

EUSEBIUS ON CONSTANTINE: TRUTH AND HAGIOGRAPHY AT THE MILVIAN BRIDGE

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Few figures from the Late Antique period have received as much scholarly scrutiny as Constantine the Great. Who might rival him? In the field of early Christian studies, St. Augustine certainly has received ample treatment, and the bibliography on him is enormous. Yet those who study the bishop of Hippo do so primarily from one angle: the power of his ideas, whether philosophical or theological. To be sure, he is “set against his background,” yet it is not mainly Roman historians but patristic scholars who find Augustine interesting. Constantine, on the other hand, did not just live within history; he made it. More than any of the Church fathers (as influential as they often were), the “first Christian emperor” was in a position to change the course of human affairs. As such, he has been the object of intense scholarly investigation, not only by theologians, but also classicists, numismatists, and historians of antiquity, art, and warfare—people who usually care very little about the difference between a *Homoousian* and a *Homoiousian*.

Perhaps no moment in Constantine’s life is more deeply etched in modern consciousness than the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in AD 312.¹ There are many reasons for this, most of which stem from the impact it had on the Christian church. Yet those who lived in the fourth century saw the battle as just one in a list of imperial victories—and not necessarily the most significant of them. After all, Constantine’s defeat of Maxentius won him the West, but it was his defeat of Licinius in 324 that won him sole rule of the Roman Empire, a situation that had not pertained since Diocletian promoted Maximian to Augustus nearly four decades earlier. Even in the context of Constantine’s Italian campaign, the Milvian Bridge comes across as somewhat anticlimactic. The battles of Turin, Verona, and little

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¹ This bridge, known in antiquity as the Pons Milvius, was constructed in the Republican period to carry the Via Flaminia across the Tiber. Today’s version stands just east of the Fascist-era Foro Italico athletic complex that hosted the 1960 Olympics. The bridge is a popular destination for lovers who wish to affix symbolic padlocks to its infrastructure. More germane to our study, the modern observer standing at the bridge will notice that to the west and northwest, the slopes of Monte Mario would have hemmed in Maxentius’s troops if they were arrayed along the northern riverbank as the sources attest. The Flaminian Way, the road by which Constantine approached Rome, skirted the hill by jogging north-east after crossing the river. One early source says the battle took place at a “plain above the Tiber” (*Origo Constantini* 4.12), and likewise the sixth-century historian Zosimus says it happened on a plain suitable for a cavalry charge near the bridge (*Historia Nova* 2.16.1). Maxentius’s error was therefore twofold: he cut off any chance of retreat by lining up on the far side of the river, and he boxed himself in by taking his stand at the foot of suburban Rome’s highest hill. Interestingly, an astronomical observatory now sits atop Monte Mario—a place from which to gaze upon the lights of heaven. One wonders what secrets the astronomers have seen.

Segusio receive just as much if not more treatment in the panegyric delivered to commemorate the war's success.² The anonymous orator suggests the affair at the Milvian Bridge was over rather quickly, with Maxentius being routed "at the first sight of (Constantine's) majesty and at the first attack of (his) army."³

Yet we cannot deny this military victory—which happened not on some distant barbarian frontier but the outskirts of the Eternal City itself—did capture the imagination of contemporary observers. Three years after the battle, a triumphal arch that still stands today was erected next to the Flavian Amphitheater. Two friezes on the arch's southern side commemorate the Italian campaign. One of them depicts the siege of Verona, while the other shows Maxentius and his troops drowning in the Tiber as a winged Victory leads Constantine onward.⁴ At least in Rome, the Battle of the Milvian Bridge meant liberation from tyranny. But it was subsequent generations of Christians who would separate this battle from other epic Roman moments to make it the hinge upon which history turns. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than the Sala di Costantino in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican, whose frescoes were planned by Raphael and executed by his students after their master's untimely death in 1520. The first two paintings, on the east and south walls, feature Constantine's famous vision and then his battle with Maxentius. Raphael used the *Latin Panegyrics* and Rufinus's Latin version of Eusebius's *Church History*, along with a close inspection of the Arch of Constantine (whose sculptures, as he informed Pope Leo X, he found tasteless) to fashion a mythic narrative of Constantinian greatness.⁵ Thus, by the time of the Italian Renaissance, legend had solidified into accepted history. All Christendom now believed the emperor's abrupt conversion to the true faith was the result of a divine manifestation in the sky, followed by a military victory under the sign of the cross.

² *Panegyrici Latini* XII 5–13, as compared to 14–18. Cf. *Pan. Lat. IV* 21–30, delivered by Nazarius in 321, which gives more attention to Rome than does the anonymous speech of 313. For the English translation, see C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994) 302–22, 366–76.

³ *Pan. Lat. XII* 17.1 (Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 320).

⁴ A. L. Frothingham, "Who Built the Arch of Constantine? II: The Frieze," *American Journal of Archaeology* 17 (1913) 492–93. Ever since Frothingham's series of articles in the early twentieth century, debate has raged as to whether the arch properly belongs to Constantine's period or the high imperial age. M. Wilson Jones considers it a Constantinian project, though one that re-used earlier monumental works, so that its iconography mixes pagan and Christian elements. He remarks, "Constantine may have leaned toward the Christians' God, but his was a syncretistic, inclusive faith, as typical for its time as it was later to become unthinkable" ("Genesis and Mimesis: The Design of the Arch of Constantine in Rome," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59 [2000] 72). Similarly, E. Marlowe highlights the visual connection between the arch and the Solar Colossus (i.e. Nero in the form of the sun god) which the arch would have framed ("Framing the Sun: The Arch of Constantine and the Roman Cityscape," *The Art Bulletin* 88 [2006] 235–37). Both of these evaluations cohere with the argument of the present study. The Emperor Constantine of the early 310s believed himself a follower of the Christian God, yet he conflated that God with other deities. His ecclesiastical admirers had yet to cast him as a full-blown Christian monarch with all the hagiographical trappings. Thus the ambiguous arch of 315 represents a traditional Roman sense of victory alongside a Christian one.

⁵ Philipp P. Fehl, "Raphael as a Historian: Poetry and Historical Accuracy in the Sala di Costantino," *Artibus et Historiae* 14/28 (1993) 17–18.

Raphael, of course, had more than a millennium's worth of help with his legend-making. There is no shortage of ancient and medieval histories that claim to record the details of Constantine's life. One of the earliest—setting aside Eusebius and Lactantius for the moment—is that of the heterodox church historian Philostorgius, whose chronicle is now lost due to its Arian leanings. Fortunately it was epitomized by the ninth-century patriarch Photius I of Constantinople. Written in the late fourth or early fifth century, Philostorgius's account (according to Photius) “agrees with the others that the reason for the conversion of Constantine the Great from paganism to Christianity was the victory over Maxentius, in which the sign of the cross appeared in the east extending to a great distance and formed of a brilliant radiance.”⁶ The cross was encircled by rainbow-like stars that formed the message “With this conquer!” in Latin. Another fragment of Philostorgius, preserved in the *Artemii Passio*, records the same account of starry Latin letters, and also asserts that many eyewitnesses saw the event, including the anonymous author of the passion.⁷

Later historians of a more orthodox persuasion concur with Philostorgius's description. Socrates Scholasticus recounts Constantine's search for a divinity to aid him in his fight against Maxentius, at which point the vision of the cross appeared just after noon, inscribed with the words Ἐν τούτῳ νικά. ⁸ That night, Christ appeared to the emperor in a dream with instructions to make a battle standard featuring the sign of the cross. The historian Sozomen likewise records Constantine's trepidation about the Italian campaign and his search for divine assistance; then comes the vision of the cross (albeit with angels offering the invitation to conquer by the Christian sign, instead of heavenly writing); and once again Jesus Christ instructs the sleeping Constantine to make the battle standard.⁹ Sozomen then cites the account of Eusebius in which the words “conquer in this” are written in the sky, as is normally described in the sources.

