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Introduction

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The age of Constantine is one of the most fertile periods of historical change in all of antiquity. By itself, his elevation of the Christian faith from the depths of the persecution it suffered in his youth to the religion of his imperial household testifies to the growth of a new genus of government and a new sort of emperor. Cast by Constantine into the open light of toleration and imperial support, Christianity blossomed into a thriving offshoot of Mediterranean religious life. By the mid-fourth century, it had grown broad enough to cast its shadow over not just religious matters but art and architecture, philosophy and thought, literature and learning, politics and foreign relations, law and social practice. To be sure, Constantine was never so revolutionary that he turned up the roots of what had gone before and planted the field of history afresh. Rather, much of what he accomplished was to bring to fruition trends and tendencies that had sprung up long before his reign. Yet it was Constantine's genius to have distinguished between productive cultural strains and the infertile tares that were doomed by the climate of history to die out. The age of Constantine thus witnessed not so much a re-creation of the historical landscape as a new emphasis on the cultivation of those features that had previously been pruned back. The result was the growth of the period now referred to as late antiquity – roughly the fourth through sixth centuries AD – a period that has aroused tremendous interest among the present generation.

Historical change is, of course, inevitable and can hardly be traced to one man, but Constantine's position as *an* emperor and later *the* emperor of the Roman world for the first third of the fourth century gave him a greater role than any of his contemporaries in fostering productive change. Thus, while we can assume that, in the absence of

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Constantine, the world of late antiquity would have shifted and developed into something different from what preceded it, it is impossible to conceive how it might have evolved. Without Constantine's patronage of holy men like Paphnutius and Anthony, we can hardly comprehend the rise of spiritual greats like the stylites Simeon and Daniel. His cultivation of theologians like Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea paved the way for powerful figures like Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom. Without his support of powerful bishops like Ossius of Cordoba or Eusebius of Nicomedia, it is hard to believe that Augustine of Hippo and Cyril of Alexandria would have had the influence they did. His summoning and oversight of the Council of Nicaea established a precedent of imperial involvement in ecclesastical policymaking for centuries to come. His reclamation of the Holy Land for Christianity prepared the ground for Christians like Melania the Younger, Jerome, and even the empress Eudocia to refashion their lives in Palestine. Above all, his reworking of Christianity into a triumphalist religion allowed for the development of the Christian monarch in all its manifestations from late antiquity down to the Crusades. Indeed, Constantine's victorious Christian king, combined with his Christianization of the Holy Land, has had consequences throughout history, consequences with profound effects on Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, consequences that endure up to the present.

Nor was Constantine's vision for shaping history trained solely on the religious. Without his new emphasis on the gold currency, we can scarcely conceptualize the rebirth and growth of the late antique economy. His creation of new government offices and his reshaping of others set the stage for the development of the grand and powerful bureaucracy of the late Roman world. His deployment of barbarian military officers and auxiliary troops enabled the ongoing vitality of the late Roman army. And his creation of the new imperial capital in Constantinople permitted the Roman empire to transplant itself eastward so as to weather the barbarian invasions and survive down to the Renaissance. As the first in a series of Constantines to rule the Roman world, Constantine I has been awarded by history the epithet "the Great." The fact is, however, that regardless of his place at the head of an imperial tradition, Constantine well merits the title. He was a man whose impact on history was so profound that we continue to feel it today.

Strangely enough, even given the universal agreement on the importance of Constantine, few historical figures present us with as many puzzling questions. This is not because the events of his reign are obscured by a lack of relevant source material. Compared to the

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sources for other periods of antiquity, those for Constantine's life and times are strikingly rich in both quantity and quality. With these we can trace the broad outlines of Constantinian history quite boldly and distinctly: born of a powerful father and raised in the royal court, he was proclaimed emperor in 306, enjoyed considerable military success in his early years, defeated his rival Maxentius in 312, began openly advertising his conversion to Christianity, fought two wars that suppressed his coemperor Licinius by 324, presided over the ecclesiastical Council of Nicaea in 325, refounded the city of Byzantium in his own name, reclaimed the Holy Land for Christianity, died while preparing a campaign against the Persians, and left the empire to a cadre of dynastic successors. Despite this lucid larger picture, however, the finer features of this monolithic historical figure often remain obscured by enigmas and contradictions. And though many of these have been exhaustively debated, the problems still abide without any apparent hope of definitive resolution.

