

The new 'revisionist' approach is thus hardly convincing, and even less as it insufficiently takes into account Constantine's life before 312. After his father had married Theodora in 289 and Helena had been banned from the imperial stage, Constantine was educated at the court of Diocletian. In this period he played a prominent role in several military expeditions, and he must have participated in the sacrifices which had been made obligatory for

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Kaegi, *Jacob Burckhardt. Eine Biographie* III (Basel and Stuttgart, 1956) 377-421; B. Brennan, 'Burckhardt and Ranke on the age of Constantine the Great', *Quaderni di Storia* 21 (1995) 53-65; L. Gossmann, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt* (Chicago and London, 2000) 267-82; G. Bowersock, 'Burckhardt sulla Tarda Antichità: dal "Constantin" alla "Griechische Kulturgeschichte"', *Riv. Stor. It.* 112 (2000) 1094-1108.

<sup>53</sup> See especially the following studies by T.G. Elliot: 'Constantine's Conversion: do we really need it?', *Phoenix* 41 (1987) 420-38; 'Constantine's Early Religious Development', *J. Rel. Hist.* 15 (1988-9) 283-91; "'Constantine's Conversion" Revisited', *Anc. Hist. Bull.* 6 (1992) 59-62; *The Christianity of Constantine the Great* (Scranton, PA, 1996).

<sup>54</sup> For Constantine's tinkering with his ancestry to improve his Christian standing see H.W. Bird, 'The *Historia Augusta* on Constantine's Lineage', *Arctos* (1997) 9-17

<sup>55</sup> Cf. VC 1.27; Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change*, 279-80; Barnes, *From Eusebius to Augustine*, Ch. IX.643; M.D. Smith, 'The Religion of Constantius I', *GRBS* 38 (1997) 187-208 and 'The Religious Coinage of Constantius I', *Byzantion* 70 (2000) 474-90.

<sup>56</sup> Eusebius, VC 3.47, vgl. J.W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta* (Leiden, 1992) 35-8; H. Heinen, 'Konstantins Mutter Helena: de stercore ad regnum', *Trierer Zs.* 61 (1998) 227-40.

<sup>57</sup> Grünewald, *Constantius Maximus Augustus*, 81-2; F. Chausson, 'Une Soeur de Constantin: Anastasia', in J.-M. Carrié and R. Lizzi Testa (eds.), *Humana Sapit. Études d' Antiquité Tardive*

officers and soldiers.<sup>58</sup> Several church historians have dedicated striking studies to the attitude of the early Christians to the military, in particular my Groningen colleagues A.J. Visser (1918-1976) and, in perhaps the most sophisticated analysis of the problem, J. Roldanus. They have shown that pre-Constantine Christianity was not concerned with the permissiveness of war and violence as such. On the other hand, the early Christians unanimously condemned the thoroughly pagan-religious character of the army and, regularly albeit less prominent in our sources, they displayed a certain reticence concerning the shedding of blood.<sup>59</sup> Whatever Constantine may have believed in the depth of his soul, his practice at the court and in the army can hardly have been but pagan in character. This conclusion is supported by the fact that Constantine had to lie about his age during the Diocletian persecution and pretended that he had been much younger than he was in reality – lies that were undoubtedly meant to prevent difficult questions about his former actions.<sup>60</sup>

But perhaps we have to go even further. In an oration in praise of Constantine, which had been pronounced shortly after his victory on his rival Maximianus in 310, the Gallic orator relates that during his expedition the emperor left his intended route and made a visit to ‘the finest temple in the whole wide world’, in which nowadays scholars recognise the sanctuary of the Gallic Apollo Grannus in Grand in France.<sup>61</sup> Here, as the orator continues, ‘you saw, I believe, O Constantine, your Apollo, accompanied by Victory, offering you laurel wreaths, each of which carries a portent of thirty years ... And – now why do I say “I believe”? – you saw and recognized yourself in the likeness of him to whom the divine songs of the bards had prophesied that rule over the whole world was due. And this I think has now happened, since you are, O Emperor, like he, youthful, joyful, a bringer of health and very handsome. Rightly, therefore, have you honoured those most venerable shrines with such great treasures that they do not miss their old ones, any longer (*Pan. Lat.* VI.21.3-7, tr. Nixon and Rodgers).

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*offertes à Lellia Cracco Ruggini* (Turnhout, 2002) 131-56.

