

# The Christian Emperor and the Pagan City: Constantine I's Legendary Relationship with Byzantium



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## Abstract

Byzantine legendary traditions regarding Constantine's foundation of Constantinople never fail to allude to the fact that the Christian capital was founded on the site of the pagan city of Byzantium. However, these traditions are not always in agreement when it comes to defining the relationship between the Christian emperor and the pagan city, or the way in which the legendary memory of Byzantium influenced the history of Constantinople. This paper discusses the existing evidence and provides a tentative interpretation of the role that different traditions played in shaping the symbolic dimension of Constantine and Constantinople.

KEYWORDS: Constantine I, Byzantium, Constantinople, Paganism, Christianity.

## El emperador cristiano y la ciudad pagana: la relación legendaria entre Constantino I y Bizancio

## Resumen

Las tradiciones legendarias bizantinas acerca de la fundación de Constantinopla por Constantino siempre recuerdan que la capital cristiana fue construida sobre la ciudad pagana de Bizancio. Sin embargo, estas tradiciones no siempre se muestran de acuerdo al momento de definir la relación entre el emperador cristiano y la ciudad pagana o la forma en que la memoria de Bizancio influyó sobre la historia de Constantinopla. El presente artículo analiza la información que se conserva al respecto y ofrece una interpretación del rol desempeñado por las diferentes tradiciones en la definición simbólica de Constantino y de Constantinopla.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Constantino I, Bizancio, Constantinopla, paganismo, cristianismo.

Legendary accounts of the foundation of Constantinople always refer to the new imperial capital being built on the site of an ancient pagan city. Upon his arrival on the western shore of the Bosphorus,<sup>1</sup> Constantine the Great encountered Byzantion—whether the actual city or its legendary memory—and raised his new, Christian city over the material, cultural, and religious remains of the ancient Byzantine civilization.<sup>2</sup> The encounter between the Christian emperor and the pagan city is not a minor aspect of the legend surrounding the foundation of Constantinople: Byzantine sources agree in claiming that the ancient city preserved an unfading grip on its successor for centuries to come. But how did this transition of Byzantion into Constantinople take place and what was the nature of the relationship between the two? Legendary accounts provide various answers. A survey of existing traditions, as already defined by Gilbert Dagron,<sup>3</sup> allows us to identify at least three different versions of events.<sup>4</sup> The first speaks of synthesis and continuity. The second, of rupture and subjugation. The third, of estrangement and detachment. In this article, we will resume Dagron's discussion of the different ways in which Constantine's arrival in ancient Byzantion was understood in Byzantine times and advance an interpretation of the changing role that the emperor played in the formulation of Constantinople's history and destiny.

## 1. Constantinople and the legacy of Byzantion

This first tradition, best represented by the early patriographic accounts attested by Hesychius Illoustrios, Malalas and the anonymous author of the *Chronicon Paschale*,<sup>5</sup> highlights the existence of two elements in Byzantion's past—one of them Greek, the other Roman. Despite their chronological dimension—the city is said to have been founded by the Greeks and later incorporated into the Roman world—these two elements are not intended to represent successive stages in the city's history. On the contrary, they are combined into a common narrative that gives Byzantion, from its very origins, a distinctive Greco-Roman character. As Janin (1964:11), Dagron (1984:26), and more recently Kaldellis (2005:396) have observed, the early history of Byzantion mirrors the early history of Rome, except that the setting, characters and imagery are explicitly Greek instead of Roman.

1 The legend states that Constantine was guided to Byzantion by divine intervention, after one or several unsuccessful attempts to build his new city in a different location. See, among others, Gren (1947:153–164; 1950:151–157), Dagron (1974:29–31).

2 Most legendary traditions agree that Constantinople was founded as a Christian capital, though, as we will see below, not all of them confer the same degree of importance to this fact.

3 The analysis follows the lines of Dagron's classical study of the legendary origins of Constantinople (1984:61–97), in which he pointed out both the symbolic figure of 'three founders' (Byzas, Severus, Constantine) and the various ways in which these founders' roles were understood in Byzantine times. Dagron's study, however, deals with several other aspects of Constantinople's legendary foundation that will not be discussed in this paper. Our main interest lies in Constantine's figure and the reasons behind the changing depiction of his relationship with pagan Byzantion.

4 It is difficult to say whether any of the elements depicted in these traditions was based on the historical circumstances of the foundation of Constantinople. For different views regarding the historical foundation (which we will not be discussing here) see, among others, Dagron (1974:13–19), Kaldellis (2005:397), Lenski (2008:267), Stephenson (2009:192–194, 339), Barnes (2014:111–112). As noted above, the legendary traditions surrounding Byzantion and Constantinople have been the subject of a classic study by Dagron (1984:61–97), on which we will rely throughout this paper.

5 Malalas' and the *Chronicon Paschale*'s accounts about Byzantion reflect, no doubt, a kernel of traditions that went back to patriographic origins, though many of them are not attested by Hesychius or by the later patriographic corpus.

In these early accounts, the legendary figure of Byzas—a Thracian hero who, according to one of the existing versions, was the founder of the city of Byzantion—evokes that of Romulus. Like Romulus, who was the grandson of King Numitor of Alba Longa and the son of Mars, Byzas was also of royal and divine descent. According to one version of the tradition, he was the great-grandson of King Inachos of the Argives, the grandson of Zeus, and the son of Poseidon.<sup>6</sup> Also like Romulus, who fought against his brother Remus, Byzas had to confront his half-brother Strombos, whom he defeated in war.<sup>7</sup> And like Romulus, who founded the city of Rome, naming it after himself and becoming its first king, Byzas founded the city of Byzantion after himself and became its first ruler.<sup>8</sup>

Again as in the case of Romulus, Byzas was believed to have pioneered the development of the new city. With the help of Poseidon and Apollo—who had formerly taken part in the building of the walls of Troy—Byzas was thought to have built a strong wall with towers that could convey sound from one to another and transmit the enemies' secrets to the city's defenders. He was also credited with building palaces and several temples, including those of Artemis at the Acropolis, Rhea at the location of the later Basilica, Poseidon near the Acropolis, Hekate in the area of the later hippodrome, Ajax and Achilles in the location of the later bath of Achilles, and others outside the city, such as the Temple of the Dioskouri at the altar of Semestre, of Amphiaraios in Sykai, and of Poseidon, Aphrodite and Artemis in the direction of the Thracian mountains. Byzas' wife, Phidaleia, was believed to have built the temple of Aphrodite at the Acropolis and to have set up the first Tyche of the city, named Keroe. No less importantly, both Byzas and Phidaleia were thought to have defended the city against many military attacks—including one by Strombos, Byzas' half-brother—and secured its continuity for the following centuries.<sup>9</sup>

