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# The Conversion of Constantine

- c. 283 born
- 306 hailed as Augustus (emperor) by his father's army in Gaul
- 312 battle of Milvian Bridge; victory over Maxentius
- 313 Edict of Milan; toleration for Christians
- 330 dedication of Constantinople
- 337 died

As Julius Caesar stood at the beginning of the Roman empire, Constantine stood at its end. For more than a century before his rise to power, the civil structure of the empire had been undermined by an increasing militarization of the monarchy that had finally degenerated into a bloody scramble among rival contenders for the imperial throne. This time has been called "the age of the barrack emperors" for, almost without exception, the claimants to the throne—and there were no fewer than twenty-six of them in a single generation of the late third century—were professional soldiers. Under the stress of nearly constant civil war, the economic system of the empire broke down. Coinage was hopelessly corrupt, trade was replaced by barter and payment in kind, and the empire was pillaged to support the forces of one general after another, one emperor after another. With the empire preoccupied by civil war, hordes of barbarians moved across its undefended frontiers to ravage some of its richest lands. The military system was barbarized, with the greater number of its soldiers recruited from the most remote and backward parts of the empire, from the frontier army camps, even with the direct cooptation of entire barbarian units. Civil law and civil order were almost nonexistent. Classical civilization itself seemed threatened not only by these ruinous assaults upon its economic and political system but by the bankruptcy of paganism as a system of thought and belief, resulting in the influx and chaotic growth of literally hundreds of eastern religious cults

to which people of every class and station swarmed in the hope of personal immortality and release from the burdens of their earthly existence.

Among these cults was Christianity.

The process of imperial decline was checked momentarily by the accession of the Emperor Diocletian, a rough Illyrian peasant who had risen by his own abilities through the military to the imperial throne in 284. Among the many reforms undertaken by Diocletian was an overhaul of the system of imperial government. It was in part an attempt to solve the problem of imperial succession and break the cycle of civil war. In part it was a recognition of the collapse of imperial unity. It was also a concession to the power that was still in the hands of dangerous army commanders. To share his authority, Diocletian named his colleague Maximian, a successful general and an Illyrian like himself. The two of them were designated *Augusti*. Shortly each Augustus took a junior colleague, called *Caesares*. Diocletian chose Gaius Galerius and Maximian chose Flavius Constantius. Constantius was the father of Constantine.

Constantine was born, probably in 283, at the town of Naissus in Moesia on the lower Danube frontier. He was a child of the camp—ruddy-faced, sturdy, broad-shouldered, and thick-necked. Later one of his epithets among his soldiers would be “bull-necked.” He had almost no education, but his mind was quick and he had a powerful will, bursting energy, and relentless ambition. While still a child and when his father was named Caesar, Constantine was sent to the court of Diocletian, doubtless as a hostage for his father’s good behavior. For the next twelve years the boy grew up at court. It was constantly on the move, and he visited most of the eastern empire and watched attentively the processes of imperial government.

By his own later account, Constantine witnessed Diocletian’s decision to renew the persecution of the Christians about 298. What prompted Diocletian to abandon his earlier policy of indifferent toleration is not clear. But once the decision was made, he pressed the persecution with great severity. It was only in Britain and Gaul—the portion of the empire under Constantine’s father—that the edicts of persecution were not enforced.

In 305 both Diocletian and his colleague Maximian abdicated on the same day. Their *Caesares* were proclaimed *Augusti*, and two new *Caesares* were named, again two generals of peasant origin, Severus and Maximin. Constantius now requested that his son be sent to him: he was ill and wanted to see him before he died. The suspicious Galerius temporized but finally permitted the young Constantine to go. He joined his father in Gaul and crossed with him to Britain for a campaign against the Picts. Within months Constantius died in his camp at York in northern England, and his soldiers promptly hailed his son Augustus. Constantine’s political career had begun; he was in his early twenties.

