

The Christianization of the Roman Empire Under Constantine

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Honors Thesis Submitted to the
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8 May 2017

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Acknowledgements

To my mother for her unending love and support.

To my advisor, Professor Josiah Osgood, for guiding me through this process and for his infinitely useful feedback every step of the way.

To seminar Professor Amy Leonard for her constant efforts to keep me and the rest of my classmates on top of our game.

To my friends who have stood by me while I talked their ears off about the nuances of classical scholarship.

And to my fellow thesis seminar classmates for their comments and suggestions, and riding out this process with me.

Introduction

Constantine (272-337), famously known as the first Christian emperor of Rome, has piqued the interest of historians for centuries. He has variously been vilified and celebrated by swathes of scholars for bringing about the destruction of Rome, liberating Rome, his tyrannical style, the murders of his wife and son, his patronage of the Church, his stabilization of the empire, his building projects and artistic style, and his suppression of paganism. His mother is a saint in the Christian tradition. Suffice it to say, Constantine is a fascinating historical figure, and elusive even to scholars working in the present day.

As fascinating as he is though, this thesis will be limited to exploring the reign of Constantine in terms of the extent to which we may evaluate the process of the Christianization of the empire. I use the term “Christianization” not to account for any sincerity or intensity of belief, but to examine the point(s) at which people started self-identifying as Christian en masse, as well as when the Roman and Christian cultures, two previously separate systems in the eyes of past Roman officials, blended together to form a new hybrid culture, in many ways anticipating the dawn of the Middle Ages. Christians had been antagonized within the empire since their conception decades before Constantine. Yet his reign witnessed a massive promotion and increased publicity of Christianity. Nearly every other emperor after him would be Christian. And most Romans would soon be Christian, paganism having been on the decline since his reign. Clearly, during his reign, Christianity’s prestige increased leaps and bounds, and its culture was rapidly absorbed. The subject of this thesis is how this happened.

Political and Military Context

This thesis will explore the Christianization of the Roman Empire during and after the reign of Constantine (r. 306-337), but it is important first to understand the historical context leading up to his accession. Traditionally, historians have referred to the affairs of the Roman Empire during the third century as the “third century crisis.” The Parthians to the east, the longtime rivals of the Romans, were subsumed by the emerging Sassanian Empire in 224. Powerful and ambitious, the Sassanians set their sights on the eastern Roman provinces in the Levant.¹ The Romans faced humiliation at the hands of the Sassanians in 260 when the emperor Valerian was captured after the Battle of Edessa. Indeed, it was alleged that the Sassanian emperor Sapor later used the back of Valerian to mount his horse.²

Meanwhile, in the west, the Germanic tribes were forming mighty federated coalitions, and other groups such as the Goths began putting more pressure on the Danube frontier. The Romans were forced to fight on two fronts, and found themselves unprepared for the new challenges these peoples presented.³

Complicating the century further was the issue of dynastic succession. After the collapse of the Severan Dynasty in 235, when Alexander Severus was assassinated by his own troops, the empire witnessed numerous claimants to the throne, most of whom saw short reigns marked by civil war and assassinations. Aurelian (r. 270-275) put an end to the civil wars and reunited the disparate territories of the empire.⁴ Yet, it was still beset on two fronts by hostile groups, the ancient economy was in shambles, and the imperial administration was in clear need of reform.

¹ Simon Corcoran, “Before Constantine,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 38.

² David Potter, *Constantine the Emperor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

³ Corcoran, “Before Constantine,” 38.

⁴ Corcoran, “Before Constantine,” 38-39.

Within this context of third century crisis arose the emperor Diocletian. After the death of the emperor Numerian in Nicomedia, his troops acclaimed Diocles, commander of Numerian's bodyguard, as emperor in 284. He promptly changed his name to the more Western and grandiose "Diocletianus."⁵

One of Diocletian's most important innovations, especially relevant to this thesis's treatment of Constantine, was his creation of the tetrarchy. Initially, in order to best deal with the problems plaguing the empire, he appointed his associate Maximian as Caesar below him in 285, and then Augustus, second only to Diocletian, in 286. When it became evident that even two joint-rulers could not properly deal with the military situation on the frontiers, they appointed two more rulers, acclaimed Caesar rather than Augustus: Constantius, the father of Constantine, and Galerius, in 293. The tetrarchy had been born, and soon proved itself effective. It successfully put down revolts in Egypt, North Africa, and Britain, and secured peace with the Sassanians after capturing their capital, Ctesiphon. Additionally, Diocletian issued a Prices Edict to stabilize the economy, though its effectiveness has often been questioned, and restructured the administrative units of the empire, subdividing the provinces and creating the dioceses.⁶ The tetrarchy appeared to be the proper solution to the crisis of the third century. It had not yet, however, been put to the test succession.

In 305, after having successfully stabilized the empire, Diocletian put aside his title of Augustus and retired, forcing the other Augustus, Maximian, to do the same. Constantius and Galerius, the two former Caesars, were elevated to Augustus, each taking a Caesar under them: Severus under Constantius, and Maximin Daia under Galerius. Tensions soon grew.

⁵ Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 39.

⁶ Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 39-46.

Constantius's son, the future emperor Constantine, was formally under the control of Galerius, who, it is alleged, had hopes of eliminating Constantine. Galerius had chosen Maximin Daia, his nephew, to be Caesar under him, a family tie which Constantine resented, since he was passed over as a choice for Caesar. Sometime around the year 305 or 306, Constantius sent for Constantine to meet him in Britain. Galerius was wary of allowing Constantine to leave the Danube region, but provided his tacit assent. Soon after arriving, Constantine found his father on his deathbed. In 306, upon the death of their leader, the soldiers of Constantius acclaimed Constantine as emperor, more specifically, as Augustus.⁷

Constantine's usurpation provoked harsh reactions among the reigning tetrarchs as well as private citizens throughout the empire. Seizing imperial power had not been how the tetrarchy was supposed to function, based on Diocletian's earlier precedent of abdication and elevation of the Caesars. Galerius was irate, but, upon realizing the futility of fighting Constantine's acclamation, settled for demoting Constantine to Caesar and promoting Severus to Augustus. Maxentius, however, the son of the former Augustus Maximian, resented Constantine's actions so much that he convinced the discontented populace of Italy to acclaim him emperor, and for his father to come out of retirement and join him. He carried favor in Rome through a building program, which Constantine would later coopt. Maxentius's own usurpation infuriated Galerius yet again. In 308, to address the issues of tetrarchic succession, Galerius called a meeting at Carnuntum, pulling Diocletian out of retirement. Diocletian ordered Maximian to retire once again, and supported the elevation of a new Caesar to fill the vacancy left by Severus, who had been captured and killed by Maxentius. It is worth noting that at this meeting Diocletian, in a

⁷ Noel Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 60-62.

manner reminiscent of that of the dictator Cincinnatus, declined returning to the throne in favor of continuing his cultivation of vegetables. As a result of the meeting Galerius elevated his friend Licinius to the rank of Augustus, much to the chagrin of Constantine and Maxentius.⁸

Since his acclamation as emperor in 306 Constantine had been fortifying the northern frontier in Gaul and along the Rhine, as well as combatting and eventually subduing Maximian, who had assumed the purple and revolted a second time. He had still been personally using the title Augustus even though he was merely a Caesar according to the other tetrarchs, and, rather than wait for Maxentius to gather his forces, he began his campaign in Italy by crossing the Alps in 312, leaving behind the northern frontier. Soon after, in the same year, Constantine took Rome at the famous Battle of the Milvian Bridge outside the city.⁹ Relations with Licinius in the east soon grew tense, especially as Licinius lacked an allied tetrarch; Galerius had died in 311 from a disease.¹⁰ The emperors fought two separate wars against each other, one from 316 to 317 and another from 323 to 324.¹¹ Constantine's defeat of Licinius in the latter resulted in his accession to sole ruler of the empire, a goal he seemed to have been aspiring to for years.

Religious Context

The above provides an adequate political and military background for the reign of Constantine. What is left out, however, is the subject of this thesis: religion. Though it served a political function, the tetrarchy also grounded itself in Roman religion. Diocletian and Maximian

⁸ Lenski, "Reign of Constantine," 62-65.

⁹ Lenski, "Reign of Constantine," 65-75.

¹⁰ The tense relations between Constantine and Licinius during the period c. 315-324 will factor into this thesis, and affect its interpretation of Constantine's actions, however, the reasons for such relations are intricate and beyond the scope of this thesis. It suffices simply to point out that the two tetrarchs did not get along in this period and came to refuse each other's selected representatives.

¹¹ Timothy Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 5.

established an inherent association between themselves and the gods Jupiter and Hercules, taking the appellations *Iovius* and *Herculius*, respectively. More importantly, in 303 the tetrarchs launched the decade-long Great Persecution, infringing on the peace Christians had experienced since the persecutions of Decius and Valerian roughly half a century earlier. They believed Christians to be a threat to the unity of religion necessary to secure divine favor, and promulgated an edict specifying that churches were to be torn down, Christian scriptures burned, and Christians who possessed it stripped of their high status.¹²

Constantine, meanwhile, was becoming more religious, and perhaps more Christian. Around the year 310, while returning to Trier, he stopped to visit a temple of Apollo and experienced a vision. This prompted him to claim special connection and association with the god Sol Invictus, who appears on numerous Constantinian coins issued around this period.¹³ Then, again, before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, he had another visionary experience, related by both Eusebius (c. 260- c. 339) and Lactantius (c. 250- c. 325).¹⁴ They record that soon before the battle Constantine experienced a dream in which he was visited by a figure, Christ in Eusebius's version, who told him to use the sign of Christ, for which the versions give different descriptions, Lactantius describing the staurogram and Eusebius, the Chi-Rho, to defeat his enemies. Eusebius adds in his version that Constantine had experienced a vision before having it explained to him in the dream.

Critical to note for the purposes of this thesis is the historical uncertainty as to Constantine's reasons for, and even theological basis of his conversion. It is certain that by the

¹² Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 43-53.

¹³ Lenski, "Reign of Constantine," 67.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 1.28-29; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 44.5; These accounts are problematic because they depict different vision experiences and different symbols Constantine was supposed to have employed as a result. Nevertheless, they both support some kind of visionary experience soon before the battle.

end of his reign he considered himself to be Christian, having been baptized on his deathbed.¹⁵ But the sources which record the emperor's conversion stories, Lactantius and Eusebius, being Christians, most likely interpreted his conversion in a Christian light. Constantine, too, may have retroactively altered his conversion experience to make it more Christian, as Eusebius records that "the victorious Emperor himself told the story to the present writer a long while after."¹⁶ The written sources imply a Christian bent in Constantine's religion early on. Other sources, such as coins and monuments, as this thesis will address in a later chapter indicate that Constantine still entertained pagan notions at this early time. Complicating the issue further, there seems to have been no political, military, or economic reasons for his conversion, as Christian numbers in the empire had still represented a small minority.¹⁷ Simply put, it may not ever be possible to understand Constantine's reasons for conversion, or its basis in theology, and this thesis will not address these issues any further than by acknowledging that much is unknown about Constantine's religion, besides that he became Christian at some point during his life. More important for the purposes of this thesis is how Christians and pagans alike approached their emperor, and he, them.

Constantine's conversion experience before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 indicated that Constantine was becoming more monotheistic, beginning to associate himself with only one supreme god. In sympathy with the suffering Christians, the emperor met with Licinius in 313 and convinced him to grant freedom of worship to Christians and restore property that had been confiscated during the persecution. The persecution was over, and Christians could again live comfortably within the empire. Ironically, however, they could not live with each other. The

¹⁵ *Life*, 4.61-62.

¹⁶ *Life*, 1.28.

¹⁷ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 32-33.

persecution had hurt Christians more than intended, and such problems as the Donatist controversy stemmed directly from the issue of collaboration during it. Diocletian was gone and Constantine was left to pick up the pieces of his persecution as Christians began fighting amongst themselves over how to address it and over theological doctrine. It was against this background that, as this thesis will argue, Christians came to associate themselves with Constantine.

Previous Scholarship

Constantinian scholarship goes back centuries. Intellectuals from a plethora of fields ranging from theology and philosophy to military and financial strategy have been enamored by him as a historical figure since his reign. Yet modern scholarship takes a variety of stances on Constantine and his rule. One of the reasons for this is the problematic source base on the emperor. Buildings and coins, military accounts, and laws from the period have prompted some scholars to cast Constantine in the light of previous Roman emperors, typical and following a set imperial style. Written contemporaneous histories, however, cast Constantine in a tremendously Christian light, and would seem to indicate a great departure from earlier emperors in terms of his religion, motivations, and influence in the Church. Some scholars focus on the sincerity of Constantine's beliefs, while others treat him in no religious terms at all.

