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AFTER CONSTANTINE

STORIES FROM THE LATE ANTIQUE AND
EARLY BYZANTINE ERA



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EARLY BYZANTINE ERA

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[1] Στα λόγια μου ας είναι
μάρτυρες όλοι οι παντοτινοί.

[2] Ότι λευκός ήταν ο κόσμος
ώσπου ν' ακουστεί η φωνή του
βασιλιά Τελεστή
όταν διέταξε: ας γίνει!

[3] Και όλα τα ουράνια
σώματα ενώθηκαν και
σχημάτισαν μεγάλη σφραγίδα
όμοια με σφυρί και άστραψε ο
ουρανός και στροβιλίστηκαν
τα νέφη.

[...]

[7] Κι έπαψε να 'ναι διάφανος
ο κόσμος και φανερώθηκε.

[8] Και είδε ο Ταξιδευτής και
θαύμασε και θέλησε ν' αφήσει
και να πάρει.

[...]

[11] Και για πάντα συνέχισε
την θεϊκή του πορεία, νέα
μονοπάτια ανοίγοντας.

FROM JUPITER TO JESUS?

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE IMPERIAL CULT OF CONSTANTINE THE GREAT¹

MARK BEUMER²

Abstract

The present article discusses the so called “conversion” of Constantine the Great, by using numismatics in relation to personal depictions of Constantine. It will be argued that Constantine never converted until his deathbed and that he favoured the Christians from a political standpoint to obtain their support for his laws and reign. His reign is characterized by ritual dynamics, in which Constantine switched between Apollo and Jesus, but was a convinced polytheist until he died.

Keywords: *Constantine the Great, Christianity, conversion, ritual dynamics*

Imperial cult is probably one of the most difficult aspects of ancient Rome. Its roots lie in ancient Egypt and the Greek cult of the rulers. Pharaohs who receive the kingship of Horus and Greek rulers such as Alexander the Great have set the tone for personal divine worship, feeling chosen by their (guardian) gods. The idea that a person would be divine or even become a god would now be considered as madness. Roman emperors implemented Jupiter and Hercules in an ideology strongly reminiscent of a father-son relationship is not surprising. An invincible sun god also became part of the imperial cult of various rulers such as Aurelian and Constantine the Great. Apollo, Helios, Sol, and, even, Christ feature prominently here. In this essay, Constantine the Great will be the central person, as he is one of the sharpest figures in history. He is

¹ This article is an English and revised edition of my earlier published article “Van Jupiter tot Jezus. De keizercultus van Constantijn de Grote nader bekeken”, in: *Kleio-Historia*, 2 (2015), pp. 21-28. I thank Mrs Zoe Tsiami for the opportunity to publish it in the new peer-reviewed journal *After Constantine: Stories from the Late Antique and Early Byzantine Era*.

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said to have been the first Christian emperor because of a vision from God. After this, he would convert into Christianity. This is just the question; the literature remains vague about this. On the one hand, Constantine is portrayed as a pagan emperor,³ who used Christianity only for personal empowerment; yet, on the other hand, we see him as a deeply Christian emperor who renounced all non-Christian matters. What is true about these statements? In this context, I will argue that Constantine was never in fact a Christian emperor and that he can easily be placed in the old traditional way of imperial cult, which is still confirmed within historiography.⁴

Jupiter-Hercules

The representation of imperial power gradually changed in the third century. The old performance ideology, namely the gaining of legitimating the power through *res gestae*, is no longer possible and the dynastic continuity lapsed after 235, and resulted in a link to all kinds of gods and an ideological elevation of emperorship. Jupiter and Hercules became important as powers behind the throne around 253, but other deities were also given a place such as Sol Invictus.⁵ Diocletian (284-305) and Maxentius (278-312) took the titles *Jovius* and *Herculius* during Diocletian's reign; Diocletian was a senior and Maxentius a junior. This explains the title; It is different with Constantius (250-306) and Galerius (306-311), where the senior is Constantius *Herculius* and Galerius is *Jovius*. Mattingly adds that Diocletian recognized Jupiter as the greatest god and that he and Maxentius were under the protection of Jupiter and Hercules. Mattingly further indicates that Constantius and Galerius in 293 recognized Mars and Sol as guardian gods. It must be realized that the titles *Jovius* and *Herculius* do not mean identification with these gods.⁶ Diocletian recognized Jupiter as the best god and he and Maxentius were placing themselves under the protection of Jupiter and Hercules. Constantius and

³ From the 4th century AD onwards the word “pagan” arose and means “non-Christian” and can be seen as a successor to the term “ancient”. I am aware of the debate that is taking place about the meaning of these concepts in relation to each other. See Lössl and Baker-Brian 2018, pp. 61-80, 391-410; Sággy and Schoolman 2017, pp. 59-68; Salzman, Sággy, Testa 2016, pp. 115-138. In this paper, I will use the term “non-Christian”.

