Visions of Constantine

RICHARD FLOWER

T. D. BARNES, *CONSTANTINE: DYNASTY, RELIGION AND POWER IN THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. xiii + 266, 8 pls, illus. ISBN 1-4051-1727-3/978-1-4051-1727-2. £75.00.

K. M. GIRARDET, *DER KAISER UND SEIN GOTT: DAS CHRISTENTUM IM DENKEN UND IN DER RELIGIONSPOLITIK KONSTANTINS DES GROSSEN*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010. Pp. ix + 213, illus. ISBN 3-1102-2788-6/978-3-1102-2788-8. €69.95.

J. HARRIES, *IMPERIAL ROME AD 284 TO 363: THE NEW EMPIRE*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 366, illus. ISBN 0-7486-2052-4/978-0-7486-2052-4. £95.00.

R. VAN DAM, *REMEMBERING CONSTANTINE AT THE MILVIAN BRIDGE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv + 296. ISBN 1-1070-9643-X/978-1-1070-9643-1. £55.00.

P. VEYNE, *WHEN OUR WORLD BECAME CHRISTIAN, 312–394*, translated by J. Lloyd. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. Pp. vi + 248. ISBN 0-7456-4499-6/978-0-7456-4499-8. £17.99.

I

Early one bright afternoon, seventeen centuries ago, Constantine stood staring at the sun. According to his self-appointed biographer Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, who claimed to have heard the story from Constantine himself, the emperor was on campaign, when, 'around midday, as the day was declining' he saw a shining cross of light over the sun, with the attached text 'By this conquer'.[1] The understandably startled ruler slept on the matter, whereupon Christ appeared in a dream and instructed him to fashion himself a copy of the holy sign, which would protect him against his enemies. He did as he had been told, took Christian clerics as his advisers and, not long afterwards, set off for Italy to fight his rival, Maxentius. The rhetorician Lactantius, writing about twenty years before Eusebius, presented a different tale in his *De mortibus persecutorum*: Constantine, on the eve of his decisive battle against Maxentius in A.D. 312, at the Milvian Bridge to the north of Rome, was instructed in a dream to 'mark the heavenly sign of God' on his shields.[2] Constantine's moment of epiphany, sometimes equated with his 'conversion', has traditionally been seen both as one of history's great turning-points and as one of its most enduring enigmas. The interpretation of Constantine's vision(s) is further complicated by an anecdote that appears in an anonymous panegyric of the emperor, delivered in A.D. 310. Having turned off from the road to visit 'the most beautiful temple in the world', Constantine was greeted by a remarkable sight: 'For you saw, I believe, Constantine, your

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[1] Eus., *V. Const.* 1.28.2.

[2] Lact., *Mort. Pers.* 44.5. This was probably a reference to the Chi-Rho 'Christogram', formed from the first two letters of 'Christ' in Greek. The identification of this symbol is discussed extensively by Girardet at pp. 72–6.

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Apollo, accompanied by Victory, offering you laurel crowns, which each brought an omen of thirty years [of life or rule]'.[3]

What is the historian to make of these various stories of Constantine's encounters with the divine? Should one 'source' be preferred over the others, on the basis of chronological priority, the author's access to information, or a modern judgement of 'reliability' or 'probability'? Should all the accounts be dismissed as literary fabrications? Or should Constantine simply be seen as a man with an overactive imagination and prone to visions? In 1993, Peter Weiss sought to solve this riddle once and for all, arguing that the vision of Apollo in A.D. 310 and Eusebius' vision of the cross were actually descriptions of the same event, but interpreted from different perspectives.[4] Furthermore, Lactantius' story of Constantine's dream in A.D. 312 could also be harmonized with this explanation. When the author mentioned 'the heavenly sign of God', he was not simply referring to a cross or Christogram, but rather to the image that Constantine had actually seen: 'he meant "God's sign in the sky", the heavenly vision, which he knew about and assumed was known to others.'[5] Weiss argued that the laurel wreaths in the panegyric of A.D. 310 and the cross in Eusebius could both be explained by the phenomenon known as a 'solar halo', in which strange light formations of this sort can be seen above and around the sun under certain conditions, and he illustrated his piece with appropriate diagrams and photographs.[6]

This hypothesis has found significant support in the recent books by both Klaus Girardet and Timothy Barnes: Girardet also provides images of solar haloes and argues that the vision was understood in pagan terms in A.D. 310 and then as a message from the Christian God in A.D. 311 (30–52); Barnes states that, despite initial scepticism from historians, 'the tide of scholarly opinion seems at last to be turning' (75), listing those who now accept this explanation and concluding that 'the consequences of Weiss's analysis are momentous' (80). In contrast, this solution does not excite either Ray Van Dam or Jill Harries: Van Dam dismisses a number of attempts to explain the emperor's vision(s), calling Weiss' solar halo theory 'reductionist' (12, n. 18); Harries discusses the vision accounts, but does not give space to this theory, instead using a footnote to direct readers to Barnes' volume if they want to read 'rationalising of Constantine's vision/dream as a solar halo' (110, n. 19).

So did Constantine and his men see a solar halo? It may indeed be the case that they did, even though the descriptions of the visions in the panegyric of A.D. 310 and Eusebius are quite dissimilar, both to each other and to the account given by the panegyrist Nazarius in A.D. 321, which described heavenly armies, led by Constantine's deified father, Constantius, that were seen and heard coming to the emperor's aid.[7] Rather than trying to provide an answer to this conundrum, however, one might more profitably look at the questions being asked. This focus on explaining and dating the emperor's experiences is a regular concern of studies of Constantine: in contrast, while Suetonius claims that an eagle landed on Claudius' shoulder when he first entered the Forum as consul, few historians would try to reconstruct the psychological impact of this event on the future emperor; nor is a rational explanation sought for the same author's story that a mysterious force ejected anyone who tried to sleep in Augustus' former nursery.[8] Yet, as the five books discussed here demonstrate, Constantinian scholarship is sharply divided, not only in its many and varying reconstructions of the emperor and his policies, but also, more importantly, in the methodologies used to create these interpretations.

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[3] *Pan. Lat.* 6(7).21.3–4.

[4] P. Weiss, 'Die Vision Constantins', in J. Bleicken (ed.), *Colloquium aus Anlaß des 80. Geburtstages von Alfred Heuß* (1993), 143–69. An expanded translation appeared as 'The vision of Constantine', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 16 (2003), 237–57.

[5] Weiss, op. cit. (n. 4, 2003), 246.

[6] While rings and 'crosses' have been documented, meteorologists and astronomers have so far not recorded any sightings of the words 'By this conquer' in either Latin or Greek — at least as far as I am aware. Weiss explained this aspect of Eusebius' account by arguing that the message in the sky was not written in words, but was instead a gloss on the iconographic significance of the heavenly cross: Weiss, op. cit. (n. 4, 2003), 247.

[7] *Pan. Lat.* 4(10).14–15, including a mention of the appearance of the Dioscuri at a battle during the early Republic. On the vision recorded by Nazarius and its relationship to the other accounts, see C. E. V. Nixon and B. S. Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (1994), 341–2, 357–8 n. 61. For a balanced discussion of Weiss' argument and the dangers of placing too much weight on what Constantine did or did not witness one sunny day in Gaul, see H. A. Drake, 'Solar power in Late Antiquity', in A. Cain and N. Lenski (eds), *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* (2009), 215–26. Jacqueline Long's article in the same volume (at 227–35), entitled 'How to read a halo: three (or more) versions of Constantine's vision', also accepts Weiss' thesis, moving on to analyse how the vision was used for different purposes by the three authors who reported it.