Evidently, Constantine is an elusive historical figure, but that has not stopped scholars from trying to pin him down. Recent scholarship owes much to the efforts of T.D. Barnes, whose seminal work, *Constantine and Eusebius*, establishes Eusebius as a reliable, if occasionally misguided, source on the emperor's reign. Moreover, by seriously interpreting Eusebius's writing in light of the contemporary historical atmosphere, Barnes opened the door to also

seriously considering Constantine's Christianity.¹⁸ Robin Lane Fox similarly understands Constantine's Christianity as genuine. His *Pagans and Christians* situates the rise of Christianity within the pagan Mediterranean world as an aspect of Constantine's personal religion.¹⁹

Other scholars neglect the religious issues during Constantine's reign in favor of casting him more into the realm of politics. Raymond Van Dam's *Roman Revolution of Constantine* points out that Constantine had many more concerns on his mind than religion, such as the borders, differences between East and West, and his succession.²⁰ David Potter's *Constantine the Emperor* takes a similar position, arguing that Constantine wanted power and was willing to use religion as a tool to with which to attain it.²¹

Yet others find it difficult to portray Constantine in strictly religious or political terms. Noel Lenski's *Constantine and the Cities* argues that Constantine engaged existing power structures as an able ruler. Accordingly, Constantine did take an interest in Christianity, and worked slowly and gradually with various power bases to ensure its success.²²

Significantly, however, nearly all scholarship on Constantine treats his agency as primary. One needs only to examine the titles of the seminal works on this period to observe Constantine in the forefront: *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*; *Defending Constantine*; *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*; *Constantine*; *Constantine the Emperor*; *Constantine and the Cities*. These works analyze Constantine's reign from a Constantine-centric point of view. The source base from around the period in which he lived necessitates this to some extent,

¹⁸ T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

¹⁹ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

²⁰ Raymond Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²¹ David Potter, *Constantine the Emperor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²² Noel Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

as they themselves generally focus on the imperial presence rather than the affairs of those under the administration. This thesis will work off of previous scholarship by problematizing Constantine as a typical emperor in some senses and one who diverged from previous precedent in others. More importantly, it will address what scholars have frequently neglected in studying Constantine's reign: the affairs of those under Constantine and their interpretations of him and his actions.

This thesis will break with previous scholarship by examining Christianization during Constantine's reign through the lens of pagans and Christians. We may never know the sincerity of Constantine's beliefs, nor his motivations. It is certain that he considered himself a Christian by the end of his reign, and supported Christians and the Church during it. This thesis will argue that it was not Constantine alone who Christianized the empire, or even necessarily intended to Christianize it, but Christians, with the tacit support of pagans. This is not to abandon entirely the primacy of Constantine presented by other scholars. Instead, it is to contribute to the scholarship by adding in other actors, including pagans and Christians alike, from orators and bishops to philosophers and historians. It is to say that the process of Christianization was not due to Constantine alone. It was a messy process involving numerous actors, Constantine being one among them.

The first chapter examines Constantine's self-presentation during his reign and his interactions with both pagans and Christians. Citizens were aware of Constantine's monotheistic tendencies and Christian sympathies as early as 310. As a result, pagan petitioners conveniently made few references to religion, and if they did, it was in vague, uncertain terms. Christians on the other hand, saw in the emperor a fellow Christian and champion, and took it upon themselves to claim him as their own. Chapter two analyzes Constantine's elevation of the bishops and

patronage of the Church. He crafted a new aristocracy out of the Christian hierarchy and made conversion attractive, but, in many cases, for more practical or customary reasons, such as supplementing the existing imperial bureaucracy, than the Christians and converted pagans who benefitted from it would have liked to believe. Chapter three demonstrates that Constantine's reign prompted a change in scholarly perceptions of history and culture. Under him a religion of persecution and acceptance became one of dominance and imperial glory. Eusebius took it upon himself to record the life of Constantine, and did so with a Christian-centric perspective, presenting his reign as the culmination of human history, abandoning the traditional emphasis on martyrs. Later historians continued this trend of blending history, theology, and Classical culture, creating a unique Christian historical perspective that would come to dominate the Middle Ages.

Chapter I: Interacting with a Christian Emperor: The Politicization of Constantine's Religion

This thesis will focus on the development of a Christian culture and the benefits accrued by Christians under Constantine. This first chapter, however, will place Constantine firmly in the picture, taking into consideration Constantine's imperial self-presentation, how pagans reacted to Constantinian rule, and the emperor's interactions with Christians and the Christian response. "Before Constantine was a Christian emperor," writes Raymond Van Dam, "he was a typical emperor."²³ On the contrary, this chapter will demonstrate that, save for his personal interest in and patronage of Christianity, Constantine presented himself and acted as a Roman emperor, not a Christian one, throughout all of his reign. Pagans saw in him an adherent to a new and strange religion, but their interactions with the emperor demonstrate this was not an impediment to them. Rather, they used religion for their own ends, learning to play off of the emperor's own religious tendencies in their interactions with him, resulting in a more positive relationship between the two parties. They came to learn that Constantine would rule with their interests in mind just as well as those of Christians.

Constantine presented himself in the public eye in typically imperial terms, hearkening back to the tetrarchic emperors before him, in addition to the "good" emperors before them, and used familiar imperial motifs and imagery in his propaganda. His personal religion aside, his primary motivation for engaging in various Church disputes and controversies was to keep the empire peaceful and secure. Yet, he did patronize Christians throughout his reign, and his association with them prompted Christians to assert themselves as the imperial favorites, as the

²³ R. Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11.

group led by their Christian champion, Constantine. It was the Christians who forged the strong link between Constantine and Christianity that historians are unraveling to this day.

Constantine's Self-Presentation

Constantine's actions upon seizing Rome from Maxentius demonstrated that he was committed to asserting himself more as a Roman emperor than a Christian one. While the two were not and would not in the future be mutually exclusive, the preceding decades of tetrarchic rule and persecution had divided the two realms of Roman and Christian. One may expect, especially given Constantine's own religious tendencies, that upon taking Rome he would have been more committed as a Christian emperor than Roman. This was not, however, the case. In the years following 312 Constantine took actions to erase the memories of Maxentius in a *damnatio memoriae*.²⁴ He took over several of Maxentius's building projects in Rome, notably including a basilica which Constantine repurposed and dedicated in his own name. He additionally erased traces of Maxentius from the famous Arch of Constantine, which initially served as a means to glorify Maxentius, and had it dedicated instead to himself around 315.²⁵ It was a norm in Roman history for emperors to invoke *damnatio memoriae* upon defeating competing rulers. More importantly, Constantine's building projects served as a typical means whereby conquerors secured the loyalty of their conquered citizens, in addition to celebrating the end of a civil war.

²⁴ The term is problematic for the historian, as in many ways this process attempted to rewrite history by erasing individuals from it and repurposing their works. For more, see, Charles Hedrick, *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

²⁵ M. Humphries, "Emperors, Usurpers, and the City of Rome: Performing Power from Diocletian to Theodosius," in *Contested Monarchy: Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD*, ed. J. Wienand. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 157; B. Bleckmann, "Constantine, Rome, and the Christians," in *Contested Monarchy: Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD*, ed. J. Wienand. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 311.

The Arch of Constantine, dedicated in Rome not long after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and Constantine's seizure of the city, epitomized ancient imperial publicity and image control. Having taken over the construction of the arch after his defeat of Maxentius, Constantine used the project as a traditional means of self-presentation, espousing divine qualities in line with the former tetrarchic pattern established by Diocletian and Maximian decades earlier.²⁶ The means by which Constantine accomplished this marked a new era in the culture surrounding *spolia*, the reuse of stone or sculpture from preexisting structures to construct or decorate something new, as he repurposed resources from monuments dedicated by Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius.²⁷ The message, however, remained as Late Roman as ever: the arch celebrated Constantine's "victories over Maxentius in 312, his *decennalia* of 315 and the new Constantinian golden age evoked in the images of the 'good' emperors from the second century AD."²⁸ Having ended a civil war, Constantine used the arch to assert himself as the unifying factor of the empire, and used images that centered on his character: images of hunting, addressing crowds, and processions into cities. And his use of *spolia* from the previous good emperors, their heads recut with Constantine's own image, evoked the virtuous qualities of these emperors for Constantine.²⁹

Most significant for understanding how pagans and Christians related to Constantine's public self-presentation, are the pagan depictions on the arch. Among the other images carved into the arch, Constantine depicted images of sacrifice.³⁰ The more singular deities Sol and Mars also stood among the images. While Christians could and would come to associate Constantine's

²⁶ Bleckmann, "Constantine, Rome, and the Christians," 313-318.

²⁷ J. Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia to the Cult of Relics: The Arch of Constantine and the Genesis of Late Antique Forms," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 68 (2000): 152.

²⁸ Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia," 152.

²⁹ Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia," 158.

³⁰ Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia," 158.

monotheistic tendencies and association with Sol with their own God, it is important to note the utter lack of Christian themes. One scholar points out that Constantine would have continued to use the tetrarchic images of Jupiter had he not chosen to distance himself from the notion of tetrarchy; Sol and Mars were better alternative images.³¹ In all of its images, the arch presented Constantine in imperial and pagan terms. He asserted himself as a Roman emperor, personally making no connections to Christianity in his monumental presentations. It is important to note that the degree to which Constantine was personally involved in the construction of the arch is unknown. Regardless, however, Romans saw in it a typically imperial portrayal.

The same goes for the coinage he issued during his decades of rule. *The Roman Imperial Coinage* presents an up-to-date catalogue of the coins issued under Constantine from 313 to his death in 337. A complete numismatic study of coinage issued under Constantine is well outside the scope of this thesis, but there is a clear pattern among the coins issued by mints from across the empire, including London, Lyons, Trier, Arles, Rome, Aquileia, Sirmium, Thessalonica, Nicomedia, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople: the coins reflect typical Roman themes, with images of glory, victory, military soldiers, and weapons.³² This contrasts sharply with the expected traits of a Christian emperor such as humility and charity.

Most significant regarding numismatic imagery and references, is the complete and utter lack of any explicit reference to Christianity; even the monotheistic themes that existed, such as images of Sol Invictus, were few and far between. The coins themselves, throughout Constantine's entire reign, showed no positive signs of conversion.³³ Constantine did not

³¹ Bleckmann, "Constantine, Rome, and the Christians," 319.

³² For a catalogue-based study of the coins issued by Constantine, see, P. Bruun, "Vol. VII: Constantine and Licinius A.D. 313-337," in *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, ed. C.H.V. Sutherland, and R.A.G. Carson. (London: Spink and Son, 1966).

³³ P. Bruun, "Vol. VII: Constantine and Licinius A.D. 313-337," in *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, ed. C.H.V. Sutherland, and R.A.G. Carson. (London: Spink and Son, 1966), 61.

publicly depict himself as a Christian, but instead as a Roman. As opposed to the depiction of Eusebius, who declared that, upon seeing a vision before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine “summoned goldsmiths and jewelers, sat down among them, and explained the shape of the sign, and gave them instructions about copying it in gold and precious stones,” Constantine’s early coins show that this was not in fact the case.³⁴ He did not present Christian symbols or markers on his early coinage. Over his reign, pagans were specifically vague or accommodating regarding what they conceived to be Constantine’s religious beliefs, and Christians recognized his monotheistic tendencies and came to recognize the emperor himself as their champion. Yet, in his major public portrayals in sculpture and coins, images that would be seen across the empire, he refrained from depicting himself in religious terms unless, as with *Sol Invictus*, it gave his victories legitimacy. It was other Romans who saw in their emperor’s religion something new and different, and who navigated around it differently, when the emperor merely asserted his own power and sovereignty as a Roman ruler.

Pagan Interactions

After the conquest of Rome in 312, as Romans became increasingly aware of Constantine’s monotheistic, if not exclusively Christian, tendencies, they looked to the emperor to establish how to properly interact with an imperial authority promulgating new religious views. The extant Latin panegyrics to Constantine, formal laudatory speeches of praise, demonstrate this development. Most likely Gallic rhetoric professors, the speakers who gave the panegyrics at official ceremonial occasions, delivered them in a distinctive style intended to

³⁴ *Life*, 1.30.

serve as pedagogical tools for students of rhetoric.³⁵ They delivered speeches at individual historical moments, and for this reason they function as valuable sources on how Romans in general, and wealthy, educated aristocrats in particular, interacted with their new Christian emperor.

As early as 313, after Constantine took Rome from Maxentius, Romans understood that Constantine's religion was different from that of previous emperors, yet, for the most part, he was understood as a Roman emperor, not a Christian one, a notion still unheard of. A panegyric given by an unnamed orator around 313, most likely in the city of Trier and celebrating Constantine's victory over the Franks, made the first known reference to a God, singular and unnamed, in extant Latin panegyrics: "what god, what majesty so immediate encouraged you, when almost all of your comrades and commanders were not only silently muttering but even openly fearful, to perceive on your own, against the counsels of men, against the warnings of the soothsayers, that the time had come to liberate the City?"³⁶ This reference to a singular God did not necessarily reference the Christian God. Even before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312) in which Constantine's forces routed those of Maxentius, Constantine had exhibited a monotheistic trend, personally associating himself with the god Sol. In many ways this was typical for the time; Neoplatonism, a revival and continuation of platonic thought which stressed a single, first principle, having taken hold among intellectuals over the course of the third century. Significant for the purposes of the panegyric of 313 is the fact that the orator purposely referenced Constantine's God and faith. He even seemed open to Constantine's god: "You must

³⁵ C.E.V. Nixon, and B. S. Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 29-33.

³⁶ "Panegyric of Constantine Augustus (313)," in *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, ed. C.E.V Nixon, and B.S. Rodgers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 289-295.

share some secret with that divine mind, Constantine, which has delegated care of us to lesser gods and deigns to reveal itself to you alone.”³⁷

While Constantine’s religion may have seemed unique to the orator, he nonetheless treated Constantine as a typical emperor. For as long as the emperor had existed it had been his obligation, serving as Pontifex Maximus, to maintain the goodwill of divinity.³⁸ In his panegyric the orator acknowledged this role by sharing that Constantine clearly had some connection to a divinity, but he also acknowledged this god as foreign to himself. Indeed, most of the speaker’s references to divinity demonstrated his awareness of Constantine’s singular God as well as his inability to express religious motifs without interchanging aspects of polytheism and monotheism: “As that god, creator and master of the world, sends messages now sad, now glad, with his same thunderbolt, so the same shafts under your divine power distinguish between your enemies or petitioners by destruction or preservation.”³⁹ The translator notes that this nameless creator god functions as a synthetic god of pagan invention; he has similar attributes to Jupiter, using lightning and giving commands, but Jupiter was not a creator god. Instead, this god is “a not entirely successful attempt to avoid offending anyone.”⁴⁰ Aware of the emperor’s religious views, the orator neglected to make specific religious references in an attempt to navigate between the religion of the emperor and the religion of the majority; in essence, as early as 313

³⁷ “Panegyric of Constantine Augustus (313),” in *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, ed. C.E.V Nixon, and B.S. Rodgers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 296. The translator notes that the expressions for divinity indicate the speaker is “groping” for a “god in charge,” and that this shows him coming to terms with the new situation.