The parallel between Rome and Byzantion, moreover, continued after the founder's death. Just as Rome had been ruled by a succession of six kings after Romulus, Byzantion was successively ruled by six *strategoi* after Byzas.<sup>10</sup> Like their Roman counterparts, the Byzantine rulers were thought to have consolidated the new city by undertaking building projects, organizing military enterprises, and developing a suitable urban environment. In the days of Dineos, for instance, the need to deal with the endemic problem of plagues and infestations afflicting the inhabitants of the city had become pressing. In former times, as recounted by Hesychius, Phidaleia had made an alliance with serpents in order to face the Scythians that were besieging Byzantion: large

<sup>6</sup> *Patria* I, 4-7 (in all references to the *Patria*, we will indicate the chapter numbers). Other traditions depict Byzas as the son of the nymph Semestre, or as the leader of a group of Megarian colonists (*Patria* I, 3). See Dagron (1984:68).

<sup>7</sup> *Patria* I, 18.

<sup>8</sup> An alternative, though apparently less widespread version of events, claims that Byzas became the king of Byzantion after his marriage to Phidaleia, who was the true founder of the city. According to Malalas and the *Chronicon Paschale*, Phidaleia was the daughter of Barbsios, a local toparch and warden of the port of the trading settlement of Thrace. During her father's life, Phidaleia undertook several constructions in the settlement and encouraged by her father, built a surrounding wall. Upon her marriage to Byzas, a ruler of Thrace, the city was given the name of Phidaleia's husband, who became the new king (Malalas, p. 246; *Chronicon Paschale*, pp. 493-494; see Dagron, 1984:66).

<sup>9</sup> *Patria* I, 10-16, 18, 51; Malalas, pp. 221, 246; *Chronicon Paschale*, pp. 493-494. Another account claimed that Phidaleia, along with the women of Byzantion, defeated and chased Strombos during the absence of the city's men (Stephen of Byzantion, *Ethnica*, p. 215). The bravery of Byzantion's women would also be recalled by other traditions (see section 3 below). See in general Dagron (1984:63).

<sup>10</sup> *Patria* I, 20, 24, 26, 29-30, 32.

numbers of serpents were collected and hurled at the enemy “like arrows of spears”, a tactic which eventually succeeded in repelling the attack. Regarded thereafter as benefactors of the Byzantines, it was forbidden to kill serpents captured in the city. However, by the days of Dineos they had become so numerous that they posed a threat to the inhabitants. Attempts were made to control them with storks, but the birds soon became hostile and started using the snakes against the Byzantines, either by throwing them into the cisterns and thus poisoning the water or by dropping them onto people in the streets. It was then that the renowned Apollonios of Tyana, who, as stated by Malalas, “travelled round making talismans everywhere in the cities and their territories”, arrived in Byzantion. He set the enchanted figures of three storks in stone to thenceforth prevent the storks from entering Byzantion; he also set charms against other problems facing the city, such as those caused by tortoises, horses, and the Lykos River.<sup>11</sup> After Apollonios had assisted Dineos in making the environment more amenable for human habitation, Timesios boosted Byzantion’s prosperity and passed laws and norms to regulate the daily life of its citizens. According to Hesychius’ eloquent definition, the “civic and civilized” legislation put in place by Timesios made the inhabitants of Byzantion both “urbane and humane” [ἀστεῖους τε καὶ φιλανθρώπους].<sup>12</sup>

The *strategoí* of Byzantion were thought to have been responsible for ensuring the city’s safety. The most meaningful of their numerous military endeavors is, perhaps, Leo’s resistance to King Philip II’s attempt to bring Byzantion under Macedonian rule. According to Hesychius’ account—which is meant to evoke the role played by the geese of the Capitol during the Gauls’ attack on Rome—the dogs of the city were roused and began barking during the moonless and rainy night in which Philip’s army furtively attacked Byzantion. The inhabitants, led by Leo, were not only able to reject the attack, but, eventually, to achieve the submission of the Macedonians themselves.<sup>13</sup>

From its early origins, therefore, the history of the Greek city of Byzantion was modeled on the example of Rome. Yet, it was only after the arrival of Septimius Severus that the Greek foundation was thought to have become formally integrated into the Roman world.<sup>14</sup> Severus’ capture of Byzantion is well attested by the Byzantine authors dealing with the pre-Constantinian history of the capital, but not all of them give precise details of the circumstances leading to the Roman conquest. Those who do provide for the most part a brief but historically accurate account in which the city’s fall is placed in the context of the civil war that broke out in the Roman Empire between Severus and Pescennius Niger after the death of Emperor Pertinax in 193. The city, which had taken the side of Niger during the war, is said to have been captured by Severus after his victory over Niger as a necessary step in the consolidation of his control over the Empire.<sup>15</sup>

As with many other aspects of the city’s past, however, the patriographers present an alternative version of the conquest of Byzantion. Hesychius’ account,

<sup>11</sup> *Patria* I, 16-17, 21, 22-23; Malalas, pp. 199-200; *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 467.

<sup>12</sup> *Patria* I, 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Patria* I, 25.

<sup>14</sup> The figures of Byzas and Septimius Severus, as Dagron has shown (1984:62ff), are the two keys of the pre-Constantinian past of the city, though their role varies in the different traditions.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Zosimus, 8.1.; George Synkellos, pp. 434-435; the *Suda*, sigma, 181; Zonaras, III, pp. 99ff (who follows D. C. 74.6-8).

as preserved by the *Patria*, begins by an ambiguous statement regarding the city's connection to Pescennius Niger. It affirms that the Byzantines "put their hope in Niger, who had seized power in the East," and that they "dared to rise against the emperor." This first statement, which would seem to invoke the city's support for Niger during the civil war,<sup>16</sup> is elaborated on later by the addition of a significant detail: Niger was not a Roman contestant for the imperial throne, but the "king of Byzantion and son of Timasios."<sup>17</sup> By supporting him, therefore, the Byzantines were not taking sides in a Roman civil war, but engaging in a local rebellion against the Roman emperor. The 'appropriation' of the figure of Niger, who had been redefined as a Byzantine ruler, served to reformulate the city's confrontation with Severus as a 'national' uprising of the Greeks against their Roman masters.<sup>18</sup>