By the time we get to the Byzantine *vitae* of the eighth and ninth centuries, the legends have been embellished with many new details, including such elements as the emperor's baptism by Pope Sylvester or Helena's discovery of the True Cross. Yet the story of Constantine's conversion remains essentially the same. While seeking the aid of the highest divinity on his way to Rome, the emperor “experienced a miracle about the middle hour of the day; for a shooting of rays shining out above the sun in the sky was changed into the form of a cross with an impression in stars, in Latin letters, declaring to the emperor Constantine, ‘in this conquer.’”¹⁰ Jesus Christ subsequently appears by night to the emperor and instructs him to make a

⁶ Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.6 (Philip R. Amidon, *Philostorgius: Church History* [Atlanta: SBL, 2007] 8–9).

⁷ Amidon, *Philostorgius* 9.

⁸ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.2 (Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories*, vol. 2 [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series; Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1890] 1–2).

⁹ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.3 (Schaff and Wace, *Socrates, Sozomenus* 241–42).

¹⁰ Anonymous, *Life of Constantine* (BHG 364) 11 (Samuel N. C. Lieu and Dominic Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine Views: A Source History* [New York: Routledge, 1996] 117–18).

battle standard. We can see, then, that the elements of this remarkable story quickly became standardized. The conversion of Constantine, with a heavenly vision and a nocturnal visit from the Lord, became a literary and artistic commonplace through the Middle Ages and beyond.

But what, exactly, are the origins of this tale? When we investigate the earliest and most reliable sources about the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (primarily the literary ones, both pagan and Christian, but also the numismatic and epigraphic), we discover they do not record the brilliant vision of the cross in the noonday sun, or the heavenly words of conquest, or the appearance of Christ with instructions to make a battle standard. Nevertheless, our sources are not completely silent about the intervention of the Christian God in Constantine's life during the run-up to the battle, as we shall see. Yet the full-fledged story with all the elements that would go on to become the stuff of Constantinian legend had to await the publication of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* in 339, two years after the emperor's death. Here we discover the famous vision of the cross for the first time, in an account that incorporates many details found nowhere else to date, not even in Eusebius's earlier *Church History*. Therefore, Eusebius's posthumous biography of Constantine is the main source for the story that would capture the fancy of generations to come.

Why do we find these new elements featured in the *Life*? No doubt there are several reasons for their inclusion, not least of which was Constantine's own self-understanding after many years of acclaim as a divinely-appointed emperor.¹¹ Eusebius goes out of his way to insist the details come from the emperor himself under solemn oath.¹² The actual battle standard, known as a *labarum*, has even come before Eusebius's eyes.¹³ While the motivation behind this bit of early Christian propaganda is intriguing, my intent here is not to take up the question of Eusebius's rhetorical intent in telling this story about his great hero. Instead I propose to investigate *whether he lied in doing so*. Ever since 1852, when Jacob Burckhardt declared Eusebius to be the author of "contemptible inventions," and "the most objectionable of all eulogists, who has utterly falsified (Constantine's) likeness," it has become all too common to view the first ecclesiastical historian with grave skepticism—as if outright fabrication were his normal *modus operandi*, and his ancient readers were too credulous to know the difference.¹⁴ Of course, Eusebius did not

¹¹ A recent study of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge emphasizes this point (Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011] 7–8).

¹² *Vita Constantini* 1.28.1.

¹³ *Ibid.* 1.30.

¹⁴ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great* (trans. Moses Hadas; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949) 260, 299. Eusebius is even called "the first thoroughly dishonest historian of antiquity" (p. 283). It is, of course, unfair to single out Eusebius among the ancients as a liar. See the conclusions of C. Gill and T. P. Wiseman, *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), summed up in the remark, "Do ancient historiographers sometimes say things they know to be factually untrue? Emphatically, yes" (p. 115). On the whole, Eusebius fares rather well among his contemporaries when it comes to truth-telling vs. mendacity, especially when we consider the rhetorical extravagancies of the panegyrist.

pursue “objective history” according to modern canons; that much is clear. His was a polemical approach at every turn. And yet when it comes to the Milvian Bridge, we do not need to think he was writing pure fiction.

To understand Eusebius’s unique and admittedly hagiographical perspective, we must examine the historical sources to determine exactly what happened on the 28th of October, seventeen hundred years ago. We have already seen that the later Christian histories and *vitae* all contain the account of the vision of the cross as an integral part of Constantine’s victory. By the end of the fourth century, and for many centuries afterward, this was taken for granted as established fact. But what about the sources much closer to the event? What do they portray? Once we have established a baseline account of the battle and its religious connotations, we will be in a position to discern the elements that Eusebius chose to layer in. As I have suggested, these unique layers do not necessarily contradict the picture that emerges from the other sources. In fact—and this is surprising—they do not even contradict a plausible reconstruction of events that could have occurred in the real world. The Battle of the Milvian Bridge definitely took on a hagiographical sheen as Eusebius cast his hero in a particular theological light. While this was a Christianized interpretation of the emperor, it was not one that played fast and loose with the facts. Eusebius did not create his stories out of thin air. Though he did put his own spin on Constantine’s epoch-making battle, he did so without recourse to blatant lies.

I. THE TESTIMONY OF THE NON-EUSEBIAN SOURCES

In terms of physical artifacts relating to the Milvian Bridge, pride of place must be given to the Arch of Constantine dedicated in 315. Its widespread use of previous sculpture (*spolia*) makes its iconography hard to interpret, yet the depiction of the climactic confrontation with Maxentius in the southern frieze is straightforward enough. The sequence of carvings presents a “well-thought out tableau, Constantine, surrounded by Roma, Victory, and Tiber, with the vanquished Maxentius drowning at his feet—a fitting scene of triumph over an emperor’s main enemy.”¹⁵ The presentation here is thoroughly Roman, and traditional pagan imagery abounds in the arch. Nevertheless, as has often been noted by historians, the dedicatory inscription on the attic is enigmatic. It suggests Constantine gained the victory on that fateful day *instinctu divinitatis magnitudine mentis*, “by the inspiration of the Divinity and the greatness of his mind.” The word *divinitas* in the singular, as opposed to something more customary like *deorum*, calls to mind Constantine’s own imprecise terminology (at least in the early days after his conversion) for the highest deity, the one exemplified by the sun and considered to be the Christian God.¹⁶ For example,

¹⁵ M. P. Speidel, “Maxentius and his *Equites Singulares* in the Battle at the Milvian Bridge,” *Classical Antiquity* 5 (1986) 259.

¹⁶ For an especially in-depth treatment of the emperor’s relationship to Sol, see J. Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 86–109, 326–35. This excellent book supplies a wealth of information, including some very helpful architectural renderings of Constantinian buildings and monuments. Yet the author takes a dim view of the emperor’s

in the so-called Edict of Milan of 313, Constantine joins with his co-Augustus Licinius to declare their “reverence for the Divinity” (*divinitatis reverentia*), and their steadfast intent to allow all people in their domain, whether Christians or not, to devote themselves to “whatever divinity there is in the seat of heaven” (*quicquid <est> divinitatis in sede caelestri*).¹⁷ This deity is, according to the joint letter, the *summa divinitas*, the “highest Divinity.”¹⁸ Thus, the overtones of the term *divinitas* in this particular historical moment indicate the Arch of Constantine was a masterpiece of double-entendre.¹⁹ It is thoroughly pagan in its theme, artistic style, and reuse of high imperial relief sculpture—all of which is consistent with the arch’s erection by a non-Christian Senate. Yet the dedicatory inscription, which must have been worded in a way that would please the emperor, leaves room for just the sort of vague Christian monotheism that appears to have colored Constantine’s thinking at this early juncture.²⁰

Another important artifact, though one no longer completely extant, is the statue that some sources claim was erected in Rome just after Constantine’s victory.²¹ Most scholars consider the colossal marble bust of Constantine on display at Rome’s Musei Capitolini to be the head of that statue, which once sat in the apse of the Basilica Nova on the Forum.²² Academic debate has arisen over Eusebius’s claim that the statue’s right hand held a “memorial of the Saviour’s Passion,” name-

authentic Christianity, seeing it as an adaptation of traditional solar worship for the purpose of political unity under the Supreme Being as a heavenly monarch. Bardill does not think the Arch of Constantine reflects much devotion to Christianity; the victorious emperor still worshiped Sol at the time of its erection (pp. 97–100). Other scholars believe Constantine’s commitment to Christianity was more pronounced by 315, though certainly not without syncretizing tendencies. In particular, T. Barnes is often noted for his belief in Constantine’s early and heartfelt conversion to the Christian religion: “After October 28, 312 the emperor consistently thought of himself as God’s servant, entrusted with a divine mission to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity” (*Constantine and Eusebius* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981] 43).