⁴ Van Dam 2009, pp. 10-11, 128; Roldanus 2006, p. 36; Van Dam 2011, p. 15; Bardill 2012, pp. 218-219.

⁵ De Blois 2007, pp. 2-3.

⁶ Drinkwater 2005, p.71.

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Galerius also recognized Mars and Sol as guardian gods. It must be realized that the titles *Jovius* and *Herculius* do not mean identification with these gods.⁷ According to Rees, the titles strengthened the rule of the Tetrarchy. The Tetrarchs were seen as a mirror of the divine rule and they were destined to receive the divine blessing of the gods for their earthly rule.⁸ Mattingly argues that by this title, Diocletian was trying to gain an entrance with the Christians; does this cult not correspond to that of God the Father and God the Son?

Hercules was increasingly being adopted as a symbol of a good emperor. He was identified with the divine *virtus*, that worked through the imperial soul. Christianity, however, refuses to see Jupiter and Hercules as adequate expressions of God.⁹ Constantine was proclaimed the new Augustus in 306. Lactantius describes this moment as the most blissful day in the world. However, this day has a twofold picture: on the one hand, Constantine deliberately left the tetrarchic form of government and transgressed his own Rubicon. He put the whole area on the map because he had to reckon with three Tetrarchs, who threaten him with physical and military destruction.¹⁰ July 25, 306 was the decisive date, the Constantinian turning point. The breakthrough of Christianity as the dominant religion came only because Constantine survived his wrongful rule and because he was included in the Tetrarchy. Lactantius' idea that Constantine ended the persecution of Christians in 306 and gave Christians full recognition of their religion is incorrect. Constantine himself had no part in the edict of Galerius. In 310, Constantine even received a vision of Apollo.¹¹ In 307 Constantine took the name *Herculius*, following the tetrarchs, but his vision of Apollo in 310 renounced that title. Another aspect is that he considered himself as a follower of Sol Invictus, while he would be so intertwined in Christian affairs and at a time when he was allied with Licinius, before he turned against him.¹² The question, of course, is

⁷ Mattingly 1952, p. 131.

⁸ Rees 1993, p. 198.

⁹ Mattingly 1952, pp. 132-133.

¹⁰ Brandt 2007, p. 38.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 10.

¹² Cameron 2005, p. 91.

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what Apollo “said”; he is said to have predicted a long and happy life for Constantine, but that does not explain his renunciation of the title *Herculius*. Praet does provide a possible explanation for this. In 307, Constantine married Fausta, Maximian’s daughter. In a panegyric in honour of the marriage, Constantine was praised for the youthful wisdom with which he was content with the title of the Caesar. An expression of the hope that Constantine will be allowed to continue the dynasty of the Herculians for all eternity follows.¹³ The bond between Constantine and Maximian was not permanent. Maximian came into conflict with his son Maxentius and fled to Constantine's territory. However, the old Augustus twice tried to get Constantine out of the saddle. The two coups failed and after the second one, in 310, Constantine granted his father-in-law the right to commit suicide. The title *Herculius* now became a nuisance and disappeared from the coins.¹⁴

Dynasty

Cameron quotes Eusebius of Caesaria’s *Vita Constantini* in which Constantius is said to be a Christian because he surrounded himself with men of the church and because he named his children like Anastasia.¹⁵ This places very much the question, because it does not in itself say anything about personal religious awareness. According to Praet, Constantius was absolutely non-Christian. He easily placed himself in the religious ideology of Jovians and Herculians and had a special devotion to the ancient sun god Sol Invictus or Helios-Apollo.¹⁶ In the beginning of the Panegyric the author tells how Constantius reached the end of the world during a campaign in the high north of England. There, where the days never end, Constantius was admitted to the assembly of the gods, and Jupiter himself asked him to appoint a successor to the throne. Constantine was thus chosen not only by his own father, but also by the father of all gods to be emperor of the Roman Empire. These claims are reinforced by placing Constantine as the third emperor in a fictional dynasty. Constantius was the son of Claudius II Gothicus (268-270). Claudius and his successor Aurelian have made the

¹³ Praet 1997, p. 141.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 141.