II

The interpretative differences that separate the explorations of the emperor's vision(s) in these volumes are emblematic of broader and long-standing debates within Constantinian historiography. Jacob Burckhardt famously painted the first (known) Christian emperor as a cynical and power-hungry politician, manipulating the religion for his own ends without believing in it.[9] Few would now agree with Burckhardt, and the issue of Constantine's 'sincerity' is not a major concern for any of these five recent studies; yet the nature of his commitment to Christianity remains a subject of intense speculation. As Van Dam observes in the foreword to his *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge*, 'the modern discussion of no other emperor is so reverential toward the weight of its historiographical tradition, and repeated references to the same Past Masters imply an ongoing concern with their problems' (15).

Despite the fading of some earlier controversies, the last thirty years have seen polarized interpretations of Constantine's reign and its impact on religion in the Roman Empire. Undoubtedly one of the most important is Timothy Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius*, published thirty years ago, which painted a portrait of an unambiguously Christian Constantine, who was not necessarily a pleasant man, at least by modern standards, but who instead emerged as 'neither a saint nor a tyrant'.[10] What marked out Barnes' Constantine was not, however, merely the sincerity of his convictions, but, more importantly, the effect that these beliefs had on his imperial rule: 'after 312 Constantine considered that his main duty as emperor was to inculcate virtue in his subjects and to persuade them to worship God'; 'benefactor of Christianity, enemy of the Church's enemies, Constantine regarded himself as the protector of Christians everywhere, entrusted with a divine mission to evangelize'.[11] This was not merely a man on a mission from God, but one who sought to make his Christian mark upon the empire that he ruled, with this transformation being the chief concern of his time on earth. It is a conception of Constantine that has been significant in defining the terms of scholarly debate ever since, although it drew some immediate criticism, most notably in a review article in this journal from Averil Cameron, who complained that Barnes relied too heavily and uncritically on Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, 'whose claims he often follows without discussion and on whose evidence he relies throughout'.[12] For Cameron, what studies of Constantine, and particularly the work of Barnes, needed was more careful analysis of Eusebius' work as literature, rather than as a 'source', and this was precisely what she and Stuart Hall provided in their excellent translation and commentary on the text, published in 1999.[13]

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[8] For these stories, see Suet., *Claud.* 7; *Aug.* 6.

[9] J. Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantins des Großen* (1853; 1880^2). The English translation was re-issued in 2007 with a new introduction by Noel Lenski.

[10] T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (1981), 275.

[11] ibid., 275, 258.

[12] Averil Cameron, 'Constantine Christianus', *JRS* 73 (1983), 184–90, at 187.

This was followed soon afterwards by another extremely influential interpretation of Constantine: Hal Drake's *Constantine and the Bishops: the Politics of Intolerance* (2000) stands in sharp opposition to Barnes' reconstruction of the emperor, both in its methodology and its conclusions. In describing his lengthy volume as a 'sketch', Drake actively played down his 'hard' research, informing his readers that 'much of what has become the apparatus of classical scholarship — prosopography, inscriptions, close analysis of texts for chronological clues — is prominent in these pages only by its absence'.[14] As such, his *modus operandi* was presented as a direct contrast to that of Barnes, who placed his faith most firmly in precisely these activities. Similarly, Drake's Constantine had little in common with the fierce promoter of religious change who emerged from the pages of Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius*. Instead, in taking a very critical approach to Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, which Drake characterized as exhibiting both 'hyperbole' and 'distortion', a new vision appeared of a more tolerant Constantine, an emperor 'whose greatest achievement — his ability to create a stable consensus of Christians and pagans in favor of a religiously neutral public space — has been buried by time'.[15] This was an emperor who promoted 'an agenda for a moderate and inclusive Christianity', even if his plan sometimes failed to meet with success.[16]

The very different interpretations of Barnes and Drake have, in recent years, been key to the framing of scholarly debates concerning Constantine and, vitally, his attitude and actions towards both Christianity and other religious activities and groups within his empire. Yet, such issues have not been the only concerns for historians of his reign. The *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, edited by Noel Lenski and published in 2005, with a revised edition in 2012, sought, as its title suggests, to give a more rounded view of this period, not only giving significant space to 'non-religious' issues, but also widening its focus beyond the figure of the emperor himself to look more broadly at the Roman Empire in his day. The volume's treatment of religious matters, however, lay closer to the 'consensus' interpretation than that of Barnes, with chapters by Mark Edwards, Doug Lee and Hal Drake himself, as well as the account of Constantine's legal traditionalism provided by Caroline Humfress.[17] In the same year, in the second edition of Volume 12 of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, Averil Cameron marked out a *via media* between polarized opinions, taking a critical approach to the 'Christianizing' Constantine of Eusebius, but also rejecting the notion of him as possessing a 'conscious desire for religious toleration', arguing that 'while it is right to be sceptical of many of Eusebius' own claims for Constantine's Christian fervour, this "tolerant" reading involves downplaying others of his pronouncements which seem to contradict it'.[18]

Thus, with the issue of 'sincerity' largely disappearing from discussions of Constantine in recent decades, the focus has shifted instead to reconstructions of his aims and actions, attempting not to interrogate his religious conviction, but rather to ask what results it had for both emperor and empire.[19] The volumes reviewed here firmly stake out their positions within this historiographical landscape, although the actively tolerant Constantine of Hal Drake receives little attention, as the major disagreement here is centred on whether Constantine had a coherent 'religious policy' of any kind. Even though none of them seeks to make a window into Constantine's soul, what Constantine was thinking at different points in his life remains a live issue.

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[13] Averil Cameron and S. G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (1999).

[14] H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (2000), xvii.

[15] ibid., 402, 389, xv.

[16] ibid., 271–2.

[17] N. Lenski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (2005; 2012^2), 111–36 (Drake), 137–58 (Edwards), 159–79 (Lee), 205–25 (Humfress). The volume as a whole was excoriated by Barnes in a review article in *The International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 14 (2007), 185–220, where he complained about manifold errors and misinterpretations, although there was relatively little criticism directed against either Drake or Lee.

[18] Averil Cameron, 'The reign of Constantine', in A. K. Bowman, P. Garnsey and Averil Cameron (eds), *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume XII: The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193–337* (2005), 90–109, at 107.

[19] There is not sufficient space to survey all recent publications on Constantine, but also worthy of particular mention are K. M. Girardet, *Die Konstantinische Wende: Voraussetzungen und geistige Grundlagen der*

III

The development of Constantine's religious thought is the focus for Klaus Girardet's *Der Kaiser und sein Gott*, which combines and develops ideas from three recent articles.[20] The book explicitly states that it does not intend to be a political biography of the emperor, but rather 'ein politisch-historisch orientiertes Bild von Konstantins Weg zum Christentum und von den verschiedenartigen Konsequenzen des Neuen in der Religionspolitik während seiner Herrschaft' (4).[21] In particular, Girardet focuses on what he regards as the most important formative period for Constantine's religious ideas and policies, the period from A.D. 310, when he experienced his vision in Gaul, to A.D. 314, which Girardet argues was the date of the delivery of Constantine's *Speech to the Assembly of the Saints* in the city of Trier (108–18). The oration is vital for any attempt to reconstruct Constantine's religious 'policy', since it contains both theological statements and expressions of desire for the conversion of non-Christians.[22] This early date for the speech allows Girardet to see a Constantinian vision for a Christian empire as the product of these few years.[23] For Girardet, this period saw a 'Konstantinische Wende', a turning-point both in the emperor's own religious views and then, after his victory over Maxentius, in his 'Religionspolitik' (106), which can be traced through a close analysis of the surviving material, most notably Lactantius, the relevant panegyrics and Constantine's own speech and letters, as well as an extensive range of artistic depictions in a variety of media.[24]

This approach comes through most clearly in chs III and IV, which guide the reader through a reconstruction of Constantine's personal religious journey in A.D. 310 and 311. While Girardet states that this is necessarily a hypothetical account of Constantine's beliefs during this time, he grounds it squarely in the ancient material, often engaging in painstaking exegesis to draw conclusions from individual passages or images. Thus, the panegyric of A.D. 310 and Constantine's own coinage are taken as evidence for his close relationship with Apollo/Sol Invictus, while Eusebius' account demonstrates that by A.D. 311, on the eve of the Italian campaign, Constantine had

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Religionspolitik Konstantins des Grossen (2007); R. Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (2007); and the volumes which accompanied major exhibitions held at York and Trier: E. Hartley, J. Hawkes and M. Henig (eds), *Constantine the Great: York's Roman Emperor* (2006); A. Demandt and J. Engemann (eds), *Konstantin der Grosse: Geschichte – Archäologie – Rezeption* (2006).