³⁸ H.A. Drake, “Speaking of Power: Christian Redefinition of the Imperial Role in the Fourth Century,” in *Contested Monarchy: Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD*, ed. J. Wienand. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 300.

³⁹ “Panegyric of Constantine Augustus (313),” in *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, ed. C.E.V Nixon, and B.S. Rodgers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 313.

⁴⁰ C.E.V. Nixon, and B. S. Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 313-314.

Romans were aware of Constantine's personal religious associations and attempted to be diplomatic in their interactions surrounding them.

Yet, besides struggling to avoid specific religious references, the orator of the panegyric from 313 treated Constantine in distinctly Roman terms. He opened the panegyric by saying how Constantine "saved not some part of the State but restored the entire republic to itself." While this statement surely represents the speaker's own wishes that the following years would be peaceful and prosperous after the upheaval of the tetrarchic civil wars, in addition to simply being typical in panegyric, it also associates Constantine with such quintessentially Roman themes as restoration of the state after upheaval. Moreover, the orator compared Constantine's own skill at military mobilization to "that rapidity in action which was Scipio's and Caesar's." Pagans saw in Constantine the qualities of a good Roman emperor, not those of a religious fanatic. Constantine's own actions upon seizing Rome, and later the East, demonstrated that he himself was committed to asserting himself as a Roman emperor much more than a Christian one, as we will see in a later section. Over the course of his reign, however, as religion became more politicized for a variety of reasons, regardless of how the emperor portrayed himself, Romans identified and interacted with him primarily by reference to his religion.

Around the year 321, the political situation in the empire had become increasingly divided. Constantine had solid control of the West, and Licinius, the East. Both sought control of the whole empire, and had entered a sort of cold war, having come to a truce after the war from 316-317. Complicating the issue was public knowledge of Constantine's religion and his sympathy for Christians, whom Licinius was allegedly persecuting.⁴¹ In 324, Constantine would

⁴¹ C.E.V. Nixon, and B. S. Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 336.

depose Licinius and become sole ruler of the empire, but Nazarius was unaware of this in 321, when he delivered a panegyric to celebrate the *quinquennalia* of Constantine's sons Crispus and Constantius, and thus had to be diplomatic in his treatment of religion to ensure he would not provoke either emperor. Nazarius attributes Constantine's victories in battle and retaking the West to "that divinity which habitually complies with your undertakings."⁴² As the translator and commentator notes, Nazarius's several references to "divinity," and "divine aid" in the panegyric come across as nondenominational.⁴³ He merely references divine aid in Constantine's conquest of the West, without specifying its source, Christian or pagan, monotheistic or polytheistic. Constantine's religion had become a political issue against the backdrop of cold war against the pagan and persecuting Licinius. Romans navigated the issue as best they could, and became more accepting of imperial monotheistic tendencies, and, as would become clear in later years, of Christianity in general, as a result of a conquering Christian emperor ruling half the empire.

Demonstrating the politicization of Constantine's religion from before 312 to 321 is the stark contrast between the panegyric of Nazarius and that of an anonymous orator given to Constantine in 310 in Trier to celebrate the anniversary of the foundation of the city. The anonymous orator referenced "the gods" several times, in addition to explicitly associating Constantine with the gods of the Roman pantheon: "For you saw, I believe, O Constantine, your Apollo, accompanied by Victory, offering you laurel wreaths, each one of which carries a portent of thirty years."⁴⁴ The orator was very explicit in the divine associations he made with the emperor, going so far as to name Apollo as his chief deity. And as opposed to Nazarius's "divine

⁴² Nazarius, "Panegyric of Constantine (321)," in *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, ed. C.E.V Nixon, and B.S. Rodgers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 357.

⁴³ C.E.V. Nixon, and B. S. Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 341.

⁴⁴ "Panegyric of Constantine (310)," in *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, ed. C.E.V Nixon, and B.S. Rodgers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 248; for references to the gods: 7.1, 7.4.

aid,” the anonymous orator stated outright that the gods helped Constantine. It did not matter to Constantine or the orator what the source of aid to the emperor was, as long as he received it. In 321, on the other hand, Nazarius took great pains to be as vague and general as possible regarding religious issues so as not to offend either Constantine or Licinius; Constantine’s religion had become politicized, specifically after his seizure of Rome in 312, in large part due to his well-known sympathy for Christians, and interest in Christianity, shown by his actions during various Christian controversies during his reign.

After Constantine’s conquest of Licinius and seizure of the East, pagans were forced to petition him with their own interests in mind. Yet, his self-stylization as a competent Roman emperor made him approachable to pagans. And after decades of Constantinian rule, while Romans still treaded carefully in matters of religion when petitioning the emperor, pagans had figured out that Constantine was not exclusively a Christian emperor, but that he would be helpful in non-Christian affairs as well, much the same as had previous Roman emperors who simply responded to petitions. Between the years 333 and 335, Constantine responded to a petition from the central leading Italian city of Hispellum, which asked for further civic autonomy. More specifically, the city requested the implementation of its own festival and the construction of a temple to the Constantinian dynasty, a pagan request, making no explicit mention of Christianity.⁴⁵ Pagans had determined they could keep their religious views vague, rather than blatantly claiming to be Christian, and still petition the emperor, even for pagan issues and concerns, as long as they emphasized traditional customs, rather than religion. Constantine’s response indicated as much. The rescript shows that the petitioners put their request in traditional terms:

⁴⁵ Van Dam, *Roman Revolution*, 21.

You claim that you are joined to Tuscia in such a way that according to the tradition of ancient custom each year priests are selected by both you and the aforementioned in turn...But because of the hardships of the mountains and the difficulties of the roads through the forests you urgently request that a remedy be granted and that it not be necessary for your priest to travel to Volsinii for the celebration of the games.⁴⁶

Hispellum successfully put its desires to gain civic autonomy in hosting games, as well as its desire for the construction of a pagan temple, in terms that appealed to the custom and tradition of city-based games. Having presented himself as a Roman, not only Christian, ruler, Constantine responded favorably to the petition, granting the city's requests, noting only one restriction: "that a shrine dedicated to our name not be polluted with the deceits of any contagious superstition."⁴⁷ This restriction makes it clear that Constantine understood the city was making pagan requests for games and a temple, and that he did not care about their being pagan as much as their refusal to participate in the ritual of sacrifice.

Pagans came to understand Constantine much in line with the terms in which he himself wanted to be understood: as a typical Roman ruler. They recognized his monotheistic, even Christian, tendencies, and they learned how to veil their requests in traditional, customary terms in order to work with him.

Christian Interactions

Though Constantine presented himself as a typical Roman emperor, one of his innovations regarding imperial rule was settling Christian disputes. He did, in fact, take a personal interest in Christian affairs during his reign. Yet he did so to ensure stability and unity

⁴⁶ Van Dam, "Hispellum: Date, Text, and Translation," in *Roman Revolution*, 366.

⁴⁷ Van Dam, "Hispellum: Date, Text, and Translation," in *Roman Revolution*, 367.

within the empire. Christians, however, interpreted his reasons differently, being based solely on the issue of religion.

Soon after his seizure of Rome, Constantine answered petitions from Christians in North Africa asking him to settle a dispute. The petitioners, called the Donatists, had opposed the consecration of Caecilianus, the bishop of Carthage under the persecuting tetrarchs.⁴⁸ After responding favorably regarding Caecilianus's position, and responding to further petitions, Constantine convened the Council of Arles in 314 to settle the dispute.⁴⁹ Eusebius, one of the only sources for the time, used surprisingly non-Christian terms to describe Constantine's actions during the council. He merely wrote that the emperor "favoured general unanimity, but the obstinate he rejected."⁵⁰ With the dispute causing instability in North Africa, and Constantine preparing for a potential war with Licinius in the East, Constantine's interest in the dispute stemmed from his interest to maintain peace among his domains as he prepared further expeditions, not from his own Christian sympathies.

The Arian controversy later on reflected a similar pattern. While Constantine campaigned against Licinius, towards the south in Alexandria a new Christian conflict was developing. Two theologians, the bishop Alexander, and his associate Arius, disagreed over the nature of the Son of God in relation to the Father.⁵¹ The nature of the dispute itself is unimportant for the purposes of this chapter, which are to show how Romans understood Constantine's actions and religious affiliations in their own ways. More significant about the Arian controversy was its impact upon the churches and populace of the rest of the empire. Eusebius provides a valuable illustration:

⁴⁸ In very simple terms, the Donatist controversy stemmed from the question over whether or not those clerics who collaborated with the tetrarchs during the persecution should be allowed back into positions of leadership.

⁴⁹ Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution*, 263.

⁵⁰ *Life*, 1.44.

⁵¹ Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution*, 269-271.

While those in Alexandria itself were sparring like juveniles over the highest matters, those around Egypt and the upper Thebaid were at variance on a previous long-standing issue, such that the churches were everywhere divided. The whole of Libya was laboring under these things like a diseased body, and with it the other parts, the provinces beyond, were catching the disease. Those in Alexandria sent delegations to the bishops of each province, while those who took the other side shared the same contentious spirit.⁵²

What began as a theological dispute quickly spread anger and upheaval across Africa, in addition to the provinces of Asia Minor and the Levant.

Hearing about the divisions the controversy was creating, Constantine sent a letter to Alexander and Arius, extant in the *Life*, in which he displayed a concern to end the controversy rather than an interest in the theological doctrines at stake. As he himself wrote: “My first concern was that the attitude towards the Divinity of all the provinces should be united in one consistent view, and my second that I might restore and heal the body of the republic which lay severely wounded.”⁵³ He made his motivations perfectly clear, to ensure the stability of the empire through a unity of belief. Yet, he was supremely unconcerned with the theology of the controversy, writing to the priests that “the cause was exposed as extremely trivial and quite unworthy of so much controversy,” and that “These things are vulgar and more befitting childish follies than suitable to the intelligence of priests and informed men.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, as the controversy continued, Constantine continued to take an interest in ending it, and in 325 called the historic Council of Nicaea “with respectful letters summoning bishops to hasten from every place.”⁵⁵ He even gave to some bishops the use of the public post, and to other he gave pack-animals to help them on their journey to Nicaea.⁵⁶ Such actions, including those he took during

⁵² *Life*, 2.62. Eusebius’s own apparent nonchalant attitude regarding the controversy most likely stems from his own attempts to invoke Constantine’s historical responses to such issues in addition to his attempts to distance himself from the controversy.

⁵³ *Life*, 2.65.

⁵⁴ *Life*, 2.86.2; 2.71.3.

⁵⁵ *Life*, 3.6.1.

⁵⁶ *Life*, 3.6.1.

the Council, demonstrated to the bishops across the empire his commitment to their cause.

Indeed, it is likely that he truly considered himself a Christian by this time, yet even Eusebius records that his motivations were much more simple than the minutiae of theology. He writes that Constantine, at the opening of the council, proclaimed to the bishops present:

So do not delay, my friends, ministers of God, and good servants of the common Lord and Saviour of us all, to begin now to bring the causes of the division between you into the open, and to loosen all shackles of dispute by the laws of peace. Thus you will both achieve what is pleasing to the God of all, and you will give extreme gratification to me, your fellow servant.⁵⁷

Constantine's involvement in Church disputes, regardless of his personal interest in them, demonstrate that he was more concerned about the stability of his empire, especially in keeping it whole after defeating Licinius in 324, than about the theology and goings-on of the Church. He turned over the running of the council to the bishops, diplomatically displaying his personal disinterest in theological argumentation while assuring the bishops that he trusted them and their ability to overcome the dispute.

Nevertheless, Constantine did sympathize with Christians and Christianity, and did indeed show an interest in supporting Christians throughout his reign. As the next chapters will show, he built churches, commissioned Bibles, distributed wealth to clergymen, promoted Christians within the imperial administration, and allowed bishops the use of imperial infrastructure. In these actions, as well as in their emperor's apparent interest in theological disputes, Christians saw their champion, and came to assert themselves as the imperial favorites, beneficiaries, and supporters of the empire.

Seeing their emperor's apparent support for their cause, Christians took up imperial symbols and motifs for themselves. Upon his initial entrance into Rome in 312, Constantine

⁵⁷ *Life*, 3.12.5.

found a highly organized Church. Considering Constantine's monotheistic tendencies as such sources as the Latin panegyrics depicted them, these Christians came to adopt the singular deity worshipped by Constantine as their own; they made Constantine's deity and the Christian god synonymous.⁵⁸ Similarly, Jaś Elsner has suggested that Constantinian propaganda, specifically in the form of the Arch of Constantine's use of *spolia*, heavily influenced the developments of the cult of relics and the medieval aesthetic of spoliation in the following centuries.⁵⁹ Christians, lacking a proper artistic tradition of their own, saw in their champion emperor's use of past artistic originals the opportunity to establish one and connect themselves to the imperial tradition. Christians interpreted even the Arch of Constantine, pagan portrayals and all, in a Christian light due to their emperor's association with Christianity.

The coins issued by Constantine too, it has already been established, showed no strong sign of conversion on his part. They did, however, include images of either a Christogram or Staurogram, the image which Lactantius and Eusebius relate to Constantine's conversion experience and describe in slightly different terms.⁶⁰ But it did not have a distinctly Christian character when depicted on the coins. Rather, Constantine used this image originally as a victorious symbol for himself.⁶¹ Christians only adopted the symbol later, over the course of Constantine's reign, when he began patronizing the Church, and when his victory against

⁵⁸ Bleckmann, "Constantine, Rome, and the Christians," 324.

