

AUGUSTUS AND CONSTANTINE

INTRODUCTION



JULIAN WAS ONE OF THE FEW ROMAN EMPERORS WHO HAD CAREFULLY studied Roman history. During the summer of 362 he arrived at Antioch to prepare for an invasion of the Persian empire. In December the city's residents enjoyed the Saturnalia, a lively festival celebrated with games, gambling, and an inversion of social standing as masters and slaves temporarily exchanged roles. Such a raucous festival might have reminded Julian that his own career had been a bit "Saturnalian" in its unforeseen trajectory. As a young man he had avidly studied classical culture, presumably with the hope of becoming a sophist or a philosopher. Instead, and quite unexpectedly, the bookworm had become an emperor. But now, rather than contemplating his own wry twist of fate, Julian decided to evaluate and rank his predecessors on the imperial throne. In the midst of a festival that celebrated role reversal the emperor returned to his original scholarly vocation by writing history.¹

¹ For the significance of Antioch in the later Roman empire, see Van Dam (forthcoming).

2 THE ROMAN REVOLUTION OF CONSTANTINE

One of those predecessors was Constantine. Julian's recollections of his uncle were scarred by a painfully personal resentment. After Constantine's death in May 337 troops had murdered several of his relatives, including a half-brother who was Julian's father. One tradition claimed that Constantine himself had already ordered these executions after discovering a plot; Julian would eventually blame Constantius, one of the three sons of Constantine who had succeeded as emperors. Still only a little boy, Julian had been spared and allowed to grow up under the implacable supervision of his cousin Constantius. When he finally did learn about this massacre of his relatives, he claimed that only the intervention of Hermes, a patron deity of eloquence, had rescued him from his despair.²

In his treatise about his predecessors Julian imagined a tribunal of gods to evaluate the emperors. In light of Julian's own love of Platonic philosophy it is no surprise that they agreed that the best had been Marcus Aurelius, a paradigmatic example of a philosopher-king. Constantine had had no chance in this competition. When the judges had invited him to argue his case, Constantine proudly noted his military victories over rival emperors and barbarians. But before this heavenly court the satyr Silenus snidely dismissed these accomplishments as "flowerbeds of Adonis," mere passing fancies that blossomed briefly and then wilted. In his estimation Constantine had been so devoted to the pursuit of pleasure that he might have been a chef or a hairdresser.³

Writing historical satire about his predecessors could reinforce Julian's smugness about his own future prospects. In the previous year the death of Constantius had averted a civil war and left Julian as the sole emperor. Constantine had reigned as emperor for over thirty years, and then Constantius for another twenty-four. Still only in his early thirties, Julian might have anticipated an even longer reign for himself. If he were successful in his Persian expedition, if he were able to revive cities

² Plot: Philostorgius, *HE* 2.16, with Chapter 3, for the relationship between Constantine and his half-brothers. Despair and Hermes: Julian, *Orat.* 7.230A-231B.

³ Julian, *Caesares* 328D-329D, Constantine and Silenus, 335A-B, chef, hairdresser, with Bidez (1930) 300, and Bowersock (1978) 101, both dating this treatise to December 362, and Gleason (1986), on the celebration of the Saturnalia. For Julian's interest in imitating Marcus Aurelius, see Eutropius, *Breviarium* 10.16.3.

and their pagan cults, then he could prove Silenus to be correct, as his accomplishments reduced the lengthy reigns of his uncle and his cousin to insignificance. He could still be the most consequential emperor of the Constantinian dynasty.

Instead, as the festivities of the Saturnalia might have portended, both Julian's version of Roman history and his vision of the future were to be turned upside-down. Six months later he was dead, killed in battle. He had also been wrong in his satirical evaluation of Constantine. As the last, fleeting pagan emperor Julian now seems to have been the oddity. Constantine meanwhile has become one of the towering figures of both Roman and early Christian history.