[20] 'Konstantin und das Christentum: die Jahre der Entscheidung 310 bis 314', in Demandt and Engemann, op. cit. (n. 19), 69–81; 'Konstantin – Wegbereiter des Christentums als Weltreligion', in A. Demandt and J. Engemann (eds), *Konstantin der Grosse: Begleitband zur Landesausstellung 'Konstantin der Grosse'* (2007), 232–43; 'Das Christentum im Denken und in der Politik Kaiser Konstantins d. Gr.', in K. M. Girardet (ed.), *Kaiser Konstantin der Grosse: historische Leistung und Rezeption in Europa* (2007), 29–53.

[21] 'A politically and historically oriented picture of Constantine's journey to Christianity and of the diverse consequences of this novelty in religious politics during his reign.'

[22] The speech is translated in M. Edwards, *Constantine and Christendom* (2003), 1–62.

[23] Girardet's argument rests, as do other interpretations of the date and venue of the speech, on the reading of chs 22 and 25 of the *Oratio* (and Girardet surveys alternatives at pp. 109–10). The argument presented here does not, in my opinion, do enough to justify the identification of the 'unworthy figure' in ch. 25 as Maximinus Daia, which is important for supporting this early date. As he has done before, Barnes (at pp. 113–18) argues forcefully and coherently that the speech was delivered at Nicomedia in A.D. 325, with the 'unworthy figure' being the recently-defeated Licinius. Harries (at p. 167) declares herself agnostic on this issue.

[24] On the notion of the 'Konstantinische Wende', see especially Girardet, op. cit. (n. 19).

shifted his attention to the Christian God. Moreover, close analysis of both Lactantius' account of the dream and surviving fourth-century images allows for a suggestion that in A.D. 310 Constantine created a military standard — which came to be known as the 'labarum' — depicting a six-pointed star, and then, one year later, added a loop to the top to create the Chi-Rho Christogram, possibly on the advice of Lactantius himself.

After this, Girardet devotes two chapters to the campaign against Maxentius and its aftermath, bringing together various literary accounts of Constantine's behaviour in Rome and readings of the artistic and epigraphic scheme of the Arch of Constantine to conclude that it presented a deliberate religious ambiguity, itself a sign that something had changed under the new, Christian emperor. One of Constantine's comments in his *Speech to the Assembly of the Saints*, that he attained wisdom in the prime of life, is here linked to the 'solar halo' explanation of his vision(s), being understood as 'eine klare Anspielung auf das seit 311 christlich interpretierte Himmelsphänomen des Jahres 310' (97).[25] While this reading, like the argument in ch. IV that Constantine's upward gaze on coin portraits had a clear religious significance, is not obviously wrong, it demonstrates a tendency to interpret all other evidence within a framework established by a small number of favoured sources and thus to create a clear and unified account of Constantine's religious thought. Thus anything that seemingly supported paganism, including the depiction of the emperor offering incense to the gods on the Arch in Rome, is taken as the result of a deliberate policy to keep the pagan majority happy, rather than as something which he did not see as problematic for his faith or in which he had no involvement. This is a Constantine with a clear plan, whose personal wishes are to be read in every legal statement, panegyric and coin during his reign.

Girardet similarly presents Constantine's pro-Christian policies as part of a wide-ranging programme of reform. Constantine's ruling, sent to the *vicarius* of Rome in A.D. 321, that manumissions, but no other legal business, could take place on the 'day of the Sun' is thus cast as a far-reaching, explicitly Christianizing change to daily life across his empire: 'Durch Konstantins Gesetz erhielt nun die Zeit in aller Form für das ganze Reich verbindlich einen neuen, einen christlichen Rhythmus' (132).[26] When stating that magistrates were forbidden from performing pagan sacrifices, a footnote is provided to a ruling that states, rather, that Christian clerics were not to be forced to sacrifice (157, n. 777).[27] In both of these cases, the basis for Girardet's account is not so much the evidence of the law codes as the narrative of Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine*.[28] The bishop's interpretation of the information that he had acquired (by whatever means) is thus treated in the same manner as the legal evidence, as a 'source' to be mined for historical facts. Since Eusebius provides by far the most detailed account of the emperor's engagement with his new favoured religion, Girardet's Constantine understandably bears many similarities to Eusebius': an emperor whose chief concern was the Christianization of the world.[29]

The Constantine that emerges from this volume is therefore, like the one who appears in Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius*, a man who felt himself to be on a mission from God. Girardet, however, goes much further in reconstructing motive, arguing that Constantine's move to Christianity may have been inspired by witnessing the failure of the Tetrarchs (and their gods) in their persecutions and invasions of Italy, as well as by his admiration for the steadfastness of Christian confessors and martyrs. This portrait is grounded in extensive and close analysis of the ancient material, including impressively detailed studies of a wide range of artistic representations, although the coherent image that they are used to make is more speculative than one might expect from such detailed scholarly analysis. As a reconstruction of the emperor's ideas and experiences, this volume proposes answers to a number of interesting questions, although many of them, due to the nature of the evidence, must remain hypothetical.

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[25] 'A clear allusion to the celestial phenomenon of the year 310, interpreted in a Christian manner since 311.' For Constantine's comment, see *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* 11.1.

[26] 'Through Constantine's law, time in every form now necessarily received a new and Christian rhythm for the whole empire.' *CTh* 2.8.1; *CJ* 3.12.2.

[27] The law is *CTh* 16.2.5.

[28] See Eus., *V. Const.* 4.18–20, 2.44.

[29] See especially pp. 158–63, entitled 'Christianisierung der Oikumene'.

A similar approach to this is taken by Paul Veyne's *When our World Became Christian, 312–394*. Originally published as *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien* in 2007, this book sets out to explain not only what happened to Christianity and the Roman Empire during the fourth century, but also the motives behind Constantine's actions and the impact of these changes on 'our world' (which here corresponds to the secular democracies of Western Europe). It is a highly personal interpretation of the reign of Constantine and the following decades, swimming against the tide of much current fourth-century scholarship, particularly in its engagement with both the ancient material, especially Eusebius, and also modern historiography.

At its heart, this volume is a study of Constantine's reign, with a biographical slant that comes through strongly in repeated reconstructions of his thoughts and motives. Much of this is based, as one would expect, on the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea. While few would now impugn Eusebius' honesty in the way that previous generations did, Veyne seems to head too far in the opposite direction, accepting Eusebius' version of Constantine, whose all-consuming concern was the promotion of Christianity and its Church. Moreover, before the appearance of some more nuanced passages towards the end of the book, the prevailing portrait of religious identity is one of sharp divisions. In particular, ch. 8 describes the revolt of Eugenius and the Battle of the River Frigidus as 'a duel to the death between paganism and Christianity' (103) and a moment when paganism 'knew that it was vanquished' (2) — this interpretation in particular stands out as rather old-fashioned, especially when compared to Alan Cameron's excellent recent discussion of these events.[30] There is very little room here for the growing pains of Christian orthodoxy or Church organization in a story where pagans and Christians are neatly divided into well-defined camps or 'parties' and where religions clash dramatically on the field of battle.