<sup>58</sup> F. Heim, *Virtus. Idéologie politique et croyances religieuses au IVe siècle* (Berne, 1991) 264.

<sup>59</sup> A.J. Visser, ‘*Christianus sum, non possum militare: soldatenmartyria uit de derde eeuw*’, *Ned. Archief v. Kerkgeschiedenis* 48 (1967-8) 5-19; J. Roldanus, ‘De vroege kerk en de militaire dienst’, *Kerk en Theologie* 33 (1982) 182-202; P.W. van der Horst, *De onbekende God* (Utrecht, 1988) 210-28 and the extensive bibliography of F. Ruggiero, *Tertulliano, De Corona* (Milano, 1992) XLIV-XLVIII.

<sup>60</sup> VC 2.51, cf. Barnes, ‘The Constantinian Settlement’, 639.

<sup>61</sup> For this sanctuary see now the finely illustrated ‘Grand, prestigieux sanctuaire de la Gaule’ = *Les dossiers d’archéologie* no. 162 (1991).



The precise interpretation of these words is debated, but for our purpose we can limit ourselves to a few observations.<sup>62</sup> In the passage the orator lets Constantine have a private meeting with Apollo, of which he emphasizes the intimate character by his pretended reticence in his description of the meeting (“I believe”).<sup>63</sup> Such a close tie of the emperor with a divine alter ego was characteristic for that era, in which important figures believed to have (or were believed to have) a direct contact with the divine.<sup>64</sup> In this case, Constantine – for in these orations it was not customary that the orator made up such details on his own initiative – clearly claimed a close contact with Apollo, the god who was often identified with Sol, and Sol Invictus does indeed become more and more prominent on the coins of Constantine after 310.<sup>65</sup> ‘Revisionist’ historians rightly argue that it is not necessary to believe that Constantine ever had this meeting (a vision?) with the god.<sup>66</sup> Lack of data prevent us of demonstrating the opposite: too little is known about the youth of Constantine than that we can with any certainty about such events. However, it does seem certain that Constantine did not deny the report about his encounter with Apollo and he did present important votives to the sanctuary – probably to make a favourable impression on the Gallic aristocracy and to win them in this way for his cause. However this may be, it is in no way possible to interpret the event as a convincing illustration of the deeply felt Christian faith of the emperor.

Let us now return to the self-presentation of Constantine. The element of rescription of one’s life we clearly find in a letter of Constantine to the bishops of the Council of Arles (314), which had been convened by the Emperor to solve a dispute with the Donatists. In this letter, in which Constantine addresses the bishops as ‘dearest brethren’ for the very first time, he pictures the past in rather sombre colours, just as so often happens in moderns conversion stories: ‘For

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<sup>62</sup> For an excellent analysis of this passage see B. Müller-Rettig, *Der Panegyricus des Jahres 310 auf Konstantin den Grossen* (Stuttgart 1990) 275-89, 330-48; see also L’Huillier, *L’empire des mots*, 376-90; S. Lieu, ‘Constantine’s Pagan Vision’, in S.N.C. Lieu and D. Montserrat (eds.), *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine Views* (London and New York, 1996) 63-96; Weber, *Kaiser, Träume*, 278-82.

<sup>63</sup> So, convincingly, Müller-Rettig, *Panegyricus des Jahres 310*, 276. The “I believe”, then, is not a sceptical qualification by the orator, as is suggested by Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 619: this would have been totally inappropriate in the company of the emperor.

<sup>64</sup> J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst, H.C. Teitler, *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XXI* (Groningen, 1991) 218-21.

<sup>65</sup> I. Tontillo, ‘L’impero della luce: riflessioni su Costantino e il sole’, *MEFRA* 115 (2003) 985-1048.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 36.

there were initially in me many obvious defects in righteousness, nor did I think that the supernatural Power saw any of those things that I did in the secrecy of my heart. So, then, what lot awaited these offences of which I have spoken? Obviously that which abounds with all ills. But Almighty God, who sits in the vantage-point of heaven, bestowed upon me what I did not deserve; it is certainly impossible to tell or enumerate those benefits that his heavenly benevolence has vouchsafed to his servant'.<sup>67</sup> Constantine is very circumspect with his language, but the progress from a state of a seeming lack of justice to the grace of God is clear. With this letter he justified his position to the bishops as one of them, and thus he must have become accepted in higher Christian circles.