The Byzantine sources that attest Severus' conquest of Byzantion usually add that the emperor punished the rebel city for its military opposition. They state that Severus destroyed the city walls, deprived its inhabitants of their civic rights, and subordinated Byzantion to the nearby city of Perinthos (Herakleia).<sup>19</sup> However, most sources also agree on affirming that the emperor's anger towards the Byzantines eventually faded away, and that he decided to reconstruct their city. According to the various existing testimonies, Severus undertook the building of two baths—the so-called Zeuxippos, inside the city, and one called The Furnaces, outside the city—the hippodrome, the *kynegion*, the Strategion, a theatre, a portico, and a temple of Helios on top of the Acropolis.<sup>20</sup>

The patriographic traditions, once again, attest to a more elaborate version of events. In Hesychius' testimony, the city of Byzantion "attained an even greater glory" after its capture by Severus, because the emperor concluded a peace treaty and set up a military alliance with King Niger that was sealed with a marriage arrangement: the son of Niger married the daughter of Severus. The subsequent reconstruction of the city—which Severus is said to have undertaken, at least in part, for the benefit of his daughter's father-in-law, Niger—was a result of the union between the imperial and local ruling families, consequently endowing the provincial Greek city with the characteristics of a Roman metropolis.<sup>21</sup>

By the end of Severus' reign, therefore, Byzantion had been definitively integrated into the Roman world. The city had become a synthesis of Greek and Roman culture that was expressed by its civilized way of life, its economic

16 The *Patria* reflect two different traditions. One of them presents Severus' conquest of Byzantion as the result of the city's support for Niger in the civil war (*Patria* I, 34). The other presents it as the result of a local insurrection of the Byzantines (*Patria* I, 37). This latter version of events is also echoed in another patriographic source, the *Extraordinary Account* (though the name of Niger is not mentioned), and in Ignatius of Selymbria's *Vita Constantini* (p. 196).

17 *Patria* I, 37; Dagron (1984:73).

18 *Patria* I, 34, 37.

19 See for instance Dio Cassius, excerpta Salm. (p. 766); George the Monk, *Chronicon breve* (PG 110, col. 533); John of Antioch (ed. Müller, frag. 127; ed. Roberto, frag. 208; ed. Mariev, frag. 151); Symeon the Logothete (p. 95); the *Suda* (sigma, 181), Kedrenos (p. 448); Glykas (p. 462); Matthew Blastares (p. 255); Ignatius of Selymbria (p. 196).

20 See for instance Malalas, p. 221; John Lydus, *De mensibus*, 1.12; *id.*, *On powers*, p. 246; *Chronicon Paschale*, pp. 494-495; George the Monk, *Chronicon breve* (PG 110, col. 533); Symeon the Logothete, p. 96; Kedrenos, p. 448; the *Suda*, sigma, 181; Zonaras, p. 100ff (following D. C. 7.12-14); Psellos, p. 24. For the historical dimension of Severus' activities, see Dagron (1984:63-65).

21 *Patria* I, 37-41. See Dagron (1984:65-66, 72).

prosperity, and its newfound military power. There was only one element missing to turn it into the future Constantinople: the Christian religion, which would soon be introduced by Constantine the Great. Yet, the transition to Christianity does not occupy a particularly important role in this tradition; on the contrary, the early patriographers seem to have been more concerned with showing that Constantine's reign implied continuity rather than rupture with Byzantium's Greek and Roman past.

Among the numerous accounts of Constantine's choice of Byzantium as his new capital, the two most popular ones evoke a connection to ancient cities well-known to Greek and Roman mythology. According to one of these accounts, Constantine was first tempted to found his capital on the site of the ancient city of Troy, but—just as Aeneas had abandoned Troy to found the kingdom of Latium and thus lay the groundwork for the emergence of old Rome—he was inspired by God to move instead towards the site of Byzantium. The manner in which the emperor was supposedly redirected towards the 'right' location for his new city is evocative of the pagan legendary tradition that the Argive or Ephesian colonists founded Byzantium. Like the colonist, who had been guided to the western shore of the Bosphorus by an oracle telling them to search for the place "where fish and deer graze at the same pasture," Constantine was thought to have founded Constantinople over ancient Byzantium after an oracle spoke to him in exactly the same enigmatic words.

According to a different account, Constantine intended to found his capital on the site of the ancient city of Chalcedon, but—unlike the 'blind' colonists of old who had failed to perceive the geographic superiority of Byzantium—he was moved by a divine revelation to build his city on the opposite shore of the Bosphorus. Again, this redirection towards the 'right' location is evocative of a pagan legend, this time grounded in the foundation of Byzantium by Byzas. Like the ancient hero, who had been guided towards the western shore of the Bosphorus by a bird that snatched away a piece of the sacrifice he was offering to the local deities, Constantine is said to have founded Constantinople after some birds snatched away the tools (or, in alternative versions, the plumb lines or stones) of the workers who had begun to build the city on the 'wrong' side of the Bosphorus.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that Constantine's arrival in Byzantium was based on a model of pagan heroes is revelatory of the patriographers' partiality towards the Greek and Roman past, as confirmed by their description of Constantine's relationship with the ancient city. According to the testimony of Malalas and the *Chronicon Paschale*, Constantine was ready to acknowledge and honor the work of his two most prominent predecessors—Byzas, the founder of the city, and Septimius Severus, the emperor who had formally integrated the city into the Roman world—by restoring or completing their architectonic enterprises.<sup>23</sup> Constantine is said to have restored the walls of Byzas, which had been partially destroyed after the war against Rome, and to have extended them in order to enlarge the perimeter of the city. He is also said to have concluded the construction of significant projects of urban infrastructure, such as the hippodrome and the bath of Zeuxippos, which Severus had left unfinished.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For the legendary traditions concerning the choice of Constantinople's location, see n. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Some of these works may actually have been restored or completed by Constantine, though their connection with Severus remains dubious. See, for instance, Mango (2004:26), Stephenson (2009:194).

<sup>24</sup> Malalas, p. 245; *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 528; see also *Patria* I, 53-54, 61.

