

COSTANTINO
IL
GRANDE

alle radici dell'Europa

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in occasione del 1700° anniversario della Battaglia di Ponte Milvio
e della conversione di Costantino*

a cura di

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CONSTANTINE'S DEATH. SOLAR AND CHRISTIAN ELEMENTS OF IMPERIAL PROPAGANDA

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In the year 2012 we not only celebrated the 1700th anniversary of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. We also remembered Constantine's death, which occurred 1675 years earlier on the 22nd of May 337. Both events were milestones in the history of the Roman Empire. Both events also had a certain significance in terms of religious history, although it is not easy to pinpoint their precise religious meaning or role. A reasonable amount of scholarly discussion about Constantine ultimately boils down to the question of how "Christian" the Emperor was at any given stage in his life. Whereas the hagiographic tradition and older research sometimes stylized the battle at the Milvian Bridge as a decisive moment or even a "conversion" on the Emperor's path toward Christianity, most recent interpretations are more cautious.¹ Quite rightly, in my opinion, but the debate suffers to a certain extent from a false, or at least somewhat limited perspective. "How Christian was Constantine?" is usually understood as "To what extent, to what degree was he Christian?" His career is perceived as a straight line running from A to B, where A is pagan and B is Christian. The debate is then about the pace and the milestones along this path.

If this holds true, and if Constantine was the "first Christian emperor", as is usually assumed, one would have to assume also that he was fully Christian at least by the end of his life. At that point, at the very latest, one should expect a clearly Christian profile and confession of faith. I will analyze the evidence for Constantine's death and burial, and I will argue that this is not the case. However, my point is not that Constantine was *less* Christian, but that he was Christian *differently* from what we would normally expect and indeed from what his contemporaries expected. The question "How Christian was Constantine?" should therefore be understood as "In what manner, or with which profile was he Christian?" In other words, it should not be understood in terms of quantity, but in terms of quality. This means that his religious biography should no longer be envisaged as a straight line

¹ See my article *In quo signo vicit? Una rilettura della visione e ascesa al potere di Costantino*, in *Costantino prima e dopo Costantino. Constantine before and after Constantine*, a cura di Giorgio BONAMEN-TE – Noel LENSKI – Rita LIZZI, Bari 2012, pp. 133-144, esp. n. 3 with further references.

running from A to B, but as a rather complicated and innovative interaction of religious identities, traditions and intentions.

Although we do witness certain changes and developments in the 25 years from 312 to 337, there is also a surprising degree of continuity. Thus inquiry into his burial and death will also shed light on the events around 312. I will argue that the hermeneutics with which we can understand the events surrounding Constantine's death are also useful for a new and deeper understanding of the religious policy in his early years. And I will argue that in this process, solar elements play a key role, hence the title of this essay. The inclusive "and" between "solar" and "Christian" should be noted. The traditional model ("from A to B") is sometimes understood as "from *Sol* to Jesus Christ", from sun worship to Christian faith. This is, in my opinion, misleading, both for 312 and 337.

However, these general assertions may come across as mere *petitiones principii*, unless they are founded on historic evidence, from both literary and non-literary sources. Let us therefore conclude these preliminary remarks with a few considerations on the surviving source material. Even more than in other areas of Constantinian studies, we rely for the burial and death of Constantine almost entirely on Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*, and hence on a Christian perspective. The Palestinian bishop gives a detailed account of the events,² which for some episodes finds partial parallels in other authors, but not for the series as a whole. One also has to bear in mind the "rules" with which Eusebius should be read. He is at the same time both highly tendentious and factually accurate. He has an extraordinary gift to make things appear in the light he wants them to appear in, without ever leaving the soil of sound scholarship, even in his panegyric writings. Wherever we can check his claims against other sources (and his contemporaries could do this more easily) he turns out to be correct, although he sometimes stretches the truth to the limit. In many cases, the means by which he achieves his goal is selective reporting. By choosing what he wants and what he does not want to portray, he leads his readers down the desired road.

² *V.C.* 4,58-73. The text of the *Vita Constantini* is quoted from the edition of Friedhelm WINKELMANN, Eusebius. *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin* Berlin ²1991 (GCS Eusebius 1,1); for quotations in English the translations of Averil CAMERON – Stuart G. HALL, Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*, Introduction, translation, and commentary, Oxford 1999 and the older version of Ernest CUSHING RICHARDSON, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 1, New York 1890, pp. 405-580 have been used (and freely modified). The introduction and notes in Bruno BLECKMANN – Horst SCHNEIDER, *Eusebius von Caesarea. De vita Constantini. Über das Leben Konstantins*, Turnhout 2007 (Fontes Christiani, 83) are also useful.