However, at the end of his life other factors had become important. The Emperor now could present himself as an active actor in his process of conversion, which is described as a rational search for truth: by weighing the various possibilities he arrives at his choice for Christ, which is immediately sanctioned by a 'remarkable divine sign'. This close tie with the divine is also stressed in an oration, the so-called *Laus Constantini* (*LC*), which Eusebius gave in 335/6 at the occasion of the thirty-year jubilee of Constantine's rule. In this oration the bishop states that the Emperor is protected by 'heavenly armies' and 'countless supernatural troops' (*LC* 5.5). Apparently, one of the goals of Constantine's conversion story, like the whole of the *Life of Constantine*, was the demonstration of the divine legitimation and protection of the Emperor.<sup>68</sup> That is why Eusebius, in spite of his skepticism, relates Constantine's version. That is why the imperial standard is, as it were, the climax of his story: behind this standard Constantine gained the military victories which eventually had made him the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

But why did Eusebius and Constantine stress the divine legitimating of the Emperor in the way they did? Three groups certainly need to be taken into account. First, Constantine stresses that his army also had seen the cross in the sky. The military standard was most important in Roman military tradition, and by Christianizing it Constantine must have tried to assure himself of the continuing support of his army, which during his rule will have been still largely pagan. The importance of his army is also clearly reflected in their prominent role during his last days, both before and immediately after his death. (*VC* 4.63.2-66).

The bishops were the second group. As Constantine promoted the position of the

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<sup>67</sup> For the letter see Optatus, Appendix 5 = K. Ziwsa, *CSEL* 26 (Wenen, 1893) 208 = *Optatus: Against the Donatists*, translated and edited by Mark Edwards (Liverpool, 1997) 189.

bishops since the Council of Arles, the question of his relationship with this increasingly influential group must have become more and more pressing to him. That is probably why he once said at a dinner party with bishops, perhaps jokingly (but many a true thing is said in jest): ‘You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside’ (VC 4.24).

A last group, which is usually neglected, were the pagans. Pagan intellectuals, such as the orator Libanius (314-393) and the Emperor Julian the Apostate (331-363), soon understood the revolutionary character of Constantine’s choice.<sup>69</sup> They located the emperor’s conversion relatively late in his life, after the executions of his son and wife in 326,<sup>70</sup> a pagan legend about Constantine’s deathbed baptism, which was incorporated into the Christian *Actus beati Silvestri*, would even become highly popular in the Middle Ages.<sup>71</sup> In this way they could devalue the conversion as a means for the emperor to absolve himself of his crimes. Constantine may already have heard of such suggestions and have felt that a story about divine support and protection could counter such rumours.

It is time to come to a close. In our analysis we have preferred the version of Lactantius,<sup>72</sup> but also tried to give a place to Constantine’s later version. For later generations Constantine now became *the* bringer of the Christian faith and his fame would last well into the seventeenth century,<sup>73</sup> when Louis XIV still frequently modeled himself on Constantine.<sup>74</sup> The

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<sup>68</sup> As is argued by Cameron, ‘Eusebius of Caesarea’.

<sup>69</sup> Libanius and Constantine: H.-U. Wiemer, ‘Libanius on Constantine’, *CQ* 44 (1994) 511-24; P.-L. Malosse, ‘Libanius on Constantine again’, *CQ* 47 (1997) 519-24. Julian and Constantine: J. Vogt, *Orbis* (Freiburg, 1960) 289-304 (1955<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>70</sup> F. Paschoud, *Cinq études sur Zosime* (Parijs, 1975) 34-5, overlooked by H. Chadwick, ‘Conversion in Constantine the Great’, in D. Baker (ed.), *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian* (Oxford, 1978) 1-13.

<sup>71</sup> The first allusions to this text emerge about 500, but a modern edition is still *in statu nascendi*, cf. Fowden, ‘The Last Days of Constantine’, 154-5 (to be read with F. Paschoud, ‘Zosime et Constantin: nouvelles controverses’, *MH* 54, 1997, 9-28) and ‘Constantine, Silvester and the Church of S. Polyeuctus in Constantinople’, *J. Rom. Arch.* 7 (1994) 274-84.

<sup>72</sup> Similarly, J. Vogt, *Constantin der Grosse und sein Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1960<sup>2</sup>) 164; H. Dörries, *Constantine the Great* (New York, 1972) 35.