While Galerius refused to accept Constantine as Augustus, he grudgingly acknowledged him Caesar. But in the meantime Diocletian’s carefully constructed succession scheme was breaking down. Maximian’s son Maxentius, with the support of his father, declared himself Caesar, then Augustus. Old Maximian approached Constantine with the offer of an Augustan title and the hand of his daughter in marriage. Constantine accepted. Severus had been killed. Maxentius had betrayed his father, and he himself had been challenged by another self-appointed Augustus. In the east Galerius appointed an Augustus to replace Severus and elevated Maximin. There were now four *Augusti*, including Constantine, and the savage wars of the previous century were already beginning again.

Hostilities were triggered by the death of Galerius, the most senior Augustus, in 311. In the west Constantine and Maxentius rapidly came to odds, and in the late summer of 312 Constantine took the initiative. Leaving the bulk of his army to protect the Rhine frontier, he took the rest of it south to Italy. Quickly disposing of the armies and overwhelming the fortifications of Maxentius in northern Italy, he pressed on toward Rome. At some point about this time there occurred for Constantine a profound conversion experience, and he became a Christian. It was under the sign and favor of his new Christian God that he defeated Maxentius at the ensuing battle of the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber. Maxentius was routed, and most of his troops perished in the river. On the following day, Maxentius’s body was washed up on the shore. His head was cut off and carried into the city on a spear.

Constantine was the master of Rome and Italy. He pushed forward with what now had become a general civil war in the empire. Within two more years, he had eliminated his last remaining rivals and stood forth as sole emperor. But neither Constantine nor the empire was ever to be quite the same again. The emperor’s conversion had changed both the man and his state. In 313 he proclaimed the Edict of Milan, which for the first time recognized the legality of the Christian religion throughout the empire. He ordered restitution for wrongs done to Christians under the recent persecutions. And for the rest of his long reign, he favored Christianity in every possible way. By 324 he had decided to establish a new imperial capital at the site of Byzantium in the Greek east. This New Rome was called Constantinople—the city of Constantine. It was dedicated in 330 to the Trinity and the Virgin Mary. Constantine was in the process of creating not only an eastern Roman empire but an empire that, from this time on, for more than a thousand years, would be fundamentally Christian. Thus the conversion of Constantine becomes one of the most important events in the history of western civilization—and one of the most mysterious.

There is nothing in Constantine’s background or experience that can readily explain it, and nothing in the political situation on the eve of the

battle against Maxentius that makes it a reasonable decision for him to have made. Neither his father nor his mother were Christians. Helena, his mother, would later be as zealous a Christian as her son, but there is no evidence she was such during her earlier life. While his father was well enough disposed toward the Christians and did not enforce the edicts of persecution against them, there is no evidence that he himself was a Christian, in spite of an ecclesiastical tradition to the contrary. If anything he was a Neoplatonist with a deistic belief that might have been a kind of philosophic monotheism. He was, moreover, celebrated as a god following his death. Constantine himself continued his father's tolerance toward the Christians in Gaul but without becoming a Christian. Indeed, until the very moment of his conversion he paid homage to *Sol invictus*, "the unvanquished sun god," and had long honored Hercules as his special patron deity. He was not even familiar with the rudiments of Christianity, and there were no Christian clergy among his counselors. Nor can it be convincingly argued that his conversion was an act of political expediency. The Christians were simply not strong enough in the West to be a group necessary for Constantine to placate. Nor were any significant number of his soldiers Christians. The civil government of the city of Rome and the political establishment of the western empire were still solidly pagan.

So the intriguing questions remain. What really happened on the way to the Milvian Bridge? Why did it happen? And what did it mean?