IV

A much more nuanced approach is taken by Timothy Barnes' *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*, which provides a very detailed and scholarly account of Constantine's life and imperial career, building not only on his 1981 book *Constantine and Eusebius*, but also on his exhaustive research during the last four decades, which is represented by sixty-four items in the bibliography. The volume's theory of history is also made clear in its epigraph, taken from Lucian: 'the sole task of the historian is to say how it happened'. Thus, Barnes states, the only way to pick our way through the difficulties presented by the surviving material, including the lies that came from Constantine's own 'propaganda machine', is to 'allow ourselves to be guided by the ancient evidence and … not seek to impose our own antecedent assumptions on its interpretation' (2). What follows is a detailed discussion of the first definitely Christian emperor that results from very impressive knowledge of, and close attention to, an extensive range of ancient material.

In providing this account, Barnes engages with a wide variety of modern interpretations of Constantine, forcefully criticizing not only the conclusions of other scholars — including his younger self — but also their methodologies. As such, while the introduction does provide a brief survey of scholarship, it soon moves into discussion of the evidence, starting with three fourth-century authors who are central to Barnes' understanding of Constantine: Lactantius, Eusebius and the poet Palladas, whose recent re-dating by Kevin Wilkinson is employed to play a vital rôle in the reconstruction of Constantine's religious policy from A.D. 324.[31] Barnes also warns readers to beware inferences 'made from coin-legends and from inscriptions whose wording was not dictated by Constantine' (17), following up this caveat with a whistle-stop tour of how other historians have misunderstood non-literary evidence: the *Sol Invictus* coinage does not indicate Constantine's continued devotion to solar monotheism after A.D. 312; the inscription on the Arch of Constantine, like the panegyric of A.D. 313, reveals shifting religious language that reflects acknowledgements by the emperor's subjects of his support for Christianity; the rescript to Hispellum on the building of a temple to the *Gens Flavia* should be re-dated to the period immediately after Constantine's death; and the original appearance of the emperor's statue in Constantinople can be deduced from its depiction on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. Barnes thus plays the rôle of the master detective, examining the minutiae of the evidence to identify the clues that others have missed.

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[30] Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (2011), 93–131.

After this review of the sources and their (mis)use, the book proceeds chronologically through Constantine's life, pausing regularly to correct misinterpretations. For example, the so-called 'Edict of Milan' from A.D. 313 is carefully dismantled over the course of four pages, demonstrating clearly that the text which is often given this title was not an edict, did not come from Milan, and was not issued by Constantine (93–7). The same error is also addressed by Girardet, Van Dam, Harries and Veyne, but Barnes gives it the most extensive treatment, outlining not only why other scholars are wrong, but why they should have known better in the first place, since the mistake was first corrected over a century ago by Otto Seeck. Similarly, even before the book comes to deal with Constantine himself, ch. 2 pays close attention to his parents: the career of Constantine's father, Constantius, is reconstructed, with a forged inscription rejected along the way; Constantine's place of birth is established as Naissus; his mother Helena is identified as an inn-keeper's daughter; her marriage to Constantius is declared legal; their first encounter is placed during the passage of Aurelian's army through Bithynia; Constantius' second marriage is dated to before his elevation to the position of *caesar* in A.D. 293; and Helena's rôle in the discovery of the True Cross is revealed as a later legend.

All of these arguments are carefully constructed through critical exegesis, dating, emendation and, on occasion, rejection of a wealth of ancient material, which is a characteristic of much of Barnes' work on this period.[32] This methodology is used to good effect throughout this volume, particularly in ch. 7, where there is a masterful discussion of Constantine's military and administrative reforms and his dynastic arrangements for the imperial succession. What will, no doubt, provoke more interest is the reconstruction in ch. 6 of the emperor's stance towards religion in the eastern part of the Empire after A.D. 324. This discussion stands as a forceful rejoinder to portrayals of Constantine as 'tolerant' or 'inclusive' in his attitude towards pagan practices (as suggested most prominently by Hal Drake), and thus also represents a restatement of Barnes' argument for a dramatic religious policy change which he initially proposed in *Constantine and Eusebius*. While a criticism of this interpretation thirty years ago was that it 'relied exclusively upon the partisan and tendentious evidence of Christian writers' (16), particularly Eusebius, the poetry of Palladas, re-dated to Constantine's reign, is here played as a trump card that proves the authenticity of Eusebius' claims.[33] Three of Palladas' epigrams are used to support the contention that Constantinople was 'a Christian city, totally free of any trace of paganism until Julian' (127), and, most importantly, dating his lament that 'we Greeks are men reduced to ashes' to the early fourth century helps Barnes to conclude that 'no reason whatsoever remains to doubt that Constantine prohibited animal sacrifice … or that he prohibited it very soon after the defeat of Licinius, as Eusebius reports, when pagans were cowed and incapable of resistance' (110).[34] Barnes does, however, argue that this ban was only applied in the eastern territories which Constantine acquired in A.D. 324, leading to a clear division between religious policies in different regions of the Empire, and he concludes that 'individual pagans could still flourish and prosper … without abandoning their traditional beliefs' (143). The arguments put forward here represent another important contribution to the debate concerning Constantine's attitude towards traditional religious practices and the degree to which his support for Christianity shaped his wider performance of the rôle of emperor; yet, while the epigrams of Palladas suggest pessimism on the part of a pagan poet, they may not be the decisive blow that settles the matter beyond all doubt.

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[31] See K. Wilkinson, 'Palladas and the age of Constantine', *JRS* 99 (2009), 36–60.

[32] See, for example, the dating of the movements of emperors in his *Constantine and Eusebius* (1981), *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (1982), and *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (1993).

This judgement of Palladas — as the 'proof' that provides the unambiguous answer — is applied elsewhere in the volume in the treatment of the ancient material. Many of Barnes' arguments are elegant and incisive. There are, however, moments where the logic for accepting or rejecting a piece of ancient 'testimony' is not entirely clear. For example, the identification of the emperor's mother, Helena, as a former *stabularia*, or inn-keeper's daughter (30–3), is accepted on the testimony of Ambrose of Milan's *De obitu Theodosii*; yet, the claim that she discovered the relics of the True Cross on a trip to the Holy Land is rejected (31, 44), and the earliest record of this story, again Ambrose's *De obitu Theodosii*, is taken to be unreliable on this point.[35] Barnes may be correct in both of these assertions, but the second seems to involve greater critical scrutiny of the relevant text than the first. There are also a few statements which may not be readily accepted by all readers, such as the claim that Constantine's visit to Babylon with the army of Galerius 'implies that in 298 he already had an interest in the Old Testament' (52), or the conclusion that, since Constantine and Maxentius had both been marked out as heirs under Diocletian and were 'both sympathetic to Christianity' (56), Galerius cunningly used religious policy to displace them in favour of his own nominees. The 'Great Persecution' was, therefore, not 'a titanic struggle for mastery between two religions on a collision course', but 'rather a political maneuver designed to influence the imperial succession' (57). Such arguments perhaps reflect a broader tendency to seek links between events and to create a unified picture of an individual's motivations or aims.

V

In its approach to the study of Constantine, Ray Van Dam's *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* takes a very different tack to the three books discussed so far. For Van Dam, a major problem lies in attitudes towards the surviving material, most notably the work of Eusebius, as exemplified in treatments of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in

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[33] Barnes is here particularly reacting to Averil Cameron, op. cit. (n. 12).