⁵⁹ Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia," 178.

⁶⁰ P. Bruun, "Vol. VII: Constantine and Licinius A.D. 313-337," in *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, ed. C.H.V. Sutherland, and R.A.G. Carson. (London: Spink and Son, 1966), 62; It is necessary to note that Lactantius and Eusebius describe two different symbols as being that taken on by Constantine as his own symbol. Both symbols had various Christian connotations before Constantine came to power, but Bruun supports the interpretation of Constantine taking the symbol as one for his own victory, rather than one with specifically Christian significance. See; *Life*, 1.29-31; *On the Deaths*, 44.5.

⁶¹ P. Bruun, "Vol. VII: Constantine and Licinius A.D. 313-337," in *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, ed. C.H.V. Sutherland, and R.A.G. Carson. (London: Spink and Son, 1966), 61.

Maxentius thus became reinterpreted by Christians as a Christian victory.⁶² With the safety and prosperity of Christianity assured, Christians found in Constantine their ultimate champion.

Conclusion

Pagans and Christians interacted with Constantine differently, dealing with his imperial self-presentation in divergent ways. Pagans saw in Constantine, or lauded him as, an emperor who respected tradition and custom, and who also entertained a foreign religion around which they could navigate. Constantine indeed presented himself as a fairly typical Roman ruler, his famous arch and coins depicting various pagan scenes and motifs. Christians, however, as early as Constantine's entrance to Rome in 312, associated their god with his, and came to understand his patronage of them, and his willing involvement in Christian controversies, especially the Arian Controversy, as indications that he championed them. They consequently took up Constantine's own images and motifs, such as the Christogram, and propagated them in Christian terms. In more ways than one, Christians, not Constantine, were responsible for Christianizing the Roman Empire.

⁶² P. Bruun, "Vol. VII: Constantine and Licinius A.D. 313-337," in *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, ed. C.H.V. Sutherland, and R.A.G. Carson. (London: Spink and Son, 1966), 62.

Chapter II: Empowering the Clergy

One major way in which Constantine's reign pushed Christianization was his empowering of the Christian ecclesiastics. He promulgated laws which gave new powers and civic exemptions to the clergy, and seized pagan temple wealth and funneled it into the Church in the form of church-building, dedications in gold and silver, and grain rations. While this chapter addresses how these actions supported Christians and Christianization, it does not very heavily take into consideration Constantine's motivations, as they are too difficult to ascertain. Noel Lenski notes that Constantine's ecclesiastical legislation was idealistic and gave too much power to the clergymen, which they used to assert their authority more than Constantine had intended,⁶³ but this is the most this chapter will address Constantine's motivations. He seems to have had sympathy for Christians, certainly, but his elevation of the clergy was most likely intended to ease administrative and social burdens, and not to give clergymen *carte blanche* social power. This chapter owes much to the work of Lenski, whose recent work *Constantine and the Cities* focuses on the emperor's actions regarding and interactions within the civic spaces of the empire. This chapter mobilizes Lenski's findings for the purposes of demonstrating how Constantine's reign marked a watershed moment in creating a socially and politically powerful echelon of Christians. It contributes to his argument by examining the tangible benefits accrued to Christians as a result of Constantine's actions. It is necessary to note that while this chapter focuses on Constantine more so than the others, the process of Christianization was nevertheless quite messy. Constantine gave the clergy more of a role in social and political life within the empire, but it was they themselves who used the opportunity to accrue more power and thus

⁶³ Noel Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 206.

popularize conversion. Christians played the larger role in this process of clerical empowerment while Constantine played more as a supporter.

Ecclesiastical Laws

Soon after Constantine assumed power in the West in 312, he promulgated legislation aimed specifically at the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The result of such legislation was the integration of the clergy into the affairs of civic and imperial administration, as well as their elevation above typical civic officials. Three particular aspects of his legislation were responsible for this: the legality of standing bishops to hear and judge judicial cases, the ability of bishops to manumit slaves, and clerical exemptions from civic councils.

Two laws concerning the ability of bishops to hear judicial cases, dating from the reign of Constantine, survive. The first, promulgated in 318, stipulated that “if any person should desire him to transfer his case to the jurisdiction of the Christian law and to observe that kind of court, he shall be heard, even though the action has been instituted before the judge, and whatever may be adjudged by them shall be held as sacred.”⁶⁴ Due to its compilation within the *Theodosian Code*, assembled about a century after Constantine ruled, the law lacks the specific circumstances and case or cases which would have offered more context to the imperial administrators, as well as bishops, within the empire.⁶⁵ It is clear from the extant text, however, that this law gave bishops the power to issue binding rulings in judicial cases. Of particular note regarding this law is that the authority of the bishop was considered “sacred.” It was not subject to appeal by the emperor, as other rulings were. Constantine reiterated this position in a law from

⁶⁴ *Theodosian Code*, 1.27.1.

⁶⁵ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 198.

333 in the *Sirmondian Constitutions*, an appendix to the *Theodosian Code*: “All cases which are tried by praetorian or by civil law, when settled by the decisions of bishops, shall be affirmed by the eternal law of permanence; nor shall any case be subject to review which the judgement of a bishop has decided.”⁶⁶ More important regarding the law of 333 was the additional stipulation that if a single litigant requested that the case be heard by a bishop, “even though the other party to the suit should oppose it, immediately, without any question, the principals in the litigation shall be dispatched to the bishop.”⁶⁷

With these two laws, noting that most likely more laws had existed that are no longer extant, Constantine brought the bishops into the civic administration of the empire. Moreover, he gave the bishops an enormous role within such administration, holding their judicial rulings sacred and binding, and not subject to appeal. In terms of judicial proceedings, these laws effectively gave more power to the bishops than to most secular magistrates. These laws showed clear favoritism to Christians, which was crucially important considering the notion of the Christianization of society at this time. Only one litigant in a case was required to ask that the case be heard by a bishop in order for it to be so. This gave disproportionate power to Christians to appeal to somebody who would have seemed more inclined to give them a favorable ruling: a fellow Christian. It is important to note the justification for the 333 law: “This we confirm by Our eternal law, thus crushing out the mischievous seeds of litigation, so that wretched men, entangled in the long and almost endless toils of litigation, may at length, with timely settlement, escape from unscrupulous legal attacks and from an unreasonable avarice.”⁶⁸ Constantine appears to have been more concerned with providing fair and speedy trials than with providing

⁶⁶ *Sirmondian Constitutions*, 1.

⁶⁷ *Sirmondian Constitutions*, 1.

⁶⁸ *Sirmondian Constitutions*, 1.

advantages to Christian litigants. His solution to the crisis of the third century was to give the Church a role in judicial matters in order to ease administrative burdens.⁶⁹ but the result of his legislation was unchanged, that is, it gave disproportionate power to bishops and showed the same degree of favoritism to Christians.⁷⁰

In addition to having the power to provide a binding sentence on judicial cases, bishops were further empowered, and assimilated into traditionally civic roles, through laws allowing them to manumit slaves. A law from 321 stipulated that slaves could be manumitted in churches, but that the “right to manumit in the churches shall be allowed only to those persons who give freedom under the eyes of the bishops.”⁷¹ The law gave bishops the power to turn slaves into Roman citizens. Moreover, when a bishop did so, “he shall appear to give it with the same legal force as that with which Roman citizenship formerly was customarily bestowed under observance of the usual formalities.”⁷² This latter stipulation was critical. Traditionally, Roman slaves could only be manumitted in a will or in the presence of a magistrate.⁷³ Constantine’s legislation from 321 further extended the bishop’s civic authority by assigning them powers traditionally held by civic magistrates.

His legislation regarding exemption from other civic duties created a Christian elite parallel to that of the traditional Roman aristocracy. A law circulating in an epistle from 313, and reaffirmed in 319, provided an enormous privilege to clerics: exemption from curial services. *Curiales* were appointed officials burdened by property taxes, tax collection duties, and local

⁶⁹ William K. Boyd, *The Ecclesiastical Edicts of the Theodosian Code* (New York: AMS Press, 1905), 71.

⁷⁰ For the reasons for the promulgation of the law, see; H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 326-327.

⁷¹ *Theodosian Code*, 4.7.1.

⁷² *Theodosian Code*, 4.7.1.

⁷³ Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275-425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 465.

administrative work.⁷⁴ The law preserved in the *Theodosian Code* assures that “Those persons who devote the services of religion to divine worship, that is, those who are called clerics, shall be exempt from all compulsory public services whatever, lest, through the sacrilegious malice of certain persons, they should be called away from divine services.”⁷⁵ Crucial to understanding this law is the last line which provides its justification: to prevent clerics from being distracted “from divine services.” This was almost certainly a reference to public sacrifice. The leaders of curial and provincial councils served as priests as well, leading public sacrifices to the state religion.⁷⁶ The text of the law indicates that Constantine gave Christian clerics exemptions from such mandatory civic duties to protect them from participating in pagan sacrifice; but in so doing he made the episcopate an attractive refuge from mandatory public services for local aristocrats.

Eusebius noted that the Church had become an attraction for the disingenuous, those looking to accrue the benefits supplied to the Church with no interest in converting, writing that there was “an unspeakable deceit on the part of those who slipped into the Church and adopted the false façade of the Christian name.”⁷⁷ Constantine appears to have noted this as well, evidenced by a law from the late 320s: “Exemption from compulsory public services shall not be granted by popular consent, nor shall it be granted indiscriminately to all who petition under the pretext of being clerics, nor shall great numbers be added to the clergy rashly and beyond measure.”⁷⁸ Constantine realized that the privileges he had given to clerics was attracting the disingenuous and the corrupt to the Church. He sought to resolve the situation with this law. He went so far as to specify that those who had kinship with a decurion family, that is, a generally

⁷⁴ Boyd, *Ecclesiastical Edicts*, 72.

⁷⁵ *Theodosian Code*, 16.2.2.

⁷⁶ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 202.

⁷⁷ *Life*, 4.54.

⁷⁸ *Theodosian Code*, 16.2.6.

wealthy family with a seat in the local city council, were unfit for exempt status when they could be of more service in civic affairs.⁷⁹ He purposely sought to limit entrance into the episcopate of those wealthy individuals who desired it for exempt status only. Nevertheless, Constantine refused to revoke the edict providing exemption from civic duties to clerics, and in fact reiterated the privilege again in a law from 330, which stated that clerics would “possess fullest exemption.”⁸⁰ Through such legislation, the emperor empowered clerics by relieving them of the burdens of civic administration, creating a class that functioned independently from the local civic councils, and even contributing to the decline of civic councils over the course of the fourth century.⁸¹

Seizure of Pagan Wealth

Constantine had legislated powers and privileges to the bishops when he controlled the West. After gaining control of the East, and thus the rest of the empire, in 324, Constantine continued his program of legislation, but he also engineered a new policy of seizing the wealth of pagan temple estates. This resulted in the loss of wealth, as well as the power and prestige that accompanied it, of the pagan temple priests, contributing to the overall decline in temple use over the course of the century. This also created a vast supply of wealth in public and private property, which could and would be funneled into the Church.

The first attestation that Constantine began a program of seizing temple wealth comes from Eusebius’s *Life of Constantine*:

[Constantine] stripped the entrances to their temples in every city so that their doors were removed at the Emperor’s command. In other cases the roofs were ruined by the removal of the cladding. In yet other cases the sacred bronze figures, of which the error of the

⁷⁹ *Theodosian Code*, 16.2.6.

⁸⁰ *Theodosian Code*, 16.2.7.

⁸¹ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 206.

ancients had for a long time been proud, he displayed to all the public in all the squares of the Emperor's city.⁸²

Imperial representatives stripped temples of their doors, roofs, and valuable statues, several of which, if they were famous or valuable enough, Constantine displayed in the Hippodrome of Constantinople. Regarding those statues not deemed valuable enough as art, imperial representatives "scraped off the material which seemed to be usable, purifying it by smelting with fire; as much useful material as was deemed to belong to them they collected."⁸³

Constantine seized temple wealth and either coveted it as art or converted it into bullion. The *Patria Constantinopleos*, a collection of works on Constantinople written in the centuries following Constantine, is invaluable for an understanding of the emperor's new policy. It records that the objects taken and displayed in the Hippodrome alone, that is, not including the other temples where imperial representatives simply stripped their precious metals and converted them in bullion, came from temples and shrines from Rome, Nicomedia, Athens, Cyzicus, Caesarea, Tralles, Sardis, Mocissus, Sebasteia, Satala, Antioch, Cyprus, Crete, Rhodes, Chios, Attaleia, Smyrna, Seleucia, Tyana, Iconium, Nicaea, and Sicily.⁸⁴

Other evidence of Constantine's program comes from the pagan intellectual Libanius (c. 314- c. 392), and the Christian historian Sozomen (c. 400- c.450). Libanius's *For the Temples*, a speech given before Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379-395) sometime between 381 and 391, recorded Constantine as having "employed the sacred treasures on the building of the city upon which his heart was set," and that as a result, "poverty reigned in the temples."⁸⁵ Libanius indicated that Constantine pillaged the temples of their valuables, and that it had a significant

⁸² *Life*, 3.54.

⁸³ *Life*, 3.54; for an illustrative description of this process, see; T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 247.

⁸⁴ *Patria Const.* 2.73.

⁸⁵ Libanius. *Or.* 30.6.

connection to his construction of Constantinople. Moreover, in imploring Theodosius to help the temples, he claimed the following:

You then have neither ordered the closure of temples nor banned entrance to them. From the temples and altars you have banished neither fire nor incense nor the offerings of other perfumes. But this black-robed tribe...these people, Sire, while the law yet remains in force, hasten to attack the temples with sticks and stones and bars of iron, and in some cases, disdain these, with hands and feet. Then utter desolation follows, with the stripping of roofs, demolition of walls, the tearing down of statues and the overthrow of altars, and the priests must either keep quiet or die. After demolishing one, they scurry to another, and to a third, and trophy is piled on trophy, in contravention of the law.⁸⁶

As the century progressed, what originated as an imperial policy transformed into the sporadic and impromptu seizure and destruction of temples by Christian vigilantes.

