

FOREWORD: VISIONS OF CONSTANTINE

CHAPTER ONE



HISTORY REMEMBERS CONSTANTINE'S VICTORY AT THE battle of the Milvian Bridge. In 312 Constantine invaded Italy. Since his accession in 306 at York, the emperor had been residing primarily at Trier and campaigning on the Rhine frontier. He commanded a large army, most of it stationed in northern Gaul and Britain. For his invasion he took only a modest expeditionary force. In Italy the emperor Maxentius commanded another substantial army. To guard against an attack from the east by Licinius, yet another rival emperor who controlled the Balkans, Maxentius had moved troops to garrison Verona at the foot of the eastern Alps in northern Italy. Constantine and his army meanwhile crossed the western Alps at Susa and captured Turin and Milan as they advanced down the Po River valley. After a hard siege, they also captured Verona.¹

Constantine and his army next marched south on the Flaminian Way through central Italy toward Rome. Although in initial skirmishes Maxentius' troops prevailed, he himself remained inside the

¹ For initial orientation to the increasingly voluminous modern bibliography on Constantine, see Van Dam (2007).

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capital's massive wall. Constantine's soldiers then approached the Milvian Bridge, which carried the Flaminian Way across the Tiber River about two miles north of the wall. Maxentius' army crossed to meet them, and Maxentius himself joined his troops a bit later. At that point, or perhaps already earlier in anticipation of the invasion, his soldiers cut the permanent bridge and replaced it with a temporary pontoon bridge. But after they were routed in battle, their attempt to isolate the city turned into a bottleneck. While retreating across the makeshift bridge, Maxentius slipped and drowned in the Tiber. On the next day the victorious Constantine entered Rome.²

Maxentius had been emperor for exactly six years. He had deliberately chosen to fight on the anniversary of his accession, hoping to add a military victory to future celebrations. Instead, after his humiliating defeat he was dismissed as just another disgraced usurper. Constantine meanwhile went on to a long glorious reign, and after his death he was even proclaimed a divinity. In subsequent years people in Rome celebrated the outcome of the battle on back-to-back holidays as the replacement of a defiled emperor by a deified emperor. October 28, the day of the battle, would become a commemoration of "the expulsion of the tyrant," and October 29, a commemoration of "the arrival of the divine [Constantine]."³

THE VISION

In the late third and early fourth century battles between rival emperors and usurpers were common. The emperor Diocletian had instituted the Tetrarchy, a consortium of four concurrent emperors, and considerably increased the overall number of soldiers to deal with increased threats

² The details recorded about this battle often conflict: see Kuhoff (1991), for an excellent overview; Nixon and Rodgers (1994) 319n.103, for a concise survey; and Chapters 3–6. Classical Latin authors typically referred to this bridge as *Pons Mulvius*: see Chapter 10. Some authors of late antiquity referred to it as *Pons Milvius*: e.g., Polemius Silvius, *Laterculus* 4, s.v. "Pontes VIII," ed. Mommsen (1892) 545. In modern Italian the bridge is the Ponte Milvio; hence Milvian Bridge in English.

³ Celebrations: *Fasti Furii Filocali*, October 28, "evictio tyranni," October 29, "advent(us) divi," ed. Degraffi (1963) 257, with the commentary on p. 527 identifying *divus* as Constantine.

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on the frontiers. Multiple emperors, large armies, and insecure frontiers were a recipe for repeated civil wars. Constantius defeated Carausius in northern Gaul and Allectus in Britain during the mid-290s. Diocletian defeated Domitius Domitianus and Aurelius Achilleus in Egypt during the later 290s. Maximian and his son Maxentius defeated Severus in Italy in 307. Maxentius defeated Domitius Alexander in North Africa in 309. Constantine defeated Maximian in southern Gaul in 310. Licinius defeated Maximinus in Thrace in 313. Constantine and Licinius fought an inconclusive war from 316 to 317. Constantine finally emerged as the sole emperor after defeating Licinius in Thrace and again in Bithynia in 324.⁴

In this litany of civil wars the battle of the Milvian Bridge was unremarkable. This was a conflict between sons of former emperors, who had both started out as usurpers and who had been hustling for legitimacy and recognition from other emperors ever since. Instead, already in antiquity the most celebrated feature of the battle would become Constantine's vision. The most important literary source for Constantine's reign is a biography written by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. His *Life of Constantine* included accounts of the emperor's vision of a cross in the sky and his subsequent dream in which Jesus Christ explained the symbol of the cross. As a result, according to *Life*, the emperor had a military standard constructed in the shape of a cross and decorated with a "christogram," the chi-rho symbol formed from the first two Greek letters of *Christ*. This military standard led him and his troops into battle against Maxentius. After his victory Constantine openly demonstrated his support for Christianity.