[34] Palladas in *Anth. Pal.* 10.90.4. Barnes' interpretation of the significance of Palladas' poems for the purely 'Christian' nature of early Constantinople pushes the argument further than the more guarded conclusions of Kevin Wilkinson in his 'Palladas and the foundation of Constantinople', *JRS* 100 (2010), 179–94, at 193–4.

[35] Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii* 42, 43. Here Barnes is reacting to the suggestion that a *stabularia* was a person of very low status, and possibly a prostitute, which is found in J. W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of her Finding of the True Cross* (1992), 15–16.

A.D. 312: 'modern scholars often treat these ancient accounts of the battle as documentation, as evidence, as testimony, as "sources" whose information can be filtered and blended into a basic factual framework' (6); 'too often positivism is hypercritical and hypercredulous at the same time' (219). This book therefore rejects an approach which tries to excavate 'true details' from the ancient accounts, instead exploring the development over time of different representations of Constantine's victory over Maxentius and his shift to support Christianity. For this purpose, Van Dam adopts a reverse chronological structure, beginning with Bernini's equestrian statue of Constantine in the Vatican and working back to the earliest commemorations of the battle in its immediate aftermath. This novel approach is presented as a way of breaking out of the teleological trap of the conventional forward narrative and its obsession with Constantine's place in the 'rise of Christianity': 'rather than adding deposits of nuance, it brushes away layers of speculation and misdirection. Rather than gathering and accruing, it excavates and disperses' (220).

As such, while Van Dam, like Barnes and Girardet, devotes much of his book to close analysis of ancient presentations of Constantine, his approach to this material is very markedly contrasting, presenting not the reassembly of a shattered artefact, but rather an archaeology of interpretation. After providing a history of the legend that the emperor was baptized by Silvester of Rome and that, in return, he had given secular power to the bishop and his papal successors, Van Dam surveys the treatment of the emperor by the generations that followed him, illuminating the different Constantines created by both his detractors, such as Zosimus, Eunapius and Julian, and also his supporters, most prominently the ecclesiastical historians Evagrius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret and Rufinus. In particular, Van Dam is interested in how the latter group treated — and sometimes reworked — their source material, especially the writings of Eusebius. This is accompanied by an interesting discussion of evocations of Constantine in presentations of later fourth-century emperors, including the use of a Latin version of the phrase 'By this conquer' on coins in the A.D. 350s and the portrayal of Theodosius' victory at the River Frigidus as a re-enactment of the Milvian Bridge.

Chapter 4 moves on to Eusebius himself, examining the ways in which he collected information and wove it into his writings. Some of the issues discussed here, including Eusebius' self-presentation as Constantine's confidant and the promotion of the bishop's own theological agenda, will be familiar to readers from other discussions of Eusebius' Constantine, including that found in Van Dam's earlier volume, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (2007). This is joined by an exploration not only of Eusebius' 'commentary' on information and documents that he acquired, but also of his narrative techniques in transforming the victories over Maxentius and Licinius into episodes in a story of religious triumph. Ch. 5 also provides a very clear and enlightening review of Eusebius' changing accounts of Constantine's defeat of Maxentius across the various 'editions' of his *Ecclesiastical History* and, later, his *Life of Constantine*. Van Dam uses this methodical study to argue that in the *Life of Constantine*, apart from including descriptions of Constantine's vision, dream and consultation of advisers, all of which came from the emperor himself, Eusebius actually made very few alterations to the version of events which he had previously written for the *Ecclesiastical History*, before ever meeting Constantine. Thus, the significance of Eusebius as the preserver of privileged imperial recollections is challenged: 'he simply included those memories as a new backstory, and he shaped his account of those memories to supplement and confirm his earlier narrative' (99).

Van Dam does not, however, stop there in his criticism of those who rely on close readings of Eusebius for understanding the emperor's 'conversion'. His analysis extends beyond the bishop's use of Constantine's account of the vision and its aftermath, questioning also the wisdom of trusting in the 'reliability' of the emperor's own testimony. This is not, however, an old-fashioned accusation of insincerity or deception, but, rather, a more sophisticated exploration of the formation of memory. Whatever Constantine may or may not have seen, in the sky or in his dreams, during the period A.D. 310–312, is not, according to Van Dam, recoverable from the surviving material. By the time the emperor related these experiences to Eusebius, possibly as late as A.D. 336, 'he had been constructing his memories for a long time during his years in western provinces' (103) and these memories were thus 'interpretations of the original events, stylized stories rather than forensic descriptions' (13). The mythologization of Constantine thus becomes a process that did not just begin in other people's depictions of the emperor during his lifetime, but also in his own thoughts and the stories that he told about his experiences. The discussion of western representations of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in ch. 6 therefore turns standard analysis of the panegyric of A.D. 313, Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorum* and the Arch of Constantine on its head: rather than asking how much these were shaped by Constantine's influence, Van Dam speculates about how much their influence transformed Constantine's own recollections. These are questions that, as Van Dam recognizes, cannot be resolved definitively, even though 'it is possible to imagine how the panegyric, the pamphlet, and the panels on this arch might have contributed to the shaping of the emperor's own memories of the battle' (103).

VI

A critical and analytical approach to the ancient material is also to be found in Jill Harries' *Imperial Rome AD 284 to 363*, which forms the penultimate volume of the new Edinburgh History of Ancient Rome. In the opening pages, the contrast between the festivities for Rome's millennium in A.D. 247–8 and the lack of any such celebration a century later, as lamented by Aurelius Victor,[36] provides the springboard not simply for a story of Rome's declining importance within the Empire, but also for a clear and informative account of change and continuity from the accession of Diocletian to the death of Julian. Moreover, as befits its place within a multi-volume history, Harries' book places Constantine in the widest context of any of the works discussed here. She presents a broad view of political, administrative, military, economic and religious developments, as well as some aspects of social and cultural change. There is, therefore, a clear structure to the volume: after an introduction providing background information on the third century, two trios of chapters follow, one on the Tetrarchy, the other on Constantine, with each using the same structure that begins with narrative, moves on to administrative, legal and military changes and finishes with religion. After a discussion of the reigns of Constantine's sons, the book becomes more explicitly thematic, moving through warfare, Christianity, women, and then the cities of Rome and Antioch, before finishing with Julian and a postscript that looks forward to the later fourth century.

These areas of historical enquiry are explored eloquently, despite the difficulties of explanation which they can pose: thus, the description of the murky topic of Diocletianic taxation reforms and economic policy is impressively clear (59–70), while the career and administration of the poorly-understood Western emperor Constans, as well as the circumstances of his fall and death, are illuminated through a close examination of legal and prosopographical material (189–96). The gradual developments in central and provincial administration are also carefully expounded, rejecting the notion of a single great reforming plan in the mind of either Diocletian or Constantine. What emerges in its place is a sense of *ad hoc* government, in which the precedents of earlier emperors were repeatedly built upon in an on-going drive for stability and effective government. The Tetrarchy thus becomes significant in the development of provincial organization (50–5), but is not credited with creating the famous Late Roman bureaucracy in a single moment of reforming zeal. Instead, Harries presents a nuanced account of piecemeal consolidation and change, which both acknowledges Constantine's debt to the legacy of Diocletian and also details his own innovations (139–45), as well as allowing his son, Constantius II, to escape from his father's shadow and be recognized as playing a significant rôle in the growth of both imperial administration and the new capital of Constantinople (199–207).

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[36] Aur. Victor, *Caes.* 28.