The fifth-century ecclesiastical historian Sozomen described the manner in which Constantine's representatives carried out his program differently from the picture given later by Libanius. The temple priests "brought out from the most secret places of concealment their most precious treasures, and the idols...while recesses known only to the priests, and wherein the people were never admitted, were thrown open to all who desired to enter."⁸⁷ Sozomen noted particularly that "he [Constantine] did not require military aid; for Christian men belonging to the palace went from city to city, bearing letters from the emperor commanding obedience to the decrees."⁸⁸ While Constantine ruled, temple wealth was seized peacefully, at least as the Christian historians would have it remembered. Eusebius and Sozomen recorded the peaceful seizure of temple wealth under Constantine, but this was not to last. Following the pattern noted by Lenski, Constantine's policy went too far, and granted too much leeway to Christians,

⁸⁶ Lib., *Or.* 30.8.

⁸⁷ Sozomen, *Ec. Hist.* 2.5.

⁸⁸ Soz., *Ec. Hist.* 2.5.

prompting them to later assert their identity at the expense of pagans violently and, as Libanius recorded, illegally.⁸⁹

Constantine's seizure of temple wealth constituted a major setback for pagans. Shrines and temples lost great quantities of moveable property and wealth, as Libanius confirms, claiming that, as a result of Constantine's policy, "poverty reigned in the temples."⁹⁰ Wealth was crucial for the function of temples. It supplied the resources necessary for regular sacrifice as well as payment for priests. Constantine's seizure of wealth made the basic functionality of temples far more difficult, in addition to diminishing their social influence. Though this would contribute to the overall decline of paganism over the course of the following centuries, wealth seizure did not put an end to paganism or to pagan worship. Temples and shrines were left standing, and still contained those sacred treasures, which, for whatever reason, Constantine's representatives left behind, either by mistake or as purposeful subversion.⁹¹

The more immediate result of this wealth seizure was the massive conversion of temple property into public and private property. The wealth that Constantine seized either ended up paying for and adorning Constantinople, or in his own private purse, the *res privata*.⁹² From the *res privata* the emperor could redistribute land and wealth through sale or gifts. Libanius recorded that Constantine "presented his courtiers with gifts of temples, as though it were a present of a horse, a slave, a dog or a golden goblet."⁹³ Libanius clearly held a pagan bias, but his comment suggests that at the very least Constantine gave gifts to those around him. The emperor willingly used the resources of the *res privata* for any purposes he saw fit. One of the most

⁸⁹ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 206.

⁹⁰ Lib., *Or.* 30.6.

⁹¹ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 169.

⁹² Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 170.

⁹³ Lib., *Or.* 30.38.

significant purposes for Constantine was funding the construction of churches, as well as providing them luxurious gifts and endowments.

Church-Building

Churches served as the civic space within which clerics and bishops exercised their newfound powers and privileges as a result of Constantine's legislation as well as his redistribution of wealth to the Church. They became the foci of Christian and imperial business alike as Constantine constructed and lavishly endowed many across the empire.

Constantine strongly encouraged church-building from the very beginning of his reign. From the *res privata* he contributed the funds and resources necessary for the construction and adornment of new churches throughout the empire. Though he only began seizing wealth from pagan shrines and temples in the latter half of his reign, historical sources imply that this seizure was directly connected to his program of church-building.

Few cities could exemplify the wealth and prestige that Constantine funneled into the Church as well as Rome. The *Liber Pontificalis*, a book of biographies of the popes written between the sixth and ninth centuries, records that Constantine constructed no fewer than seven new churches in the city.⁹⁴ More important were the gifts he bestowed upon them. Lavish and ornate, the gifts to these churches alone totaled to 2,965 pounds in gold dedications, and 19,832 pounds in silver dedications.⁹⁵ One need only read a page of the *Liber Pontificalis* to get a sense of the vast wealth. It records, for example, that the grand basilica *Constantiniana* received 1,232 lbs. in gold dedications, and 11,525 lbs. in silver dedications.⁹⁶ One of the comparatively less

⁹⁴ *Liber Pontificalis*, 34.

⁹⁵ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 185, table, Constantinian Church Foundations in the *Liber Pontificalis*.

⁹⁶ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 185, table, Constantinian Church Foundations in the *Liber Pontificalis*.

wealthy basilicas he constructed, the basilica to St. Agnes, received from the emperor a 10 lb. gold chalice, a 15 lb. chandelier, and five silver chalices each weighing 10 lbs., among many other gifts.⁹⁷ Even more important than the lavish gifts in gold and silver dedications was the gift of lands and estates. To the basilica to St. Agnes Constantine gave annual revenues from nearby estates totaling 9.6 lbs. of gold per year, and to the basilica *Constantiniana* he gave 202 lbs. of gold per year.⁹⁸ Such actions were unprecedented before Constantine had assumed power. Emperors had never supported the construction of Christian churches or given them grants of land. Save for the emperor Julian, future emperors throughout the rest of the century, as well as several centuries after, would continue Constantine's pattern of Church patronage. What should not be lost on the reader, however, is the sudden acquisition of status, wealth, and power on the part of the Church. Due directly to Constantine's gifts, the Church in Rome and across the empire became an institution of wealth on the same level as the Roman aristocracy. One indicator of such wealth was the rapid increase in commissioned Christian sarcophagi over the course of the fourth century.⁹⁹ Christians increasingly grew more ostentatious and confident in their public displays of wealth, due directly to Constantine's laws and endowments.

As noted previously, Constantine constructed and adorned basilicas across the empire. In addition to the capital city, he built churches in the other imperial capitals. He provided the funds and resources for the construction of churches at Circa, Trier, Antioch, Nicomedia, and Constantinople, cities spanning across the empire.¹⁰⁰ The emperor also supplied lavish

⁹⁷ *Liber Pontificalis*, 34.

⁹⁸ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 185, table, Constantinian Church Foundations in the *Liber Pontificalis*. The monetary and financial systems of the later Roman Empire were very unstable, and so it is difficult to put these values in perspective. Suffice it to say that these were significant sums. See; Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire AD 284-430* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 115-117.

⁹⁹ T.D. Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 25.

¹⁰⁰ Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 246.

endowments for these churches. The connection between the imperial capitals and new churches was significant. Emperors frequently moved between the capitals as they administered the empire. For Constantine to construct churches in cities with a frequent imperial presence meant to associate Christianity with the imperial administration. Moreover, Constantine constructed various churches in Italy on land traditionally associated with the emperor. The *Basilica Constantiniana* stood over the barracks of Maxentius's horse guard, the church of Santi Marcellino e Pietro stood over the burial ground of Maxentius's horse guard, and the church of San Lorenzo stood on land which had previously been owned by the imperial treasury.¹⁰¹ Constantine sought to associate Christianity with the imperial administration while simultaneously coopting and Christianizing the locales of his pagan predecessor.

The emperor also sought out sites specifically associated with Christianity and built churches there, in the process essentially creating the Holy Land. Eusebius recorded the excavation of the Holy Sepulchre, as well as Constantine's reaction: "the Emperor next gave orders by the stipulations of pious laws and by generous grants for a place of worship worthy of God to be built with rich and imperial munificence around the Saviour's cave."¹⁰² He also constructed another church at Mamre, where God had appeared to Abraham: "he ordered a place of worship to be built in honour of the God who was seen there."¹⁰³ His mother, Helena, built a church near Bethlehem to celebrate the Savior's birth, and one on the Mount of Olives to celebrate His ascension.¹⁰⁴ Constantine had initiated an empire-wide program of church-building that constructed the Holy Land and resulted in a massive influx of wealth to the Church.

¹⁰¹ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 182-187.

¹⁰² *Life*, 3.29.

¹⁰³ *Life*, 3.51.

¹⁰⁴ *Life*, 3.41-43.

Important to note, however, is that while Constantine initiated this empire-wide program, he served more as a facilitator of church construction than as the originator. More often than not, churches were built on a basis of petition and response. Eusebius preserved a letter written by Constantine, which circulated throughout the provinces, encouraging local clergymen to build or improve churches:

Where therefore you yourself are in charge of churches, or know other bishops and presbyters or deacons to be locally in charge of them, remind them to attend to the church buildings, whether by restoring or enlarging the existing ones, or where necessary building new. You yourself and the others through you shall ask for the necessary supplies from the governors and the office of the Prefect, for these have been directed to cooperate wholeheartedly with what your holiness proposes.¹⁰⁵

Constantine openly encouraged bishops across the empire to build or improve churches, and he made supplies available to them from his own resources. Indeed, some churches in Rome were built at the behest of the bishop Silvester, or Constantia, Constantine's daughter, and not Constantine himself.¹⁰⁶

Though Constantine had been building churches since he controlled the West, his accession to sole ruler of the empire in 324, and subsequent seizure of temple wealth, especially around the year 330, brought new funds from which the emperor could supply local bishops with resources for their beautification and construction projects. Eunapius, a pagan sophist living in the fourth century, drew the connection between Constantine's destruction of temples and construction of Christian churches, and considered them interrelated.¹⁰⁷ The sixth-century Byzantine historian Theophanes recorded a similar passage from the fourth-century ecclesiastical historian Philostorgius: "In this year [329/30] the devout Constantine increased his efforts to

¹⁰⁵ *Life*, 2.46.

¹⁰⁶ *Liber Pont.* 34; basilica to St. Peter the Apostle built at the request of Silvester; basilica to St. Agnes built at the request of Constantia.

¹⁰⁷ Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 6.1.5.

destroy the idols and their temples, and he destroyed them in place after place. He gave their revenues to the churches of God.”¹⁰⁸ At the same time that Constantine was taking wealth from pagan temples, he was funneling it into the Church in the form of dedications of precious metals, estate revenues, and, as the next section will discuss, grain doles. Parallel to the waning wealth, power, and influence of the temples was the rising wealth, power, and influence of the churches, and of the Church.

The Civic Church

Though Constantine took measures to enrich the Church with material wealth, he also provided the bishops a valuable new avenue to power: food. In the *Life*, Eusebius glosses over Constantine’s contribution of grain doles to the churches, but he does suggest that it occurred: “to the churches of God in particular he was exceptionally generous in his provision, in one place bestowing estates, and elsewhere grain allowances to feed poor men, orphan children, and women in distress.”¹⁰⁹ The ecclesiastical historian Theodoret (c. 393- c.458) provides another description, taking place immediately after the Council of Nicaea in 325: “After the conclusion of the feast, he again presented other gifts to them [the attending bishops]. He then wrote to the governors of the provinces, directing that money should be given in every city to orphans and widows, and to those who were consecrated to the divine service.”¹¹⁰ An emperor providing grain rations or funds for grain rations to a city was nothing new. Constantine, however, for the first time gave the bishops a leading role in civic affairs by leaving them responsible for grain distribution. Never before had the Church served as a middleman for distributing grain.

¹⁰⁸ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 170.

¹⁰⁹ *Life*, 4.28.

¹¹⁰ Theodoret, *Ec. Hist.*, 1.11.

Constantine opened new avenues to power for the bishops via the social influence that being responsible for grain distribution supplied. Important to note is that this new function of the bishops did not end with Constantine. The *Chronicon Paschale*, a chronicle of the world written during the seventh century, records that Constantius (sole Augustus 350-361), Constantine's son and successor, allotted huge amounts of grain to Constantinople "for the sustenance of the aforementioned [clergy, virgins, widows] and of the beggars, and orphans, and prisoners, he added a corn allocation of greater size than that which his father Constantine had bestowed."¹¹¹ The emperors who succeeded Constantine continued to provide, in addition to lavish gifts and material wealth, grain doles to the churches for the benefit of the clergy and those they served. Constantine made the Church responsible for social welfare based on Christian virtues, subsuming the limited power of the temples to do the same based on the pagan past.

We have already seen that Constantine provided material wealth to the Church, as well as yearly revenues from estates. He also funneled specie into the Church from his private accounts, allotting clergymen yearly revenues in coin. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius preserved a letter written by Constantine in 313 to Caecilianus, the bishop of Carthage. Constantine told the bishop that the imperial account manager had been ordered to move three thousand *folles*, bronze or copper coins, to him [the bishop] to distribute among the clergy. He added that Caecilianus should write to the procurator of the *res privata* to request more if needed.¹¹² To give some scale of this amount, historians' calculations estimate that the sum, distributed only to the clergymen of Carthage, could have purchased enough grain to feed over seven thousand people per year.¹¹³ Even so, Constantine openly encouraged the bishops to request further funds and resources if

¹¹¹ *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 545.

¹¹² Eus., *Ec. Hist.*, 10.6.

¹¹³ Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 176.

necessary. Bishops and clergymen suddenly took on an enormous role in the civic landscape. They accumulated vast sums of wealth and distributed grain to widows, orphans, and the homeless. Sozomen gave an illuminating picture regarding the new role of the clergy within the civic space: “He [Constantine] enacted that part of the funds levied from tributary countries should be forwarded by the various cities to the bishops and clergy, wherever they might be domiciled.”¹¹⁴ Constantine sought to assimilate the clergy with typical civic leaders, and did so by appropriating wealth from the civic treasury and distributing it to them. The effects were startling. Between 317 and 337 more Christians than pagans were appointed to the prefecture of Rome.¹¹⁵ A law promulgated by Constantius in 343 continued the tradition of encouraging clergy to act as civic leaders by providing them with tax exemptions.¹¹⁶

All of the above-mentioned privileges and wealth given to the clergy by Constantine and his successors created a new class of Christian elites, possessing wealth and social influence. Wealth, as mentioned previously, had been crucial for basic temple functions. It was no less important for Christians, and in fact those Christians who possessed wealth possessed a great deal of social influence as a result. One account records that the congregation of a rich Christian followed him in switching to a heretical branch of Christianity based on considerations of his assets and financial status.¹¹⁷ Constantine’s provision of vast amounts of wealth as well as food to the Church brought it into a new light in the public eye. The bishops in particular received the greatest share, and even attracted the attention of local pagan nobles. Augustine (354-430) remarked in 411 that the bishops “are thought to use and enjoy church property as if they owned

¹¹⁴ Soz., *Ec. Hist.*, 1.8.