Precisely when, for example, was Constantine born? The range of possible dates spans a decade, and our choice of dates affects our interpretation of all the events of his career; nonetheless, there are no clear criteria by which to establish the truth beyond the shadow of a doubt. Other important dates are similarly disputed: the date of his first war with Licinius (314 or 316?), the date of his grandiloquent *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints* (a broad range between 315 and 328), the date of his refusal to perform public sacrifice in Rome (312? 315? 326?). Was Constantine originally intended by Diocletian to have succeeded to the throne? Was he born a bastard? Was his father Christian? Did he issue a law banning sacrifice? Did he attack his rivals Maxentius and Licinius because they were persecuting Christians? Where precisely did he fight his decisive battle against Maxentius? Why did he execute his son Crispus and wife Fausta? Why did he burden the empire with so many dynastic successors, and how precisely were these eliminated after his death? A series of questions also surrounds his foundation of Constantinople and his religious foundations in Palestine. How extensive were his building projects in Constantinople? Did he intend to create there a rival to Rome or merely another regional capital? Why did Constantine initiate his Holy Land reclamation project? How great a role did his mother Helena play? Did she or her contemporaries actually find what they believed to be the True Cross or did this happen later? Above all, there lingers the monumental question of Constantine's conversion, the "Constantinian question" par excellence. How many divine visions did he have leading up to his conversion: one, two, perhaps more? When

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precisely did he convert? Did he ever really convert? Scholars continue to argue these questions fiercely, yet opinion on all of them remains divided. Though general consensus has developed around some, none has been definitively solved and many remain wide open.

Constantine would surely have appreciated this situation. He was himself a lover of allusions, riddles, and secret messages in poetry and art, an interpreter and follower of ambiguous signs and puzzling portents, and a purveyor of legendary stories and frustratingly mixed messages. Examples abound. As to allusions and riddles, Constantine was convinced, as he states in his "Oration to the Saints," that the pagan poet Virgil, writing in the 30s BC, made vatic reference to the advent of Christ in his famous fourth *Eclogue* and that the mythic Sybil of Cumae tucked encrypted allusions to Christ into her oracles.[1] Indeed, the poet Optatianus Porfyrius was able to win his way back into Constantine's good graces and eventually secure plum political appointments by dedicating to Constantine a collection of poems larded with triply encoded messages layered throughout his verses in artfully shaped acrostics.[2] As to signs and portents, quite apart from his famous vision and dream of a crosslike symbol in the sky prior to the battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine is said to have witnessed a heavenly host coming to his aid on the day of that battle, October 28, 312.[3] He also had a vision of two youths – perhaps the Dioscuri – battering the enemy lines during a battle against Licinius at Adrianople (presumably the battle fought in 324); he believed he witnessed a light enclosing his camp during his siege of Byzantium in the summer of 324; he claimed God had appeared to him in a dream ordering him to found his new capital at Byzantium; and he had another vision during his wars with the Goths and Sarmatians.[4] As to legendary stories, Eusebius reports that Constantine himself regaled a group of bishops with tales of his vision(s) and military successes, and Constantine must also be the source for the boast that he had manhandled wild beasts and personally captured barbarian chiefs in combat during his stay at Galerius's court.[5] Finally, Constantine's mixed messages are too numerous to catalog. A brief list might include his establishment at Constantinople of Christian churches alongside pagan temples and statues, some of the latter gathered for him by a pagan priest of the Eleusinian Mysteries;[6] or his famous letter to the eastern provincials where he excoriates pagans for holding onto their "sanctuaries of falsehood" but simultaneously refuses to coerce them to convert;[7] or his rescript to the people of Hispellum (AD 337) where he allows them to establish a cult temple to his family but refuses to let it be "defiled by the conceits of any contagious superstition."[8] To be sure,

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all of these seeming contradictions, these paradoxes, can be explained, though not always to everyone's satisfaction. If anything, all might agree that they reflect a consistently inclusive religious model that refuses to accept the contradiction in simultaneously fostering monotheist and polytheist belief. Yet the contradiction cannot be hidden, no more to us moderns than it could to many ancients. Constantine seems deliberately to have projected ambiguity, deliberately to have kept people guessing.