In the testimony of the early patriographic accounts that we find attested by Hesychius, Malalas, and the *Chronicon Paschale*, Constantine was keen to follow in the footsteps of the pagan rulers. He was far from a militant Christian, and may even be seen as rather indulgent towards pagan worship.<sup>25</sup>

These testimonies clearly take pride in the pre-Christian past of the city. The writers who compiled these accounts were pleased to invoke the pagan origins of Byzantium, in which gods, oracles, and ancient heroes played a prominent role. The mythological figures that remained attached to the city's natural surroundings—in particular relating to the water sources forming the background to the city's extraordinary origins—were evoked with undisguised complicity. Byzas, they recalled, was the son of the sea-god Poseidon, and his wife, Phidaleia, the daughter of the river Barbyzes, so their union symbolized the confluence of salty and fresh water. Byzas' mother, Keoressa, had been born at the altar of the water nymph Semestre, where the rivers Barbyzes and Kydaros converged into the Golden Horn. The nymph Semestre had raised Keroessa, and another water nymph, Byzie, had later raised Byzas himself. The altar of Semestre at the confluence of the rivers Barbyzes and Kydaros was a place of divination, where people went to learn their future, and it was from there that the eagle had snatched away the sacrifice to reveal to Byzas the location of the city he was destined to found. Two of the main bodies of water that surrounded Byzantium had taken their name from Byzas' family—the Bosphorus, from Byzas' grandmother Io, and the Golden Horn, from Byzas' mother Keroessa—and the Byzantines still drew their water from the river Byzie, which took its name from the water nymph that had raised the future king of Byzantium.<sup>26</sup>

But the early patriographic traditions did not only cherish the myths inscribed in the natural landscape. They were equally favorable to pagan buildings and monuments that evoked the sophisticated and well-developed city of Byzantium. In this tradition, Constantine was the heir of Byzas and Septimius Severus.<sup>27</sup> Following in their steps, he had refounded the city and inaugurated the ultimate phase of its beauty, wealth, and prestige. This transition, by which the pagan Byzantium had become the Christian Constantinople, had taken place without disruption. The Christian Constantine—whose faith is only vaguely and rather ambiguously evoked—had been, like the early patriographers themselves, seduced by the charm of the pagan city.

## 2. Constantinople and the conquest of Byzantium

The second tradition regarding the transition of Byzantium into Constantinople presents a very different version of events. This tradition does not concern itself with the pre-Constantinian history of the city—the narrative begins with the arrival of Constantine—and the emperor's relationship with the Byzantines is defined by rupture rather than by continuity. According to the compilers of the c. eighth century *Parastaseis*,<sup>28</sup> Constantine was only able to gain control

<sup>25</sup> For Hesychius' paganizing depiction of Constantine's figure, see Kaldellis (2005:397).

<sup>26</sup> Dagron (1984:68).

<sup>27</sup> Dagron (1984:66).

<sup>28</sup> Regarding the date and the literary role of the *Parastaseis*, see Dagron (1984:29-48), Mango (1963:60), Cameron (1984:1-53), Ševčenko (1992:289-293), Anderson (2011:1-19), Odorico (2014:755-784).

over ancient Byzantion after defeating its inhabitants in open warfare.<sup>29</sup> Unconcerned by anachronism, as is usually the case with legendary traditions, the compilers of the *Parastaseis* did not hesitate to turn the symbolic figures of Byzas and Septimius Severus into Constantine's military foes.<sup>30</sup> Though their references are rather elliptical, it is clear nevertheless that the Christian emperor had fought and defeated Byzas (among other military leaders) in a major battle that took a heavy toll on the inhabitants of the city.

*Parastaseis* 52

Ἐν τῷ Βοῖ Κωνσταντίνου φοσσάτον παρεσκευάσθη μέγιστον, καὶ πόλεμον αὐτῷ Βύζας παρετάξατο, καὶ ἀπέθανον ἑλληνας, ὡς ὁ Σωκράτης φησὶν, εἴκοσι χιλιάδες.

In the area of the Forum Bovis a great encampment was prepared by Constantine the Great, and Byzas made war on him, and as Socrates says, twenty thousand pagans died.<sup>31</sup>

*Parastaseis* 38

Ἐν τῷ ὠρέῳ Μιλίῳ Ἡλίου Διὸς ἄρμα ἐν τέτρασιν ἵπποις πυρίνοις, ἰπτάμενον παρὰ δύο στηλῶν, ἐκ παλαιῶν χρόνων ὑπάρχον· ἔνθα Κωνσταντίνος ὁ μέγας εὐφημίσθη μετὰ τὸ νικῆσαι Ἀζώτιον καὶ Βύζαν καὶ Ἄντην [...].

At the golden Milion a chariot of Zeus Helios with four fiery horses, driven headlong beside two statues, has existed since ancient times. There Constantine the Great was acclaimed after defeating Azotius and Byzas and Antes<sup>32</sup> [...].

In addition to this, Constantine and his generals were believed to have defeated Severus (among other military leaders), and to have also successfully confronted the mercenaries settled near the city.

*Parastaseis* 57

Ἐν τοῖς πλησίον τοῦ Ταύρου μέρεσιν Κωνσταντίνος ὁ μέγας ἐν τῷ θέρει ἀδεῶς διέτριβεν [...] καὶ πόλεμος Κωνσταντίνου γέγονε καὶ Σευήρου τὸν Ἐρκούλιον ἐνίκησε καὶ ἐν ταῖς καμάραις τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ τε καὶ τῶν μεγιστάνων αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ ἑπτὰ ἡμέρας ἐκρέμασε.

In the area of the Taurus Constantine the Great spent some time resting in the summer [...]. And there the war of Constantine and Severus took place, and <he> defeated Herculus and hung up his head and those of his leaders in the vaults for seven days.

*Parastaseis* 54

Ἐν αὐτῷ δὲ τῷ τόπῳ τοῖς Βιγλεντίου Σευήρος Γάζου κατώκισεν, οὓς καὶ πολεμήσας Μαξιμίνος στρατηγὸς Κωνσταντίνου ὡσεὶ ὀκτῶ χιλιάδας ἀπέκτεινε.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Kazhdan has argued that the traditions preserved by the *Parastaseis* are not intended to present Constantine as a hero, but rather to be critical of his figure (Kazhdan, *ODB*, s.v. 'Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai'; *id* [1987:250]). As Benjamin Anderson has shown, however, this view cannot be upheld (2011:12-13). In their particular style, in fact, the *Parastaseis* are meant to exalt the deeds of the first Christian emperor.

<sup>30</sup> See Dagron (1984:84).

<sup>31</sup> In all quotations from *Parastaseis* we follow the English translation by Cameron *et al.* (1984).

<sup>32</sup> For Byzas and Antes, see Dagron (1984:79-80).



In this region, they say, the area of *ta Viglentiou*, Severus settled the Gazoi and Maximinus, the General of Constantine, fought against them and killed about eight thousand.