## The Life of Constantine

### EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA

Lactantius

*The only contemporary account of Constantine's conversion is from The Life of Constantine by the Christian ecclesiastic, bishop, theologian, and historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340). He claims to have seen Constantine while still a boy, a member of Diocletian's court when that emperor visited Caesarea. But it was many years later when Eusebius came to know Constantine as emperor himself. Eusebius had been active during the Arian controversy of the 320s and at some point became a court figure and personal friend of the emperor. He was a voluminous writer. His Ecclesiastical History is the best source we have for the early history of the Christian church. After Constantine's death in 337, Eusebius wrote his Life of Constantine.*

*Eusebius belongs to the group known in early Christian tradition as the apologists—those who undertook specifically to defend Christianity against the claims of classical paganism. It was in this tradition that he wrote his Ecclesiastical History and his Life of Constantine. His intention in both was to prove that historic events moved in such a way as to be "pleasing to God, the Sovereign of all." Thus, in his Life of Constantine, he says he intends "to pass over the greater part of the royal deeds of this thrice-blessed prince"—his battles, victories, triumphs, his legislative enactments and other imperial labors. Rather, he says, he will treat "of those circumstances only which have reference to his religious character" (1:484). Like the apologist he was, Eusebius sought—and found—every scrap of information that would presage the eventual Christian conversion of Constantine. He comes as close as possible to claiming that his father Constantius was a Christian, saying that he "entered into the friendship of the Supreme God" (1:485), and goes on to extol his clemency toward the Christians under his rule. Later on in his narrative he attributes the knowledge of "the God of his father" to Constantine (1:489). He attributes Constantine's own elevation to the will of God, declaring that of all his fellow rulers, "he is the only one to whose elevation no mortal may boast of having contributed" (ibid.).*

*Clearly, the conversion of Constantine must be the central incident in a career so auspiciously begun. Eusebius tells us what happened on the occasion of the conversion.*

AS SOON THEN as he was established on the throne, he began to care for the interests of his paternal inheritance, and visited with much considerate kindness all those provinces which had previously been under his father's government. . . .

While, therefore, he regarded the entire world as one immense body, and perceived that the head of it all, the royal city of the Roman empire, was bowed down by the weight of a tyrannous oppression; at first he had left the task of liberation to those who governed the other divisions of the empire, as being his superiors in point of age. But when none of these proved able to afford relief, and those who had attempted it had experienced a disastrous termination of their enterprise, he said that life was without enjoyment to him as long as he saw the imperial city thus afflicted, and prepared himself for the overthrowal of the tyranny.

Being convinced, however, that he needed some more powerful aid than his military forces could afford him, on account of the wicked and magical enchantments which were so diligently practiced by the tyrant, he sought Divine assistance, deeming the possession of arms and a numerous soldiery of secondary importance, but believing the co-operating power of Deity invincible and not to be shaken. He considered, therefore, on what God he might rely for protection and assistance. While engaged in this enquiry, the thought occurred to him, that, of the many emperors who had preceded him, those who had rested their hopes in a multitude of gods, and served them with sacrifices and offerings, had in the first place been deceived by flattering predictions, and oracles which promised them all prosperity, and at last had met with an unhappy end, while not one of their gods had stood by to warn them of the impending wrath of heaven; while one alone who had pursued an entirely opposite course, who had condemned their error, and honored the one Supreme God during his whole life, had found him to be the Saviour and Protector of his empire, and the Giver of every good thing. Reflecting on this, and well weighing the fact that they who had trusted in many gods had also fallen by manifold forms of death, without leaving behind them either family or offspring, stock, name, or memorial among men: while the God of his father had given to him, on the other hand, manifestations of his power and very many tokens: and considering farther that those who had already taken arms against the tyrant, and had marched to the battle-field under the protection of a multitude of gods, had met with a dishonorable end. . . .

. . . Reviewing, I say, all these considerations, he judged it to be folly indeed to join in the idle worship of those who were no gods, and, after such convincing evidence, to err from the truth; and therefore felt it incumbent on him to honor his father's God alone.

Accordingly he called on him with earnest prayer and supplications that he would reveal to him who he was, and stretch forth his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with

fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he was honored with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of after-time has established its truth? He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, Conquer by This. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle. . . .

He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies. . . .

At dawn of day he arose, and communicated the marvel to his friends: and then, calling together the workers in gold and precious stones, he sat in the midst of them, and described to them the figure of the sign he had seen, bidding them represent it in gold and precious stones. And this representation I myself have had an opportunity of seeing. . . .