Modern historians have often interpreted the vision of Constantine as a transformational moment in the historical trajectories of the Roman empire and early Christianity. This vision seemingly confirmed the emperor's personal conversion to Christianity. It accelerated the conversion of Roman society throughout the empire. It initiated an era in which politics and Christianity were intertwined, for good or ill, and

⁴ See Bleckmann (2004), for the frequency of civil wars as a consequence of Tetrarchic emperors, and Humphries (2008a) 85–87, for Constantine as a usurper.

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in which Christianity became a key feature of Western Civilization, for good or ill. The battle of the Milvian Bridge, including Constantine's vision, has become a shorthand reference for momentous change in religion, society, and politics. In this perspective, "nothing counts for more than the year 312."⁵

Yet this revolutionary moment has also raised doubts among modern historians. Several aspects of the vision might seem suspect: the message, the messengers, and the medium. Some skeptics belittle the historical importance, either by claiming that pagan cults were already a spent force and the eventual success of Christianity did not require imperial patronage or by arguing that even after Constantine's reign, Christianity nevertheless long remained a small cult. Others shoot the messenger, whether Constantine or Eusebius. With regard to the emperor, one skeptical approach is to suggest that the vision was irrelevant because he was already a Christian, another that the vision was ineffective because he continued to patronize pagan cults afterward, and another that his advertisement of the vision was merely one more example of his relentless political opportunism. With regard to Eusebius, the typical skepticism concerns whether he misreported the vision, or even whether he fabricated the entire story. It is also possible to critique the medium by claiming that the appearance of the outline of a cross in the sky was merely a consequence of sunlight refracted through ice crystals high in the atmosphere to produce a solar halo. In this case hard natural science supposedly comes to the rescue of fuzzy social science. In modern historiography Constantine's vision is hence simultaneously an epochal moment and an irrelevant event, a deeply spiritual experience and a political gambit, a true divine revelation and a misunderstanding of a spectacular meteorological phenomenon.⁶

⁵ Personal conversion: Odahl (2004) 106, "At this moment, Constantine converted." Quotation about nothing from MacMullen (1984) 102. Girardet (2006a), concludes his critical overview of the "Constantinian Revolution" by suggesting that the emperor's new religious policies had global consequences: "ohne die Konstantinische Wende . . . hätte die Weltgeschichte einen anderen Verlauf genommen" (p. 155).

⁶ Opinions about Constantine's vision are legion. For the prior demise of pagan cults, see Burckhardt (1949) 215, proposing "the twilight of paganism" already before Constantine, as discussed by Leppin (2007); Demandt (2006), insists that Christianity would have expanded

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This uneasiness is a symptom of a deeper interpretive anxiety: somehow it seems inappropriate to attribute such a momentous historical impact to a vision. A vision of a cross in the sky seems to encourage evaluating the moment, and therefore all the subsequent historical consequences, as somehow spiritual and religious. A vision seems to reveal the intrusion of divine guidance into human affairs and to make Roman history appear to have been providential and even teleological all along. A vision complicates any attempt to offer a nonreligious evaluation, a more secular or perhaps a symbolic analysis, of the moment or of Constantine's reign.

As a result, one antidote for this discomfort is to shift the emphasis from the vision to a proclamation. A few months after the battle, early in 313, Constantine and his fellow emperor Licinius agreed on a joint accord that extended "to Christians and to everyone else the free power to follow whatever religion each person prefers." Such a generous statement of religious toleration seems so much more acceptable as a catalyst for the transformation of the Roman world, comparable to other progressive documents such as the Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence. Such a proclamation of universal pluralism seems to have been a preview of modernity, that is, our enlightened modernity, certainly preferable to a religious vision and its distasteful potential for theocracy and totalitarianism.⁷

MEMORIES, TRADITIONS, NARRATIVES

For historical analysis the availability of so much information and so many opinions is both an opportunity and an obstacle. Constantine has

even if Maxentius or Licinius had defeated Constantine. For Constantine as a Christian before 312, see Elliott (1987); for his continued toleration for pagan cults, Clauss (2006); for his limited impact, MacMullen (2009) 111, suggesting that still in 400 less than 7 percent of the population of Rome was Christian: "the evidence from Rome is not at odds with the evidence from cities anywhere else in the empire." For the importance of politics, see Drake (2000) 191: "it is better to situate Constantine's religious development in the context of contemporary power politics and political thought." For the solar halo, see Jones (1972) 99–100 (first published in 1949).

⁷ Joint letter (often, but misleadingly, referred to as the Edict of Milan) quoted in Eusebius, *HE* 10.5.1–14, and Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 48.2–12, with Drake (2000) 194: "a landmark in the evolution of Western thought."