Even if they were aware of the differences between Greeks and Romans—the figures of Byzas and Severus are never associated despite their common rivalry against Constantine—the compilers of the *Parastaseis* reveal no particular interest in the material and symbolic implications of Byzantium's Greco-Roman past. In their view, Greeks and Romans were simply 'pagans' and their mores those of 'barbarians.' The cultural heritage of Greece and Rome, which the first tradition regarded as the seed of the city's material and cultural development, had become reduced to a belligerent paganism that refused to accept the Christian Constantine. In this version of events, defined as it is by a religious dichotomy, little room is left for the possibility of a civilized world order outside the Christian faith.<sup>33</sup>

As depicted by this tradition, Constantine's conquest of the pagan Byzantium was but an evocation of the conquest of Rome. In their distinctively elliptic way, the *Parastaseis* narrate that the emperor had had a vision of the cross outside the city, which, we are tacitly led to understand, revealed that God supported the emperor's cause. Despite some hesitation regarding the place and the circumstances of the apparition of the cross, the episode is clearly meant to evoke the vision that had preceded Constantine's battle against Maxentius for the city of Rome.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Parastaseis* 54

Ἐν τοῖς Βιγλεντίου ὑπῆρχεν ἡ ὄχυρωτάτη βίγλα Κωνσταντίνου, ἣν πρὸ τῆς ὀπτασίας <ἔξω> τῆς πόλεως ἔστησεν· ἐκεῖ γάρ, ὡς ἔλεγεν, καὶ τὸν σταυρὸν περὶ δειλινὸν ὀφθαλμοφανῶς ἐθεάσατο.

In the area of *ta Viglentiou* was the very strong watchtower of Constantine, which he put up before his vision outside the city; for there, they say, he saw the cross with his own eyes about evening.

#### *Parastaseis* 58

Ἐν τοῖς Θιλαδελφίου τῆς καλουμένης πόρτης μέρεσιν ἐνουπνιάσθη Κωνσταντίνος· ἐκεῖ πρῶτον πάντων τὸν τύπον τοῦ σταυροῦ ἐθεάσατο [...].

In the region of the so-called gate of the Philadelphion, Constantine had a dream. There first of all he saw the sign of the cross [...].

Sometime after the composition of the *Parastaseis*, the *Vita Constantini* (BHG 364) edited by M. Guidi (hereafter Guidi-Vita) and the *Passio* of Saint Eusignios provided a full account of the emperor's conquest of Byzantium that clearly

33 Regarding the *Parastaseis'* evocation of pagan practices in connection with the foundation of Constantinople, see Cameron and Herrin's analysis (1984:36-37). As they noted, the compilers of the *Parastaseis* saw nothing "particularly pagan or offensive" in them and understood them as "entirely compatible with a Christian interpretation of Constantine's foundation." The emperor, in fact, is presented "as the Christian founder throughout."

34 Kazhdan hesitated about the symbolic role of the cross in the legend of Constantine. Following his notion that the *Parastaseis* were meant to be critical of Constantine, he first argued that the vision of the cross had not military connotation (1987:250), yet he expressed the opposite opinion in a later study (1999:133-134). There is, any case, no doubt that Constantine's cross was meant as a military symbol. The legendary narratives preserve numerous traditions regarding the emperor's vision of the cross in the sky (in different locations), and they are always associated with his victory over a given enemy. The vision of the cross in Byzantium as a symbol of God's support in his fight against pagan Byzantium is, moreover, ratified by the testimony of the *Vita Constantini* edited by M. Guidi and the *Passio* of Saint Eusignios edited by Latyšev and Devos (for which see below). See, in general, Dagron (1984:87-88).

reflects the same tradition. In this narrative, Severus' figure is completely omitted, and, along with it, the city's Roman past.<sup>35</sup> According to the Guidi-Vita and the *Passio Eusignii*, Byzantion had remained independent until the times of Constantine, and it was the latter who brought the city under Roman rule. In a certain way, this tradition assigns to Constantine the role that the previous tradition had assigned to Severus, though the narrative clearly focuses less on the 'Roman' than on the 'Christian' character of Constantine. In essence, Constantine's fight against Byzantion was not one of Romans against non-Romans, but one of Christians against pagans.

Although the Guidi-Vita and the *Passio Eusignii*'s depiction of Constantine's conquest of Byzantion is but a duplicate of his conquest of Rome, it is made clear that the ancient city offered greater resistance than its western counterpart. According to their version of events, the emperor had great difficulties in overcoming the pagan forces that defended Byzantion, to the extent that in the first and second day of battle Constantine suffered overwhelming defeats at the hands of his pagan rivals.<sup>36</sup>

Guidi-Vita, 334-335

Ἐπεὶ δὲ Βύζας μικρὰν πόλιν ἐπ' ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ τὸ Βυζάντιον ἔκτισεν [...] καὶ κατώκησαν ἐν αὐτῷ βάρβαροι ἄνθρωποι μὴ ὑποκείμενοι τῇ τῶν Ῥωμαίων βασιλείᾳ, ἀλλ' αὐτονομία καὶ ἀγριότητι πολλῇ πρὸς τοὺς Ῥωμαίους κεκρημένοι, μετὰ τὴν ἀναίρεσιν Λικινίου ὁ μέγας Κωνσταντῖνος ἀπὸ τῆς Νικομήδους πόλεως πρὸς αὐτοὺς παρεγένετο, καὶ μὴ θέλοντες <τοῦτον> οἱ Βυζάντιοι ὑποδέξασθαι ὡς βασιλέα καὶ ὑποκύψαι τὸν ἑαυτῶν αὐχένα καὶ φόρου τελέσαι εἰς πόλεμον πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἐτράπησαν. Καὶ δὴ τῆς συμβολῆς γενομένης τῇ πρῶτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκόπησαν τῶν Ῥωμαίων χιλιάδες ἕξ· ἦν δὲ ὁ μέγας Κωνσταντῖνος πῆξας τὸν παπυλεῶνα καὶ τὸ σένδετον αὐτοῦ ἐν ᾧ τόπῳ ἐστὶν νῦν ὁ φόρος· καὶ ἦν ἀδημονῶν σφόδρα διὰ τὴν τῶν ἕξ χιλιάδων κοπήν. Συνάπτουσιν οὖν ἐκ δευτέρου τὸν πόλεμον, καὶ πάλιν ὁμοίως ἐκόπησαν ἀπὸ τῶν Ῥωμαίων χιλιάδες τρεῖς· συνέταξαν δὲ οἱ Βυζάντιοι ἕτι μίαν ἡμέραν συγκροτῆσαι πόλεμον, ἐλπίζοντες λαβεῖν τοὺς Ῥωμαίους δεσμίους καὶ αἰχμαλώτους [...].