Now it was made in the following manner: A long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a transverse bar laid over it. On the top of the whole was fixed a wreath of gold and precious stones; and within this, the symbol of the Saviour's name, two letters indicating the name of Christ by means of its initial characters, the letter P being intersected by X in its centre: and these letters the emperor was in the habit of wearing on his helmet at a later period. From the cross-bar of the spear was suspended a cloth, a royal piece, covered with a profuse embroidery of most brilliant precious stones; and which, being also richly interlaced with gold, presented an indescribable degree of beauty to the beholder. This banner was of a square form, and the upright staff, whose lower section was of great length, bore a golden half-length portrait of the pious emperor and his children on its upper part, beneath the trophy of the cross, and immediately above the embroidered banner.

¶ The emperor constantly made use of this sign of salvation as a safeguard against every adverse and hostile power, and commanded that others similar to it should be carried at the head of all his armies. ✓

These things were done shortly afterwards. But at the time above specified, being struck with amazement at the extraordinary vision, and resolving to worship no other God save Him who had appeared to him, he sent

for those who were acquainted with the mysteries of His doctrines, and enquired who that God was, and what was intended by the sign of the vision he had seen.

They affirmed that He was God, the only begotten Son of the one and only God: that the sign which had appeared was the symbol of immortality, and the trophy of that victory over death which He had gained in time past when sojourning on earth. They taught him also the causes of His advent, and explained to him the true account of His incarnation. Thus he was instructed in these matters, and was impressed with wonder at the divine manifestation which had been presented to his sight. Comparing, therefore, the heavenly vision with the interpretation given, he found his judgment confirmed; and, in the persuasion that the knowledge of these things had been imparted to him by Divine teaching, he determined thenceforth to devote himself to the reading of the Inspired writings.

Moreover, he made the priests of God his counselors, and deemed it incumbent on him to honor the God who had appeared to him with all devotion. And after this, being fortified by well-grounded hopes in Him, he hastened to quench the threatening fire of tyranny. . . .

Constantine, however, filled with compassion on account of all these miseries, began to arm himself with all warlike preparation against the tyranny. Assuming therefore the Supreme God as his patron, and invoking His Christ to be his preserver and aid, and setting the victorious trophy, the salutary symbol, in front of his soldiers and body-guard, he marched with his whole forces, trying to obtain again for the Romans the freedom they had inherited from their ancestors.

And whereas, Maxentius, trusting more in his magic arts than in the affection of his subjects, dared not even advance outside the city gates, but had guarded every place and district and city subject to his tyranny, with large bodies of soldiers, the emperor, confiding in the help of God, advanced against the first and second and third divisions of the tyrant's forces, defeated them all with ease at the first assault, and made his way into the very interior of Italy. . . .

And already he was approaching very near Rome itself, when, to save him from the necessity of fighting with all the Romans for the tyrant's sake, God himself drew the tyrant, as it were by secret cords, a long way outside the gates. And now those miracles recorded in Holy Writ, which God of old wrought against the ungodly (discredited by most as fables, yet believed by the faithful), did he in every deed confirm to all alike, believers and unbelievers, who were eye-witnesses of the wonders. For as once in the days of Moses and the Hebrew nation, who were worshipers of God, "Pharaoh's chariots and his host hath he cast into the sea, and his chosen chariot-captains are drowned in the Red Sea,"—so at this time Maxentius, and the soldiers and guards with him, "went down into the depths like stone," when, in his flight before the divinely-aided forces of Constantine,

he essayed to cross the river which lay in his way, over which, making a strong bridge of boats, he had framed an engine of destruction, really against himself, but in the hope of ensnaring thereby him who was beloved by God. For his God stood by the one to protect him, while the other, godless,<sup>1</sup> proved to be the miserable contriver of these secret devices to his own ruin. So that one might well say, "He hath made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made. His mischief shall return upon his own head, and his violence shall come down upon his own pate." Thus, in the present instance, under divine direction, the machine erected on the bridge, with the ambushade concealed therein, giving way unexpectedly before the appointed time, the bridge began to sink, and the boats with the men in them went bodily to the bottom. And first the wretch himself, then his armed attendants and guards, even as the sacred oracles had before described, "sank as lead in the mighty waters." So that they who thus obtained victory from God might well, if not in the same words, yet in fact in the same spirit as the people of his great servant Moses, sing and speak as they did concerning the impious tyrant of old: "Let us sing unto the Lord, for he hath been glorified exceedingly: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. He is become my helper and my shield unto salvation." And again, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, marvelous in praises, doing wonders?" . . .