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been guaranteed a central place in all discussions of early Christianity and the later Roman empire in particular and of religion and politics in general, from the medieval period to today. As the first Christian emperor Constantine promptly became a standard of comparison for the evaluation of subsequent medieval and Byzantine Christian rulers. Even a pagan orator used Constantine as an exemplar. In 364 Themistius suggested that the emperor Jovian's policy of religious toleration had made him "fully Constantine." Constantine was also a constant topic of analysis for ancient historians, both Christian and pagan. Eusebius ended his *Ecclesiastical History* with Constantine's victory over Licinius; subsequent church historians started their narratives with the vision of the cross or the theological controversies leading up to the normative definition of orthodoxy at the council of Nicaea. Moments in Constantine's reign would become important pivot points of ecclesiastical history and Roman history.⁸

The historians and churchmen of late antiquity also discussed the battle at the Milvian Bridge soon afterward. Within a year or two Eusebius published an initial narrative of the battle in his *Ecclesiastical History*; decades later, after Constantine's death in 337, he repeated that earlier narrative in his *Life of Constantine* even as he added accounts of the vision and the dream. An orator at Trier in 313 and another at Rome in 321 described the invasion and the battle in their panegyrics. The Christian rhetorician Lactantius discussed the activities of both Constantine and Maxentius in an apologetic pamphlet composed within two or three years of the battle. One of the sculpted relief panels on the arch of Constantine at Rome, dedicated in 315, recalled the battle of the Milvian Bridge by depicting combat at the edge of a river. Within a decade the battle was uncommonly widely referenced and described.

Modern scholars often treat these ancient accounts of the battle as documentation, as evidence, as testimony, as "sources" whose information can be filtered and blended into a basic factual framework. Too often, however, this higher criticism has led to oddly speculative and irrelevant outcomes, in particular by disparaging the vision as "a purely

⁸ Jovian: Themistius, *Orat.* 5.70d.

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psychological event” or “the moment of psychological conviction.” Freud would be proud. Even in our post-Freudian age a psychological crisis is apparently easier to comprehend than a religious conversion. In the process of evaluation, however, this higher criticism has frequently overlooked the implications of more fundamental questions about the transmission and recording of the accounts. What were the sources for these “sources”? None of these authors was a participant in the battle or even an eyewitness. Where did the authors acquire their information, and how did their personal agendas affect their narratives?⁹

The starting point is in fact Constantine’s vision and dream. Constantine was the only participant in the battle whose personal recollections survive, and in *Life* Eusebius pointedly emphasized that he had heard the accounts of the vision and the dream from the emperor himself. The accounts in *Life* were Constantine’s stories as subsequently recorded by Eusebius. The timing of the emperor’s storytelling is hence vital. Eusebius never met Constantine until the summer of 325 at the council of Nicaea. One possibility is that Constantine first told the stories about his vision and his dream to Eusebius and other churchmen during a banquet celebrating the twentieth anniversary of his accession that he hosted immediately after the council. Another possibility is that he entertained Eusebius and other guests with his stories at Constantinople in 336 during a banquet celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of his accession. In the trajectory of accounts of the battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine was a comparatively late contributor. The emperor never told his stories about his vision and his dream, or at least these particular versions of his stories, until long after the battle.

By then Constantine had already heard and seen many other accounts of the battle. He had listened to the panegyric at Trier in 313; he had perhaps heard about the account of Lactantius, who was teaching his son at Trier; and he had attended the dedication of the arch at Rome in 315. Before he told his own stories, he may also have already heard Eusebius’ account of his victory at Rome. In 325 Eusebius had “taken

⁹ Quotation about event from MacMullen (1969) 78, about moment from Barnes (1981) 43. For conversion as a process rather than a moment, see Van Dam (2003c).

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the stage at the council of God's ministers" to praise the "gloriously victorious" emperor with "hymns for the twentieth anniversary" of his reign. In 336 he had delivered "garlands of words in honor of the thirtieth anniversary." In this panegyric at Constantinople he had repeated some of his earlier observations on the emperor's actions at Rome after the battle. Perhaps Constantine responded to one of Eusebius' panegyrics by telling his own stories during the anniversary banquet afterward.¹⁰

Constantine's stories were hence reactions, not catalysts. All of the early accounts of the battle, whether a panegyric, an apologetic pamphlet, a historical narrative, or a decorated monument, had been typically written, orated, or sculpted independently of the emperor's opinions. These accounts had been aimed at Constantine, as recommendations of how he ought to behave as ruler, and were not derived from him. As a result, modern scholars should not string the accounts together as a synopsis of Constantine's views over the years. Instead, the relationship was reversed. These accounts were influences on Constantine. By the time the emperor told his stories, he had been thinking for years not just about the battle but also about subsequent accounts of the battle.¹¹

This approach that emphasizes the influences on the stories of the battle, the vision, and the dream draws on important developments in historical and literary studies. One is the significance of individual and

¹⁰ Stage, garlands: see Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.1.1, with Chapter 7, for the repetition of passages from Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* in his panegyric of 336. Perhaps it is possible to speculate that Constantine had read sections of Eusebius' *History*. Constantine once complimented Eusebius for his "love of learning," and he had certainly read Eusebius' treatise about Easter: see his letter quoted in Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 4.35.2.