¹¹⁵ Barnes, *Constantine*, 25.

¹¹⁶ *Theodosian Code*, 16.2.8; though other scholars suggest that the clergy received tax exemptions in laws under Constantine which are no longer extant. See; R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 49.

¹¹⁷ *Acts of Peter*, 8.

it themselves.”¹¹⁸ The material benefits of becoming a bishop were clear. Jerome (c. 347-420) recorded the quip of the senator Praetextatus that if he could be bishop he would happily become a Christian.¹¹⁹ Pagan nobles noted the advantages of becoming a high-ranking Christian, and, as evidenced by Constantine’s above-mentioned law regulating the beneficiaries of curial service exemption, as well as Eusebius’s remark on the disingenuous entering the Church, attempted to assimilate. The Church became a haven for rich and poor alike, each seeking the advantages which being a Christian bestowed as a result of Constantine’s legislation and the influx of wealth into the Church, changing the very nature of Christianity in the process.

One of the clearest indications that the Church had become a source of power and influence was the accusation of corruption against its members. Athanasius (c. 298-373), the bishop of Alexandria, records that he himself was accused of such:

A quantity of corn was given by the father of the Emperors for the support of certain widows, partly of Libya, and partly certain out of Egypt. They have all received it up to this time, Athanasius getting nothing therefrom, but the trouble of assisting them. But now, although the recipients themselves make no complaint, but acknowledge that they have received it, Athanasius has been accused of selling all the corn, and appropriating the profits to his own use.¹²⁰

As a result of handling vast quantities of food and wealth, bishops became the foci for corruption charges. Though pagan, and thus biased against Christians, Libanius hinted at both the material advantages of the Christians as well as the corruption of them, claiming that they “eat more than elephants and, by the quantities of drink they consume, weary those that accompany their drinking with the singing of hymns, who hide these excesses under an artificially contrived

¹¹⁸ MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 53.

¹¹⁹ H.A. Drake, “Speaking of Power: Christian Redefinition of the Imperial Role in the Fourth Century,” in *Contested Monarchy: Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD*, ed. Johannes Wienand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 305.

¹²⁰ Athanasius, *Apology Against the Arians*, 18.2.

pallor.”¹²¹ Constantine had enriched the churches and created a new class of wealthy and powerful Christians as a result.

Conclusion

Under Constantine, Christians in general and clergymen in particular gained tremendous new advantages in material wealth and civic privileges. His laws gave the bishops a new civic function, in addition to making the position of bishop desirable for the exemption from curial services that it entailed. The emperor took vast amounts of wealth from pagan temples across the empire, and used it to establish new churches and provide them with lavish gifts, endowments, and grain rations, simultaneously weakening the influence of the temples and strengthening that of the churches, and especially the bishops. He created a new class of Christian aristocrats in the form of bishops and lower clergymen. As a direct result of Constantine’s policy, clergymen assumed leading roles in the cities, distributing grain and caring for the widows and orphans. They accumulated wealth and used church lands and gifted estates freely, as their own property, to such an extent as to prompt charges of corruption against them. Constantine had elevated the Christians and empowered the bishops. He created the class which would oversee economic, political, religious, and artistic affairs across Europe for centuries.

¹²¹ Lib., *Or.* 30.8.

Chapter III: Changing Perceptions of History and Culture

The rise of Constantine as Roman emperor, along with the simultaneous legalization of Christianity within the empire, brought a radical shift in Christians' perceptions of history and their place in the world. They suddenly found themselves in an empire whose leader supported them after a decade of harsh persecutions. With the legalization of Christianity, Christian writers demonstrated a new zeal and fervor, claiming their history as being that which was inevitably moving towards the triumph of Christianity, a linear, teleological, Christian history.¹²² Such a different historical perspective necessarily provoked Christians to reevaluate traditional Roman values, expressing more vocally such Christian values as charity, care for the poor, and modesty. Eusebius most of all embodies the above changes, and indeed is responsible for much of the Christianization that occurred in the empire at this time, as this chapter will demonstrate.

Changing Sense of History

This new kind of history is most easily seen in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, the forerunner of future Christian histories. Eusebius was imprisoned during the persecution under the tetrarchs, and later went on to become the bishop of Caesarea.¹²³ He may have served as Constantine's chief theological adviser, though it is unclear how frequently the two actually interacted.¹²⁴ Eusebius certainly presented himself as having shared a close relationship with the

¹²² A note on the sources: I have primarily, for the purposes of this chapter, chosen to work with those sources such as Eusebius and Lactantius who found themselves within Constantine's inner circle, rather than a wide swathe of Christian writers. I have done this in order to better enter into the conversation of the role of Constantine and the cultural circle which surrounded him in shaping the new Christian perspective which this chapter addresses. While most historiography dealing with this time period focuses on the figure of Constantine himself, in this thesis I merely attempt to demonstrate that, purposely or not, Constantine and the cultural circle around him did take on a significant role in shaping the Christian culture which would come to dominate East and West.

¹²³ *Ec. Hist.* Intro ix-x.

¹²⁴ *Ec. Hist.* Intro xi. Though T.D. Barnes takes issue with such a title, believing the two to not have been very close. See; T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 265-266.

emperor in his *Life of Constantine*.¹²⁵ A work of considerable research, the *Ecclesiastical History* sought to “record in writing the successions of the sacred apostles;” however, in so doing “the real antiquity and divine character of Christianity will be equally demonstrated to those who suppose that it is recent and foreign, appearing no earlier than yesterday.”¹²⁶ Eusebius’s purpose was very clear: he intended to show the ancient roots of Christianity in history since the supposed dawn of Abraham two millennia ago.¹²⁷

With the rise of a Christian emperor, or at the very least one who tolerated the Christian faith, Christians could for the first time see themselves and their time as the culmination of all of history. Eusebius in particular worked hard to show, as he wrote, “the ancient history of our teaching, and the antiquity of the dogmas of the Christian life according to the Gospel.”¹²⁸ Thus, for Eusebius:

Him [Christ] even from the creation of mankind did all who are said to have been pre-eminent in righteousness and virtuous piety recognize by the contemplation of the pure eyes of the mind, and pay him the reverence due to a child of God; thus did Moses, the great servant, and his fellows, and even before him Abraham, the first, and his children, and all the righteous and prophets who have since appeared.¹²⁹

This was the Christian history, a line of faith based on the teachings of Jesus that went back to the very foundations of the Jewish nation, which originally recognized God. The *Ecclesiastical History* codified Biblical history into a Christian history.

Even more important for analyzing the changing perceptions of history on the part of Christians is the fact that Eusebius, as well as other writers like Lactantius, saw the arrival of

¹²⁵ In addition to the various letters to Eusebius from Constantine preserved in the *Life*, whether personal or imperially-circulated, Eusebius mentions that the emperor himself personally told Eusebius various stories from his reign. See; *Life* 1.28.1, and 2.8.2.

¹²⁶ *Ec. Hist.* 1.1-1.2.

¹²⁷ For a more in depth analysis of the works of Eusebius and their relation to Constantine, see; T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

¹²⁸ *Ec. Hist.* 2.0.

¹²⁹ *Ec. Hist.* 1.2.

Christianity in the empire as inevitable and ordained by God. The *telos* of human history was the successful rise of Christianity. Mosaic Law had softened the minds of the pagan heathen, turning savagery into cooperation: “Then, at last, when all men, fitted for the benefits prepared for them beforehand, for the reception of knowledge of the Father, then again that same divine and heavenly Logos of God, the teacher of virtues, the minister of the Father in all good things, appeared at the beginning of the Roman Empire through man.”¹³⁰ Eusebius even attributed the initial lackadaisical response on the part the emperor Tiberius to the formal beginning of Christianity to God: “For heavenly providence had designed putting this in his mind in order that the word of the Gospel might have an unimpeded beginnings, and traverse the earth in all directions.”¹³¹ For Eusebius, Christianity had long ago been preordained for success and proselytization. The *Ecclesiastical History* presented a straight line of theological-historical descent from the Hebrews down to the Christians contemporaneous with Eusebius. This was the new history of the Christians which would take hold throughout the Middle Ages. This was not, however, yet the epitome of Eusebian history. That came only with his *Life of Constantine*.

The *Life of Constantine*, one of the most important sources on Constantine, presented what Eusebius saw as the culmination of all of history, that is, the rise of a Christian emperor.¹³² “This is what ancient oracles of prophets, transmitted in Scripture, predict,” he wrote, “when Constantine, alone among all those who have ruled the Roman Empire, became a friend of the

¹³⁰ *Ec. Hist.* 1.2.

¹³¹ *Ec. Hist.* 2.2. Kirsopp Lake, the translator of the *Ecclesiastical History*, comments that it seems Eusebius intended to attribute this quote to Tertullian, however it is itself not found in the Latin manuscripts. Even if he was referencing Tertullian, he was doing so in support of Tertullian’s comment, and so the point stands.

¹³² There are two things or import to note: 1) It is far beyond the scope of this thesis, and possibly that of the historian, to attempt to put together any truthful interpretation of Constantine’s personal faith. What matters for our purposes is his own sense of being Christian as well as others’ perceptions of such; 2) Though of strong historical value, the *Life* was never completed in the manner Eusebius intended before his death. It was edited and published by someone else, and so its purpose is split between panegyric and an account of Constantine’s own religious actions. See Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 265.

all-sovereign God, and was established as a clear example to all mankind of the life of godliness.”¹³³ The *Life* was written partly as a panegyric, as is immediately obvious to those familiar with the genre, and so scholars must be wary to distinguish between Eusebius’s true feelings and the panegyric style. Given his beliefs regarding the rest of history, however, as evidenced in the *Ecclesiastical History*, it seems that we may consider the above statement to be an accurate representation of Eusebius’s historical narrative.

Just as the coming of God in the form of Jesus was prophesied long ago, in Eusebius’s view, so too was it inevitable that history would culminate in the arrival of a Christian emperor. Contributing to this sense of the inevitability of the rise of Christianity was Eusebius’s implicit comparison of Moses and Constantine.¹³⁴ Moses grew up among tyrants as a child, but was provided for by God until he could lead the oppressed Hebrews out of Egypt. Similarly, Constantine grew up among the ‘tyrannical’ tetrarchs, and was protected by God until he could lead the Romans to freedom from tyranny under the mantle of God. And just as the success of Moses had been promised by God, so too was Constantine’s accession.

The *Chronicle*, another work completed by the prolific Eusebius, visually demonstrated the rise of Christianity as the culmination of history in a more tabular than narrative style. Dividing the millennia since Abraham into collated decades using the two chronological measures from Abraham and of the Olympiad years, cross-referenced with lists of Persian kings, Eusebius attempted to visually show the progression of history.¹³⁵ He recorded the creation of

¹³³ *Life*, 1.2.4.

¹³⁴ *Life*, 1.12. The passage is too long to quote, and it will do us no good to divide this particular one up. I have therefore summarized it in the body. Of note is that this is not the only comparison Eusebius makes between Moses and Constantine, but perhaps the most useful in demonstrating Eusebius’s views on the inevitable rise of Christianity.

¹³⁵ Anthony Grafton, and Megan Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 137; Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Chronicle of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition* (London: Associated University Presses, 1979), 35.

cities, inventions, the worship of false gods, wars, and the names and dates of the kings and political leaders of all known societies.¹³⁶ Visually, this displayed the rise of fall of successive kingdoms and empires, of various poets and philosophers, all while leading to the rise of the Roman Empire and of Christianity. As Eusebius would put it, Rome remained because it had been ordained to as a result of Christianity's rise within the empire.

Important to note is that as crucially valuable as Eusebius as an author is historically, he was but one in a series of innovators in considering this sort of Christian history and developing means of displaying it in manuscript form.¹³⁷ Before Eusebius, and serving as a model for his own *Chronicle*, Origen (185-254) wrote the *Hexapla*, which recorded the Old Testament in parallel columns. Origen's correspondent, Julius Africanus (160-240), reworked history in purely Christian terms.¹³⁸ Eusebius, the self-acclaimed successor to Origen, used Origen's work to construct a similar manuscript history of human civilization. And as opposed to Julius Africanus, he included secular material, constructing a Christian history that melded with the societies of the past. Origen and Julius, however, had written their works before witnessing Christianity's rise in the Constantinian era, and thus lacked the historical culmination that Eusebius was able to emphasize so strongly. His *Chronicle* would go on to become one of the most important sources for students and professionals of Christianity and civilization alike for centuries.¹³⁹ This was due in part to the acceptance of Christians and Christian thought promoted by Constantine's accession. He patronized the Church and most likely gave Eusebius access to resources which Origen and Julius had to go without. While Eusebius was not the first writer to establish a sense

¹³⁶ Anthony Grafton, and Megan Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 137.

¹³⁷ Though outside the scope of this thesis, Eusebius, along with the Christian intellectuals before him, like Origen, helped develop the modern manuscript, codex style of writing, replacing the earlier style of writing on scrolls.

¹³⁸ Grafton and William, *Transformation of the Book*, 142-148.