<sup>73</sup> C. Marksches, ‘Wann endet das “Konstantinische Zeitalter”?: eine Jenaer Antrittsvorlesung’, in D. Wyrwa et al. (eds), *Die Weltlichkeit des Glaubens in der Alten Kirche: Festschrift für Ulrich Wickert zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Berlin, 1997) 157-88

<sup>74</sup> Vgl. A. Kazhdan, ‘“Constantin imaginaire”: Byzantine legends of the ninth century about Constantine the Great’, *Byzantium* 57 (1987) 196-250; Bonamente and Fusco, *Costantino il Grande*; P. Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven and London, 1992); P. Magdalino (ed.), *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th - 13th Centuries* (Aldershot, 1994);

process of debunking started only with the Pietists and accelerated with the Enlightenment,<sup>75</sup> when Gibbon (1737-1794), in a still valuable analysis, rejected the version of the Emperor, but without accusing him of hypocrisy, as Burckhardt would do: a subtle approach which still can teach something to many a modern historian.<sup>76</sup> Contemporary historians go much further.<sup>77</sup> One of our best modern experts on Constantine, Tim Barnes, has recently argued that the Constantinian ‘Wende’ was not really a ‘Wende’ at all, since the progressive Christianisation of the Roman Empire had already advanced too far to be reversed.<sup>78</sup> It is true that a considerable part of the population had become Christian in his time, nevertheless it was hardly more than 10 percent;<sup>79</sup> moreover, the male members of the aristocracy and the army were still largely pagan. It is rather Constantine’s longevity – often an overlooked aspect of history -, the Christian education of his sons and his careful politics regarding pagan cults that insured the Christianisation of the Roman Empire. His vision may not have been the sign of his conversion; it certainly was the first sign of a lasting change in the direction of Western civilisation.<sup>80</sup>

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H.J.W. Drijvers, *History and Religion in Late Antique Syria* (Aldershot, 1994) XVIII.197-201, XIX.70-71; A. Marcone, ‘Il destino dell’impero e la fortuna di Costantino’, in F. Chausson and É. Wolff (eds.), *Consuetudinis amor. Fragments d’histoire romaine (II<sup>e</sup>-VI<sup>e</sup> siècles) offerts à Jean-Pierre Callu* (Rome, 2003) 311-21.

<sup>75</sup> W. Kaegi, ‘Vom Nachleben Konstantins’, *Schweiz. Zs. f. Geschichte* 8 (1958) 289-326.

<sup>76</sup> E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury (London, 1896) II, 299-307, cf. J. Straub, *Regeneratio imperii* II (Darmstadt, 1986) 252-82 (‘Gibbons Konstantin-Bild’); W.H.C. Frend, ‘Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) and Early Christianity’, *J. Eccl. Hist.* 45 (1994) 661-72.

<sup>77</sup> Note also H. Schlange-Schöningen, ‘Konstantin der Große und der “Kulturkampf”’. Bemerkungen zur Bewertung des ersten christlichen Kaisers in Theodor Mommsens Römischer Kaisergeschichte’, *Gymnasium* 104 (1997) 385-97.

<sup>78</sup> Barnes, ‘Constantine and Christianity’, 294.

<sup>79</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 585-92 (who is perhaps too conservative in his views); D. Praet, ‘Explaining the Christianization of the Roman Empire’, *Sacris Erudiri* 33 (1992-3) 5-119; P. van Minnen, ‘The Roots of Egyptian Christianity’, *Arch. f. Papyrusf.* 40 (1994) 71-85; K. Hopkins, ‘Christian Number and Its Implications’, *J. Early Christ. Stud.* 6 (1998) 185-226; Bremmer, ‘Perpetua and Her Diary: Authenticity, Family and Visions’, in W. Ameling (ed.), *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten* (Stuttgart, 2002) 77-120 at 85f.

<sup>80</sup> This is the updated and revised version of my ‘Het bekeringsvisioen van Constantijn de Grote’, in H.S. Benjamins *et al.* (eds.), *Evangelie en beschaving. Studies bij het afscheid van Hans Roldanus* (Zoetermeer, 1995) 49-67, which had profited from comments by Mirjam de Baar, Jan den Boeft, Jan Willem Drijvers and Ton Hilhorst. Later versions also profited from lectures at The Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton (2000) and the University of Bremen (2004). Ian Rutherford kindly corrected my English.