¹⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 48.2 (J. L. Creed, *Lactantius: De Mortibus Persecutorum* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1984] 71).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 48.3.

¹⁹ According to one scholar, the Roman populace would have understood the phrase *instinctu divinitatis* as a reference to the magical method of foreknowing the future described in Cicero’s *On Divination*. Clearly the pagan citizens of Rome in 315 were prepared to accept the notion that a vision from the highest deity had aided the emperor in war. The arch’s “reference to monotheism may have seemed vague enough to accommodate the emerging Christian faith of the emperor and the entrenched pagan belief of the Roman senate” (Linda Jones Hall, “Cicero’s *instinctu divino* and Constantine’s *instinctu divinitatis*: The Evidence of the Arch of Constantine for the Senatorial View of the ‘Vision’ of Constantine,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 [1998] 670).

²⁰ “The coherence of the (arch’s) iconography also points to Constantine as the driving force behind the project—albeit operating via a delegate, given his frequent absence from the capital. It may make for conceptual neatness to contrast the arch to his Christian benefactions, and so to portray it as a pagan monument commissioned by a pagan Senate, but this would be to simplify the complex intermeshing of imperial and senatorial institutions. The Senate may have built the arch, but it did as the emperor bid” (Wilson Jones, “Genesis” 72).

²¹ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 9.9.10; *Vit. Const.* 1.40.2; *Pan. Lat.* XII25.4; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 40.28.

²² Bardill provides extended treatment of the Roman Colossus (*Constantine* 203–16). See also Van Dam, *Remembering* 190–91.

ly, a cross.²³ The claim is particularly interesting in light of Rufinus's decision in his version of Eusebius's history not to back-translate the Greek, but to supply the actual Latin of the statue's dedicatory inscription. In it, the emperor claims to have restored Rome "by this unique sign, which is the emblem of true power."²⁴ Some scholars have questioned whether the sign could have been a cross or Chi-Rho figure at so early a point in Constantine's career.²⁵ If not, it was probably the Roman military standard known as a *vexillum* consisting of an upright spear-shaft with a transverse bar, forming the shape of a cross.²⁶ An innocuous staff or scepter is also possible, though one wonders why specific attention would be called to it in that case. Perhaps the most elegant solution is to consider the statue to be much like the arch: a masterpiece of double meaning, displaying a cross-shaped item that was susceptible to both pagan and Christian interpretation. In any case, whatever was in the colossus's right hand, the monumental statue provides tantalizing evidence that Constantine was willing to go public with his Christian faith in a big way after his victory at the Milvian Bridge.²⁷

Constantine's religion, then, appears to have been more than private piety. If his favorable attitude toward Christianity was not obvious enough from his monuments, or his granting of the Lateran Palace to the Roman bishop, or his inclusion of churchmen like Hosius of Cordova in his retinue, or his financial policies toward the catholic Church (more on this in a moment), then his coinage certainly would have made the point that the emperor had adopted the Christian religion around the time of his victory over Maxentius. This is not to say the imperial mints exhibited an abrupt cessation of pagan imagery after the year 312. Rather, we find the occasional addition of Christian themes and the gradual tapering of pagan ones, with Sol Invictus serving as a kind of transitional figure.²⁸ The most important evidence in this regard comes from the silver medallions struck in 315 at the mint of Ticinum (modern-day Pavia in northern Italy).²⁹ On these commemorative coins, three of which survive today, Constantine is depicted holding a horse and carrying a shield that bears the emblem of the Roman she-wolf suckling the twins Romulus and Remus. However, Constantine's military helmet is marked with the Chi-Rho—

²³ *Hist. Eccl.* 9.9.10 (J. E. L. Oulton and H. J. Lawlor, *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History In Two Volumes* [LCL 265; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932] 363).

²⁴ *In hoc singulari signo, quod est verae virtutis insigne* (Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* 9.9.11; Van Dam, *Remembering* 192–93).

²⁵ For example, Bardill (*Constantine* 207) and Van Dam (*Remembering* 193–94) are skeptical the item was an obviously Christian symbol; whereas Barnes accepts it as a *labarum* whose purpose was to send a message "even the illiterate could hardly fail to imbibe" (*Constantine and Eusebius* 46).

²⁶ Eusebius calls it a ὑψηλὸν δόρυ σταυροῦ σχήματι, "a tall spear-shaft in the shape of a cross" (*Vit. Const.* 1.40.2).

²⁷ "Big" is a fitting word in this context. The statue was eight times life size (Bardill, *Constantine* 203).

²⁸ Patrick Bruun, "The Disappearance of Sol from the Coins of Constantine," *Arctos* 2 (1958) 15–37. Sol Invictus continues to appear on imperial coins until around the year 325 (Bardill, *Constantine* 326).

²⁹ Patrick Bruun, "The Christian Signs on the Coins of Constantine," *Arctos* 3 (1962) 9ff. The author suggests the evidence from Lactantius, combined with the new medallions, indicate "a legend or an official account regarding the course of events at the (Milvian Bridge) was being circulated in the Empire" (p. 18). Bardill arrives at the same conclusion (*Constantine* 169).

“a clear allusion to the victory of Ponte Molle,”³⁰ and the first depiction of Christian imagery in Roman numismatic history.³¹ A cross-shaped scepter or standard looms behind him as well.³² Other coin issues from the same period at Aquileia, Siscia, and Thessalonica likewise feature the Christogram, which eventually became ubiquitous throughout the empire, not only in coinage but also epitaphs and inscriptions.³³ Though the Ticinum medallions were of limited issue and do not necessarily reflect widespread propaganda, they do reveal that only three years after Constantine entered Rome as victor, his new religion was known to mint officials in northern Italy. The coins mark the inception of a long trajectory of imperial support for the Christian religion.

The emperor’s own correspondence likewise attests his favorable attitude toward the Christian God immediately after the events at the Milvian Bridge. The evidence has already been introduced from Constantine’s joint letter with Licinius expressing their intent to continue a policy of religious tolerance (the “Edict of Milan” of 313). We may also consider the letters Constantine issued to Anulinus, proconsul of Africa, in this same year. Recorded for us by Eusebius, these imperial missives demand immediate restoration of properties to the churches, and exempt Christian clergy from public service.³⁴ Constantine refers to “Divine Providence,” the “Deity,” and the “Divinity” in the second of these letters. Likewise in his letter to Caecilian, bishop of Carthage, Constantine opens the imperial treasury to the Christians with the blessings of the “divinity of the great God” (ἡ θεϊότης τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ).³⁵ The emperor’s involvement with the Donatist schism, leading to the Council of Arles in 314, also points to his intimate concern with Christianity in the years just after the Milvian Bridge.

³⁰ Patrick Bruun, “Early Christian Symbolism on Coins and Inscriptions,” *Studi di Antichità Cristiana* 26 (1965) 533. Ponte Molle is an alternate term for the Ponte Milvio.

³¹ Noel Lenski, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 19–20.