Byzantium was a small city founded by Byzas [...] who called it by his own name. It was inhabited by barbarian people not subject to Roman rule who displayed much independence and discourtesy towards the Romans; accordingly, after slaying Licinius, Constantine the Great marched against them from Nicomedia. However, the Byzantines were unwilling to accept Constantine as emperor and to bow their necks to his yoke and pay tribute to him, and so war broke out between them. What is more, on the first day of their encounter, 6,000 Romans fell; nevertheless, Constantine the Great had pitched his tent and fixed his quarters where the forum now is, though he was sorely distressed over the loss of the 6,000 men. So for a second time battle was joined, and again likewise 3,000 of the Romans fell; furthermore, the Byzantines drew their forces up to join battle for yet one more day, hoping to take the Romans prisoners and put them in chains [...].<sup>37</sup>

After the second defeat, Constantine had a vision in which he saw the symbol of the cross with a legend admonishing him to fight in the name of God.

<sup>35</sup> As Dagron has observed, Constantine adopts here the role of conqueror attributed to Severus in the first tradition (and also in the third, for which see below), though the Christian emperor is never reconciled with the pagan city (Dagron; Paramelle, 1979:493-494).

<sup>36</sup> We reproduce here the testimony of the Guidi-Vita, which is slightly more elaborate than the one attested by the *Passio Eusignii*.

<sup>37</sup> In all passages from the Guidi-Vita, we follow the English translation by Beetham *et al.* (1996:106-142).

Amazed at the incident, the emperor proceeded to make the emblem of the cross out of a piece of wood. It was only the next day—the third day of battle, which is likely a symbolic number but may also be meant to evoke Severus' three years of war against Byzantium—that Constantine was finally able to defeat the Byzantines and conquer their city.<sup>38</sup>

Constantine's conquest of Byzantium was not only thought to have been more difficult than his conquest of Rome,<sup>39</sup> but also more challenging in the long term, for the local resistance continued even after the emperor's occupation of the city.<sup>40</sup> The notion that some of the local pagans were opposed to the emperor's Christian faith was recognized from an early date—it was already present in Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History* and remained popular in Early and Middle Byzantine sources—but the tone was one of conciliation rather than rivalry. According to these early accounts, Constantine had been challenged in Byzantium by a pagan philosopher (or a group of pagan philosophers) accusing him of making "innovations in religion" and abandoning "the customs of Roman emperors." In response the emperor sent Bishop Alexander to debate with the philosopher.<sup>41</sup> Alexander, a man of great piety but no philosophical learning, responded to his adversary's dialectical skills by performing a miracle: he ordered the philosopher to be silent, and from that moment on the pagan became unable to speak. In some of the versions, the miracle resulted in the philosopher's conversion to Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

This rather unoriginal account—the confrontation between a pagan philosopher and an uneducated but faithful Christian is a *topos* of hagiographic literature—was essentially meant to exalt the piety of Bishop Alexander, but it also allows us to catch a glimpse of the way in which Constantine's relationship to the pagan Byzantium was perceived during the early centuries of the Empire. As suggested by examples discussed in the previous section, that relationship was one of tolerance and conciliation. The emperor had responded to the philosopher's accusations by opening a debate, and the bishop's miracle led to the pagan's conversion. The emperor was gently bringing the pagan city into the sphere of the Christian faith.

During the eighth century, however, the compilers of the *Parastaseis* recorded a new version of the same account. The circumstances remained the same—a pagan philosopher confronted Constantine over his rejection of the ancestral faith—but in this version the emperor's reaction was entirely different. Instead of opening a debate, he admonished the pagan and attempted to force his conversion; upon the latter's refusal, he ordered his execution.

#### *Parastaseis* 55

Ἐν τῷ Φόρῳ μὲν ἡμέρας Κωνσταντίνος ἐδοξάσθη καὶ εὐφημίσθη παρὰ τοῖς μέρεσι καὶ παρὰ τοῖς ἄρχουσι τῆς αὐτῆς πόλεως. Κανονάρης δὲ

38 Guidi-Vita, 335-6.

39 Unlike the Byzantines, the Romans were believed to have offered no resistance to Constantine. On the contrary, after Maxentius and his forces were overcome, Constantine was allegedly welcomed in the city and his newfound Christian faith was soon met with approval.

40 Dagron (1984:89).

41 The sources that attest this tradition present a number of variations. In certain cases, it is the philosophers themselves who request the debate, which Constantine authorizes.

42 See, for instance, Sozomen, I, 18.5.; Anagnostes, I, 14; Theophanes, p. 23; George the Monk, *Chronicon*, p. 523; Symeon the Logothete, pp. 109-110; Pseudo Symeon, pp. 20-21; Kedrenos, pp. 502-3; Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos (*PG* 146, col. 64d-65a).

φιλόσοφος ἐν ὑψηλῷ τόπῳ ἀνελθὼν μετὰ τὸ πεσεῖν τοὺς ὄχλους μεγάλη φωνῇ ἔκραξεν· ὑπερ προγόνων μὴ φρόνει, ὁ τῶν προγόνων καθαιρέτης.’ Ὅν ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος μετακαλεσάμενος συνεκρότει καὶ παρεκάλει τοῦτον παύσασθαι ἐλληνίζειν. Ὁ δὲ ἰσχυρᾷ τῇ βοῇ ὑπερ προγόνων καὶ ἀποθνήσκειν ἐλόμενος ἐκατατομήθη ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς Βιγλεντίου ἐμβόλοις εἰς φόβον τῶν καταληφθέντων Γάζων.