Having then at this time sung these and suchlike praises to God, the Ruler of all and the Author of victory, after the example of his great servant Moses, Constantine entered the imperial city in triumph.

## The Christian Fable

EDWARD GIBBON

*The matter of Constantine's conversion lay essentially where Eusebius had left it until Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) decided to write The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, which must still be*

<sup>1</sup> What this engine of destruction might have been is unknown. There is no other reference to it, not even in the parallel passage in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 363–64.

considered the greatest of all histories of Rome. For some time Gibbon had been looking in vain for a suitable subject for a major literary work. He was traveling on the continent and had gone to Italy in the spring of the year 1764. By the autumn he and his party had arrived in Rome. To quote a famous passage in his *Memoirs*, "It was on the fifteenth of October in the gloom of evening, as I sat musing on the Capitol, while the barefooted fryars were chanting their litanies in the temple of Jupiter, that I conceived the first thought of my history."<sup>2</sup> But, as Gibbon continues, "Several years elapsed, and several avocations intervened" before the first volume of his famous book appeared in 1776. It was an immediate sensation and something of a scandal, mainly because of Gibbon's treatment of the history of early Christianity. The scandal, however, was more apparent than real. Unlike Voltaire, Gibbon was not a thoroughgoing skeptic in matters of religion. While it is true that his most famous dictum on the decline of Rome was, "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion," his more circumspect judgment is contained in another: "If the decline of the Roman empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine, his victorious religion broke the violence of the fall" (4:163).

If Gibbon was not a skeptic in matters of religion, he was still a figure of the Enlightenment and, as such, he introduced into historical writing and thinking the concept of natural causation, the idea that in the case of the decline of the Roman empire, that great and complex phenomenon ought to be explained in natural and rational terms arising out of the events themselves and not as a matter of prophecy or portent, predetermined destiny or the intervention of supernatural forces.

The conversion of Constantine is as central to Gibbon's history as it was to that of Eusebius. And Gibbon had, of course, to treat Eusebius as his primary source. But he does so with the greatest caution. He accepts Eusebius's judgment—now discredited—that Constantine may have had some earlier disposition to Christianity. But he questions Eusebius's readiness to turn to the supernatural for the explanation of events, even the strangest ones. He questions the methodology and the judgment of Eusebius, who was willing to rely only upon the single unsupported statement of Constantine himself about the fiery sign in the sky rather than confirming it by resort to the many others still living who must have seen it. But while he admits that many, especially of Protestant or philosophic disposition, might "arraign the truth of the first Christian emperor," he does not do so. He sees the conversion of Constantine rather as a matter of enlightened self-interest and a willingness to be flattered that he had

<sup>2</sup> There are several versions of this incident in Gibbon's papers. This is the one preferred by his editor John Murray in *Autobiography of Edward Gibbon* (London: John Murray, 1896), p. 405.

been chosen by heaven for this singular favor. This, Gibbon tells us, is why the conversion happened. And he concludes that even if the piety of Constantine was a specious piety at the time of his conversion, it maured into a "serious faith and fervent devotion."

We turn now to Gibbon's analysis, beginning with his assessment of Eusebius.

HE AFFIRMS, with the most perfect confidence, that, in the night which preceded the last battle against Maxentius, Constantine was admonished in a dream to inscribe the shields of his soldiers with the *celestial sign of God*, the sacred monogram of the name of Christ; that he executed the commands of heaven; and that his valour and obedience were rewarded by the decisive victory of the Milvian Bridge. Some considerations might perhaps incline a sceptical mind to suspect the judgment or the veracity of the rhetorician, whose pen, either from zeal or interest, was devoted to the cause of the prevailing faction. . . .