³² The item forms a T-shaped cross, topped by a larger and then a smaller disc or globe. Bardill suggests this shape was the “saving sign” by which Constantine fought the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, and which was placed in the right hand of the colossus in the Basilica Nova. He does not, however, consider the coin’s imagery to be explicitly Christian, interpreting the device instead as an Egyptian *crux ansata* with a purely solar referent (*Constantine* 177–78). This is a strange conclusion, bordering on absurd. The cross’s close association with Christianity was already well established, as attested by many second- and third-century Church fathers, not to mention the NT (e.g. 1 Cor 1:18). The famous Alexamenos graffito from the Palatine Hill confirms non-Christian awareness of this sign. And as Bardill himself points out (pp. 77–78), Diocletian initiated the Great Persecution precisely because Christians made the sign of the cross during an act of ritual divination, causing the sacrifice to fail. The Ticinum donative medallions of 315, marked with both a Chi-Rho and a cruciform standard, would have been highly reminiscent of Christian symbolism—a fact that coheres with the contemporaneous literary accounts (such as the emperor’s correspondence or Eusebius’s *Church History*) that portray Constantine as a recent convert. Bardill acknowledges Constantine had adopted Christianity by the year 314 when he got involved in the Donatist controversy (273, 326); so then, why the sustained effort to avoid interpreting crosses from this period as intentionally Christian?

³³ Bruun, “Early Christian Symbolism” 532, and *passim*.

³⁴ *Hist. Eccl.* 10.5.15–17; 10.7.1–2 (Oulton and Lawler, *Eusebius* 453–55, 463–65).

³⁵ *Ibid.* 10.6.1–5 (Oulton and Lawler, *Eusebius* 461–63).

Pagan literary sources report an awareness of divine events surrounding the battle as well. For example, *Panegyric XII* delivered in 313 claims Constantine was “advised by divine inspiration” (*divino monitus instinctu*).³⁶ The speech also makes reference to “that god, creator and master of the world,” who sends messages with his thunderbolt.³⁷ This allusion picks up certain divine aspects of Jupiter, yet it subtly refers to the Christian God too, since Jupiter was not styled as the creator. The oration goes on to describe the battle itself, though with scant detail. Most of its emphasis is on Maxentius’s heinous atrocities and the foolish decisions that led to his defeat. Constantine, hearing of Maxentius’s oppression, decides to liberate Rome by the counsel of a *divinum numen*, a “divine power.”³⁸ In contrast, *Panegyric IV* from the distinguished professor of rhetoric Nazarius provides much more detail about the actual fighting of the Italian campaign; indeed, the work is the main source for those battles. Constantine is displayed as pious and virtuous like his father Constantius. He is even said to be empowered by *deus* in the singular,³⁹ a term that could easily be understood as Christian, having been the normal Latin word for God since at least the late second century, and probably long before that.⁴⁰ Nazarius goes on to describe how heavenly hosts with celestial weaponry made themselves manifest to the emperor’s Gaulish allies, proclaiming, “We seek Constantine, we go to help Constantine.”⁴¹ This otherworldly appearance, not attested anywhere else in the sources, might be Nazarius’s explanation of what Christians call angels, or it might be thoroughly pagan in its imagination.⁴² The orator goes on to claim that in the confrontation with Maxentius, “the force of divinity drove [the

³⁶ *Pan. Lat. XII* 11.4 (Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 312).

³⁷ *Ibid.* 13.2 (Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 313; cf. n. 80). This deity is similarly described as the “supreme creator of things” (26.1).

³⁸ On Maxentius’s atrocities and dabbling in magic, in comparison to Constantine’s “divinely promised” victory and his noble liberation of Rome, see *Pan. Lat. XII* 3–4 (Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 297–302).

³⁹ *Pan. Lat. IV* 16.2 (Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 360). See n. 68 on the use of *deus* without a qualifier.

⁴⁰ The *Passio Sanctorum Scillitanorum*, dated to around AD 180 and therefore the earliest Christian text extant in Latin, refers, e.g., to *dominum Deum nostrum qui est in caelis*, “our Lord God who is in heaven” (Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972] 88).

⁴¹ *Pan. Lat. IV* 14.1–4 (Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 357–58).

⁴² The pagan oratorical tradition had already established that Constantine was empowered by the supernatural. An earlier panegyrist speaking two years before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge claimed that Constantine, in gratitude for overcoming a plot by Maximian and for victories along the barbarian frontier, turned aside to a temple and received a vision of Apollo (*Pan. Lat. VI* 21.3–7; Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 248–51). On this so-called “pagan vision” of Constantine, see Barnes (*Constantine and Eusebius* 36), who considers it a fabrication of the orator. Even if the appearance of Apollo did originally carry the weight of Constantine’s authority, it is difficult to imagine that Nazarius, speaking in 321 (only four years before Nicaea), would be completely pagan in his presentation of the emperor’s divine aid. As will be argued below, Constantine had by the 320s reinterpreted his bright vision in the sky along Christian lines. Here Nazarius—who would certainly have known about the emperor’s religious affiliation—appears to hint that the heavenly armies of the Christian God may have turned the tide of battle. Yet he does not say so outright to his audience of pagan civic leaders at Rome. Indeed, it is the divinized Constantius, not Jesus, who commands the angelic forces. Pagan and Christian ideas intermingle in this delicate speech.

tyrant] out from his habitual hiding places” in Rome—a “hostile god” who intended the usurper’s demise.⁴³ This led to Maxentius’s foolish troop deployment with the feet of the rear guard in the Tiber itself, whereas Constantine’s terrestrial army (the orator hesitates to speculate about the angelic) was wisely arranged, leading to a glorious victory.⁴⁴

A few other pagan sources should be mentioned here, noteworthy in that they do not contain the miraculous or religious details found in the *Latin Panegyrics*. The source known as the *Origo Constantini*, probably written at the time of Constantine’s death, gives a very succinct account of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge with no hint of divine interference.⁴⁵ Another source from the mid-fourth century, the *De Caesaribus* of Aurelius Victor, describes the battle as an easy rout. Strangely, the actual fighting is said to have taken place at Saxa Rubra nine miles from Rome (now recognized as a mistake on the author’s part).⁴⁶ Victor reveals his awareness that Constantine was interested in “regulating religious practices”—a reference, no doubt, to the Council of Nicaea and the subsequent Arian controversy—but he pays little attention to the role Christianity played in the emperor’s policies.⁴⁷ The same may be said for *Breviarium ab Urbe Condita* of Eutropius (c. 369), which speaks positively about Constantine, yet ascribes no divine impetus to him at the Milvian Bridge, and in fact mentions Christianity only once in the entire account.⁴⁸ The pagan historian Zosimus also speaks favorably about Constantine in his *New History*, describing him as a benevolent conqueror, whereas Maxentius resorted to cruel oppression and heeded dubious haruspices and seers at Rome.⁴⁹ Zosimus’s account of the Milvian Bridge reveals Constantine to have been a much better general than Maxentius, whose battle strategies were ill conceived. In contrast, the anonymous fourth-century *Epitome de Caesaribus* is hostile to Constantine, attributing his victories neither to military skill nor the support of a divine being, but only “extraordinary

⁴³ *Pan. Lat.* IV 27.5, 28.1 (Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 372–73).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 28.4ff.

⁴⁵ *Origo Constantini* (*Anonymus Valesianus pars prior*) 4.12 (Lieu and Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian* 45).

⁴⁶ *De Caesaribus* 40.23 (H. W. Bird, *Aurelius Victor: De Caesaribus* [Translated Texts for Historians 17; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994] 48). N. Lenski, in the *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, goes against the contemporaneous sources by accepting Saxa Rubra as the location of the battle, although his only argument is that Maxentius’s deployment along the Tiber “makes no sense” (p. 86, n. 59). Yet surely Maxentius, who had never fought in a battle before this day, could have been capable of an egregious military blunder. Barnes, with the majority of scholars, is far more convincing in attributing the mention of Saxa Rubra to Victor’s erroneous conflation of this battle with earlier events (*Constantine and Eusebius* 305, n. 144). Bardill suggests an initial confrontation took place at Saxa Rubra with a retreat to the bridge, though he provides no evidence for his view (*Constantine* 92).