An excellent case in point is the beginning of the aforementioned section on Constantine's death and burial, which is the description of the so-called "church of the apostles". Unfortunately, there is no archaeological evidence, since it is not possible to excavate under the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet Fatih Camii, which nowadays stands at the place of the ancient building. And yet, whoever visits the site today will realise immediately, even without excavation, that this is a prominent place in the urban texture of Constantinople. On the crest of the hill between the Sea of Marmara and the Golden Horn, the site played a key role in Constantine's ambitious project of a new capital for the empire. Therefore, it is not trivial to ask what shape and programme this sumptuous building had, a building which Eusebius describes at some length. At the end of the description he mentions three purposes:

All this the emperor consecrated with the desire of perpetuating the memory of the apostles of our Saviour. He had, however, another object also in mind when he built: an object at first unknown, but which afterwards became evident to all. He had prepared the place there for the time when it would be needed on his decease. (...) He therefore gave instructions for services to be held there (ἑκκλησιάζειν), setting up a central altar (θυσιαστήριον).³

For Eusebius, the Christian observer, the primary purpose of the building was the memory of the apostles, the secondary – which he understood only later – was the imperial mausoleum, and the third was Christian liturgical services with an altar. It should be emphasised that this was the order in which Eusebius saw things, because in Constantine's mind the order was different:

He had provided with prudent foresight an honourable resting-place for his body after death, and, having long before secretly formed this resolution, he now consecrated this church to the apostles, in the belief that their memory would become for him a beneficial aid to his soul.⁴

For Constantine, therefore, the primary purpose was the mausoleum for himself, and only afterwards did he attach to it the idea of the memory of the apostles. The description of the monument's interior that follows these comments has been the subject of scholarly debate,⁵ and it is quite

³ V.C. 4,60,1 f.

⁴ V.C. 4,60, 3 f.

⁵ The most relevant contributions are Richard KRAUTHEIMER, *Zu Konstantins Apostelkirche in Konstantinopel*, in Mullus, *Festschrift Theodor Klauser*, Münster 1964 (JAC.E 1), pp. 224-229; Cyril MANGO, *Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics*, in «Byzantinische Zeitschrift» L, p. 83 (1990), pp. 51-62; Rudolf LEEB, *Konstantin und Christus. Die Verchristlichung der imperialen Repräsentation unter Konstantin dem Großen als Spiegel seiner Kirchenpolitik und seines Selbstverständnisses als christlicher*

possible that Eusebius was deliberately being vague. It is not the purpose of the present paper to enrich this debate. Suffice it to say that I tend to agree with the most recent reconstruction, that of Arne Effenberger (2006). In his view, the mausoleum of Constantine's daughter Constantina was built on the model of her father's tomb. Therefore, the circular form of Santa Costanza in Rome gives us a rough idea of what the original building in Constantinople may have looked like (Fig. 1).⁶

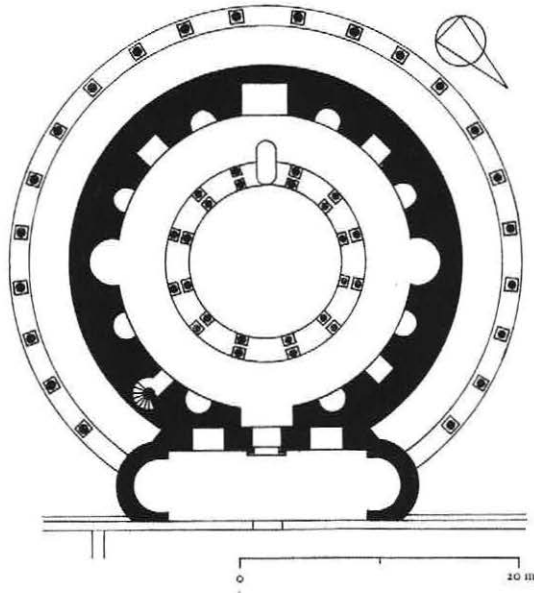


FIG. 1 - Mausoleum of Constantine's daughter Constantina (Santa Costanza in Roma). Cfr. Arne EFFENBERGER, *Frühchristliche Kunst und Kultur von den Anfängen bis zum 7. Jahrhundert*, München 1986, p. 132.

Kaiser, Berlin 1992 (AKG 58), pp. 93-120; Paul SPECK, *Urbs, quam Deo donavimus. Konstantins Konzept für Konstantinopel*, in «Boreas» 18 (1995), pp. 143-173, esp. pp. 144 f.; Stefan REBENICH, *Vom dreizehnten Gott zum dreizehnten Apostel? Der tote Kaiser in der Spätantike*, in «Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum» 4 (2000), pp. 300-324 (= *Konstantin und das Christentum*, ed. Heinrich SCHLANGESCHÖNINGEN [Neue Wege der Forschung], Darmstadt 2007, pp. 216-244), esp. pp. 309-317; Arne EFFENBERGER, *Konstantinsmausoleum, Apostelkirche – und kein Ende?*, in ΛΙΘΟΣΤΡΩΤΟΝ. *Studien zur byzantinischen Kunst und Geschichte. Festschrift für Marcell Restle*, hrsg. von Birgitt BORKOPP – Thomas STEPPAN, Stuttgart 2000, pp. 67-78; Neslihan ASUTAY-EFFENBERGER – Arne EFFENBERGER, *Die Porphyrsarkophage der oströmischen Kaiser*, Wiesbaden 2006, pp. 99-145; Albrecht BERGER, *Konstantinopel (stadteschichtlich)*, in *Realexikon für Antike und Christentum XXI*, Stuttgart 2006, coll. 435-483, esp. 446 f.; Mark J. JOHNSON, *The Roman Imperial Mausoleum in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 2009, pp. 119-129; Jonathan BARDILL, *Constantine. Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 364-384.

⁶ ASUTAY-EFFENBERGER – EFFENBERGER *Die Porphyrsarkophage...op. cit.*, pp. 52 f.