¹⁵ Cameron 2005, p. 91.

¹⁶ Praet 1997, p. 140.

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cult of Sol Invictus the most favoured cult and religious foundation. The Sol discourse of 310 seamlessly linked Constantine with political and dynastic considerations: the solar cult linked Constantine with two prestigious emperors who played a crucial role in restoring the unity of the empire.¹⁷ Constantine was not interested in his father's political ideology and revealed no loyalty to it. He strived for a monarchical position.¹⁸ His father, Constantius, belonged to the Tetrarchy as *Herculius* and Caesar since 293. The fact that Constantine had been familiar with the divine omnipresence and his somewhat monotheistic cult of Sol from childhood does not imply that Constantine was a Christian before or during 306, or adherent to an exclusive solar cult. This must be seen against the background of the religious-political developments in the last quarter of the third century and the fact that Constantine was sensitive to everything religious.¹⁹

Representation on coins, structures and statues

According to ancient historian Timothy Barnes, Constantine, born between 275 and 285, found his way to Christianity on an, relatively, early age and was in any case sympathetic to the Christians and the Christian church in 306. Jacob Burckhardt gives in *Die Zeit Constantins der Großen* a very different picture. Burckhardt suspects that Constantine did not pretend or behave as a Christian during his lifetime, but that he used all his physical strength and spiritual power to achieve his goal, which was to consolidate his emperorship.²⁰ Brandt agrees with his *Konstantin der Grosse*, in which he indicates that Constantine was the first Roman emperor to understand that he must accept monotheistic Christianity without losing or limiting his political leeway. Even as Christian, he retained the sovereignty to pursue a partly tolerant non-Christian policy in the service of the common good, but of course also because of his power-retaining policy.²¹ According to Palanque, Constantine reached Christianity in several steps and not all at once. Lactantius is cited here, which distinguishes three levels: the first level condemns false religions and repels unruly cults. The second level discovers that there

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 142-143.

¹⁸ Brandt 2007, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 21-22.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 9-10.

²¹ Brandt 2006, p. 17.

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is only one supreme God and the third level reveals the servant sent to earth by God to reveal Him. A first conversion can be said to be the case when the relationship between Constantine and Maximian ended. Maximian was related to the Herculan ideology as well as Constantine. In 310 Constantine replaced this title with the official Sol Invictus dynasty.²² Straub argues, in my opinion incorrectly, that Constantine already converted to the Christian God when he wrote Anullius. But despite the new belief, its traditional frame of reference did not change.²³ Cameron states that Constantine continued to mint coins with the image of Sol. His refusal of sacrifices must be included in this matter. However, aren't these all due to his personal plan to consolidate and increase his power?²⁴

The next question is how Constantine viewed the new faith. Because there is often a talk of the "highest God", henotheistic tendencies can be discerned here. More important, this god is not named. This makes his supposed conversion even more unreliable.²⁵ Straub speaks again of the relationship between Constantine and Sol, portraying Constantine as an ardent follower, but according to Straub, Constantine made no secret that he started to believe in God since 312. This is very much the question, given his great love for Sol. According to Nicholson, it's about what Constantine thought he saw. According to Eusebius, Constantine was so astonished by the sign that he missed its meaning. Neither Eusebius nor Lactantius indicate that this vision made Constantine become a Christian.²⁶ Even after his vision of Apollo in 310, he had himself portrayed as *Sol Comes* (companion). Christians were also familiar with the image of *Sol Iustitiae*. Hermann Usener adds that an immovable mighty sun god is well known to Christians and that in this they came to see Christ as the saviour of the earth.²⁷ Constantine was seen by the gentiles as *Helios*, by the Christians as Christ, and thirdly as the glorious majesty of the Emperor. Christians were further criticized for

²² Palanque 1971, pp. 66-67.

²³ Straub 1967, p. 40.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 41.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 41.

²⁶ Nicholson 2000, pp. 311-312.