Elsewhere, Harries also deftly brings a number of aspects of the Later Roman Empire to life when she turns her attention to the experiences of particular individuals which might be taken as illustrative of wider phenomena: focusing on Constantius II's wife, Eusebia, allows late antique representations and stereotyping of women to be illuminated (262–5); the career and writings of Libanius demonstrate urban life in Antioch and the workings of administration and patronage (283–90); and Ammianus' narrative of his escape from the siege of Amida (217–20), with its 'vividness and immediacy', is a compelling story of military hardship which, in Harries' words, 'conveys what being at war really meant' (220). Thus, while the progression of the volume is broadly chronological, a number of sections draw on material from across the whole century, meaning that, for instance, the reader has met Julian many times before he takes centre stage in ch. 13. This approach does, however, help to avoid any descent into dry narrative (as can easily happen with textbooks), as does Harries' lively prose and inclusion of well-chosen examples and anecdotes, particularly those drawn from the papyri records of Flavius Abinnaeus.

More generally, documentary evidence takes centre stage in this study, with legal material given particular attention and analysis, as one would expect from Harries, one of the foremost experts on Late Roman legislation.[37] This is already made clear in the introductory chapter, where the *Theodosian Code*, together with the problems of its reconstruction and interpretation, is given more extended treatment than any other piece of ancient material, being described as 'perhaps the most important single source for the social, economic and administrative history of the fourth and early fifth centuries' (17). This emphasis therefore produces a markedly different Constantine from the ones presented by Barnes and Girardet. This is a man who was certainly not on a vigorous mission of Christianization, even though 'his stance towards the competitors with Christianity in general was far from neutral' (157). The effects of his beliefs on his actions appear much less dramatic than in Barnes' account: the idea of Constantinople as the emperor's new 'Christian capital' is rejected; his marriage and celibacy legislation is not motivated by Christian ideas; his apparent creation of manumission in church, episcopal powers of arbitration and a 'Sunday holiday' are all revealed as affirmations of existing practice, rather than imperial innovations;[38] while his rulings and admonitions against pagan sacrifice 'would have amounted to a de facto ban — where it was enforced' (164), this did not bother most pagans, including Palladas, who was more concerned about the confiscation of temple treasures.

This image partly emerges through Harries' focus on legal material, assessing the extent to which individual emperors, including Constantine, were innovative or traditional by surveying their whole extant legislative output.[39] This approach comes at the expense of Eusebius, who is given short shrift here: 'it would be unwise to argue for reforms not hinted at in extant literature on the basis of tendentious literary authorities, such as

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[37] See, for example, J. Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (1999); eadem, *Law and Crime in the Roman World* (2007); J. Harries and I. Wood (eds), *The Theodosian Code: Studies in the Imperial Law of Late Antiquity* (1993; 2010^2).

[38] This argument is also reinforced by querying the authenticity of *Const. Sirm.* 1 at p. 161 n. 25.

[39] Similarly, while Julian is seen as out of touch in his religious beliefs, he is also criticized for his 'gratuitous attacks on Constantine's legislation' (p. 317), which were not confined to religious matters.

Eusebius, whose aim was to portray Constantine as a "Christian" lawgiver' (160). Yet, this is more than merely choosing to privilege one 'source' over another.[40] Rather, Harries' interpretation results from her conception of the working of imperial administration and her understanding of the processes by which legislation, as we now find it in the *Codes*, was created. Her Constantine responded to the suggestions of those around him, rather than taking the initiative, particularly in internal Christian disputes. He desired harmony and consensus, unwillingly intervening in the Donatist and Arian controversies: and he was right to hesitate, because, by taking part in the Council of Nicaea, he 'allowed the integrity of his imperial office to be compromised by involvement with ecclesiastical factionalism' (176). Just as many of his laws on a variety of different issues were the results of questions and petitions from prefects, governors and other officials, not spontaneous acts of imperial reform, so the benefits he gave to Christians and his rôle in their theological arguments can be viewed in the same way: 'left to himself, Constantine is unlikely to have exceeded the limits traditionally set for an emperor's patronage of a favoured cult' (180).[41] While this counterfactual suggestion must, like so much in reconstructions of Constantine, remain hypothetical, Harries' impressive work highlights the benefits of assessing imperial religious policy not as a unique field of enquiry, but within a holistic view of the emperor's relationship with his empire.

VII

Moreover, while all five volumes make extensive and detailed use of the surviving ancient material, their different approaches are exemplified in their treatment of Eusebius of Caesarea. Girardet and Veyne are the most reverential towards his writings, using them as the most important source for their understanding of Constantine's actions, policies and ideas. Barnes' account is based on a more extensive and extremely learned discussion of a great range of ancient material, although Eusebius lies at its heart, just as it did in Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius* thirty years ago. In contrast, Harries' critical approach sees Eusebius reduced to a much more subsidiary rôle in assessing Constantine's 'Christianization' of the Empire, with his interpretations of policies and commentaries on legislation being given much less weight than surviving imperial letters and constitutions, in stark contrast to Girardet's practice. Similarly, it is notable that Van Dam, whose book gives greater sustained attention to Eusebius than any of the others, is also the least inclined to treat his works as 'sources' to be mined for clues about Constantine's attitude towards Christianity and 'paganism'.

These varying approaches to Eusebius thus demonstrate a reasonable correlation with the authors' broader methodologies. It is possible to offer wildly divergent interpretations of Constantine through extremely detailed exegesis — and sometimes re-dating — of all available literary, epigraphic, numismatic and artistic material. In part, the many different Constantines that appear in some modern scholarship are the result of attempts to rearrange the 'sources' and cause them to make sense as a unified whole, to reconcile the apparently conflicting images of Constantine that have come down from antiquity, just as the different vision accounts are combined into a single solar halo. History thus becomes a jigsaw puzzle: while each piece seems to depict something different, if one looks closely enough at it and understands how it fits together with the hundreds of others, then the overall picture will eventually emerge. Such a strategy, however, assumes that all the necessary pieces are there, if one only looks hard enough, and that they really are all part of the same image.

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[40] On this issue, see also the sophisticated argument about the dangers of relying solely on either Eusebius or the *Theodosian Code* in J. Harries, 'Superfluous verbiage? Rhetoric and law in the age of Constantine and Julian', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19 (2011), 345–74.

[41] Similarly, at pp. 153–4, Harries speculates that Constantine's ruling on unilateral divorce may have been influenced by its recipient, the Christian praetorian prefect Flavius Ablabius.

Veyne and Girardet present the clearest examples of the 'jigsaw' approach, seeking to combine the evidence of a collection of different ancient presentations into a coherent and cohesive image of Constantine. Barnes lays out a great number of pieces with which to complete his puzzle, and is also prepared to reject some of them as not belonging to it, since they present incorrect information or distorted 'propaganda'; those selected are combined to create a clear picture, although Barnes laments that it will never be completed due to certain gaps in the evidence (1).[42] Harries, in creating a fusion of narrative and thematic analysis of the period for a multi-volume history, privileges certain forms of evidence, most notably legal and administrative documents, although this is to be expected in a volume which concentrates on emperors and their official actions and reforms. Furthermore, these documents, along with the other ancient material, are subjected to close critical analysis, emphasizing their status as expressions of ideology, as well as vehicles for the transmission of historical 'facts'. Similarly, Van Dam's volume, with its reversed chronology and its focus on 'excavating many layers of representations of Constantine' (16), is almost the antithesis of 'jigsaw' historiography. The varying ancient portraits of the emperor, like the varying accounts of his visions, are left unreconciled, standing as different interpretations, produced by individuals whose authorial practices and intentions contrasted with those of both other contemporaries and modern scholars. Van Dam thus invites the reader to see the many commemorations of Constantine and his victory at the Milvian Bridge as individual artefacts, created for specific circumstances, sometimes in response to other depictions, sometimes in isolation from them. In drawing out the relationships, or lack thereof, between the various accounts, this volume's great insight lies in revealing the pitfalls that await readers of the 'sources' for Constantine's reign, a task which Barnes' study sets out to perform, but by a very different method.