According to Eusebius, Constantine “had twelve repositories (θήκας) set up, like sacred pillars (ὡσανεὶ στήλας ἱεράς) in honour and memory of the company of the apostles”.⁷ It is hard to tell what these *thekai* looked like. One option is that they resembled cenotaphs, which would mean they had the form of sarcophagi. However, the comparison with *stelai* seems to suggest something more like pillars or monuments. More important is the position of Constantine’s coffin: it was to be placed in the middle of the twelve *thekai*. Whether the whole thing was a semicircle with Constantine at the centre and six *thekai* on each side or whether we are talking about an entire circle in the centre of which the imperial sarcophagus stood, is unclear. At any rate, from a Christian point of view the conclusion is almost inevitable that Constantine was presenting himself in the position of Christ. He was not *isapostolos*, as the Byzantine liturgical tradition claims, but *isocristos*. This has been rightly pointed out by the historian Stefan Rebenich in a brilliant article on the subject.⁸ Just how embarrassing the whole arrangement was for “good” Christians and theologians, is demonstrated by the fact that shortly after Constantine’s death his corpse was moved into different positions, so that ultimately John Chrysostom, at the end of the century, was able to say that the emperors had become “doorkeepers” at the tombs of the apostles.⁹

However, I do not agree with Rebenich in saying that the original arrangement, as Constantine had wished it, was clearly and unequivocally a translation of the language of the Roman *consecratio* into the language of Christianity, albeit in a non-standard and somewhat embarrassing form.¹⁰ We do not know whether the reading of the twelve *thekai* as memorials for the apostles was Eusebius’ own interpretation or whether this was predetermined in the monument itself by means of inscriptions, iconography or even relics.¹¹ The former seems more likely, since we have an interesting (albeit

⁷ V.C. 4,60,3.

⁸ REBENICH, *Vom dreizehnten Gott... op. cit.*, pp. 311-317.

⁹ γεγόνασι θυρωροὶ λοιπὸν τῶν ἁλιέων οἱ βασιλεῖς. *Contra Iudaeos et gentiles* 9, PG 48,825.

¹⁰ REBENICH, *Vom dreizehnten Gott... op. cit.*, pp. 316 f.

¹¹ Only under Constantius II, were relics of Christian saints (Andrew, Luke, and Timothy) brought into the newly erected church of the apostles (next to the mausoleum). This event must be dated to 356/57, as is attested by numerous sources (Hier. *Chron. ad Ann.* 357; *Chron. Pasch. ad Ann.* 356/57; PHILOSTORGIUS, h.e. 3,2; *Cons. Const. ad Ann.* 357; “appendix” to Theodorus Lectof). However, Richard W. BURGESS, *The Passio S. Artemii, Philostorgius, and the Dates of the Invention and Translations of the Relics of Sts Andrew and Luke*, in «*Analecta Bollandiana*» 121 (2003), pp. 5-36 argues that the translation of Andrew and Luke originally took place in 336, and that in 357 they were “retranslated to the church” (p. 32). The basis for his view is the entry in a list of

very late) source which says that Constantine erected his mausoleum at the site of a former pagan altar with the name δωδεκάθεον (sanctuary of the twelve gods).¹² In a forthcoming paper I argue that this designation is unlikely to be an invention of later Byzantine scribes and story-tellers.¹³ Likewise, it is improbable that the mausoleum was really erected above a pre-existing pagan sanctuary. The best solution is to assume that δωδεκάθεον reflects an alternative interpretation of Constantine's idiosyncratic configuration. If this is the case, the only reasonable way to interpret the expression would be as a reflection of the particular role of *Sol* in Constantine's religious world, as has been pointed out by Charlotte Long in her study on the "Twelve Gods".¹⁴ A non-Christian visitor would not have seen Christ and the apostles, but the sun and the twelve *zodia* (months). This would certainly provide an additional motive for posthumously altering the arrangement – which indeed is what happened under Constantius II.

This point will become important again in the context of the actual burial, but let us first turn to the events in Nicomedia: the baptism and death of Constantine. In Eusebius' account the whole sequence of events is described against the history of Jesus Christ. The story of illness and death

consular *fasti* for the year 336 (attested by three different witnesses, the *Fasti Berolinenses*, the *Fasti Vindobonenses priores*, and the *Barbarus Scaligeri*, all dependent on the same archetype). If one has to choose between the two dates, there can be no doubt that the evidence for 357 is considerably stronger. The theory of two separate translations (in both years) is not convincing, firstly for general and methodological reasons (*entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*), secondly because of a lack of historical plausibility (why would the sources describe a reallocation in 357 as a new translation?). However, the most important argument against Burgess's view is the striking similarity of the exact wording between the *Fasti Berolinenses* and several sources for 357 (*Cons. Const.*, "appendix" Theod. Lect. etc., see pp. 33 f.), in particular the strange use of the active verb: the relics εισηλθεν/*introierant*. One would have to assume that in a group of sources the entry for the second translation was modelled after the first – which, however, is not mentioned. It goes without saying that this is highly improbable. Detailed references for all mentioned sources are to be found in Burgess; what I refer to as the "appendix" to Theodoros Lector is a series of excerpts at the end of the "Epitome" of Church histories (attested, among others, in the famous codex Barocianus 142, fol. 240^v), on which see Bernard POUDERON, *Les fragments anonymes du Baroc. gr. 142 et les notices consacrées à Jean Diacrinoméno, Basile de Cilicie et l'anonyme d'Héraclée*, in «Revue des Etudes byzantines» 55 (1997), pp. 169–192 (unknown to Burgess).

¹² Nicephorus Xanthopoulos, h.e. 8,55, PG 146, 220C.