²⁷ Straub 1967, p. 43.

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worshipping Constantine as a god, but this is a false statement. Constantine's coins say enough: on the front he is depicted in a veil, but on the back, he is in a chariot pulled by four horses, with one arm outstretched upwards.²⁸ A hand reaches out from heaven to receive Constantine. The question is whether this is Jupiter or God;²⁹ another factor to consider is the fact that he continued to hold the title *pontifex maximus* and that he did not suddenly take away all the privileges of the non-Christian priests.³⁰ This gives enough food for thought. It is certain that he did not repent before his death, that he still spent too much time in non-Christian spheres for that. Before his "conversion" to Christianity, Constantine displayed only a vague religious sense. He initially continued in his public portrayal and propaganda, to use expressions and motifs that were not exclusively non-Christian, but did appeal to the polytheistic civilians. Until 323, Constantine's officials continued to mint coins dedicated to Sol Invictus.³¹ Constantine was still in need of the support of the ruling class. Preger argues that five years after the Council of Nicaea, Constantine had himself portrayed as *Helios*, because he himself was so little Christian. According to the author, the theory is still undisputed (1978).³² Furthermore, Dölger and Stähelin are quoted as agreeing that they found each other in the Constantine-*Helios* image in Constantinople and that *Helios*' identification with Constantine is a fact.³³ This theory, which says that Constantine wanted to be deified and identified with *Helios* in 330, is in strong contrast to the theory that Constantine adopted Christianity. However, according to the author, it is certain that from 320 onwards, Constantine distanced himself more and more from all non-Christian issues.³⁴ The question is whether this is true given his currency policy. Karayannopoulos provides various evidence. For example, he speaks of charters and letters. Furthermore, the predicate *invictus* was replaced by "victor", and the title *divus* was not used for its

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 44.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 45.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 47.

³¹ Sarris 2002, pp. 21-22.

³² Karayannopoulos 1978, pp. 485-486.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 487.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 488.

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name. The genius of the emperor is also no longer depicted on coins, namely Sol (322).³⁵ Furthermore, Christianity would now have much more influence on Constantine's policies. From 324 onwards, Constantine's politics are portrayed as politically inspired by Christianity. However, Constantine did allow the construction of the temple for the *gens Flavia*, bearing in mind that no superstition should be professed.³⁶ The church buildings founded by Constantine also speak a clear language. This includes the Latheran basilica built in 313. In 315 the famous Arch of Constantine was inaugurated. There are no Christian elements depicted in this iconography, contrary to Victoria, Sol and other deities. Constantine was a highly motivated power politics pragmatist and realist, well known in the field of religious politics.³⁷

The Arch of Constantine was formally dedicated by order of the people and the Senate. The inscription is characterized as the "Masterpiece of Obscurity": *For the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantinus, the greatest pious and fortunate Augustus, the Senate and the people of Rome, while inspired by a deity with the greatness of his spirit and at the same time, the state, as well as tyranny, as well as the collective supporters, has avenged it with just weapons, consecrating this excellent bow by triumph.*³⁸ This inscription does not seem so obscure at all when placed against the background of henotheism. Some gods were then placed higher in the divine hierarchy. God is just one of them. Constantine was known more as "Emperor Constantine" in the period 312-324 than as the "Christian Constantine". Its main goal was the acquisition of supremacy. To achieve this, he would have first to take out Licinius. For this, he needed the support of the mainly non-Christian soldiers. Also, in 320, Constantine was addressed by his officers with the words: "Augustus Constantine, may the gods keep you".³⁹ Constantine's domestic politics, law, and religion in the years 312-324 referred to the emperor as a rationally acting politician, continuing in many ways the reform policies

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 489-490.

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 491-492.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 14.