Constantine was honored in the Forum for forty days and acclaimed by the factions and by the leaders of the city. But Canonaris the philosopher went up to a high place and when the crowd had fallen silent cried out in a loud voice ‘Do not give yourselves airs above your ancestors, you who have destroyed your ancestors’. Constantine summoned him and upbraided him and called upon him to give up his paganism. But he cried out loudly that he chose to die for the sake of his ancestors, and was beheaded in the same portico of Viglenti to inspire fear in the remaining Gazoi.<sup>43</sup>

This reformulation of the account is, in fact, well in tone with the eighth- to ninth-century patriographic views of Constantine’s arrival in pagan Byzantium. The emperor had become a Christian conqueror who took the city by force, and it was equally by force that he attempted to bring it into the sphere of the Christian faith.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the efforts attributed to the Christian emperor, this tradition never thought of Constantinople as a fully Christianized city. Byzantium’s monumental artwork, in particular, remained a taunting evocation of the city’s pagan past and became a source of distrust and concern.<sup>45</sup> Unlike Hesychius, Malalas, and the author of the *Chronicon Paschale*, who perceived Byzantium’s pagan monuments as a symbol of the city’s prosperity and splendor, the compilers of the *Parastaseis* saw them as a reminder of human sacrifice, astrological practices, and daunting mysteries.<sup>46</sup> Constantine was thought to have ‘neutralized’ some of the pagan artwork and architecture, either by destroying monuments (see *Parastaseis* 57 above) or by building churches on top of pagan places of worship.<sup>47</sup> The emperor, for instance, was believed to have raised the churches of Saint Menas<sup>48</sup> and Saint Mokios over temples of Zeus,<sup>49</sup> the church of Saint Michael at Sosthenion over an ancient temple raised by the Argonauts during their crossing of the Bosphorus,<sup>50</sup> the church of the Theotokos *ta Kontaria* over a “temple of idols” raised by Emperor Galen,<sup>51</sup> and the church and imperial Mausoleum of the Holy Apostles over a temple of the Twelve Gods.<sup>52</sup>

43 *Parastaseis* 55; see Dagron (1984:89-89).

44 Kazhdan (1987:250) saw this episode as further evidence that the *Parastaseis* were intended to discredit Constantine, for the pagan philosopher calls the emperor a “destroyer of ancestors”. Yet, as Anderson has observed (2011:12-13), the episode is actually meant to emphasize “Constantine’s uncompromising Christianity”. The philosopher’s death is, indeed, proof of Constantine’s fierce determination to convert the pagan city.

45 See Dagron (1984:91-93).

46 Regarding the monuments of Constantinople and the traditions associated with them, see, among others, Mango (1963:55-75), Guberti Bassett (1991:87-96), Dagron (1984:127-159); Cameron *et al.* (1984:31-34); Berger (2016:9-29).

47 See Dagron (1984:68-69, 89).

48 *Patria* I, 51, III, 2. According to a different tradition, it was a temple of Poseidon (I, 13).

49 *Parastaseis* 1; *Patria* II, 110; III, 2-3.

50 Malalas, p. 56, followed by numerous later sources.

51 *Parastaseis* 53. Cf. *Excerpta Anonymi Byzantini*, 16; *Patria* II, 66.

52 Kallistos Xanthopoulos (*PG* 146, col. 220 c-d).

Yet, it was not only the pagan monuments and architecture that inspired apprehension among Middle Byzantine authors. The tradition they represent, in fact, reveals a certain discomfort with the city's natural surroundings, especially with sources and streams of water, perhaps as a result of their connection to the city's pagan past.<sup>53</sup> Local rivers and springs were believed to have been inhabited by dragons, to have provided the setting for human sacrifice, and to remain haunted by demons.<sup>54</sup> In certain cases, the Christians—whether emperors or holy men—had taken measures to cleanse these spaces and incorporate them into the realm of Christianity. This was the case, for instance, of Emperor Zeno, who “put an end” to the pagan practices—including human sacrifice—that had been taking place near the river at Saint Mamas,<sup>55</sup> and of Saint Hypatios, who had fought against and killed a dragon that dwelt and “ate people” at the spring of Illiou.<sup>56</sup> Not all the sources and streams of water had been neutralized, however. The Amastrion area, which stretched around the River Lykos (the “river worshipped by a wolf”), had not been cleansed and remained an area of frightful reputation, in which the memories of human sacrifice were combined with the presence of ominous statues and alleged demonic apparitions.<sup>57</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that Kedrenos evokes the presence of a temple of Helios and Selene built by the pagan King Byzas in that area of the city.<sup>58</sup>

In this tradition, therefore, Constantine was the Christian conqueror of a pagan city. In view of the pagans' reluctance to accept his rule, the emperor's arrival in Byzantium was therefore marked by military confrontation. Though the city's destiny was finally sealed by divine intervention, Constantine's conquest never completely erased the traits of ancient paganism. After his occupation of Byzantium, the emperor had to deal with the pagans' unwillingness to accept the Christian faith, and even in the long term, when Christianity had already become the dominant religion of the Empire, the tradition of pagan practices—deeply rooted in the natural landscape, pre-Constantinian architecture and in ancient monuments—remained to haunt the city. The patriographers who composed this alternative version were not only keen to exalt Constantine as a champion of the Christian faith, but also to do so in detriment of his pagan predecessors.

### 3. Constantinople and the loss of Byzantium

The third tradition concerning the transition of Byzantium into Constantinople presents yet another version of events. The author of this version<sup>59</sup> reveals an interest in the pre-Constantinian history of the city, in which he recognizes both a Greek and a Roman element. But, unlike the first tradition, in which

<sup>53</sup> See Dagron (1984:69).

<sup>54</sup> Local attitudes towards water would change again in Middle- and Late Byzantine times, though it is probably no coincidence that this was also a time in which attitudes to paganism began to change, at least among the Constantinopolitan aristocracy and its literary circles. See Nilsson (2016:281-298).

<sup>55</sup> *Parastaseis* 22.

<sup>56</sup> *Patria* III, 211.

<sup>57</sup> *Patria* II, 52.

<sup>58</sup> Kedrenos, p. 558.

<sup>59</sup> If the attribution of the account to John Malaxos is correct, then the composition would have the same date as the manuscript (sixteenth century) (Dagron; Paramelle, 1979:508-509; Dagron, 1984:75). Some of the notions incorporated into the account, however, had been in circulation for many centuries and are sometimes evocative of the depiction of Byzantium presented by earlier patriographic traditions.

the Greek and Roman dimensions of the city were harmonized into a shared narrative, this new version presents them as successive—and starkly differentiated—stages of Byzantium’s past. First of all, the account begins by ratifying the well-known attribution of the city to Byzas, but does not provide much detail concerning this early stage of Byzantium’s history. It merely states that Byzas was the first king of the city and that his throne was occupied during several generations by an “uninterrupted succession” of his descendants.<sup>60</sup>

Eventually, the city of Byzantium became part of the Roman world. Though the transition was not conflictive, at a certain point the Byzantines began to resent their submission to the Roman State. They rebelled against the emperor—Septimius Severus at the time—by refusing to pay taxes and by taking military action against “Roman cities and territories,” thus igniting a war against Rome.<sup>61</sup>

*Extraordinary Account*, 513

Βύζας οὖν ὁ κτίσας τὸ Βυζάντιον ἐβασίλευσεν ἐν αὐτῷ, καὶ κατ’ ἀλληλοδιαδοχὴν ἐκ σπέρματος τοῦ Βύζα βασιλέως ἐβασίλευον ἐν πόλει τῇ Βυζαντίᾳ· ὕστερον δὲ ὑπόφοροι γεγονότες οἱ Βυζάντιοι τῇ βασιλείᾳ Ῥωμαίων καὶ ἐτέλουν φόρους τοῦς Ῥωμαίους ἕως τῆς βασιλείας Σευήρου βασιλέως Ῥωμαίων. ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς βασιλείας Σευήρου ἐπαναστάντες οἱ Βυζάντιοι οὐκ ἤθελον ἀποδοῦναι φόρον τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον καὶ τὰς Ῥωμαϊκὰς πόλεις καὶ χώρας ἐλήϊζον.