⁴⁷ *De Caesaribus* 41.12 (Bird, *Aurelius Victor* 50).

⁴⁸ *Breviarium ab Urbe Condita* 10.4 (H. W. Bird, *The Breviarium Ab Urbe Condita of Eutropius* [Translated Texts for Historians 14; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993] 65). Christianity is mentioned at 10.16 in passing.

⁴⁹ *Hist. Nov.* 2.14.4, 2.16.1 (R. T. Ridley, *Zosimus, New History: A Translation with Commentary* [Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, University of Sydney, 1982] 31). Zosimus’s text comes from the early sixth century, but it draws from the fourth-century *Histories* of Eunapius, a source no longer extant.

luck.”⁵⁰ And lastly we may return to the ninth century patriarch Photius I, who summarized the now-lost *History of Constantine the Great* by Praxagoras of Athens, composed late in Constantine’s reign.⁵¹ That text described Maxentius as a tyrant who fled before the ascendant young general coming to deliver Rome. Photius notes that despite Praxagoras’s paganism, he celebrated Constantine as a fine ruler—yet the author’s praise was reserved for the emperor’s political achievements, not his religious ones. Without the counterbalancing effect of sources such as these, we might be led to think the whole empire celebrated the emperor’s newfound religion. While non-Christians certainly were aware of it, the conversion was by no means the main thing every ancient historian wished to record about Constantine. Yet for all the ecclesial writers, God’s empowerment of his chosen instrument at the Milvian Bridge could hardly be overlooked. It was the main thing the church historians wanted to convey.

Only two Christian accounts of the battle survive from a date close to the actual events. Lactantius’s *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, composed around AD 314,⁵² is the more concise of the two (the other being Eusebius’s *Church History*). The author, an African rhetorician who wrote in Latin, develops the narrative as a battle between God’s servants and enemies. In this way the text functions as a kind of morality tale of divine favor and retributive judgment. Yet on the whole, Lactantius was not prone to myth-making. He was far more interested in imperial politics than Eusebius, who often delved into the lurid details of persecution. Lactantius’s account of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge is quite straightforward. The usurper Maxentius is covering in Rome as Constantine approaches. The emperor sets up camp in the vicinity of the Milvian Bridge. At some point,

Constantine was advised in a dream (*in quiete*) to mark the heavenly sign of God on the shields of his soldiers and then engage in battle. He did as he was commanded and by means of a slanted letter X with the top of its head bent round, he marked Christ on their shields. Armed with this sign, the army took up its weapons.⁵³

Lactantius records that as the battle unfolded, the hand of God was clearly with Constantine, until at last the soldiers of Maxentius were hurled into the Tiber to drown along with their commander. In this account, written only two years after the battle, we find an explicit record of (1) a message to Constantine in a dream or vision; (2) the designation of the Chi-Rho (or a Christogram of some sort) as a battle-sign; and (3) heavenly aid from the Christian God in bringing about the victory. Therefore, in combination with the archaeological, numismatic, and literary evidence cited above, we must acknowledge that the idea of Constantine triumphing at the Milvian Bridge through miraculous help from on high, resulting in his conversion to Christianity, was widely recognized by observers at the time. It was sug-

⁵⁰ *Epitome de Caesaribus* 41.11–18 (Lieu and Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian* 4–5).

⁵¹ Lieu and Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian* 7–8.

⁵² A date of 314/15 is advanced by J. L. Creed in his critical edition and translation of the work (*Lactantius*, xxxiii–xxxv).

⁵³ *De Mort. Pers.* 44.5–6 (Creed, *Lactantius* 63).

gested by various pagan sources, and is clearly attested by Lactantius as early as 314. At least when it comes to these essential elements, the Constantinian conversion narrative can by no means be construed as a figment of Eusebius's imagination.

II. THE EUSEBIAN CONSTANTINE

What, then, does Eusebius add to our understanding of the battle? We must look first at his *Church History*, an important historical source whose account of the Milvian Bridge is contemporaneous with that of Lactantius.⁵⁴ The text of Book 9.9.2–11 as we now have it supplies the following elements:

1. Constantine pities Rome's plight under a tyrant.
2. Constantine seeks aid from the highest God against Maxentius.
3. Maxentius relies on magic and oppresses Rome.
4. Constantine is successful by God's help in the northern Italian campaign.
5. God draws Maxentius out from Rome.
6. The song of Moses about Pharaoh at the Red Sea (Exodus 15) is fulfilled in Maxentius.
7. Maxentius is trapped by his own devices (Ps 7:15–16) when his bridge of boats fails.⁵⁵
8. The rejoicing of Moses is applied to Constantine, in further fulfillment of Exodus 15.
9. Constantine gives praise to God, the "cause of the victory" (τῆς νίκης αἰτίω).
10. Constantine enters Rome in triumph, and is celebrated by all the people and the Senate.
11. Constantine is humble before God.
12. Constantine erects a statue of himself holding a cross as the sign by which he triumphed, and proclaims Rome's ancient splendor to be restored.

At first glance this account appears rather legendary, with its striking biblical references and bold assertions about the workings of the divine hand. Yet when we tease out these Eusebian glosses, a valid historical core remains. Everything except the scriptural allusions and the overt Christianity can be found in the earliest and best evidence. Though some of the pagan sources are silent about Constantine's Christian faith, they are from the mid-fourth century and reflect the views of histo-

⁵⁴ Though there is considerable debate about when the first seven books of this work were composed, they are more unified than the last three, which clearly went through several recensions as new information emerged or the political situation changed. The final edition of the *Church History* was published in 325/6, though the substance of Book 9 (which discusses the battle) was penned as early as 313. It is difficult to say how much the present edition differs from what was found in the version written immediately after the battle, although certain pro-Licinius statements that remain in the text indicate it derives from a time prior to the souring of Constantine's relations with his brother-in-law around 315. See Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* 158, and the timeline at p. 278; cf. Robert M. Grant, *Eusebius as Church Historian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 13.

⁵⁵ Patriarch Photius alludes to this evaluation when he summarizes Praxagoras's account: "Maxentius met the kind of death that he himself had often thought up in order to destroy his enemies, and he fell into the ditch that he had dug" (Lieu and Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian* 7).

rians commenting from a distance. In contrast, the honorific arch, the colossal statue, the imperial coinage and correspondence, the official panegyrics, and the contemporaneous Christian writers with high-level access all agree that the *summus deus* played a prominent role in Constantine's understanding of his victory over the tyrant Maxentius at Rome. These sources are closer to the events and represent a variety of types. As historical evidence they are first class, and are to be preferred over the later historical synopses. While certain ecclesial interpretations of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge did creep into the later accounts, the original sources support Eusebius's basic contention in his *Church History* that Constantine intended to confront his enemy under the wing of a new divine protector, a deity whom he understood to be the God of the Christians. Eusebius may have over-interpreted Constantine's religious devotion in 312, but he did not fabricate the emperor's growing interest in the God whose sacred symbol was the cross. Good sources corroborate Eusebius's essential facts.

But what about the *Life of Constantine*, with its blazing cross in the sky, its "conquer in this" inscription, and its nocturnal visit from Jesus? Surely these are nothing but hagiographical accretions from a quarter-century after the actual events?