¹³⁹ Grafton and William, *Transformation of the Book*, 138.

of history culminating in the rise of Christianity, he was one of the most prolific and significant, promulgating a conception that would be maintained for centuries, largely due to Constantine's patronage of Christianity.

Eusebius's works were also crucial in their preservation of documentary evidence, such as the *Oration to the Assembly of Saints* by Constantine. Serving as the fifth book of the *Life*, Eusebius appended the *Oration* to the *Life* "so that none may think our assertions about his [Constantine's] speeches to be mere rhetoric."¹⁴⁰ Though of unknown date and occasion, the *Oration* is typically accepted by historians as a genuine speech by Constantine to an assembly of bishops.¹⁴¹ Preserving documentary evidence had not previously been a staple of either Roman or Christian history-writing. That Eusebius used documentary evidence to support his works was supremely innovative in the historical field.¹⁴² Medieval historians and chroniclers later took up this trend, though to a lesser extent than Eusebius.

Similarly to Eusebius, if unsurprisingly, Constantine too viewed history as unfolding due only to God: "So let us make these statements as a confirmation that nothing occurs without mind or reason, and that reason and providence are God."¹⁴³ Whether it was God who provided the fruits of agriculture, such as olive oil and wine, or those of the precious metals in the earth, or whether it was He that decreed that Moses crush Pharaoh, Constantine presents God in the *Oration* as the end-all and be-all of history.¹⁴⁴ Also of note regarding the *Oration* as well as the

¹⁴⁰ *Life*, 4.32.

¹⁴¹ M. Edwards, *Constantine and Christendom* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), ix. For a discussion of the possible dates for the *Oration*, see H.A. Drake, "Suggestions of Date in Constantine's *Oration to the Saints*," *American Journal of Philology* 106 (1985), though Drake believes, as do I, that the exact date is unimportant for analyzing the Christian themes.

¹⁴² Grafton and William, *Transformation of the Book*, 134-135.

¹⁴³ *Oration*, 8.

¹⁴⁴ *Oration*, 7-8, 16.

Ecclesiastical History is that both sources make passing reference to Babylon as a metaphor for vice, a notion on which Augustine would later write heavily.¹⁴⁵

Lactantius's *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* stands as the last major Christian work contemporary with Constantine and Eusebius. It is particularly useful here for its cultural insights into the period 303-313. During the tetrarchy the reigning emperors launched a final wave of Christian persecutions across the empire, demanding that Christians worship in accordance with the state religion. Lactantius's work dealt with, as its title would suggest, the deaths of the persecutors, namely, all of the persecuting tetrarchs as well as older persecuting emperors, from Nero to Valerian. Important to note is the manner in which Lactantius treated these deaths. Just as Eusebius and Constantine held notions of the inevitability of the rise of Christianity, so too did Lactantius regarding the fall of the persecutors: "Those who had outraged God lie prostrate; those who had overturned His holy temple have themselves fallen in even greater ruin; those who had butchered the righteous have now after blows from heaven and agonies which they had earned yielded up their guilty souls."¹⁴⁶ With the end of the persecution and the rise of Constantine, Christian history was no longer about the glory of martyrdom as it had previously been; it was now about the spread and flourishing of Christian teachings, about the deaths of those who opposed them, and the rise of their imperial champion. "God vanquished all the persecutors of His Name," wrote Lactantius.¹⁴⁷ These sources all expressed a significant amount of optimism about the future, as well as a sense that the past was always going to work out the way it had. There was no other way history could have transpired besides with the triumph of Christianity.

¹⁴⁵ *Ec. Hist.*, 2.15. *Oration*, 16.

¹⁴⁶ *On the Deaths*, 1.5.

¹⁴⁷ *On the Deaths*, 50.1.

Comparing this history-writing to that of earlier pagan Roman historians, such as Livy or Tacitus, reveals that Christian perceptions of their place in the world had markedly changed the way history was being written in the empire. Tacitus (58-117) wrote the *Annals* seeking to challenge the autocracy under which he lived, as evidenced by some of his opening comments: “The histories of Tiberius, Caius, Claudius, and Nero, while they were in power, were falsified through terror, and after their death were written under the irritation of a recent hatred. Hence my purpose is to relate a few facts...without either bitterness or partiality.”¹⁴⁸ Livy (c. 59 BCE-17 CE), too, sought to provide a history of Rome’s decline from moral righteousness.¹⁴⁹ Both historians wrote secularly, and on a wide variety of topics, from administration, to war, to the character of the leaders. As opposed to such political and moralizing history-writing, in the Constantinian period, we are left with this description by Eusebius:

The greatest, the imperial parts of the history of the Thriceblessed, his encounters and battles in war, his valiant deeds and victories and routing of enemies, and how many triumphs he won, his peacetime decrees for the welfare of the state and the benefit of the individual, and the legal enactments which he imposed for the improvement of the life of his subjects, and most of his other acts as Emperor, and those which everybody remembers, I intend to omit. My purpose in the present work is to put into words and write down what relates to the life which is dear to God.¹⁵⁰

Eusebius, along with other Christian historians of his time, tended to write more with the content described above in mind; that is, not the ruling and administrative affairs of the empire, but simply those things the emperors did that was pleasing to God.

¹⁴⁸ A.J. Church, and W.J. Brodribb, trans. *The Annals of Tacitus* (New York: Everyman’s, 2009), 1.1.

¹⁴⁹ Livy. *On the Founding of the City*. Perseus Digital Library 1 pr. 9.

¹⁵⁰ *Life*, 1.11.1.

Christianity and Roman Culture

The Constantinian era also saw the Christian appropriation¹⁵¹ of various aspects of traditional Roman heritage and culture, transforming Roman and Christian culture in the process. The *Oration* presents the most obvious evidence for such a phenomenon. In discussing notions of truth and Christianity, Constantine quoted lines from Virgil (70 BCE-19 BCE):

‘Tiphys shall come again, and, glad with heroes,
A new Thessalian Argo. Greece and Troy,
Tried by a new Achilles, fight again.’

Well said, O wisest of poets!...you set forth the truth in a secure and guarded manner, so far as was possible.¹⁵²

Here Constantine quoted lines from Virgil (he does so several times in the *Oration*) in front of an audience of primarily Eastern bishops. Virgil had no relation to the Christian religion, and yet Constantine referenced his works several times in a speech dedicated to the Christian religion. It is clear that Constantine was attempting to force associations between the Roman cultural canon and Christian culture.¹⁵³ Similarly, Constantine made an association between the Erythraean Sibyl and Jesus: “she foretold in words what was to happen with respect to God, plainly revealing by the prefixing of the initial letters, which is called an acrostic, the history of Jesus’ descent.”¹⁵⁴ Here again, Constantine made implicit associations between such a traditionally

¹⁵¹ The term “appropriation” may sound too one-sided, or maybe even too anachronistic, however I have elected to use it anyway to describe the changing Christian, as well as Roman, culture of this period, due to the rhetorical use of such historically memorable and important figures as Plato without fully giving their arguments by our various Christian sources. I do not use it as a judgmental but rather an analytical term.

¹⁵² *Oration*, 20; Worth noting is Edwards’s humorous footnote to this passage: “What Greek, even if forging an oration on behalf of a Latin speaker, would have given such an accolade to Virgil?”

¹⁵³ Whether he does so purposely or not, and whether he truly believes it, is, as with his personal religion, not supremely relevant to our consideration of Christian and Roman culture on the whole. His motives do not matter, rather, simply that he said this and made such an association is what matters.

¹⁵⁴ *Oration*, 18.

Roman figure as the Sibyl, and Christianity, by reading into the acrostic arrangement of her lines of prophecy.

No longer was there either a unified Roman or Christian culture; the Romans (pagans that is) could no longer exclusively claim their cultural canon for themselves, nor could the Christians any longer function outside of Roman society while constantly referencing traditionally Roman works and figures. Instead, the Constantinian era witnessed the amalgamation of the two cultures, a messy process of exchange. Lactantius even invoked the foundational name of “Romulus” to criticize the tetrarch Maximian: “From then on he began to behave with the greatest insolence, wanting both to appear and to be called the son of Mars as if he were a second Romulus.”¹⁵⁵ He invoked Romulus both as a Christian criticizing a persecutor, and as a Roman criticizing a tyrant. Lactantius in many ways stands as a model of this process of cultural exchange.

Christians not only attempted to make the Roman cultural canon theirs, but also the philosophical, academic culture of the East. The Church father Tertullian (c. 155- c. 240) once famously expressed: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” His question was one that Church fathers, including Eusebius, would address for decades: How do Christians reconcile the Hellenistic cultural heritage of the East with the religious heritage of the Christians? For such Church fathers as Clement (150-215), and Origen (185-254), along with Eusebius, the answer was by synthesis.¹⁵⁶ Writing on Philo, a prominent Jewish philosopher who had lived in Alexandria, Eusebius extolled his learning: “it is not necessary to say anything of his position in philosophy and the liberal studies of the heathen world since he is related to have surpassed all

¹⁵⁵ *On the Deaths* 9.9.

¹⁵⁶ Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 1.

his contemporaries, especially in his zeal for the study of Plato and Pythagoras.”¹⁵⁷ In addition to appropriating Plato and Pythagoras, two foundational figures in Western thought, into Christian culture, this comment, very haughtily too, conflated philosophy and “the liberal studies of the heathen world” with Christian culture, as the heathens could never hope to surpass the intellectual vigor of Christians like Philo. “And Plato himself, who excelled all others in gentleness and first accustomed human intellects to revert from the sensible to the intelligible,” said Constantine, “did well when he postulated the god above being...but in what follows he is found to err from the truth, introducing a host of gods and assigning a form to each.”¹⁵⁸ The above references to the intellectual and philosophical canon of the East do not so much serve as examples of Christians simply accepting such cultural facets so much as examples of Christian writers using historical individuals for their own rhetorical benefit in discoursing about God and Christianity.

One of the last comments made by Eusebius in the *Ecclesiastical History* demonstrates that the development of Christian culture was rarely, if ever uniform. In recounting a heresy which had developed in the Church, he wrote, quoting another author: “If anyone adduced to them [the heretical sect] a text of divine Scripture they inquire whether it can be put in the form of a conjunctive or a disjunctive syllogism...Some of them, forsooth, study the geometry of Euclid and admire Aristotle and Theophrastus. Galen perhaps is even worshipped by some of them.”¹⁵⁹ Clearly, Eastern learning was not universally admired or rhetorically used by all Christians. While this passage could be interpreted as a flat rejection of Eastern learning and

¹⁵⁷ *Ec. Hist.*, 2.4.

¹⁵⁸ *Oration*, 9.

¹⁵⁹ *Ec. Hist.* 5.28. Lake’s [the translator’s] footnote to this passage may elucidate us: “Apparently the meaning of the passage is that these persons tried to introduce Greek learning generally into the interpretation of Scripture. Though little noted at the time or since, their rejection by the Church is perhaps one of the turning-points of history.”

culture on the part of the Church, the translator's comment that the heretics wanted to use Greek learning in the interpretation of Scripture may challenge such an assumption. Rather, it seems that Greek learning was acceptable for Christians as long as it was not applied to Scripture, but only used for more general religious discourse. Either way, however, Eusebius's comment demonstrates that there was not one simple, uniform Christian culture developing before, during, or after Constantine's reign, but instead an unequal diffusion of Roman and Christian cultures that went into forming personal identities. Even more importantly, his comment shows that Christians were aware that there were some who were applying Eastern learning to Scripture, or to rhetoric, and that this development of Christian culture and consciousness was something happening that people felt.

Christian Values

Along with such a significant change in Christians' perceptions of themselves and their culture came a changing set of values. Eusebius, Lactantius, and Constantine made it clear that the values of the empire were changing. Traditional Roman values were being appropriated by Christians, new, Christian values were entering into the mainstream, and increasingly, educated elites were expected to know and be able to quote the Bible as any other classical text, such as the *Iliad*.

Even before the Constantinian period Christians attempted to assimilate, as best they could relative to their lack of ability to participate in the state religion, their own values with traditional Roman life. Pliny the Younger (61-113) asked Trajan (r. 98-117) what he should do about the Christians who seemed fairly guiltless of any crime:

They [the Christians] maintained, however, that all that their guilt or error involved was that they were accustomed to assemble at dawn on a fixed day, to sing a hymn

antiphonally to Christ as God, and to bind themselves by an oath, not for the commission of some crime, but to avoid acts of theft, brigandage, and adultery, not to break their word, and not to withhold money deposited with them when asked for it.¹⁶⁰

The above passage demonstrates that Christians had been, on the whole, amiable to following traditional Roman rules and laws. But the persecutions of the third and fourth centuries had left them isolated from traditional Romans. Thus, when they finally had the imperial support to do so, Christians did not simply abandon entirely the values of the empire, but instead appropriated them for themselves under a Christian framework. Both Eusebius and Lactantius, for instance, put great value on freedom. In relating the capture of the emperor Valerian (r. 253-260) by the Sassanians Lactantius writes that he “lost not just the imperial office which he had arrogantly misused, but even the freedom of which he had deprived everyone else; he lived most ignominiously in servitude.”¹⁶¹ Eusebius too, writing on Constantine’s battle with Maxentius, commented that Constantine was “claiming for the Romans their ancestral liberties.”¹⁶² Clearly, to both writers, freedom and liberty, those quintessentially Roman values, were still esteemed as Christian values, versus the servitude and tyranny which both authors relate as their antitheses. Christianity did not represent a break with the past so much as the purposeful self-selection of shifting values.

With the accession of Constantine, while Christians adopted Roman values, Christian values also entered mainstream Roman society. Though none of the sources makes explicit all the values novel to Christianity, a subject covered by the theological developments of the Church fathers over the course of the centuries after the death of Jesus, they did all reference, to some

¹⁶⁰ P.G. Walsh, trans. *Pliny the Younger: Complete Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), *Ep.* 10.96; This anecdote is also related by Eusebius in the *Ecclesiastical History*, who attributes it within the text to Tertullian; *Ec. Hist.*, 3.33.