¹³ Martin WALLRAFF, *Tod und Bestattung Konstantins nach späteren hagiographischen und historiographischen Quellen bis Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos*, in *Ecclesiastical History and Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos*, Proceedings of the International Conference (Vienna December 2011), edited by Christian GASTGEBER – Sebastiano PANTEGHINI, Wien 2014 (Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung ?) (in print).

¹⁴ Charlotte LONG, *The Twelve Gods of Greece and Rome*, Leiden 1987 (EPRO 107), pp. 315 f.

is inserted into the framework of Easter and Pentecost.¹⁵ All this is not necessarily inaccurate, but from other sources we know that Constantine's actions were not determined by religious motivations. Likewise, he probably did not go to Nicomedia for the hot springs because of his illness, rather because of his planned military campaign against the Persians.¹⁶ According to Eusebius, two things happened in or near Nicomedia: one is the baptism, and the other the death of the Emperor. The two are carefully distinguished, and interestingly only the second is a "public event". Only after the baptism, which is celebrated by Christian ministers almost in a "private" setting, are the leaders of the army let in again, and soon afterwards they witness the actual passing away.¹⁷

Eusebius does not mention the name of the person who baptized the Emperor. It seems likely that it was the local bishop, i.e. the namesake of the historian, Eusebius of Nicomedia. However, this is attested for the first time only several decades later, in Jerome's continuation of Eusebius' chronicle.¹⁸ As is well known, the baptism produced a rich and variegated echo in later Christian sources, including some innovative and exaggeratory variants.¹⁹ Considering this, it is quite remarkable that even Christian sources of the fourth and fifth century, for the most part make no mention of the baptism. This is true for the surviving fragments of Gelasius of Caesarea and Philostorgius, but also for the wholly preserved Rufinus, not to mention various non-Christian texts. The later tradition depends entirely on Eusebius.

The Palestinian bishop is silent with regard to another event attested by several later sources, namely that the death of the Emperor was announced by the appearance of a comet.²⁰ It could well be that the story of this apparition was officially disseminated by imperial propaganda, seeing as it would have fit well into several explanatory frameworks. It might, for example,

¹⁵ Easter is mentioned before and after the description of the mausoleum: *V. C.* 4,57; 4,60,5 (in the case of 4,57 only the *kephalaion* survives; although this probably does not go back to Eusebius himself, one has to assume that it was written when the text was still intact, see BLECKMANN, *Eusebius von Caesarea... op. cit.*, p. 91, n. 427 and WINKELMANN, *Eusebius... op. cit.*, XXVI; XLVIII f.). Pentecost as the date of death: *V. C.* 4,64.

¹⁶ *Origo Constantini* 35; Eutropius 10,8,2; cfr. Garth FOWDEN, *The Last Days of Constantine. Oppositional Versions and their Influence*, in «The Journal of Roman Studies» 84 (1994), pp. 146-170, here pp. 146-153.

¹⁷ *V. C.* 4,63,2.

¹⁸ *Chron. ad ann. 337* (GCS Eusebius 7², 234a HELM).

¹⁹ Cfr. FOWDEN, *The Last Days... op. cit.*, pp. 153-168; Marilena AMERISE, *Il battesimo di Costantino il Grande. Storia di una scomoda eredità*, Stuttgart 2005 (Hermes. Einzelschriften, 95).

²⁰ Aurelius Victor *Caes.* 41,16; Eutropius 10,8,2; *Passio Artemii* (possibly from Philostorgius), quoted in Philostorgius, *H. E.* 2,16^a (GCS 26,9 f. BIDEZ/WINKELMANN).

remind us of the astral phenomena at the moment of the birth and death of Jesus, but it could also be open to more general astrological interpretations. Indeed it is perhaps because of this interpretive ambiguity that Eusebius kept quiet about the issue.

What follows in Eusebius is a highly stylized and very “ritualized” description of the transfer of the corpse from Nicomedia to Constantinople and its laying-out for public viewing in the imperial palace. The account is framed by redactional formulas,²¹ which might indicate that Eusebius was using a written source. In any case, the whole story is devoid of Christian motifs.²² We do, however, witness here a Roman imperial rite in the public sphere. Constantine is mourned by the soldiers and by his courtiers. Maybe the most specific and most interesting part of the description is the golden coffin in which his body is laid out. It may well be that Eusebius chose the Homeric expression χρυσῆ λάρναξ to remind educated readers of the case in which Hector’s bones were buried.²³ Archeologically speaking, there are also famous parallels such as the golden case in which the ashes of Philipp of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great, were buried. However, in our case things must have been different. Obviously, Constantine’s body was not burned, and the χρυσῆ λάρναξ will have been a wooden case covered by gold-foil.

Was the corpse still visible when he was publicly displayed in the palace? We do not know, but the answer is probably no. Whilst still in Nicomedia “the military took up the remains and laid them in a golden coffin, which they enveloped in a covering of purple, and removed to the city which was called by his name”.²⁴ Transportation and public viewing would have been more a matter of weeks than days. For the funeral, the arrival of Constantius II was awaited; he had to come over from Antioch.²⁵ If the body was still visible during this time, it would have had to have been embalmed. This is possible, but we hear nothing of it. Eusebius says that the σκῆνος of the emperor

²¹ ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐπίομεν ἐπὶ τὰ ἐξῆς, v.C. 4,64,2 and ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ᾧδὲ πῆ συνετελεῖτο 4,67,3.

²² The remarks at V.C. 4,67,3 are interpretative; they are not part of the actual description of the events.