VIII

The differences in the methodologies of these volumes therefore not only produce a range of contrasting Constantines, but also divergent interpretations of his conversion. In part, this can be seen in the attitude taken towards Weiss' 'solar halo' theory, with which this article opened: Barnes and Girardet are keen to embrace this 'harmonizing' explanation, while Van Dam and Harries display scepticism not so much with Weiss' answer, but with the questions that he asks of the three accounts. Yet, beyond that, these volumes also look to different ways of understanding and contextualizing this event, in order to comprehend its antecedents and consequences. For Veyne, Constantine was a man who swam with the tide of history. He provides a sketch of Christianity on the eve of Constantine's conversion, declaring that the religion 'had acquired the status of an avant-garde talking point among the elite' (17), such that no educated third-century Roman could be indifferent towards it. Veyne's Constantine was a sincere believer, but not a zealot, a man who 'imagined that the god of the Christians was more likely than other gods to bring him victory' (49). While acknowledging the impossibility of ever knowing for certain the reasons for Constantine's conversion, Veyne discusses the kudos that a ruler might gain by converting to the 'avant garde' religion and declares that 'in the eyes of Constantine, Christianity was the only religion which … was worthy of a sovereign' (61–2). Veyne's Constantine is thus a pro-active ruler, who displayed

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[42] For a similar analysis of Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius* see Averil Cameron, op. cit. (n. 12), 185–6.

'Caesaro-Papist ambition' (80) and brought the State into the service of the Church's mission, for instance by combating the Donatists, but prudently did not try forcibly to convert his pagan subjects, as 'it was important that no one should suspect the messianic plans in favour of Christ that Constantine was harbouring' (75).

While social context is also extremely important for Girardet, his view of Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century presents a marked contrast to that of Veyne. At the beginning of his volume, Girardet spends time criticizing Burckhardt, not primarily for his portrait of an irreligious Constantine, but rather for his view of late antique paganism as moribund, destined, through the force of 'historical necessity', to be replaced by the rising power of Christianity. After surveying more recent supporters of this thesis, almost exclusively writing in German, Girardet then argues, with extensive use of Anglophone scholarship, that Christians were still a small, divided, disorganized minority in the early fourth century, especially in the West, and that Constantine cannot therefore have supported the religion for reasons that would today be termed 'political' (10–21). In addition, this introductory section makes another important point concerning the intertwining and inseparability of 'religion' and 'politics' in the ancient world that shapes the volume's approach to its subject (9). Rather than imposing anachronistic divisions on the subject matter, Constantine is to be understood as a man of his time, whose attitude towards the divine was grounded firmly in the traditional Roman approach to divine favour and assistance: he favoured the Christian God, whom he regarded as his 'Helfer-Gott', and whose divine power and protection was demonstrated by Constantine's own victories on the battlefield.[43]

Yet Girardet also explicitly refuses to attempt a reconstruction of the details of the emperor's own theology, seeing this as immaterial to the sincerity of his Christian faith, according to the understanding of his own time (50–2). As such, his account works hard to avoid what it sees as anachronistic or unfounded versions of Constantine's religious thought and policy.[44] One product of this emphasis on contextualization is a Constantine who, with his 'traditional' Roman understanding of the relationship between 'religion' and 'politics', as well as that between the human and divine realms, continued to play the imperial rôle of *pontifex maximus*, but now with regard to Christianity, becoming the *episcopus episcoporum*, bringing both those outside and those inside the Church into a new form of religious community: 'das ihn leitende Ideal war die Bürgergemeinschaft des *populus Romanus* als Kultgemeinschaft, wie einst polytheistisch, so jetzt bei und seit Konstantin monotheistisch-christlich, eine Kult- und Glaubensgemeinschaft' (154).[45] This was the emperor's intended outcome of the 'Konstantinische Wende': a new world order.

Barnes, however, takes a more measured approach to Constantine's thought processes. He explicitly rejects speculation about the emperor's motives, stating that 'the internal psychological process which led to the "conversion" of Constantine and his public embrace of the Christian religion is not important to the historian because it is undiscoverable — and perhaps was unclear even to Constantine himself' (80). More broadly, Barnes, unlike Veyne and Girardet, does not seek to give a detailed account of the social and cultural background to the emperor's conversion, focusing instead on the figure of Constantine himself, looking for evidence of his interest in Christianity in his life before A.D. 306, such as his visit to Babylon, rather than seeing the 'conversion' as the product of, or a rebellion against, historical necessity. Yet, while the origins of his belief are not reconstructed here, his intentions for the Empire are laid out clearly. In *Constantine*, Barnes depicts the emperor as always having one eye on the future, a master politician with a developed scheme for change, but who knew that he must tread carefully to avoid causing a pagan backlash. He did not launch widespread attacks on temples 'not because of any ambiguity in his religious beliefs, not because he lacked the courage to offend diehard pagans, but out of political calculation. As Constantine correctly saw, he was doing enough to ensure that the Roman Empire would with the passage of time become a completely Christian empire' (175). Barnes' Constantine, like those who appear in the pages of Veyne and Girardet's volumes, as well as Drake's *Constantine and the Bishops* and Barnes' earlier *Constantine and Eusebius*, is a man with a plan.

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[43] The idea that Constantine regarded the Christian God as the 'bringer of victory', and that his promotion of his favoured religion was tied inextricably to his military success and security, is presented forcefully in P. Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (2009).

[44] Some of the most withering criticism is directed towards the 'consensus' model put forward in Drake, op. cit. (n. 14).

[45] 'The guiding ideal for him was the citizen community of the *populus Romanus* as a religious community, as it had once been polytheistic, so now, under and after Constantine, monotheistic and Christian, a religious and faith community.'

In sharp contrast, Van Dam performs a very different type of contextualization for the ancient literary, epigraphic and artistic material. His volume's backwards progression allows much of the material from the West after A.D. 312 to be viewed not in the light of the later success of Christianity, but rather in the context of earlier Roman history, stretching from the Republic down to the Tetrarchy. Concerns over the 'conversion' are thus removed from centre stage in the readings given here: the panegyric of A.D. 313 is not a witness to the emperor's changing religious profession, or even a text particularly concerned with his victory over Maxentius, but instead a celebration of Constantine's return to Gaul and his defence of the Rhine frontier; Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorum* is more concerned with Licinius in the East than Constantine in the West, while its classicizing account of the Milvian Bridge 'represented Constantine's battle as a Roman victory rather than a Christian victory' (119); the Arch of Constantine is a statement by the Senate of their hopes for the emperor's behaviour in the ancient capital, where 'a shared history was more important than a shared religion' (132). Similarly, in a discussion of an inscription which was erected in Rome to celebrate the victory over Maxentius, Van Dam argues that Eusebius' Greek text, which referred to the victory being won τούτῳ τῷ σωτηριώδει σημείῳ, should be rejected in favour of Rufinus' Latin, which transmits the phrase 'in hoc singulari signo', thereby casting doubt on this as a description of a cross or Christogram, or as a public statement of Christianity.[46] In keeping with this analysis, Van Dam presents Constantine as an emperor whose 'top priority was not necessarily the promotion of Christianity' (158): even in his involvement in the Donatist dispute, 'Constantine's primary concern was his imperial authority in North Africa' (177).[47]

This focus on the exercise of imperial rule is brought to the fore in ch. 9, where Van Dam turns the spotlight back on Maxentius himself and his identification with the city of Rome and its Senate. His defeat by Constantine becomes not a clash, conscious or unconscious, between paganism and Christianity, but between different ways of ruling the Empire: the 'Republican' versus the 'Tetrarchic'; the civilian versus the military; Italy and the Mediterranean versus the periphery. Even though Constantine may have paid lip service to Rome and her traditions, he was a military emperor, who 'continued Tetrarchic notions about divine rule but in a Christian guise' (247). This is an account of continuity which contrasts markedly with the revolutionary Constantine to be found in Barnes and Girardet, as well as in Eusebius, and it will not go unchallenged by those who defend the reliability of this ancient narrative. Yet, Van Dam's approach is impressive and fruitful not only for the answers it provides, but, perhaps more importantly, for the questions it asks.