Perhaps we need not view the text in such a skeptical fashion. Let us examine the pieces the *Life* layers in. In the sequence found at 1.26–40, we discover the following:

1. Constantine pities Rome's plight under a tyrant.
2. Constantine seeks aid from the highest God against Maxentius.
3. THE VISION (exact date/place not specified).
 - a. "Cross-shaped trophy formed from light" in the noonday sun.⁵⁶
 - b. "A text attached to it": τούτω νίκᾳ.
 - c. Amazement among all the soldiers.
4. THE DREAM (date/place not specified, though subsequent to the vision).
 - a. "The Christ of God" appears to Constantine.
 - b. "Copy of the sign" from the sky is to be used as "protection."
 - c. In the morning, Constantine reports the dream to his friends.
5. EXCURSUS: THE LABARUM.
 - a. "Then" (or 'afterwards,' καπειτα) Constantine gives directions to craftsmen.
 - b. Eusebius describes the *labarum* in detail from his own observations.
 - c. Eusebius resumes his narrative: "That was, however, somewhat later. At the time in question, stunned by the amazing vision," Constantine decided to worship God and confront the tyrant.
6. Maxentius is sacrilegious and oppresses Rome.
7. DETAILS OF MAXENTIUS'S CRIMES.
 - a. A Christian woman commits suicide rather than be ravished.

⁵⁶ The English quotations here are from Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) 79–86.

- b. Senators and commoners alike are murdered.
- c. Maxentius uses magic and practices extispicy on humans.
8. USE OF THE CROSS IN BATTLE: Constantine sets “the victorious trophy, the truly salutary sign,” at the head of his army.
9. Constantine is successful by God’s help in the northern Italian campaign.
10. God draws Maxentius out from Rome.
11. The song of Moses about Pharaoh at the Red Sea (Exodus 15) is fulfilled in Maxentius.
12. Maxentius is trapped by his own devices (Ps 7:15–16) when his bridge of boats fails.⁵⁷
13. The rejoicing of Moses is applied to Constantine, in further fulfillment of Exodus 15.
14. Constantine gives praise to God, the “cause of the victory” (τῆς νίκης αἰτίω).
15. Constantine enters Rome in triumph, and is celebrated by all the people and the Senate.
16. Constantine is humble before God.
17. Constantine erects a statue of himself holding a cross as the sign by which he triumphed, and proclaims Rome’s ancient splendor to be restored.

The first thing to notice here is that we have the same basic outline as found in the *Church History*, but with new elements added (marked in all capitals). As we have already seen, this outline is not at odds with our historical sources. The idea that Constantine was exploring the patronage of what he perceived to be the Christian God in the early days of his campaign against Maxentius is clearly borne out in the evidence. Though this God was sometimes referred to by vague terms like “the Divinity,” the Ticinum coins and the evidence of Lactantius demonstrate—independently of Eusebius—exactly which *divinitas* Constantine had in mind.⁵⁸ The emperor’s correspondence, displaying as it does his immediate support and concern for the catholic Church, likewise corroborates this point. And when it comes to the actual events of the battle, we have other sources that inform us of Maxentius’s oppression in Rome, his ill-conceived battle plan at the Pons Milvius, his drowning in the Tiber, Constantine’s joyful reception by the *senatus populusque Romanus*, and

⁵⁷ Eusebius now informs us of a new development. He suggests a hidden mechanism in Maxentius’s temporary pontoon bridge over the Tiber, designed to trap Constantine, instead failed and trapped its inventor, in fulfillment of the psalm’s words, “He dug a hole and excavated it, and will fall into the pit he made. His labour will return on his head, and on his pate will his wickedness fall.” Zosimus (*Hist. Nov.* 2.15.3–4) and Victor (*De Caesaribus* 40.23) also attest to such trickery on Maxentius’s part.

⁵⁸ That is to say, he had the Christian God in mind, even if he often conflated this God with Jesus, or Sol Invictus, or Apollo, thereby creating a kind of hybrid solar monotheism. The point is: to the emperor, it was a *Christian* solar monotheism. Constantine retained this syncretizing type of view until he was more properly catechized into catholic dogma. On this point, Bardill appears to have overinterpreted the evidence for ongoing solar worship when he suggests a naked statue of Constantine wearing a radiate crown like a sun god was erected on a porphyry column in Constantinople in the year 330 (*Constantine* 28–36, 104–9). Such an action from the convener of the Nicene council five years earlier hardly seems likely. Though an imperial statue certainly existed, it was probably neither naked nor radiate, in light of the strong anti-pagan statements Constantine was prone to make, e.g., in his *Oration to the Saints*.

the erection of a monumental statue holding a “unique sign” of “true power.”⁵⁹ Though Eusebius imbued these facts with a high degree of Christian triumphalism, he did not make them up.

So, the core outline as already found in the *Church History* appears to be historical. But what are we to make of the new and seemingly legendary elements in the *Life of Constantine*? Setting aside Eusebius’s biblical typologies as a topic beyond the scope of this study, let us examine the veracity of his historical additions. First we may consider the vision of the cross. As has been convincingly argued by P. Weiss, the appearance of a solar halo fits Eusebius’s description very well.⁶⁰ It is by no means difficult to believe that at some point prior to the Milvian Bridge, Constantine witnessed an atmospheric phenomenon that caused the light of the sun to be refracted into a cross shape, which he eventually took to be an indication of the Christian symbol. Such meteorological events, though rare, are scientifically established.⁶¹ This portentous omen could have been seen by Constantine’s army too, as Eusebius attests. When might it have occurred? Weiss argues the solar halo is to be equated with Constantine’s “pagan vision” of 310, as recorded in *Panegyric VI* 21.4.⁶² Although my present argument does not depend on this identification (only that Constantine witnessed a solar event), I find the suggestion plausible.⁶³ In any case, whenever it happened, Eusebius later received Constantine’s spiritualized interpretation of a normal meteorological occurrence, then intensified the Christian overtones in his retelling. Yet behind all the hagiography, some sort of t-shaped solar phenomenon probably did unfold before the young emperor’s eyes.

However, modern skepticism about the vision has not centered on the possibility of a heavenly manifestation, but on the remarkable inscription in the sky: $\tau\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omega$ $\nu\acute{\iota}\kappa\alpha$, “conquer in this.” Surely here we have a fabrication on Eusebius’s part? I will not deny the theoretical possibility that Eusebius could have made this up. But is that the most likely solution? The story could just as easily be attributed to

⁵⁹ These sources are all surveyed above. The terms “unique sign” and “insignia of true power” come from the Latin inscription upon the statue: *singulari signo* and *verae virtutis insigne* (Rufinus, *Hist. Ecl.* 9.9.11).

⁶⁰ See Peter Weiss, “The Vision of Constantine,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 16 (2003) 237–59. The hypothesis of a solar halo was suggested earlier by A. H. M. Jones (*Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, repr. Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 4 [Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1978] 85–86), who rightly points out this event might have been “brief and unspectacular,” yet deeply significant in Constantine’s “overwrought imagination.”

⁶¹ A Google image search of “sun dogs” will quickly demonstrate the circular halo and cross of light that can sometimes form in the sky.

⁶² Parhelia and arcs of light are normal features of solar halos. The panegyrist may have interpreted this as a heavenly appearance of the solar deity Apollo and the goddess Victory, surrounded by wreaths, when he wrote, “For you saw, I believe, O Constantine, your Apollo, accompanied by Victory, offering you laurel wreaths” (Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise* 248). On the issue of whether the orator or Constantine himself made the equation with Apollo, see the editors’ footnote 92.