²³ *Il.* 24,795, this Homeric motif has been pointed out by SCHNEIDER, *Eusebius von Caesarea... op. cit.*, pp. 490 f., where the parallel with Philipp of Macedonia is also mentioned.

²⁴ V.C. 4,66,1.

²⁵ V.C. 4,70,1; the sentence is not easy to understand, see below n. 33. Socrates, *H. E.* 1,39,5 (possibly from Gelasius of Caesarea).

was visible.²⁶ This could be interpreted either literally or symbolically. It is possible (and on the basis of parallels also quite plausible) that the general public venerated the Emperor in the form of his imperial attributes (diadem, jewelry, purple cloth), or perhaps even in the form of a waxen image.²⁷

What is more important, is the way in which the coffin was displayed. It was placed in an elevated position in the most superb of all the imperial halls, and surrounded by candles burning in candlesticks of gold, presenting a wonderful spectacle for the onlookers of a kind never seen on earth by anyone under the light of the sun from the first creation of the world.²⁸

The golden coffin, surrounded by golden candlesticks and illuminated by numerous candles: this must have resulted in a grandiose staging of light (*Lichtinszenierung*). Eusebius does not say so explicitly, but the intention will have been to present the divinized Constantine as the true sun, shining over the whole world. It is also possible that the public viewing took place in the palace hall where Eusebius had seen a golden cross decorated with gems (*crux gemmata*).²⁹

Once Constantius, the second son of Constantine, had arrived from Antioch, the main ceremony could take place, that is to say, the burial in the mausoleum. A procession of extreme grandeur led the coffin from the imperial palace to the building, which Eusebius continues to call “the temple of the apostles of the redeemer”. According to later biographers the corpse was accompanied by bishops and priests.³⁰ This must be a secondary attempt at “Christianizing” a ritual that was fundamentally civil and military. Eusebius speaks of “detachments of soldiers in military array”, and of “companies of spearmen and heavy armed infantry”.³¹ Significantly, the same ritual was repeated for the burials of Constantius II. and – to a certain

²⁶ What can be seen is ἐφ’ ὕψηλῆς κείμενον χρυσοῦς λάρνακος τὸ βασιλέως σκῆνος. *V.C.* 4,66,2 (148,1 f. Winkelmann). Normally, σκῆνος designates the corpse (in this case situated on top of the golden coffin). A broader/synecdochical meaning cannot be ruled out. We should also keep in mind that Eusebius is talking about something that he has not seen. His sources (oral or written) are unknown.

²⁷ Cfr. Pio FRANCHI DE’ CAVALIERI, *I funerali ed il sepolcro di Costantino Magno*, in «Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire» 36 (1916), pp. 205-261, here p. 226.

²⁸ *V.C.* 4,66,1.

²⁹ *V.C.* 3,49.

³⁰ *Vita Constantini*, BHG 362, ed. Theophilos IOANNOU, *Μνημεῖα ἀγιολογικά*, Venice 1884, pp. 164-229, here p. 224, quoted after FRANCHI DE’ CAVALIERI, *I funerali... op. cit.*, p. 228.

³¹ κατὰ στίφος τὰ στρατιωτικὰ τάγματα and λογχοφόροι τε καὶ ὀπλίται. *V.C.* 4,70,1 (149,15 f. WINKELMANN).

extent – Julian, for which we have detailed descriptions.³² «In che punto del corteo cercheremo la piccola impettita figura di Costanzo?», asks Pio Franchi de' Cavalieri in a learned and still very useful article on the subject.³³ Indeed, where was Constantius? Franchi is certainly right in saying that the new emperor immediately preceded the coffin of his father. He was the most important person in the whole ritual. Given the distance from the palace to the mausoleum and given the length of the convoy, the procession itself may have taken several hours. Unfortunately, it is difficult to tell exactly what took place in the mausoleum. We do know however, that once again, Constantius was the protagonist. Eusebius speaks of “the due performance of the sacred ceremony”.³⁴ The only thing we can say for certain is that there was no Christian connotation to it whatsoever.

This becomes very clear in Eusebius' account where the Christian ritual is kept strictly separate from the public one. After a neat break it is introduced as a second phase to the proceedings. The bishop is very explicit, indeed surprisingly explicit about this: “As soon as [Constantius] had withdrawn himself with the military train, the ministers of God came forward”.³⁵ Not only were the two rituals strictly demarcated, but the Christian part has a sort of secondary role, like an appendix, because the most important person, Constantius, was no longer present. Why did the new emperor leave? Franchi de' Cavalieri's explanation that he was tired,³⁶ may be true, but is certainly insufficient. It does not account for the withdrawal of all the military. Likewise, it seems artificial to surmise that the new emperor had to leave because he had not yet been baptized.³⁷ There is no indication that the

³² Gregory of Nazianzus, *or.* 5,16-18 compares the two funerals – obviously with polemical intent. For the case of Constantius II it is striking to note that here too the Christian liturgies and mourning (§16) are separate from the official and military rites (§17). For commentary and further parallels cfr. Leonardo LUGARESI, *Gregorio di Nazianzo. La morte di Giuliano l'apostata, Oratio V*, Fiesole 1997 (Biblioteca patristica 29), pp. 205-213, see also Sabine G. MACCORMACK, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 1981, pp. 132-134.