The fragments left to us to construct the events of his reign were thus already shrouded in mystery before he died, and their layers of complexity were brought into high relief by the strong feelings he evoked in all who experienced him or wrote his story. Thus, our most fulsome source, Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*, written shortly after his death, already presents so tendentious a picture in favor of Constantine that it has often been dubbed a tissue of lies or an outright forgery.[9] Though more recent scholarship has backed away from this extreme interpretation, Eusebius certainly set a high benchmark for slathering adulation. Nor was he alone, for his fellow Christian Lactantius and the pagans Praxagoras and Bemarchius were also quite lavish in their praise, albeit more restrained in expressing it. Very quickly, however, a contrapuntal reaction developed, first, apparently, in the writings of Constantine's own nephew Julian. The pagan Julian lampooned his Christian uncle as a spendthrift, a revolutionary, a sop to barbarians, and a murderer of his own kin who turned to the church in search of forgiveness for his unspeakable crimes.[10] Here, too, this tradition found adherents, the most notable being Eunapius and his transcriber Zosimus, who blackened Constantine's memory with scandalous accounts of his prodigality and maladministration and scurrilous reports of his family intrigues and love of luxury.[11] Nor was Constantine's reputation unblemished by Christians, for even the orthodox Jerome was quick to point out that he had been baptized an Arian heretic on his deathbed.[12] Thus did Constantine enter history with a reputation for a sort of ethical schizophrenia, all good to his advocates, who daintily sidestepped his foibles, all bad to his opponents, who trained their focus on his glaring faults.

By the fifth century, the history of this controversial figure had begun to meld with legend, at least in part as a way to iron out persistent contradictions. The earliest and most noteworthy among the legends – that of Helena and the True Cross aside – centers around the figure of Pope Sylvester, a contemporary of Constantine's, but one with whom he seems to have had little real contact.[13] The Sylvester legend portrayed the young Constantine as a bloodthirsty pagan who converted after allowing

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himself to be baptized by Sylvester in order to cure leprosy and eventually used the pope as his spiritual guide. This legend eventually gave rise to the eighth-century pseudojuridical document known as the Donations of Constantine, a pious forgery claiming that the emperor had turned over earthly and heavenly authority in Italy to Pope Sylvester and his successors. These ties forged (in both senses) between pope and potentate were variously exploited in subsequent centuries, as for example when the young German emperor Otto III installed his friend and teacher Gerbert of Aurillac as Pope Sylvester II in 999, at the latter's request, or when tensions between Pope Innocent IV and Frederick II in the thirteenth century were played out in the creation of frescoes of the Church of SS Quattro Coronati portraying a humbly genuflecting Constantine handing a tiara to a severe-looking Pope Sylvester (Fig. 38).[14] Only as late as 1440 was the Donations document decisively proven to be a forgery by Lorenzo Valla. By then, however, Constantine had already been cemented by the legends into his historical niche like some icon of the Christian prince locked in a love-hate wrestling match with the church over world rule.

Constantine thus entered the Enlightenment with plenty of baggage, baggage he would not shed any time soon, for modern historiography has been no less multivalent in its interpretations of and ultimately its uses of Constantine. The modern literature is staggering and cannot be done justice here. A glance across its surface is, nevertheless, revealing. In his breathtaking *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), E. Gibbon presented a characteristically insightful interpretation of Constantine that combined his good and bad qualities into a dynamic portrait. Convinced of his divine right to rule, Gibbon's Constantine exploited the advantages of Christianity – its monotheism, its revelatory theology, its teleological cosmology, and its preexisting organization – to secure his claim to exclusive power. Once he had obtained this, however, he became personally convinced of the mythic narrative he had invented for himself:

> His vanity was gratified by the flattering assurance that he had been chosen by heaven to reign over the earth; success had justified his divine title to the throne, and that title was founded on the truth of Christian revelation. As real virtue is sometimes excited by undeserved applause, the specious piety of Constantine, if at first it was only specious, might gradually, by the influence of praise, of habit, and of example, be matured into serious faith and fervent devotion.[15]

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Gibbon's Constantine is thus a victim of his own success, trapped in a fantasy of divine grandeur that was fed by his undeniable achievements. More pointedly, because in Gibbon's eyes the rise of Christianity spelled the fall of the Roman empire, his Constantine also becomes a tragic standard-bearer for the empire's demise.