⁶³ Weiss notes his argument has convinced no less an authority than T. Barnes, who is quoted as saying, “Constantine and his army undoubtedly saw a halo-phenomenon: the theory that there was only a single vision and that it happened in 310 and that it was only later, in 312, that Constantine adopted a Christian interpretation of what he had seen removes all the contradictions which have worried historians” (“The Vision” 258).

the bishop's gullibility in the presence of such an awe-inspiring figure as the imperial Augustus. Constantine may have genuinely believed he witnessed words in the sky fifteen years earlier, or he may have expressed himself in a cryptic or symbolic manner that Eusebius mistook for literal—a case of mistaken meaning.⁶⁴ Apparently the story was new to Eusebius, for he certainly would have recorded such a marvel in his *Church History* had he known of it. The emperor, speaking with the bishop after a decade and a half of memory reshaping,⁶⁵ emphatically swore he had witnessed a divine portent that announced with absolute clarity which sign would lead to victory. An indubitable message had been conveyed: Maxentius could only be conquered by the power of the Christian cross. Though Eusebius was willing to record his hero's testimony in a very literal fashion, he was aware it was "perhaps not easy to accept."⁶⁶ For this reason he cited the emperor's oaths and begged his readers' forbearance—actions more consistent with a historian transmitting a dubious story than a propagandist trying to pass off a far-fetched tale. In his handling of the heavenly inscription *τοῦτω νίκᾳ*, Eusebius may have been guilty of credulity and carelessness, yet we need not accuse him of invention and deceit. It is possible he was simply conveying the recollections—jumbled, yet all the more captivating for their imprecision—of the world's most powerful man.

Next we come to the pre-battle dream in which the cross was suggested as a war emblem. Little needs to be said to validate the dream's historicity, for something similar is also attested in Lactantius as we have seen.⁶⁷ Eusebius only adds the

⁶⁴ It is also possible Constantine intentionally fed Eusebius a bit of propaganda here, but I find this conclusion untenable in light of the emperor's oaths. Ancient people, whether pagan or Christian, did not take oaths lightly, believing as they did in divine repercussions. Based on what we know about the development of Constantine's spirituality, by the time he was reminiscing with Eusebius at Nicaea he was unlikely to indulge in frivolous oath-swearing before the God of heaven. Apparently the emperor vowed in Eusebius's presence that he saw a cross of light whose message was, to him, indubitable. For this reason I cannot accept Weiss's suggestion ("The Vision" 247) that Eusebius merely intended to record the general meaning conveyed by the cross, not actual heavenly writing, because "the emperor (never) told such a bizarre story of having seen an inscription in the sky." Whatever Constantine said—probably some cryptic remarks about the significance of the cross, accompanied by vehement oaths, all easily misunderstood—Eusebius came away with the impression that there was indeed writing in the sky. The grammar of his report makes this clear. The basic structure of the sentence, without all its descriptors and modifiers, is *ιδεῖν ἔφη ... σταυροῦ τρόπαιον ... γραφήν τε αὐτῷ συνήφθαι*, "(Constantine) said he saw the trophy of the cross and writing attached to it." The enclitic particle *τε* joining two accusative nouns as the objects of the infinitive can only mean the heavenly *γραφήν* was something seen in addition to the *τρόπαιον*. Eusebius believed Constantine intended to report two supernatural phenomena: divine words and the cross-shaped trophy of light. As was noted, the bishop likely misunderstood Constantine's intent here, unless perhaps the emperor had come to believe he saw actual heavenly words. Either way, Eusebius dutifully recorded for posterity a message in the sky above the cross of light. This historiographical blunder would prove to have remarkable staying power in popular imagination through the centuries.

⁶⁵ Barnes (*Constantine and Eusebius* 266) claims the meeting happened during the two months at Nicaea in the summer of 325.

⁶⁶ *Vit. Const.* 1.28.1 (Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius* 81).

⁶⁷ And in fact, Lactantius's record of the inspirational dream at *De Mort. Pers.* 44.5 is not the only evidence for it outside of Eusebius. It has already been noted that the phrase *instinctu divinitatis* on the Arch of Constantine (language echoed in the anonymous panegyric of 313) is entirely consistent with pagan

specific identity of the dream's protagonist, Jesus Christ. Without making any claims that the Risen Lord actually made a nocturnal visit to the emperor, we can certainly accept the hypothesis that Constantine could have dreamed about the deity who had occupied his mind of late, perhaps to the point of obsession. The sudden appearance of "the Christ of God" need be nothing more than a vivid dream during an anxious night, a dream in which a powerful figure associated himself with a cross. This would be enough to convince Constantine that Jesus had instructed him to take this sign as his talisman in war. Over time, the "remembered" version of the dream would solidify in the emperor's mind as the actual one. He would also have connected this visitation with the solar halo he and his army witnessed as they marched around Gaul. All of this—influenced by the blurring of memory that comes from hindsight—he passed on to Eusebius, who dutifully recorded it, though not without some hesitation.

A further Eusebian addition to the *Life*, the elaboration on Maxentius's villainy at Rome, is of slight interest here and will require no in-depth commentary. Suffice it to say the usurper's crimes are attested elsewhere,⁶⁸ and indeed it requires no mental gymnastics to imagine heinous atrocities in such a barbarous age. In light of the torture, rape, and murder inflicted upon the martyrs, the stories of Maxentius's cruelties are entirely believable. It would not have been out of step with the *Zeitgeist* of the early fourth century to order mass executions or practice extispicy on some unfortunate pregnant woman. Eusebius appears to have drawn from independent sources to report what was widely believed about Maxentius's reign of terror in Rome.⁶⁹

The final item Eusebius added to his biographical *Life of Constantine* does require some extended discussion: the use of the *labarum* at the Milvian Bridge. When exactly was this standard adopted? Was it actually used in 312? Eusebius's time sequence at this point is unclear. In fact, it appears to me the bishop's biggest misrepresentation in his entire account of the battle has to do with a collapsed chronology that melds all the events together. Whether this was done intentionally for the sake of a better narrative, or stems from the author's confusion about the facts, or was just historiographical sloppiness, is hard to say. Eusebius places the vision of the cross somewhere in the time window between the beginning of Maxentius's reign around 307 and the battle in 312,⁷⁰ though the account in 1.28–32 could easily

awareness that a divine revelation of the future had taken place, offering hope to the young emperor on the brink of battle (Jones Hall, "Cicero's" 670).

⁶⁸ *Pan. Lat.* XII is replete with criticism of the "stupid, worthless creature" (14.3) who terrorized Rome; *Pan. Lat.* IV 6.2 suggests Rome is to be pitied for the crimes perpetrated by the "impious tyrant"; Lactantius (*De Mort. Pers.* 44) points out how happy the Romans were to be rid of Maxentius; Eutropius (*Breviarium ab Urbe Condita* 10.4) says he was "savagely persecuting the nobility of Rome in all manner of ways"; Zosimus (*Hist. Nov.* 2.14.4) claims he was "cruel and violent" toward the Romans and all the Italians.

⁶⁹ Barnes suggests Maxentius's rule may not have been as bad as the sources suggest, at least not through his entire reign. However, by the end, "the civilian population of Italy tolerated Maxentius rather than supported him with active enthusiasm" (*Constantine and Eusebius* 37).

⁷⁰ Maxentius ascended to the purple at Rome in 306, but Eusebius notes Constantine waited to mobilize his own troops until other rulers had attacked the usurper first (*Vit. Const.* 1.26; Cameron and Hall,

be read to imply Constantine received his revelations in a single 24-hour period while he was already en route to Rome. This version of things became standard in later recitations of the story, though it is not what Eusebius actually said. Instead he claimed the vision happened on an unknown military campaign prior to the decision to march out against Maxentius.⁷¹ While Eusebius's narrative placement of the nighttime visitation immediately after the sky-vision would seem to imply their proximity, the two events actually may have been separated by a significant time span. In any case, when Constantine awoke the next morning after the dream, he "arose and recounted the mysterious communication to his friends."⁷²

At this point Eusebius proceeds to tell his readers about the *labarum* in great detail. He transitions to this discussion with the ambiguous time marker *καπειτα*, which seems at first glance to mean "then, immediately," but could in fact mean "then, sometime afterwards." Eusebius describes how Constantine summoned goldsmiths and jewelers, whom he instructed to make a cross-shaped standard studded with gems. Eusebius has seen this device with his own eyes. The Chi-Rho appeared on it, the same symbol Constantine wore on his helmet "in later times," that is, after the confrontation with Maxentius (as depicted on the Ticinum medallions of 315). This impressive standard was "always" used by the emperor in battle, according to Eusebius.