³³ FRANCHI DE' CAVALIERI, *I funerali...* *op. cit.*, p. 230. After a short digression on the situation in Rome Eusebius states: ὁ δὲ τῶν παιδῶν δεύτερος τὸ τοῦ πατρὸς σκήνος ἐπιστάς τῆ πόλει προσεκόμιζεν, αὐτὸς ἐξάρχων τῆς ἐκκομιδῆς. *V.C.* 4,70,1 (149,13-15 WINKELMANN). The meaning of the sentence is not immediately clear. Basically, like Franchi de' Cavalieri, I take it to mean three things: 1. The arrival of Constantius (ἐπιστάς τῆ πόλει) was awaited. 2. Constantius brought the funeral procession into action (τὸ σκήνος προσεκόμιζεν). 3. He preceded the coffin (ἐξάρχων τῆς ἐκκομιδῆς).

³⁴ τὰ τῆς πρεπούσης ὁσίας ἀπεπλήρου. *V.C.* 4,70,2 (149,19 f. WINKELMANN).

³⁵ *V.C.* 4,71,1.

³⁶ FRANCHI DE' CAVALIERI, *I funerali...* *op. cit.*, p. 236.

³⁷ REBENICH, *Vom dreizehnten Gott...* *op. cit.*, p. 306.

performed rite was Eucharistic. The reason must be different. Apparently, the protocol did not envisage the presence of the army during the Christian liturgy. The new emperor as commander-in-chief was seen as belonging to that realm. An overlap between Christian and Roman military rituals was still unthinkable, even for an occasion of this sort.

The consequence is, of course, that the Christian part of the funeral was relegated to second rank. Eusebius tries to conceal this fact by speaking of "the multitude and the whole congregation of the faithful" who participated in the liturgy. This may well be true. There may have been a certain turnover in the audience with the soldiers and larger parts of the public leaving and making room for members of the Christian church. However, there can be no doubt that the first part was perceived as the principal act. If it is true that this first part was devoid of Christian elements, then this further supports the hypothesis that the architectural structure of Constantine's burial building was "neutral". It was primarily an imperial mausoleum, and it became a "church of the apostles" only in the eyes of a Christian spectator and thanks to Christian services (which were in fact held regularly there, as Eusebius states).³⁸

In terms of literary structure, Eusebius' account is quite remarkable. The entire account is given a Christian framework. The pericope starts and ends with Christian rituals: baptism and funeral rites. This gives a sort of spherical unity (*Ringkomposition*) to the whole narrative, a powerful signal when it comes to rhetoric and literary art. However, it does not conceal the fact that these two rituals were not part of the series of public events. Indeed, one could almost consider them "private" (which is, of course, an anachronistic expression for a late antique emperor). Many spectators might not even have been aware that the rituals took place. They were held strictly separate from the public sphere, as was pointed out by Pio Franchi de' Cavalieri almost 100 years ago.³⁹ Again, this is an excellent example of how skilled Eusebius was when it came to making his case without falsifying the facts.

However, the last public signal sent by the emperor was very "pagan" indeed, and not even the skillful Christian bishop had a Christian interpretation to offer. Constantine's "famous last words", so to speak, were iconic, nonverbal. I am talking about the famous consecration coin that was minted in large numbers for the occasion. We will come back to this in the concluding remarks. Before we do, let us put the Emperor to rest definitively by turning to his golden coffin: What became of it?

³⁸ *V.C.* 4,71,2.

³⁹ FRANCHI DE' CAVALIERI, *I funerali...* *op. cit.*, p. 261.

The coffin will have been carried in the solemn procession to the mausoleum. In the building there was already a *larnax*, designed for the body of the emperor and mentioned by Eusebius. It is the one in the middle of the twelve *thekai*. Undoubtedly, this will have been a porphyry coffin, as was the tradition for emperors. Arne Effenberger, who has studied the surviving porphyry sarcophagi in Istanbul, has presented, together with his wife, a new hypothesis for the identification of this piece (Fig. 2).⁴⁰ If the iden-



FIG. 2 - Porphyry sarcophagus in Istanbul (Archeological Museum), possibly originally used for Constantine, Cfr. ASUTAY-EFFENBERGER-EFFENBERGER, *Die Porphyrsarkophage der oströmischen Kaiser*, Wiesbaden 2006, Abb. 10.

tification is right, the coffin was of extraordinary dimensions, but iconographically very simple, almost unadorned (much more sober than his first

⁴⁰ ASUTAY-EFFENBERGER – EFFENBERGER, *Die Porphyrsarkophage... op. cit.*, pp. 72-76.

bellicose sarcophagus which was later used by Helena in her mausoleum in Rome and which today is kept in the Vatican museum).⁴¹ The generous dimensions would allow for the entire golden coffin to be put inside the sarcophagus. This is the only plausible explanation, especially seeing as by that stage Constantine had been dead for several weeks. It is unlikely that the golden coffin was opened again. This provides a further argument for Effenberger's identification.⁴²

When Eusebius speaks about the Christian service, the body of the Emperor is lying on a high platform (κρηπίς).⁴³ This must be the exalted position of the porphyry sarcophagus in the middle of the twelve *thekai*, interpreted as monuments for the apostles. In an indirect and fairly subtle manner Eusebius alludes to the claim that Constantine was *isochristos*, when he says in his concluding remarks that the defunct emperor "resembled his Saviour".⁴⁴ This is followed by the somewhat lacklustre description of the consecration coin: "the reverse exhibited him [Constantine] sitting as a charioteer, drawn by four horses, with a hand stretched downward from above to receive him up to heaven".⁴⁵ No further explanation follows. It is obvious for Eusebius, as for everybody else, that the iconography is that of the Sun god (Fig. 3). It is also obvious that it would be difficult to offer a Christian interpretation, despite the christological tradition identifying Jesus Christ with the sun of righteousness. In fact, Eusebius does not venture any theological hypotheses here. Modern scholars have sometimes thought of the ascension of Christ or Elijah, but there are no relevant parallels in the tradition of Christian iconography, and therefore this sort of *interpretatio christiana* fails to convince.⁴⁶ We might ask whether Constantine was actually

⁴¹ It is often taken for granted that the sarcophagus in the Vatican was originally intended for Constantine; see the recent discussion in JOHNSON, *The Roman Imperial Mausoleum... op. cit.*, pp. 117 f.