The most important book about Roman history from the twentieth century is Ronald Syme's *The Roman Revolution*. In this book Syme analyzed the transition from the Republic to the rule of emperors by focusing on the career of Augustus, the first emperor. His narrative of Augustus' rise to prominence and the details of his reign was seductively compelling, in part because he proposed a distinctive political interpretation of the basis of the first emperor's power. Augustus' contemporaries had already been arguing over whether the emperor had truly restored the old Republic, as he himself claimed, or whether he had instituted a monarchy in disguise. Syme cut through this conundrum over the legal and institutional framework by dismissing the Roman constitution as "a screen and a sham." He also downplayed the importance of Augustus' own ambitions in favor of highlighting "the identity of the agents and ministers of power." "Emphasis is laid . . . not upon the personality and acts of Augustus, but upon his adherents and partisans." If relationships and alliances were more important than institutions or personalities, then Syme's task was to plot the replacement of one group of ruling elites by another. His Augustus hence presided both as a great patron at the center of many networks of personal obligations and as the representative of the interests of new factions. "There is always an oligarchy somewhere, open or concealed."⁴

⁴ Argument over Augustus' motives: Tacitus, *Annales* 1.9–10. Syme (1939) vii, personality, 15, screen and sham, 325, identity, 346, oligarchy. In a supplementary study

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88209-5 - The Roman Revolution of Constantine

Raymond Van Dam

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 THE ROMAN REVOLUTION OF CONSTANTINE

Syme's vision has had a powerful afterlife. Not only did it influence subsequent accounts of Augustus and the origins of the Roman principate; it also defined a distinctive style of interpreting Roman history. Syme's emphasis on networks legitimated the importance of prosopography, the study of the career patterns of notables and their personal connections, as a useful tool of historical analysis. His emphasis on oligarchy reasserted the significance of the history of elites that had long been at the heart of so many studies of the ancient world: "Roman history, Republican or Imperial, is the history of the governing class." His emphasis on political scheming provided a license to hunt for the unspoken intrigues and hidden motives in all writings of the era and essentially transformed contemporary literary masterpieces into patriotic manifestoes orchestrated from the center by Augustus and his cronies through "the systematic exploitation of literature on the grand scale." Syme approached Augustus' reign from both ends through his reverence for the interpretive perspectives of Sallust, a pre-Augustan historian who had lamented a decline in values already during the late Republic, and Tacitus, a post-Augustan historian who would mock the pretenses of the first emperors. By inheriting their moralizing nostalgia for a lost Republic, Syme adopted a deprecatory perspective on Augustus himself as "a chill and mature terrorist." His account of Augustus was hence political history at its grandest and most critical, simultaneously a scathing critique and a begrudging panegyric that tempered its distaste for the emperor's ruthlessness at suppressing personal liberty with admiration for his success at imposing stable government.⁵

In subsequent centuries Augustus remained an intriguing figure. Already in the later second century bishop Melito of Sardis argued that the coincidence of Augustus' rule and the birth of Jesus was a conclusive

of the Augustan regime Syme reiterated his theory about oligarchy and his dislike of biography: see Syme (1986) 13, "Oligarchy is imposed as the guiding theme, the link from age to age whatever be the form and name of government," 14, "biographies of emperors are a menace and an impediment to the understanding of history in its structure and processes."

⁵ Syme (1939) 7, governing class, 19, terrorist, 460, exploitation. For an excellent assessment of Syme's use of prosopography, see Galsterer (1990).

demonstration of the providential intersection of Roman empire and Christian church: “our teaching flourished along with an empire that had a splendid foundation.” Emperors too were aware of Augustus’ lingering reputation. Constantine issued an edict that repealed the penalties on celibacy in Augustus’ “ancient law.” In his evaluation of his predecessors Julian allowed Augustus to speak before the tribunal of gods about his achievements, which included his success at ending the civil wars, his respect for philosophy, and his firm administration of the state. When the gods subsequently questioned Augustus, their only criticism was to dismiss him as a “model maker,” because he had fabricated some new gods, among them Julius Caesar, his father by adoption. They also complained that he was a “chameleon” and a “monster of many shapes.” Even Julian’s gods could not quite define Augustus’ many facets.⁶