In favor of Licinius, who still dissembled his animosity to the Christians, the same author has provided a similar vision, of a form of prayer, which was communicated by an angel, and repeated by the whole army before they engaged the legions of the tyrant Maximin. The frequent repetition of miracles serves to provoke, where it does not subdue, the reason of mankind; but, if the dream of Constantine is separately considered, it may be naturally explained either by the policy or the enthusiasm of the emperor. Whilst his anxiety for the approaching day, which must decide the fate of the empire, was suspended by a short and interrupted slumber, the venerable form of Christ, and the well-known symbol of his religion, might forcibly offer themselves to the active fancy of a prince who revered the name, and had perhaps secretly implored the power, of the God of the Christians. . . .

The praeternatural origin of dreams was universally admitted by the nations of antiquity, and [a considerable part of the Gallic army was already prepared to place their confidence in the salutary sign of the Christian religion.] The secret vision of Constantine could be disproved only by the event; and the intrepid hero who had passed the Alps and the Apennine might view with careless despair the consequences of a defeat under the walls of Rome. . . .

The philosopher, who with calm suspicion examines the dreams and omens, the miracles and prodigies, of profane or even of ecclesiastical history, will probably conclude that, if the eyes of the spectators have sometimes been deceived by fraud, the understanding of the readers has much more frequently been insulted by fiction. [Every event, or appearance, or accident, which seems to deviate from the ordinary course of nature, has

been rashly ascribed to the immediate action of the Deity; and the astonished fancy of the multitude has sometimes given shape and colour, language and motion, to the fleeting but uncommon meteors of the air. . . .

The Christian fable of Eusebius, which in the space of twenty-six years might arise from the original dream, is cast in a much more correct and elegant mould. In one of the marches of Constantine, he is reported to have seen with his own eyes the luminous trophy of the cross, placed above the meridian sun, and inscribed with the following words: By This Conquer. This amazing object in the sky astonished the whole army, as well as the emperor himself, who was yet undetermined in the choice of a religion; but his astonishment was converted into faith by the vision of the ensuing night. Christ appeared before his eyes, and, displaying the same celestial sign of the cross, he directed Constantine to frame a similar standard, and to march, with an assurance of victory, against Maxentius and all his enemies. The learned bishop of Caesarea appears to be sensible that the recent discovery of this marvellous anecdote would excite some surprise and distrust among the most pious of his readers. Yet instead of ascertaining the precise circumstances of time and place, which always serve to detect falsehood or establish truth; instead of collecting and recording the evidence of so many living witnesses, who must have been spectators of this stupendous miracle; Eusebius contents himself with alleging a very singular testimony; that of the deceased Constantine, who, many years after the event, in the freedom of conversation, had related to him this extraordinary incident of his own life, and had attested the truth of it by a solemn oath. The prudence and gratitude of the learned prelate forbade him to suspect the veracity of his victorious master; but he plainly intimates that, in a fact of such a nature, he should have refused his assent to any meaner authority. . . .

The vision of Constantine maintained an honourable place in the legend of superstition, till the bold and sagacious spirit of criticism presumed to depreciate the triumph and to arraign the truth of the first Christian emperor.

The protestant and philosophic readers of the present age will incline to believe that, in the account of his own conversion, Constantine attested a wilful falsehood by a solemn and deliberate perjury. They may not hesitate to pronounce that, in the choice of a religion, his mind was determined only by a sense of interest; and that . . . he used the altars of the church as a convenient footstool to the throne of the empire. A conclusion so harsh and so absolute is not, however, warranted by our knowledge of human nature, of Constantine, or of Christianity. In an age of religious fervour, the most artful statesmen are observed to feel some part of the enthusiasm which they inspire; and the most orthodox saints assume the dangerous privilege of defending the cause of truth by the arms of deceit and falsehood. Personal interest is often the standard of our belief, as well

as of our practice; and the same motives of temporal advantage which might influence the public conduct and professions of Constantine would insensibly dispose his mind to embrace a religion so propitious to his fame and fortunes. His vanity was gratified by the flattering assurance that *he* had been chosen by Heaven to reign over the earth; success had justified his divine title to the throne, and that title was founded on the truth of the Christian revelation. As real virtue is sometimes excited by undeserved applause, the specious piety of Constantine, if at first it was only specious, might gradually, by the influence of praise, of habit, and of example, be matured into serious faith and fervent devotion.