¹⁶¹ *On the Deaths*, 6.2.

¹⁶² *Life*, 1.37.1.

degree or another, various Christian values like modesty, fidelity, and charity. More importantly, the evidence of the *Life* and of the pagan emperor Julian's own letters show that, even though most sources were Christians expounding upon Christian values, the values were nonetheless entering non-Christian Roman society. The *Oration* reveals a plethora of what at least Constantine himself had considered to be Christian values: "and among many things the greatest discretion is shown in the feasts made for alms and the recovery of the needy and the assistance of the fallen. If anyone should deem these vulgar, he does not think according to the divine and blessed teaching."¹⁶³ Though Christian values are implicit within the text of the *Ecclesiastical History*, it suffices to remark that, among others, it presented chastity, and the desire for everlasting life by living in accordance with God as some of the more salient ones.¹⁶⁴ And Lactantius demonstrated the value of modesty: "Any women who refused [the advances of Emperor Maximinus Daia] was drowned, as if modesty under this adulterer's rule was a treasonable offence."¹⁶⁵ Lactantius sought to discredit one of the persecuting emperors, but he did so in Christian terms.

For these values to spread, however, the emperor had to act with them in mind. As Eusebius wrote of Constantine in the *Life*: "He made all sorts of distributions to the poor, and apart from them showed himself compassionate and beneficent to those outside who approached him."¹⁶⁶ The Roman emperor himself acting on Christian values would necessarily have given Christian values more widespread publicity across the empire, especially given the later Roman Empire trend of emperors constantly moving from city to city. Regardless of the impact of the emperor spreading Christian values throughout the empire, however, a letter from the pagan

¹⁶³ *Oration*, 12.

¹⁶⁴ *Ec. Hist.*, for chastity: 2.17; ever-lasting life: 3.26.

¹⁶⁵ *On the Deaths*, 38.2-3.

¹⁶⁶ *Life*, 1.43.1.

emperor Julian (r. 361-363) to the high priest of Galatia makes it clear that they continued to spread, even after Constantine's death and the accession of a pagan emperor: "Do we not realise that what has really contributed to the growth of atheism [i.e. Christianity] is their generosity towards strangers, their care for the burial of the dead, and the dignified way of life that they feign? I think we ought genuinely to be making each of these areas our business."¹⁶⁷ Julian's letter shows us that Christian values were actually gaining enough traction to increase the size of the Church. Even more importantly, it shows us that pagans were beginning to take up such values as well, or at the very least were starting to do so under Julian's guidance, if for no other reason than to attract pagans back from Christian worship. The accession to the throne of an emperor sympathetic to Christian values clearly helped to spread the values of the newly confident Church.

The analysis of the dynamic nature of Roman and Christian value systems has been treated in an abstract manner thus far, as they would have affected a typical individual. But the sources also indicate the much more tangible and scholarly value of Biblical knowledge. It should not be surprising that a work titled the *Ecclesiastical History* made references to the Bible nearly every page. Even so, the *Life* and *Oration* show that Eusebius and Constantine had a strong working knowledge of the Bible. Eusebius, unsurprisingly, comes off as more knowledgeable, having been a scholar and bishop, and makes frequent passing references to the Bible within the *Life*. In recounting the events of the Council of Nicaea, for example, he wrote on the number of people in attendance:

The word is that there were gathered 'from every nation under heaven' 'devout men' (Acts 2:5), among whom were 'Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and dwellers in Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt

¹⁶⁷ A.D. Lee, *Pagans and Christians, a Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Julian letter 84.

and the parts of Libya around Cyrene, the resident Romans, both Jews and Proselytes, Cretans and Arabians' (Acts 2:9-11).¹⁶⁸

For seemingly little reason other than to connect the Biblical past with the Christian present, or to demonstrate a strong knowledge of the Bible, Eusebius relates a couple of biblical verses.

Constantine did something similar in his *Oration*, relating the follies of pagan sacrifice:

“Memphis is waste, where Moses in accordance with the decree of God shattered the arrogance of Pharaoh.”¹⁶⁹ Though not a direct quote, Constantine does make an accurate reference to the

book of *Exodus*.¹⁷⁰ Both Constantine and Eusebius directed what they said and wrote,

respectively, to an audience of Christians, expecting them to be familiar enough with the Bible to understand allusions to it if unable to directly quote from it, much as a first-century Roman would be able to do with such a classic as the *Aeneid*. This implies, especially with the emperor's encouragement, that more and more educated elites were expected to have read the Bible.

Biblical culture was increasing in general during Constantine's reign, as evidenced by a letter included in the *Life* sent from him to Eusebius requesting that more Bibles be made: “It appeared proper to indicate to your Intelligence that you should order fifty volumes with ornamental leather bindings, easily legible and convenient for portable use...copies that is of the Divine Scriptures, the provision and use of which you well know to be necessary for reading in Church.”¹⁷¹ Though scholars today do not know if Constantine was requesting copies of a complete Bible, which would have been a novel development, or simply copies of the Gospels, a regular production during the third century, what is certain is that his request marked an

¹⁶⁸ *Life*, 3.8.

¹⁶⁹ *Oration*, 16.

¹⁷⁰ *Exodus*, 14.23-31.

¹⁷¹ *Life*, 4.36.2. Though the letter is recorded within Eusebius's *Life*, historians generally take the included letters as genuine. This one especially was sent to Eusebius specifically, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that he recorded its contents faithfully.

increased value, especially imperially-sponsored, on Biblical literacy.¹⁷² Thus, the evidence from the reign of Constantine points to an increase, at least among the educated elites, in the value of biblical knowledge. And with the bishops gaining more of a civic role within the empire through various laws enacted by Constantine, it is likely that biblical knowledge, as well as the perceived social value of such, spread to non-Christians as well.

Epilogue

Reflecting upon these views, that is, the consideration of a newly merged Christian-Roman culture, as well as the Christianized historical perspective, in the late fourth and early fifth century, was Augustine.¹⁷³ His style of history-writing bore a strong resemblance to that of Lactantius and Eusebius, and, as one historian puts it, Eusebius's perception of history was markedly similar to that of Augustine.¹⁷⁴ Both envisioned history as the laying out of God's plan and leading to the inevitable success of Christianity. "It is beyond belief," wrote Augustine, that "God wished the kingdoms of men, their lordships and their servitudes, to be outside the laws of his Providence."¹⁷⁵ Augustine's ideas also, however slightly, reflected the views expressed by Constantine and Eusebius on the metaphorical Babylon, the city symbolizing for Christians the debauchery of secular affairs, though Augustine stretched the notion much further in his *City of God*. Augustine's views are not entirely within the scope of this thesis, but they do demonstrate the continuity which existed from the time of Constantine, Eusebius, and Lactantius, to nearly a

¹⁷² Grafton and William, *Transformation of the Book*, 217.

¹⁷³ The works of Augustine lay far beyond the scope of this paper. I bring him up only to show that there are strands of continuity in the several decades between when Eusebius died and when he was writing. For more detail on his life and works see P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁷⁴ A. Brent, *A Political History of Early Christianity* (London: T&T, 2009) 283.

¹⁷⁵ R.H. Barrow, *Introduction to Saint Augustine the City of God: being selections from the De Civitate Dei including most of the XIXth book with text, translation, and running commentary by R.H. Barrow* (London: Faber, 1950) extract 13.

century later. He wrote in a manner which combined the various qualities discussed above. He saw history as the unfurling of God's plan. He wrote on the glory and power of Rome, in part praising the historical Romans, exhibiting typical Roman values, but also holding in high regard such Christian values as nonviolence.¹⁷⁶ And he clearly saw Christian history as being within the realm of Scripture, or else the metaphorical Babylon would be meaningless. In short, Augustine encapsulated nearly everything this chapter has discussed: the belief that Christians' place in the world was ordained by God, a blending of Roman and Christian values as well as biblical knowledge, and a historical grounding in the Scriptures. It is also worth noting, though this is well known, that Augustine's work has historically had an extraordinary impact on Christian faith and identity, very much so to this day. Such an impact can be traced back to the changing Christian and Roman identities for which the sources, like Eusebius, provide evidence.

Moreover, though Augustine may be one of the most well-known Christian writers from the later Roman Empire, he was far from the only one who bore resemblance to the earlier writers this chapter has discussed. Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, a foundational text in Christian history, was imitated by a number of later scholars. Socrates of Constantinople (c. 380- c. 439), Theodoret (c. 393- c. 458), and Sozomen (c. 400- c. 450) each wrote their own *Ecclesiastical Histories*, very heavily drawing from Eusebius's various works, but most especially his *Ecclesiastical History*. Eusebius's works served as the basis for those of future theologians and historians alike, foundational in conceptions of history in general and Church history in particular. It was only with the publicity of and patronage towards Christianity brought about by Constantine's accession and association with Christianity that Eusebius could become so valuable. Yet, Constantine only brought Christianity to the fore. It was Christians, specifically

¹⁷⁶ *City of God*, extract 14-15.

such prolific writers as Eusebius, who promoted their visions of history and Christianity, and brought about the Christianization of the empire.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Roman emperor Constantine's policies and legislation worked in conjunction with Christian and pagan interpretations of his actions to result in a marked level of Christian publicity and promotion, beginning and consolidating a process of imperial Christianization that would continue for centuries.

The conditions within the empire from 312 onwards led to the politicization of Constantine's religion and association with the god Sol by pagans and Christians alike. Constantine presented himself as a typical Roman emperor in his building projects, coinage, and personal interactions. Pagans under Constantine recognized this and took it upon themselves to keep their own religious views general and vague in official correspondences in order to maintain or even create imperial favor. Christians saw in Constantine's personal religion their own God, and interpreted actions he took related to the Church as his own championing of their religion. This empowered Christians to assert their identity as the imperial favorites, and to make more public the new benefits accrued by Christians.

Indeed, Constantine took many actions that resulted in an unprecedented degree of wealth and privileges being bestowed on Christians. Bishops and ecclesiastics were given civic privileges and an increased role in the civic landscape. Constantine ransacked pagan temples and used the profits to fund numerous churches as well as lavish endowments. And the churches were given the new civic duty of distributing grain, a privileged job which Constantine justified on the basis of Christian principles of charity and care for the poor. Constantine's reasons for taking such actions, however, differed from what Christians may have believed to be a strident ideological basis. He certainly identified as Christian by his death, and throughout his reign he made personal associations with Christian principles and theologians. As a result, some of his

actions, such as providing lavish church endowments, were taken purely to benefit the Church and its Christian constituents who supported Constantine. Other actions he took, however, such as giving bishops the power to hear court cases or manumit slaves, and making churches responsible for the distribution of grain, had more pragmatic purposes. Constantine's reign saw the upheaval of the tetrarchic political system, in addition to a series of civil wars. He sought to alleviate the resulting administrative and social difficulties through the addition of the Church as a body to do so. These actions had the effect of empowering the Church as a socially administrative unit, while bequeathing new wealth and high status to the ecclesiastics. Constantine's attempts to stabilize the empire through a body for which he had sympathy had the long-lasting effects of making the Church into a much more prominent and publicized social and political actor. The ramifications of this rippled throughout the Middle Ages in East and West for centuries as bishops served as intellectuals, and bishoprics as bastions of wealth and political power.

The elements discussed above led to the consolidation of Christian history and history-writing, melding Roman and Christian values, creating a culture with blended Greco-Roman and Christian principles. Eusebius most of all embodied a new Christian scholar. The successor of Origen, his conception of history only became socially valued and highly publicized, due to Constantine's accession and association with Christianity. Moreover, his conception of history would not have been able to exist without Constantine. Even more important, Eusebius proclaimed himself as Constantine's historian, and deliberately wrote history in Christian terms which projected more Christian motivations onto the emperor than Constantine most likely had. Historians following Eusebius wrote in the same style and with the same preconceived notions and assumptions regarding Christianity. He pioneered a new method of writing history. All of

this was only made possible by Constantine's personal association with Christianity and empowerment of the Church.

Constantine's reign witnessed the Christianization of the Roman Empire in a variety of ways. Pagans became wary of their own position and less important within the empire, the Church became a social and political force, and the very conception of history itself changed to adopt a more universalist Christian perspective. This is not, however, to say that Constantine's reign witnessed the utter and complete rise of Christianity at the expense of a paganism that was wiped out in the same time. This thesis itself has made use of prominent pagans like Libanius, who lived after Constantine. Zosimus, himself a historian living around the year 500, was a pagan writing his history from a pagan perspective. Paganism would not be expunged completely within Europe for another several centuries.

Nevertheless, as this thesis has argued, the Roman Empire changed dramatically under Constantine, beginning the imperial process of Christianization. Every future emperor besides Julian the Apostate proclaimed themselves to be Christian. More importantly, future emperors looked back to Constantine as a model. The *Theodosian Code* itself, created under Theodosius II, purposely only went as far back in the law codes as the time of Constantine. The most significant developments that this thesis has shown, however, are the transformation of the Christian Church into a tremendously wealthy and powerful body with a wide variety of responsibilities and privileges, and a new sense and conception of history that Christians would promulgate for centuries more. Constantine took an enormous role in Christianizing the Roman Empire, but it was Christians themselves who took advantage of the new opportunities afforded to them to publicize and promote the religion within the empire. A messy process, neither party could have accomplished this without the other. As a result, this thesis has shown that historical processes of

social, cultural, and religious change are far more complicated than the sources describing them may make them seem. They occur and are brought about by the conflation of a variety of factors and influences, groups and leaders, perceptions and ideologies. Rome was not built in a day, nor was Roman Christianity. Studying the intricacies of historical change would be unhelpful and unentertaining otherwise.

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