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[46] Eus., *HE* 9.9.11; *V. Const.* 1.40.2; Rufinus, *HE* 9.9.11.

[47] While, in reading Constantine's own extant statements about Christianity, Van Dam does identify a turning point in his religious terminology and dealings with bishops, he situates it not in the context of a vision or 'conversion' before the defeat of Maxentius, but, rather, in Constantine's encounters with bishops at the Council of Arles in A.D. 314.

Continuity is also emphasized by Harries, in both religious policy and other aspects of imperial rule. The roots of Constantine's shift to Christianity, like many other facets of his behaviour, are thus to be found in his predecessors and their relationships with the divine: Aurelian's 'concentration on Sol Invictus, with its associated ideas of light, victory and celestial supremacy, would influence the early religious ideals of Constantine, and with them the nature of imperial Christianity' (20–1).[48] Harries' Constantine is thus a ruler whose attitude towards his favoured religion did not represent a great revolution or even a significant departure from earlier practice. With his devotion to a divine patron, on whose whims the success of the Empire and its ruler were thought to depend, this Constantine overlaps with the one presented by Girardet; yet, Harries' reconstruction differs markedly in portraying an emperor who desired distance from ecclesiastical affairs: 'he maintained an imperial role as an external benefactor, combined with benign non-involvement with the day-to-day concerns of the church as an institution' (157).

In addition, the breadth of Harries' book provides the vital contextualization needed for this interpretation to be developed and presented forcefully, producing a lucid account of eighty momentous and formative years for the Roman Empire. Constantine's actions and pronouncements regarding religion, as well as the evidence for them, are read as part of an integrated approach to his entire reign, while the emperor himself is viewed alongside his immediate predecessors and successors. Thus, while Constantine occupies a central position within this volume, the wider chronological and thematic scope allows this dominating figure to be seen not simply in close-up, as a Christian colossus, obsessed with religious matters and bending the world to his will, but rather as both an innovator and a traditionalist, as a Late Roman emperor whose statements and actions, as well as their portrayal by others, were inspired by a range of different, and sometimes contradictory, concerns and pressures.

IX

On the seventeen-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine remains the subject not only of great attention, but also widely divergent interpretations. In part, these are the products of different critical approaches to the ancient material and different reconstructions of the religious milieu in which he first affirmed his allegiance to the Christian God. The position of Christianity in the early fourth century and its possible appeal to the emperor are still used as part of an attempt to explain the 'conversion' of Constantine. While the question of whether he believed in Christ is no longer posed as explicitly as it once was, attempts to explain the circumstances and processes that led him to this belief, and the impact it had on his imperial rule and subjects, remain a highly contested issue.

Yet, the different Constantines who inhabit the pages of these volumes are also shaped by the authors' own conceptions of the relationship of the emperor to his subjects and, in particular, the degree to which actions, texts, coins and images can be regarded as resulting from Constantine's own initiative.[49] For some, the first Christian emperor's intentions can be read clearly from this material — he was driving forward policies at the centre of everything, simultaneously keeping his eye on the big picture while micromanaging all aspects of the Empire: for Girardet, this took the form of working for the gradual erosion of religious pluralism and its replacement with Christianity, not only in the Roman Empire, but across the entire world (162); for Veyne, all Constantine's major decisions after his conversion 'were designed to prepare a Christian future for the Roman world' (8) — he was 'a prophet armed with an ideal, a Christian empire' (120). Interestingly, however, while these two portraits of Constantine's aims are very similar, the former depicts a man who turned the tide of history when he embraced an insignificant minority sect, while the latter has him joining a rising, 'avant-garde' religious movement. While Barnes often disagrees with both Girardet and Veyne in both his methodology and his conclusions, his revolutionary Constantine, a man who actively changed the world, also bears some resemblances to theirs: 'He was also supremely fortunate that his religious convictions and his political interests coincided so completely. Constantine was a political genius of the highest order, to whom events presented no obstacle, as they have so often for less able leaders, but rather a launching pad for continual success' (173). All three of these Constantines were colossi, whose influence and impact, both in their own lifetime and in later history, was immense.

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[48] Similarly, the stark language of right and wrong in Diocletian's rescript against the Manichaeans 'reflects an intolerance of dissent, which foreshadows the Christian rhetoric against heretics to come' (p. 85).

[49] This reading of such material as Constantinian 'propaganda' is also pursued in depth in T. Grünewald, *Constantinus Maximus Augustus: Herrschaftspropaganda in der zeitgenössischen Überlieferung* (1990).

In contrast stands an image of the emperor not as the architect of sweeping policies, preoccupied with religious change, but as the central point of a vast and complex empire, where slow communications, unreliable subordinates and conflicting information made imperial rule a continual struggle to manage competing interests and maintain control. For Van Dam, this is how Constantine should be viewed, especially in his early dealings with the Donatists: this was a time when 'so many communities and individuals submitted so many petitions and letters' and so he, like all Late Roman emperors, 'depended on petitioners to supply the background information' that would fill in the large gaps in his knowledge of his empire (175). We cannot, therefore, see his hand — let alone read his thoughts — in every coin, every panegyric, every image: 'we should not conflate the ancient accounts into a single master narrative' (13). Similarly, Harries' responsive Constantine was not a man who could deal with every detail, even losing control of his own succession plans in a 'dynastic coup' led by officials 'which the emperor was unable or unwilling to control' (187). While he was 'occasionally erratic', he was also a 'master politician', but not because he exercised complete Machiavellian domination, but rather because he was 'responsive to those … whom it was in his interest to conciliate' (155). In Harries' view, this is how a successful fourth-century ruler is characterized. For her, while Constantine was undoubtedly significant, it was not because he consciously changed the world according to his own grand design: 'it is in the context of emperors as cautious and incremental reformers, responding to prompts from officials and subjects, that we should view the pivotal figure of Constantine and his relations with the religion that he patronised and promoted' (321).

The most fundamental divisions between these volumes are not, therefore, the same as those which were most prominent a decade ago, when Barnes' intolerant Christianizing Constantine was challenged by Drake's pacific religious pluralist. Critical analysis and arguments about the 'favouring' of particular ancient 'sources', especially Eusebius, remain just as much a bone of contention as when Averil Cameron reviewed Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius*; yet, the big differences between these recent approaches lies not so much in their interpretations of Constantine's religious policies, however much these vary, but rather in the frame within which they view the emperor and his Christianity. Barnes' volume is a work of great traditional scholarship which continues his earlier approach to Constantine, intervening in countless existing debates and opening up a number of new ones. In contrast, Van Dam and Harries make the clearest steps towards new horizons: Van Dam in looking at the evolution of disparate presentations of Constantine in their individual contexts; Harries in viewing the emperor's religious policies within a nuanced understanding of his imperial rule, and that of his predecessors and successors. Neither of these historians looks for a unified

Constantine in the ‘sources’, or a masterplan in his pronouncements, instead providing complex accounts in which his actions, and the stories told about them, are seen to have been shaped by numerous, often competing, questions, motives and concerns. At heart, therefore, what really distinguishes all these different visions of Constantine are not their reconstructions of his conversion, sincerity or beliefs, but their ideas about the rôle of the emperor in the Later Roman world.

University of Sheffield
richard.flower@sheffield.ac.uk