## Constantine and the "Great Thaw"

PETER BROWN

*The preponderance of more modern scholars have tended to follow the cautious rationalism of Gibbon in the matter of the conversion of Constantine and what it meant. Some, it is true, have followed the lead of the great nineteenth-century historian Jakob Burckhardt, who regarded Constantine as "essentially unreligious" and "driven without surcease by ambition and lust for power" and who characterized Eusebius as "guilty of so many distortions, dissimulations, and inventions that he has forfeited all claim to figure as a decisive source."<sup>3</sup>*

*More typically, A. H. M. Jones regards Constantine as "an impulsive man of violent temper" and "above all things ambitious for power;" but that he was in some sense converted to Christianity in the year 312 "there is no manner of doubt."<sup>4</sup> He rejects out of hand the possibility that his conversion was an act of political expediency.*

*This is the position as well of Peter Brown, the Oxford historian of late Roman antiquity from whose provocative *The World of Late**

<sup>3</sup> Jakob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, tr. Moses Hadas (New York: Pantheon, 1949 [1852]), pp. 292-93.

<sup>4</sup> A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 1:78; Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London: English Universities Press, 1949), p. 79.

*Antiquity the following selection is taken. In this selection, while accepting the genuineness of Constantine's conversion experience, Brown turns it around and looks at it from the point of view of the Christian cult rather than the soldier-emperor who became a member of that cult in 312. And he sees it as the event that decisively affected the shape of the Christian Roman empire that Constantine founded. This, Brown argues, is what the conversion of Constantine meant.*

WITH THE RETURN of peace after the accession of Diocletian, the wound began to close between the new, military governing class and the urban civilization of the Mediterranean. But there were now two groups who claimed to represent this civilization: the traditional pagan governing class, whose resilience and high standards had been shown in the revival and spread of Platonic philosophy in the late third century, were in danger of being outbid by the new, "middlebrow" culture of the Christian bishops, whose organizing power and adaptability had been proved conclusively in the previous generation.

At first, organization for survival was more important to the emperors than culture. Diocletian was a sincere, *borné* Roman traditionalist; yet he ruled for nineteen years without giving a thought to the Christians. The "Great Persecution," which began in 302 and continued spasmodically for a decade, came as a brutal shock to respectable Christians. They found themselves officially outcastes in the society with which they had so strenuously identified themselves. It was a terrifying and, on the whole, a deeply demoralizing experience. They were saved by an obscure event. In 312, a usurping emperor, Constantine, won a battle over his rival at the Milvian Bridge, outside Rome. He ascribed this victory to the protection of the Christian God, vouchsafed in a vision.

If God helps those who help themselves, then no group better deserved the miracle of the "conversion" of Constantine in 312 than did the Christians. For the Christian leaders seized their opportunity with astonishing pertinacity and intelligence. They besieged Constantine in his new mood: provincial bishops, notably Hosius of Cordova (c. 257–357), attached themselves to his court; other bishops, from Africa, swept him into their local affairs as a judge; Lactantius emerged as tutor to his son; and, when Constantine finally conquered the eastern provinces in 324, he was greeted by Eusebius of Caesarea, who placed his pen at the emperor's disposal with a skill and enthusiasm such as no traditional Greek rhetor had seemed able to summon up for Constantine's grim and old-fashioned predecessors—Diocletian and Galerius.