⁴² EFFENBERGER, *Konstantinsmausoleum... op. cit.*, discusses the 12th cent. *ekphrasis* by Nicolaus Mesarites, where the sarcophagus is described as "relatively long (μετρίως δ' επιμήκης)".

⁴³ ἔνθα δὴ ὁ μὲν μακάριος ἄνω κείμενος ἐφ' ὑψηλῆς κρηπίδος ἐδοξάζετο. *V.C.* 4,71,1 (149,18 f. Winkelmann).

⁴⁴ τοῦτω [sc. Χριστῶ] οὖν ἐμπερῶς, *v.C.* 4,72 (150,12 f. Winkelmann).

⁴⁵ (...) θατέρου δὲ μέρους ἐφ' ἄρματι τεθρίπῳ ἡνιόχου τρόπον, ὑπὸ δεξιᾶς ἄνωθεν ἐκτεινομένης αὐτῷ χειρὸς ἀναλαμβανόμενον. *V.C.* 4,73 (150,18-20 Winkelmann). Cfr. Patrick Bruun, *The Consecration Coins of Constantine the Great*, in «Arctos» 1 (1957), pp. 19-31.

⁴⁶ This has been clearly shown by Lieselotte Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, *Zur Darstellung der Himmelfahrt Constantins des Großen*, in *Jenseitsvorstellungen in Antike und Christentum. Gedenkschrift für Alfred Stüiber*, Münster 1982 (JAC.E 9), pp. 215-224, here p. 217. However, the Christian interpretation continues to find support, cfr. e.g. the influential translations with notes by CAMERON



FIG. 3 - Constantine's consecration coins (Antioch 337, RIC 39, Privat-sammlung München [Photo Nicolai Kästner])

able to influence the iconography of the posthumous minting. This cannot be determined with ultimate certainty. However, the fact that the medaillon was coined immediately after the Emperor's death in almost identical manner in several mints all over the empire seems to imply that it was carried out according to a pre-established scheme (and not a local ad-hoc-decision).

The iconography is very conventional; we find an almost identical representation in monumental scale on the eastern side of the arch of Constantine (Fig. 4),⁴⁷ which was erected, as is well known, after the victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312. The only difference is the hand of God stretching out from above. There are also attempts at interpreting this element as Christian, but for this indirect representation of God there are only a few distant parallels in Judaism, and it is certainly not necessary to go that far.⁴⁸ The closest parallel is Constantine's father, upon whose consecration a panegyrist could say that he was received "Iove ipso dexteram porrigente", by the outstretched hand of Jupiter. Elsewhere the divinized Constantius

– HALL, Eusebius. *Life of Constantine...* *op. cit.*, p. 349 and BLECKMANN – SCHNEIDER, *Eusebius von Caesarea. De vita Constantini...* *op. cit.*, p. 498 (but differently at p. 93!).

⁴⁷ For the arch in general see the contribution of Noel Lenski in the present volume. For the Constantinian sculptures in particular cfr. Paul ZANKER, *I rilievi costantiniani dell'Arco di Costantino a Roma*, in *Costantino 313 d.C. L'editto di Milano e il tempo della tolleranza*, a cura di Gemma SENA CHIESA, Milano 2012, pp. 48-55.

⁴⁸ For the iconography of Constantine's coin, cfr. Lieselotte KÖTZSCHE, *Hand II (ikonographisch)*, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum XIII*, Stuttgart 1986, coll. 402-482, esp. pp. 423-425, for "hands" in Jewish art *ibid.*, pp. 418-420.



FIG. 4 - Sol on the eastern side of the arch of Constantine in Rome (erected 315) DAI Rom Inst. Neg. 32,71

Chlorus was also compared to the Sun god.⁴⁹ In this way, the consecration coin is an element of continuity within Constantine's reign and within his dynasty. Again, this is a very strong public signal, with considerable impact (given the high number of minted coins), certainly stronger than the baptism and Christian funeral rites.

To sum up, although our main source for the death and burial of Constantine is Christian, we find both Christian and solar aspects of imperial propaganda. The arrangement of the imperial coffin in the middle of the twelve *thekai* was, perhaps, polyvalent and open to different interpretations. The laying-out in a golden coffin with golden candlesticks and sophisticated elements of lightning may have been part of the solar propaganda. The same must be true for the consecration coin with the Sun god on his quadriga. All this was visible and meaningful in the public realm. The Christian elements were likewise meaningful, although less visible to the public: the

⁴⁹ Quotation from *Paneg. lat.* 6[7],7,3; comparison with Sun: 7[6],14,3.

baptism shortly before the death, Christian prayers at the grave immediately after the funeral. The arrangement of the coffin also had Christian theological implications, even if they were somewhat problematic from the point of view of Christian orthodoxy.