The Swiss polymath J. Burckhardt, whose monograph *The Age of Constantine the Great* (first published in 1853) represents the first attempt to describe an "Age of Constantine," was less convinced of the emperor's self-deception. For him, Constantine was a calculating politician who shrewdly employed all means necessary to secure and maintain power. As such, he never gave himself over to any party – Christians, pagans, soldiers, senators, bishops, bureaucrats – but always played all sides against each other:

> In a genius driven without surcease by ambition and lust for power there can be no question of religiosity; such a man is essentially unreligious, even if he pictures himself standing in the midst of a churchly community. Holiness he understands only as a reminiscence or as a superstitious vagary. . . . He thinks that he will be at peace when he has achieved this or the other goal, whatever it may be that is wanting to make his possessions complete. But in the meantime all of his energies, spiritual as well as physical, are devoted to the great goal of dominion, and if he ever pauses to think of his convictions, he finds they are pure fatalism.[16]

Burckhardt's Constantine was thus a political impresario who feigned conversion and studiously avoided sincerity in his relentless drive for *Macht*. Nor was he alone in this assessment. Burckhardt's realist *tendance* found its culmination in the approach taken by a Belgian scholar of Constantine, H. Grégoire. Writing in the 1930s, Grégoire became a harsh critic of the authenticity of Eusebius's *Life* and saw Constantine's vision and conversion as a postmortem rewriting of events by his postulated pseudo-Eusebius. For him, Constantine remained a soldier emperor and political player whose interest in Christianity grew only after he witnessed the political usefulness of Christian religion as employed by his rival Licinius.[17] Burckhardt's opportunistic Constantine thus became Grégoire's exploitative Constantine.

This picture of the calculating pragmatist naturally provoked a reaction of its own, a reaction that came primarily in two flavors. The milder of these is well represented by the simple, even naive Constantine

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presented by the German O. Seeck in his monumental *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt* (1920–3). For Seeck, Constantine was very much a product of his world, a world rife with superstition and religious mysticism. His Constantine stood out in only one respect:

> What distinguished the character of this remarkable man was, above all, his deeply rooted feeling of duty and his religious sentiment that naturally bore the colors of its time and of his lowly social position, but was no less honest and pious for all that. Like most great military heroes, Constantine believed blindly in his good fortune. But like most all people of his era, who were ruled in one form or another by their fear of the divine, his sense of fortune was clothed in religious garb. After groping his way along and wavering considerably, he developed the conviction that he was the chosen instrument of the highest God, called to eliminate his enemies and to spread his kingdom on earth.[18]

Seeck's Constantine was thus an uncultured but generally sincere war hero whose faith in his own good fortune came to be translated into faith in his role as God's divine agent on earth. This Constantine's enigmas and contradictions were less a product of ingenious calculation than humble inconsistency. A not dissimilar Constantine appears in the Frenchman A. Piganiol's *L'empereur Constantin* (1932). For Piganiol, Constantine was neither a religious mystic nor an exploitative egotist; instead he was a sincere and simple man who sought truth and justice in religion and government but ultimately failed to achieve them. Though he was wise enough to have seen the value of Christian monotheism to the project of empire, he polluted his innate sense of equity with uncontrolled rage and surrendered too much of his power to the bishops he so labored to please. The result was a failed experiment in caesaropapism that, for all its good intentions, proved detrimental to the empire.[19] Less condemnatory were the related portraits by A. H. M. Jones and R. MacMullen, both of whom see in Constantine a less visionary and dynamic figure but more of what MacMullen calls "an impulsive, not overly subtle man, inclined to make decisions on inadequate grounds."[20] Thus was the masterfully conniving Constantine deflated, losing first his acumen to religious fanaticism, then even his standing as a religious icon.