This prolonged exposure to Christian propaganda was the true "conversion" of Constantine. It began on a modest scale when he controlled

only the under-Christianized western provinces; but it reached its peak after 324, when the densely Christianized territories of Asia Minor were united to his empire. Its results were decisive. Constantine could easily have been merely a "god-fearing" emperor, who, for reasons of his own, was prepared to tolerate the Christians: there had been many such in the third century (one of whom, Philip (244–249), was even regarded as a crypto-Christian). Given the religious climate of the age, there was no reason, either, why his decision to tolerate the Church might not have been ascribed to intimations from the Christian God. Constantine rejected this easy and obvious solution. He came to be the emperor we know from his speeches and edicts: a crowned Christian Apologist. He viewed himself and his mission as a Christian emperor in the light of the interpretation of Christianity that had been presented to the average educated layman by the Christian Apologists of his age. In becoming a Christian, Constantine publicly claimed to be saving the Roman empire: even more—in mixing with bishops, this middle-aged Latin soldier sincerely believed that he had entered the charmed circle of "true" civilization, and had turned his back on the Philistinism of the raw men who had recently attacked the Church.]

One suspects that Constantine was converted to many more aspects of Mediterranean life than to Christianity alone. The son of a soldier, he threw in his lot with a civilian way of life that had been largely ignored by the grey administrators of the age of Diocletian. From 311 onwards, Constantine put the landed aristocracy on its feet again: he is the "restorer of the Senate," to whom the aristocracy of the West owed so much. In 332, he gave these landowners extensive powers over their tenants. After 324, he grouped a new civilian governing class round himself in the Greek East. He gave the provincial gentry of Asia Minor what they had long wanted: Constantinople, a "new" Rome, placed within convenient range of the imperial court as it moved along the routes connecting the Danube to Asia Minor. For the Greek senator and bureaucrat, roads that had long ceased to lead to Rome converged quite naturally at this new capital.

Constantine, very wisely, seldom said "no." The first Christian emperor accepted pagan honours from the citizens of Athens. He ransacked the Aegean for pagan classical statuary to adorn Constantinople. He treated a pagan philosopher as a colleague. He paid the travelling expenses of a pagan priest who visited the pagan monuments of Egypt. After a generation of "austerity" for everyone, and of "terror" for the Christians, Constantine, with calculated flamboyance, instituted the "Great Thaw" of the early fourth century: it was a whole restored civilian world, pagan as well as Christian, that was pressing in round the emperor.

In this restored world, the Christians had the advantage of being the most flexible and open group. The bishops could accept an uncultivated emperor. They were used to autodidacts, to men of genuine eccentric talent



who—so they claimed—were taught by God alone. [Constantine, one should remember, was the younger contemporary of the first Christian hermit, St. Anthony. Neither the Latin-speaking soldier nor the Coptic-speaking farmer's son would have been regarded as acceptable human material for a classical schoolmaster: yet Eusebius of Caesarea wrote the life of Constantine the soldier, and Athanasius of Alexandria—an equally sophisticated Greek—the life of Anthony the Egyptian. It was over the wide bridge of a “middlebrow” identification of Christianity with a lowest common denominator of classical culture, and not through the narrow gate of a pagan aristocracy of letters, that Constantine and his successors entered the civilian civilization of the Mediterranean.]

## Suggestions for Further Reading

THERE ARE A NUMBER of good modern biographical studies of Constantine. Probably the best is Ramsey MacMullen, *Constantine* (New York: Dial, 1969), but also recommended are A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London: English Universities Press, 1949); John Holland Smith, *Constantine the Great* (New York: Scribner's, 1971); and Hermann Dörries, *Constantine the Great*, tr. R. H. Bainton (New York: Harper, 1972).

There are a greater number of good modern works that treat Constantine and his reign as part of the history of late Roman antiquity. The most important and magisterial of these is A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602, A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964). Three excellent shorter surveys are Diana Bowder, *The Age of Constantine and Julian* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978); Stewart Perowne, *The End of the Roman World* (New York: Crowell, 1967); and Joseph Vogt, *The Decline of Rome, The Metamorphosis of Ancient Civilisation*, tr. Janet Sondheimer (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), especially good on the Germanic peoples. Ramsey MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman*

*Empire* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), is the best work on this topic.

Finally, there are two books of essays: F. W. Walbank, *The Awful Revolution, The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West* (Toronto and London: Toronto University Press, 1969), and Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1978).