What should we make of this variegated, perhaps even contradictory picture? (This may be the reason why the debate surrounding all these facets, most of which have been known for a very long time, continues to be so lively.) People sometimes describe the events as “ambiguous”, and I can see why this epithet is used – it makes sense from the point of view of an amazed and somewhat helpless posterity. The various signals do not fit into our inflexible conception(s) of “pagan” and “Christian”. There are elements of both. However, I do not think that “ambiguous” accurately describes Constantine’s plan and intentions. His policy in the field of religion was quite clear and deliberate. All of the measures described bear the hallmark of Constantine’s hand, even after his death. We should therefore refrain from putting apparent contradictions down to lack of control or decision on Constantine’s behalf. The consecration coin was not minted by “uncontrolled” court officials. The baptism did not take place as a private confession of faith as opposed to the Emperor’s role in the public sphere (where he did not dare to show his deepest convictions). A contrast between personal faith and public role is a modern retro-projection on to a late antique emperor who was a *zoon politikon* from the cradle to the grave. Rather, one has to assume that all measures and messages were part of a religious programme, although one that may be difficult to understand today. However, we can take comfort in the fact that it was also difficult to understand for Constantine’s contemporaries. Eusebius was an intelligent and very learned observer, and he tried to make the very best of things – from his perspective. The result of his effort is remarkable and admirable. However, we have also seen the points where he was at a loss to offer any reasonable explanation.

To come back to the battle at the Milvian Bridge and to the main topic of the present volume, certainly it is not true to describe Constantine’s biography simply in terms of a linear progression “from pagan to Christian”. Even if one wants to use the category “conversion” (I am personally unconvinced by its usefulness), there is no moment in his life in which Constantine became a “good” Christian. If one wants to describe his attitude as “ambiguous” in 312, one has to say the same for 337. I do not say that there was no development in the time that elapsed between these two dates, but the basic constellation remains surprisingly stable. Arnaldo Marcone has

written two quite different monographs on Constantine within two years.⁵⁰ The second book is entitled "Pagan and Christian". This seems to hit the nail on the head. Constantine's religious policy up to and including his death aimed at combining and integrating the best of both worlds. He was (and wanted to be) both pagan *and* Christian. Hence, one should not use the term "ambiguous", but rather "integrative", because this is what he wished to achieve. His programme was: one God, one emperor, one empire – and this programme ultimately failed. It failed although it was designed in a sensible and intelligent manner. The term "pagan" is much too rough (and pejorative) to describe the subtleties of this programme. Constantine was not interested in just being "pagan" – actually, he was quite opposed to many traditional elements of "paganism". Within the spectrum of the Greco-Roman religious culture the sun was an excellent point of reference for his intentions. It was sufficiently concrete, and sufficiently abstract; it was able to accommodate the widespread tendency towards monotheism, and it had (potentially) a political impact; it was attractive to philosophers and intellectuals, without being too elusive. Last, but not least, it reflected certain trends in Christianity. Since the third century at the latest, it had become customary to praise Jesus Christ as the "true sun" or the "sun of righteousness" – epithets not yet attested in the New Testament, but frequent in theologians like Origen or Clement of Alexandria.⁵¹ There were many points of contact for the many subjects of the Emperor. And yet the programme failed.

The "pagans" (if there was such a thing) were indifferent or did not understand. The Christians were actively opposed for theological reasons. Even Eusebius, who was so enthusiastic about the Emperor, leaves little doubt that he had no interest in blurring the clear-cut borderline between Christian and non-Christian. This becomes particularly apparent when he praises the Emperor as the new sun, but at the same time reminds us of the sun's status in the order of the world: it belongs to the realm of created beings, like everything else in this world.⁵² God is one alone, and he created the sun.

Although Constantine's impact on the religious history of Europe and the world was enormous, his programme and intentions were a failure. The visible and symbolic representation of this was the fate of his tomb after his

⁵⁰ Arnaldo MARCONE, *Costantino il Grande*, Roma 2000; Id., *Pagano e cristiano. Vita e mito di Costantino*, Roma 2002.

⁵¹ Cfr. Martin WALLRAFF, *Christus Verus Sol. Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike*, Münster 2001 (JAC.E 32), pp. 41-59.

⁵² Emperor as sun: I.C. 3,4; sun as creation: I.C. 10,2.

death. What Eusebius theologically anticipated, would soon become a reality. Under Constantius II, the whole complex was substantially altered. As a consequence, the “Christian church” aspect became predominant. In this context the programmatic position of the imperial coffin was intolerable.⁵³ At the end of the 4th century, and after various conflicts, the Emperor was no longer the Christ-like centre of the choir of the apostles, but indeed had become their doorkeeper, as Chrysostom said.

Fig. 1 *Plan of St. Costanza*, Rome, possibly resembling Constantine’s Mausoleum in Constantinople.

⁵³ Bishop *Macedonius* had the coffin removed to St. Acacius. This cannot have been simply due to safety precautions (as he stated), since the operation resulted in heavy turmoil. It is not easy to reconstruct the exact series of events. The main source is Socrates, *H. E.* 2, 38, 35-43. Ultimately the coffin returned, but probably to a different position. Discussion of all relevant sources in MANGO, *Constantine’s Mausoleum...* *op. cit.*, pp. 56 f. and ASUTAY-EFFENBERGER – EFFENBERGER, *Die Porphyrsarkophage...* *op. cit.*, pp. 104-107.