Since Augustus was still a significant presence during the fourth century, it is perhaps predictable that modern scholarship on late Roman emperors and aristocrats, with regard to interests, approach, and tone, has often followed the lead of Augustus’ most powerful modern interpreter. Syme’s influence is directly apparent in analyses of Constantine, in three linked perspectives. One is an emphasis on a close reading of the ancient evidence, especially the literary texts, as sources whose contents and intentions require repeated scrutiny. Since some ancient documents were so flattering of Constantine and others so disparaging, source criticism (including prosopography) will always be a mainstay of scholarship on Constantine. A second important influence is a focus on the emperor’s politics. This approach tries to resolve Constantine’s sometimes bewildering inconsistencies about his attitudes toward Christianity and paganism in terms of his political needs and strategies. It also highlights the influence of his supporters, who soon of course included bishops. In some cases these bishops would become so powerful that they were seemingly able to compel Constantine to accept their own preferred policy of intolerance toward heterodox churchmen.

⁶ Teaching: Eusebius, *HE* 4.26.7–8, citing a lost treatise by Melito. Celibacy: *CTh* 8.16.1, issued in 320. Julian, *Caesares* 309A–C, chameleon, monster, 325C–327A, Augustus’ speech, 332C–333A, critique.

6 THE ROMAN REVOLUTION OF CONSTANTINE

Even though one bishop, Eusebius of Caesarea, carefully defined the emperor as “a loyal son of the church,” the supposed underlying reality is that more aggressive bishops like Athanasius of Alexandria and Eusebius of Nicomedia had simply overwhelmed this “artful negotiator, patient consensus builder, and ardent judicial reformer.” A final important influence concerns the sincerity of Constantine’s commitment to Christianity. Not only was Constantine sometimes fickle in his attitudes toward Christianity; he also seemingly used Christian policies in order to advance a political agenda. The question of the sincerity of Constantine’s religious commitment is hence an analogue of the question about the sincerity of Augustus’ political claim to have restored the Republic. Because each pronouncement can readily seem disingenuous, Constantine is as vulnerable as Augustus to Syme’s sort of dark, skeptical style of historical interpretation.⁷

⁷ Source criticism can even include an attempt to explain a vision of Constantine as the witnessing of a solar halo: see Weiss (2003). Quotations about Constantine’s politics from Drake (2000) 357. For the modern emphasis on Constantine’s motives, see Brandt (1998) 32, “die übergeordnete Frage, ob Konstantins Begünstigung des Christentums auf politisches Kalkül oder auf religiöse berzeugung zurückzuführen ist.” But for criticism of the emphasis on Constantine’s personal beliefs, see Dagrón (2003) 128: “we have to stop . . . speculating about the sincerity or the depth of his faith.”

Scholarship on the prosopography of late antiquity has flourished with a proliferation of specialist studies and large handbooks such as *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, *Consuls of the Later Roman Empire*, and *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire*; for appreciative overviews of the impact of prosopography, see Eck (2003), Martindale (2003), and Mathisen (2003). For the reign of Constantine prosopographical studies have typically focused on the religious preferences of the top magistrates, such as consuls, praetorian prefects, and prefects of Rome. The first Christian consul served in 317, and about a dozen more during the 320s and 330s; praetorian prefects and prefects of Rome who were certainly or probably Christians also served during the 320s and 330s: see von Haehling (1978) 513–21, and Barnes (1994a), revising Barnes (1989a). But this emphasis on the top Christian magistrates can be misleading about the nature of the Constantinian revolution, and in particular about the continuity (or discontinuity) from the Tetrarchs to Constantine. Almost all top magistrates (excepting perhaps emperors’ relatives) would have held lesser offices, such as provincial governorships,

Another approach to Augustus has focused on his public representation. From the beginning of his rise to sole rule, he and his advisors were experimenting with various public identities, as communicated in various media. As a result, how the emperor presented himself or how others represented him far overshadowed his actions and convictions. The other great modern book about Augustus' reign is Paul Zanker's *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. His approach was both a complement to Syme's perspective and an antidote. Because Syme had approached Augustus' reign with the assumption that the emperor and his cronies used literature and art to conceal their power, he was always looking for the true underlying reality of imperial rule. In contrast, Zanker assumed that Augustus and his supporters used art and iconography in order to reveal the emperor and to project favorable images. Syme presented Augustus as a manipulative dissimulator, and Zanker as an equally manipulative self-promoter. While Syme's Augustus seemed to live in the shadows, Zanker's Augustus was always on public display.