But here the bishop becomes aware he has gotten ahead of himself chronologically. As he returns to his narrative of the Milvian Bridge after his excursus on the *labarum*, he notes,

That [widespread use of the expensive standard] was, however, somewhat later. At the time in question, stunned by the amazing vision [of the cross in the sky], and determined to worship no other god than the one who had appeared [in the dream], he summoned those expert in [the Christian god's] words, and enquired who this god was, and what was the explanation of the vision which had appeared of the sign.⁷³

The experts—presumably Christian bishops—revealed that the god who had appeared was the Only begotten Son of the one true God. Emperor Constantine, now armed with the power of the cross, was ready for war.

Eusebius has unfortunately collapsed all this into a single narrative with very little to indicate when each event occurred. He does say the *labarum* was used "somewhat later," in which case his *καπειτα* with its overtones of immediacy

Eusebius 79). This is probably a reference to the invasions of Italy by Severus and Galerius in 307. According to Zosimus, Constantine had "long been suspicious" of Maxentius by the time he actually moved against him in the spring of 312 (*Hist. Nov.* 2.15.1; Ridley, *Zosimus* 31).

⁷¹ Eusebius tells us that Constantine received his vision while "on a campaign he was conducting somewhere" (*Vit. Const.* 1.28.2; Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius* 81). It was *after* this event that Constantine "began making every armed preparation against the tyranny" (*Vit. Const.* 1.37.1; Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius* 84).

⁷² *Vit. Const.* 1.30.1 (Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius* 81). The immediate availability of "friends" (τοῖς φίλοις) is what one would expect in a more settled environment, not a military expedition. Constantine seems to have returned home by the time he had the dream.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 1.32.1 (Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius* 82).

should be considered infelicitous rather than duplicitous. And Eusebius also notes it was only after Constantine had inquired about the meaning of his vision and dream that he “finally set about (ὠρῆατο λοιπὸν) extinguishing the menacing flames of (Maxentius’s) tyranny.”⁷⁴ This comment would seem to indicate the bishop’s awareness of a broader time frame for the events. Although the tale reads as if everything happened on the approach to the Milvian Bridge, a more careful examination, one that separates Eusebius’s actual claims from later legends, will reveal that both the vision and the dream occurred prior to Constantine’s initiation of his Italian campaign. Though Raphael might have wished us to believe in an eve-of-battle inspiration, that was not the testimony of the bishop of Caesarea. Admittedly, Eusebius’s sequence of events is unclear; yet it is not intentionally deceptive. Perhaps we can excuse him for getting things a bit muddled. He is certainly not the only historian to leave his readers wishing for more chronological clarity.

III. MAKING SENSE OF THE PONS MILVIUS

Let us try, for our part, to sort out a plausible course of events for the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. If Constantine’s cross-vision was a solar halo he witnessed while on expedition in 310, he would have had ample time to consider its meaning and inquire about the omen’s significance. Perhaps for about a year he viewed the parhelia as a manifestation of Apollo and Victory alongside the solar disc of Sol, offering symbolic victory laurels (as mentioned in *Panegyric VI* 21). Yet as Constantine reflected on his father’s noble religion, a stricter monotheism began to make more sense to him. The patronage of the highest Divinity would be needed against Maxentius’s magic charms, so Constantine began to ponder the God advocated by the Christian religion. In this restless state of mind, it is not surprising he would experience a dream that could be interpreted as a visit from a powerful Christian figure. Could *this* be the god behind the sign in the sky? The religious young general decided to submit his musings to the leaders of the church and see what they had to say. Hosius of Cordova is a possible candidate for such an advisory role, since he is well known to Constantine as early as 313, but in truth it could have been any coterie of civic bishops who happened to be nearby.⁷⁵

Apparently the priests’ words about the awesome power of Christ made a deep impression on the emperor. Having ascertained the potency of the cross as a talismanic sign, a new *vexillum* could have been hastily fashioned while Constantine’s army was preparing to embark for Italy. The soldiers’ shields could have been marked by paint or incision even while on expedition.⁷⁶ Although there was proba-

⁷⁴ Ibid. 1.32.3 (Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius* 82).

⁷⁵ Hosius appears to function as a kind of ecclesiastical liaison with the imperial court in Constantine’s letter to Bishop Caecilian of Carthage in 313 (*Hist. Eccl.* 10.6.2). Eusebius likewise remarks that prior to initiating the campaign against Maxentius in 312, Constantine had taken “the priests of God as his advisers” (*Vit. Const.* 1.32.3; Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius* 82).

⁷⁶ Constantine was not traversing raw wilderness but using the excellent Roman travel system from city to city. He probably descended from the Rhine frontier down the Saône to Lugdunum (Lyon, France) and the Rhône to Vienna (Vienne, France), marched east toward Cularo (Grenoble, France) and

bly no golden, gem-encrusted standard in 312, such an item later was made, and Eusebius saw it.⁷⁷ The battles against Licinius at Adrianople and Chrysopolis in 324 were fought under the banner of the Christian God,⁷⁸ so there is no reason to think a more primitive form of this practice could not have occurred at the Pons Milvius.⁷⁹ The action is particularly understandable given that Constantine believed he had received a divine revelation in the sky and a momentous dream. The Ticinum coins of 315 further support this hypothesis. Some type of Christogram likely went ahead of the troops on the approach to Rome.

From there, the rest is history. The usurper Maxentius, who was not much of a military man, blundered in his tactics along the Flaminian Way and was drowned in the Tiber. Rome welcomed a liberator in place of a ruler whose measures had grown harsh. An ambiguous monumental arch and a colossal statue (endowed with the Christian sign, yet vague enough not to cause offense) were erected in the victor's honor. And so it was that Constantine the Great triumphed at the Milvian Bridge.

But the passage of time and the constant adulation began to do their work on the emperor's memory. Somewhere down the line he provided a nostalgic account of the battle to one of his more notable bishops—though probably with few time markers to indicate the actual sequence of events. In this reminiscence, Constantine emphasized the vital message he had perceived through divine revelation: the cross was the sign by which he would conquer Maxentius. Perhaps some ill-chosen wording confused the matter. Now all that remained was for the first church historian to try and make sense of the emperor's impressive yet perplexing story. Eusebius of Caesarea did not hesitate to identify the tide-turning moment as the will of Almighty God. This was, no doubt, an audacious claim. Yet in its essential historical contours, it was not a deceitful one.

Brigantium (Briançon, France), then crossed the Alps to attack Segusio (Susa, Italy). Ancient Brigantium on the western side of the Cottian Alps was situated at 4350 ft elevation. The Col de Montgenèvre, which is the pass most likely used by Constantine (and also Hannibal?) to initiate his Italian campaign, was only 1700 ft higher than the municipality. It is not unduly treacherous. In fact, there is a golf course on the pass today. This would not have been a difficult alpine crossing for Constantine's soldiers in the late springtime—especially considering they were not encumbered by elephants!

⁷⁷ Bardill considers it likely that a special cruciform standard was fashioned for the battle, though it would have been “far less ornate” than the one Eusebius saw (*Constantine* 175).

⁷⁸ *Vit. Const.* 2.7–9, 2.16 (Cameron and Hall, *Eusebius* 98, 101).

⁷⁹ Lactantius provides independent confirmation of this (*De Mort. Pers.* 44.5), and in fact, it really is not all that surprising. Ancient wars were often fought under the power of a talismanic sign. According to R. MacMullen, “the painting of a declaratory or magical device on the shields of (Constantine's) troops had earlier close parallels,” (“Constantine and the Miraculous,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 9 [1968] 87; cf. 96). Likewise A. Alföldi notes that many Roman battles were claimed to have been won by divine intervention (*The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (trans. Harold Mattingly [Oxford: Clarendon, 1948] 126–27, n. 7). Constantine's use of the cross as a war emblem fits a well-established pattern in ancient life. The only remarkable thing about it was the deity he chose to follow.