¹¹ For the mix-up in perspective, note the questionable characterizations of Barnes (1981) 47: "The speech of 313 reveals how Constantine wished the war of 312 to be remembered"; Kuhoff (1991) 138, referring to the reliefs and inscription on the arch at Rome as "die Zeugnisse der konstantinischen Selbstdarstellung"; and Heck (1972) 165, concluding from the invocations to his *Institutes* "daß Lactanz hier constantinische Theologie und Geschichtsauffassung, überhaupt sein Selbstverständnis als christlichen Herrscher reproduziert." For discussions of how these authors and sculptors instead imagined Constantine, see Chapter 6.

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community memories in promoting and transmitting versions of earlier events. The past did not generate fixed memories; instead, memories constructed a past. The memories became collective when communities accepted particular versions of what was memorable by designing monuments and celebrating commemorative festivals. Because those memorials and rituals might evoke a range of meanings, both at a specific moment and even more so over time, social memories were powerful political and religious forces. Such “reworking of the past is most pronounced in periods of dramatic social transformation.” In the early empire a revived interest in classical Greek culture had allowed provincials in the East to negotiate the disruptive imposition of Roman rule. In the later empire the unexpected appearance of an emperor who openly supported Christianity was equally disruptive. Memories of Constantine’s victory, as well as of his vision and dream, helped both Christians and non-Christians cope with the uncertainty and the dislocation. As an event, the battle of the Milvian Bridge was behind them in the past; as a memory, however, it was always with them in the present.¹²

A second development is the formation and transmission of oral traditions. The study of oral traditions is closely allied with memory studies but usually focuses more on the formatting of memories through oral transmission. Oral traditions tend to be episodic, self-contained stories that are typically told in no particular chronological sequence and that often include no specific chronological markers. Because such timeless stories blur the boundaries between narrators and characters, they are highly unstable from one telling to the next. Even oral accounts by eyewitnesses or participants are susceptible to the distortions of selectivity and emotional involvement. Because oral

¹² Quotation about reworking from Alcock (2001) 325, in an excellent discussion of Greek archaism under Roman rule. For the rewriting of the past as a consequence of the rise of Christianity, see Van Dam (2003b) 15–45, on the theological controversy over Eunomius, 82–97, on Christianity in Cappadocia; and Ferguson (2005) 121, on Rufinus’ adherence to “the Eusebian pattern of writing history as an apologetic extension of loyalty to a theological tradition.”

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accounts are public performances, they furthermore respond directly to the needs and interests of the audiences. In turn, members of those audiences can tell their own versions of those accounts to bond with yet other communities of listeners. Some oral stories might, sooner or later, be included in narratives made permanent by writing or by sculpting. In contrast, by constantly responding to changes in communities, pure oral traditions remain flexible enough to be always relevant and contemporary. Constantine fought one battle at the Milvian Bridge; then he and others told many, many stories about it.¹³

A final development is an increased focus on the rhetorical aspects of written narratives. Narratology, the study of literary narratives, has absorbed many of the insights of structuralist analyses of the underlying grammar of myths, and literary scholars are by now accustomed to uncovering the self-conscious enigmas and meanings inherent in the plots of ancient narratives. In constructing their accounts, ancient authors elaborated or condensed similar episodes, they variously claimed to be accurately re-creating actions or merely representing them, they sometimes seemed to know more and sometimes less than their characters, and they perhaps even elided the past time of their characters and their own present time. For modern historians the lessons of narratology challenge the positivist notion of a direct correspondence between the plots of ancient narratives and the sequence of actual events, or between the literary characters and the historical actors. In the ancient narratives about the battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine hence performed as an ensemble of one. For his own stories he was both an actor in the past and the narrator in the present. For contemporary panegyrics and a monumental frieze he was both an actor in the past and a listener or a viewer in the present. But for later literary accounts he was only an actor in the past, on his way to

¹³ For an overview of orality in Roman society, see Thomas (1992) 158–70. The study of oral culture in late antiquity has often highlighted preachers and preaching; see Van Dam (2003b) 101–50, for sermons in Cappadocia, and Maxwell (2006), for John Chrysostom at Antioch. Consideration of oral traditions is especially helpful for understanding stories about saints; see Van Dam (1982) 280–97, (1988).