Zanker emphasized the invention of "a whole new method of visual communication" that included a "completely new pictorial vocabulary." At first Augustus and his rivals used images based on the portraits of

perhaps two decades or so before their consulships or prefectures. For instance, Amnius Anicius Julianus, consul in 322 and prefect of Rome from 326 to 329, had been proconsul of Africa in the early fourth century: see *PLRE* 1:473–74, "Amnius Anicius Iulianus 23." Sextus Anicius Paulinus, consul in 325 and prefect of Rome from 331 to 333, had likewise been proconsul of Africa: see *PLRE* 1:679–80, "Sextus Anicius Paulinus 15." Because these men might well have held these lesser imperial offices under Diocletian and the Tetrarchs, the question facing modern scholars is whether this continuity of magistrates was matched by continuity of religious preferences. One possibility is that these men had held lesser offices under pagan emperors despite their Christianity; note Eusebius, *HE* 8.1.2, for a claim that Christians were serving as provincial magistrates under the Tetrarchs. Another possibility is that these men had previously been pagans but converted to Christianity before serving as high magistrates under Constantine. Eusebius noted that of Constantine's magistrates, although "some preferred paganism," most had acknowledged "the saving faith." But he also complained that some men only pretended to accept Christianity, perhaps to improve their job prospects: see Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 2.44, magistrates, 4.54.2–3, pretense.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88209-5 - The Roman Revolution of Constantine

Raymond Van Dam

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 THE ROMAN REVOLUTION OF CONSTANTINE

Hellenistic rulers; then he adopted a new harmonious style of portraiture “inspired by the Classical canon.” He also gradually shifted away from overt self-glorification to advertisement of his religious piety and political traditionalism. In this new era he restored temples, dedicated offerings, and enhanced priesthoods; he also promoted the standing of senators and restored the functioning of old Republican offices and institutions. The basis of Augustus’ prestige and authority was now a repeated public display of modesty and deference.⁸

Zanker furthermore stressed Augustus’ self-conscious use of Roman legends and the early history of the Republic in his public imagery. The centerpiece of Augustus’ new forum at Rome was a temple dedicated to Mars the Avenger that celebrated his ultimate victory in the civil wars. The decoration of the temple also emphasized how Augustus’ rule was a natural outcome of Roman history. Inside the temple were statues of Mars, the father of Romulus according to legend, and Venus, an ancestor of Aeneas according to myth. Romulus and Aeneas were central figures in legends about the foundation of Rome. Alongside those statues of Mars and Venus was another of Julius Caesar, Augustus’ father by adoption. By implication Augustus was the new founder of Rome, the proper successor to both Aeneas and Romulus. In one of the colonnades that flanked the courtyard in front of the temple Augustus erected a row of statues of the worthiest ancestors in his Julian family. In the opposite colonnade he set up a corresponding row of statues of eminent leaders and generals from the Republic. The juxtaposition of these statues clearly highlighted the importance of Augustus’ dynasty in Roman history. “These portrait galleries thus offered a revised version of history suited to the purposes of Augustan Rome.” By the end of Augustus’ reign the iconography of this “new official mythology” had become “a single integrated system of images”: “the message was comprehensible to all.” People hence used this visual language throughout the empire, in Italy to decorate their houses with depictions of Augustan ideals, in the provinces to embellish temples in honor of the emperor. In Zanker’s perspective, for Romans “an image was more powerful than

⁸ Zanker (1988) 3, visual communication, 98, canon, 101, pictorial vocabulary.