The more assertive response to Burckhardt's realism came, however, with the reintroduction of Constantine the committed Christian. This approach was already heralded by N. Baynes's influential lecture

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cum monograph *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (1929), which argued for a Constantine who converted with some reluctance but soon became a committed Christian whose guiding principle was the establishment of unity among the members of the Church. What seems, then, like contradiction or wavering is in fact evidence of an effort to attract new adherents and absorb schismatics under the banner of a single *ecclesia*.[21] An even stronger representative of this school was the Hungarian A. Alföldi. He argued in *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (1948) that the best evidence for the genuineness and robustness of Constantine's conversion is the concerted retrenchment of a "pagan reaction" to him and his policies.[22] In the past two decades, most of the case for the rise of a pagan reaction – under Constantine or any emperor – has been discredited, but the image of Constantine the *Christianissimus imperator* has remained, indeed grown stronger.

The most developed and convincing defense of the Christian Constantine is to be found in the comprehensive and authoritative *Constantine and Eusebius* (1981) by T. D. Barnes:

> Constantine . . . was neither a saint nor a tyrant. He was more humane than some of his immediate predecessors, but still capable of ruthlessness and prone to irrational anger. As an administrator, he was more concerned to preserve and modify the imperial system which he inherited than to change it radically – except in one sphere. From the days of his youth Constantine had probably been sympathetic to Christianity, and in 312 he experienced a religious conversion which profoundly affected his conception of himself. After 312 Constantine considered that his main duty as emperor was to inculcate virtue in his subjects and to persuade them to worship God. Constantine's character is not wholly enigmatic; with all his faults and despite an intense ambition for personal power, he nevertheless believed sincerely that God had given him a special mission to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity.[23]

Barnes's Constantine is not nearly so radical as that of his forebears. Very much human and with all the attendant limitations, this Constantine nevertheless experienced a radical conversion, which he then actualized into a personal crusade to convert his empire. For Barnes, Constantine was a Christian sympathizer from the beginning and an unwavering proponent of Christianity from his conversion in 312 onward. The

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argument has strong merits, though at times it has been put forth without giving full weight to potentially contradictory evidence.[24] The argument for a firmly Christian Constantine reaches its zenith in T. G. Elliott's *The Christianity of Constantine the Great* (1996). Elliott's Constantine has no need for conversion, for he was already a committed Christian – as were his parents – from the start. Evidence of less-than-Christian behavior does not then convict him of a wavering faith, only of a faith imperfectly exercised. In Elliott the argument has come full circle. Like Grégoire, he discounts the stories of conversion as later falsifications. Yet his goal is no longer to prove Constantine a cynical opportunist but to show that Constantine was always a committed believer who, over time, developed the persona of the Christian prince.[25]

It should not go unremarked that the colorful Constantine we began examining – the warrior and statesman, the reformer of bureaucracy and economy, the builder of edifices and cities, the rebuilder of army and dynasty – has quickly become monochromatic as we turn to the history of legend and scholarship. No matter how hard the student of Constantine struggles, it is nearly impossible to avoid getting caught in the snares of the "Constantinian question," the question of conversion and faith.[26] This is precisely the predicament that I hope this volume goes some way toward avoiding. Important, indeed central, though the Constantinian question may be, it tends to overshadow the many facets of Constantine and his world that were unrelated or only tangentially related to Christianity and conversion. I hope with this text to move the debate outside this trap, without of course sidestepping it. The division of chapters should make it clear that religion, omnipresent though it is, is only one of the topics that will be illuminated in this book. Apart from this introduction and an overview of the sources, it consists of five sections, each with three essays. The first section is on politics and personalities, the second on religion and society, the third on law and economy, the fourth on art and literature, and the fifth on foreign policy. Most of the chapters have been assigned to younger scholars, and while some of the contributors are more seasoned and have previously written widely on Constantine, all, I hope, have been given a chance to express new ideas.

The volume begins with a survey of the sources by Bruno Bleckmann and then moves on with a chapter on the political situation before Constantine. In particular, Simon Corcoran examines the way that the comprehensive reforms undertaken by Diocletian and his fellow Tetrarchs set the stage for much of what Constantine would accomplish. I have written the second chapter, which surveys the political and

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