³⁸ Brandt 2006, p. 60.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

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of the highly non-Christian Diocletian.⁴⁰ Constantine had long left the image of the confession to Christianity.⁴¹ As for the coinage, Sol still appears as *Comes*, companion, and protector of Constantine until the year 325. Christian symbols are completely absent. The last monarchical phase of Constantine's rule begun with the elimination of Licinius in 324 and ended with his own death in 337. Since September 324, Constantine as sole ruler exercised a dynastic monarchical traditional example, in which his sons acted as subordinate co-rulers in the rank of Caesar. Almost at the same time, Constantine experienced its peak with regard to his church politics, the Ecumenical Council of 325.⁴² Of course, the view on Constantinople cannot be based on a fundamental, sudden opposition between Christians and non-Christians. Constantine renounced blood sacrifices, the hecatombs of Jupiter and the extensive sacrifice of a hundred oxen. On the other hand, he preserved *Victoria* as well as the cult of Sol Invictus, so beloved by him, which referred in many ways to the light Christology with many sun components. After his death he was recognized and worshiped not only as an apostle but also as Christ like (*isochristos*). The Christian ruler appointed by God came from a later tradition that liberates the emperor from all fractures and inconsistencies.⁴³

According to Ramage and Ramage, Constantine expressed his own importance from often colossal images. As the first emperor, he also had sculptures removed from the monuments of his predecessors and placed on his own monuments. Thus, he hoped to let something like this radiate upon himself from the glory of his own predecessors.⁴⁴ According to Ramage, nothing more spectacularly illustrates the importance that Constantine placed on visual propaganda than the remains of his colossal statue, which had stood in the apse of his basilica on the *Forum Romanum*. The height of over nine meters and the high head is unparalleled in terms of effect. The giant eyes are turned upwards, accentuated by the deeply drilled bean-shaped pupils. For the first time since Hadrian, the emperor no longer wears a beard. This gives his powerful jaws even more

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 16

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Ramage en Ramage 1999, p. 282.

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emphasis. The image is related to non-Christian cult images, which often were also very large and showed the same distant expression. The image must have completely dominated the basilica.⁴⁵ Jonathan Kirsch quotes Eusebius, who said that Constantine should remove all idols in non-Christian temples from the empire. They should have been stripped of their gold, silver, and sheaths, so that the wooden structures and scattering fills became visible and the non-Christians were confronted with the fact that their idols were not gods at all. However, this had nothing to do with Christianity, but with the funding for his new city. Even non-Christian emperors would melt down metal statues to pay for armies and palaces. Even the gigantic statue of Constantine, made of cast bronze and placed on a stone column, is free from Christian iconography. He is depicted as a non-Christian god –the head is adorned with a halo attribute of Sol Invictus and the right hand carries Victoria.⁴⁶ The statue itself is Apollo from the site of ancient Troy, whose face has been reworked into that of Constantine. The detailed whole is intended to gain the faithfulness of both Christians and Gentiles.⁴⁷ Rudolf Leeb elaborates on the Sol symbolism even further. He says that this symbolism had long been very important to Constantine, but that it is not certain how long Constantine used this symbolism.⁴⁸ At the foundation of Constantinople, a gigantic porphyry column with a statue of Constantine was erected in the center of the *Forum Constantini*. Sixth-century historians gave extensive account about this. Constantine was, among other things, compared with the sun by Hesychius Ilustrios. John Malalas speaks of seven rays. According to the fifth-century church historians, the statue was honoured by the population.⁴⁹ Leeb also speaks of a fifty-centimeter-high statue that at first resembles Sol, but is more likely Constantine, because the hairstyle refers to the rules introduced by Constantine.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 291.

⁴⁶ Kirsch 2005, p. 184.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 185.

⁴⁸ Leeb 1992, p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.12-13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 17.

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Conclusion

As far as I am concerned, it has been sufficiently argued that Constantine had an imperial cult that can be placed in the tradition of the earlier emperors. His new encounter with Christianity says nothing about a new religious experience. Constantine, he was not only placed in a Sol dynasty, but he also continued to depict Sol on coins following his predecessors. Constantine still acted from the traditional tolerant Roman ideas, in which ritual dynamics were palpable. He did not believe in God, but regarded him as a strong divine presence that could stand by him, just as other strangers gods could, but it says nothing about conversion, but more about the confirmation of henotheistic thoughts. Moreover, a real conversion implies renouncing the old faith, but this is not the case with Constantine. This notion played no role at all at the time. He even wanted to portray himself as Sol and be deified. The many statues bear witness to this. In short, Constantine the Great was a member of a dynasty familiar with the Tetrarchic ideology of Jovians and Herculians and the alleged Sol dynasty. In this, he placed himself effortlessly and saw his encounter with God as a means to reinforce his power politics. Sol and Christ merged together into a kind of Solar Christ, which meant that there was no real religious break. Syncretism and henotheism flourished at that time as never before.

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