the reality.” Augustus had invented himself as a Republican emperor, and many Romans had accepted his self-representation. In his appropriation of traditional imagery Augustus had become a true champion of the Republic.⁹

One imposing requirement for interpreting the past is to forget the future. In hindsight the actual course of events may seem to have been a natural, almost inevitable, outcome: Roman Republic becomes empire, and Roman empire becomes Christian empire. But this sort of retrospective teleology thoroughly obscures the underlying contingency of past events and the fundamental uncertainty of our modern interpretations. Even as Augustus absorbed past traditions, his success seemed to challenge the expectations of those same traditions. A Republican emperor was a contradiction in terms, because centuries earlier the Republic had been founded as the opposite of monarchy. Panels of magistrates had replaced monarchy, the annual tenures of these magistrates had replaced the lifetime rule of a king, and the election of magistrates had replaced dynastic succession. Now, although Augustus and subsequent emperors carefully avoided calling themselves “kings,” their mere presence as sole rulers with lifetime tenure and a preference for dynastic succession was a denial of the essence of the Republic.

A Christian emperor was no less of a contradiction in terms. Before Constantine churchmen had not anticipated the possibility, and their

⁹ Zanker (1988) 114, comprehensible, 193, mythology, 211, portrait galleries, 237, integrated system, 238, image. The visual language of Constantine’s reign deserves a similar study. For his portraits, see L’Orange (1984), and Fittschen and Zanker (1985). For imperial buildings, see Mayer (2002), interpreting the monuments “aus dem ideologischen Diskurs zwischen dem Kaiser und der jeweiligen gesellschaftlichen Elite” (p. 5). For churches, see Klein (1999c): “So wie der Neubau und die Ausstattung der Heiligtümer im Erneuerungsprogramm des Augustus die wichtigsten und vornehmsten Aufgaben waren, so waren für Constantin die neuen Basiliken Zeugnisse offizieller Staatsarchitektur und dienten somit der Propaganda kaiserlicher Politik” (p. 212). Elsner (2000a) 177–78, stresses the importance of investigating Constantinian building projects and images “as aspects of a concerted and developing visual strategy over three decades.”

10 THE ROMAN REVOLUTION OF CONSTANTINE

hope of a Christian ruler had instead highlighted the return of Jesus Christ “at the end of time.” As they were once thought to have explained to an emperor, Christ’s “heavenly and angelic empire” would succeed the Roman empire, not replace it. A generation after Constantine, his nephew Julian was still trying to analyze the rise of Christianity. In his perspective, the success of Christians would have surprised both Jesus and the apostle Paul, “both of whom never had even the hope that you [Christians] would someday attain such power.” Even Jesus had not foreseen a Christian emperor. As a result, the reign of Constantine had been so unexpected that, like the reign of Augustus as a Republican emperor, it introduced “a whole new way of thinking” about emperors. The greatest challenge that the reign of Constantine posed, for both Christians and non-Christians, was simply imagining a Christian emperor.¹⁰

Modern scholarship has typically insisted that Constantine’s involvement with Christianity was the defining characteristic of his long reign. Already in their titles many books advertise this association between emperor and Christianity: *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*; *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*; *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*; *Constantine and Eusebius*; *The Christianity of Constantine the Great*; *Constantine and the Bishops*; *Constantine and the Christian Empire*. In these books the usual issues about Christianity take priority: the timing and exact nature of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, the inconsistency between his patronage for Christianity and his continuing support for some aspects of pagan cults, his involvement in the controversies over Donatist Christianity and Arian Christianity, his role at the council of Nicaea, his supportive relationship with anti-Nicene churchmen like Eusebius of Caesarea, and the tension between his opposition to the use of coercive force and the intrigues of bishops. Even studies that examine ostensibly non-religious aspects of Constantine’s reign, such as his legislation about marriage and families,

¹⁰ Explanation to Domitian: Eusebius, *HE* 3.20.4, alluding to Jesus’ saying in John 18:36: “My kingdom is not of this world.” Jesus and Paul: Julian, *Contra Galilaeos* 1.206A. Quotation about thinking from Zanker (1988) 263.