Byzas, the builder of Byzantium, reigned there, and from then on an uninterrupted succession of King Byzas’ descendants reigned in the city. Later on, the Byzantines became subjects of the Roman Empire and paid taxes to the Romans until the reign of Emperor Severus. During Severus’ reign, the Byzantines, rising in rebellion, refused to pay taxes to the Romans and instead begun to plunder the Roman cities and territories.

After Severus’ failure to end the conflict by diplomatic means, he mobilized his forces against Byzantium. This version of events ratifies the notion that Severus’ war against Byzantium was due to a local insurrection and not to the city’s involvement in a Roman civil war.<sup>62</sup> In this case, however, the Byzantine king at the time of the rebellion is not identified, and, as we will see below, the war’s ending did not involve a reconciliation between the adversaries.<sup>63</sup>

*Extraordinary Account*, 513

Τοῦτο οὖν μαθὼν ὁ Σευήρος, πρέσβεις πολλακίς ἀπέστειλε πρὸς τὸ Βυζάντιον <ἵνα> τοὺς φόρους ἀποδώσουν καὶ τὴν εἰρήνην ἀσπάσουσιν· αὐτοὶ δὲ οὐδαμῶς πειθόμενοι ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἐπαιρόμενοι ὑπερηφάνους καὶ ὑπερόγκους λόγους ἀπέπεμπον τῷ Σευήρῳ. Ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Σευήρος μετὰ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ὅτι μὴ πειθόμενος τοὺς Βυζαντίους, λαβόντες πᾶσαν τὴν στρατιὰν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν ἐκστρατεύουσιν κατὰ τοῦ Βυζαντίου.

Being informed of these things, Severus sent ambassadors many times to Byzantium, to persuade [the Byzantines] to pay their taxes and make peace. Quite the opposite of being persuaded, the Byzantines were aroused and

<sup>60</sup> See Dagron (1984:75).

<sup>61</sup> See Dagron (1984:75).

<sup>62</sup> A notion that we have already seen attested in the first tradition (see section 1 above).

<sup>63</sup> See Dagron (1984:75).

sent arrogant and unrestrained replies to Severus. Severus and the Romans, seeing that the Byzantines were not convinced, took the entire army and Roman forces and marched against Byzantium.

It is noteworthy that as with the first tradition, this account presents the Greek inhabitants of the city in a favorable light. Despite their pagan religion, the Byzantines are praised for their bravery, wisdom, and nobility; and echoing a notion that we have already seen attested in the first tradition, the Byzantine women are said to have been as audacious and determined as their men.<sup>64</sup>

*Extraordinary Account, 513*

Μαθόντες δὲ οἱ Βυζάντιοι ὅπως κατ' αὐτῶν οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι στρατεύουσιν, ὠπλιίσθησαν λαμπρῶς καὶ γενναίως [...]. Ἐλθόντος δὲ τοῦ Σευήρου μετὰ πάσης τῆς στρατιᾶς αὐτοῦ καὶ χάρακα τῆ πόλει Βυζαντίδι πήξας καὶ πόλεμον κροτήσας, τὰ τεῖχη ἐκύκλωσαν. Οἱ δὲ Βυζάντιοι τοὺς Ῥωμαίους ἰδόντες κύκλω τοῦ τεῖχους καὶ προσβολὴν πολέμου κατάρξαντες, ἀγεννῆς καὶ ἄνανδρον τοῦτο νομίσαντες τοῦ ἔσωθεν εἶναι τοῦ τοίχου καὶ τὰς προσβολὰς τῶν Ῥωμαίων δεχόμενοι, τὰς πύλας ἀναπετάσαντες γενναίως καὶ ἥρωϊκῶς ἐξῆλθον εἰς τὸ ἀντιτάξασθαι. ἐξελθόντες δὲ καὶ συμμιγνέντες τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις, προσβολὴν πολέμου μεγάλην ἐποίησαν, καὶ οὐ μόνον μίαν καὶ δευτέραν τοῦτο ποιήσαντες οἱ Βυζάντιοι, ἀλλὰ πολλᾶκις καὶ μυριάκις τὴν τριετίαν αὐτοῖς ἀντεμάχοντο [...].

When the Byzantines learned that the Romans were marching against them, they armed themselves splendidly and gallantly [...]. Severus came with all his army, built a palisade and called for battle against Byzantium, and then surrounded the [city's] walls. Seeing that the Romans had surrounded the walls and were starting to do battle, and considering it of low character and unmanly to remain behind the walls and endure the enemy's attack, the Byzantines gallantly opened the gates and heroically went out to confront the Romans face to face. Having come out and clashed with the Romans, they fought a great battle, doing so not only once or twice but many times, fighting against them innumerable times over a period of three years [...].

The resistance of the Byzantines against their Roman enemies was so significant that despite his great military resources Severus began to doubt the outcome of the war. The emperor's concern was so deep that he felt the need to summon an astrologer to find out whether he would eventually succeed in conquering Byzantium.<sup>65</sup> After the astrologer had examined the stars and performed his calculations, he was able to inform Severus that he would seize—and destroy—Byzantium, and that the city would remain “deserted and uninhabited” (ἔρημος μείνασα καὶ ἀοίκητος) during many years until a “great and most admirable” emperor restored it and turned it into the “head and the queen” of cities. Severus' astrologer also announced the events that would take place thereafter—from the time of the city's restoration until the end of the world—and the emperor was so amazed by these revelations that he decided to engrave them on a column that he set up in the Xerolophos in order to preserve them for posterity.<sup>66</sup> When it was ready, the Romans sacrificed numerous animals and young girls at the foot of the column and performed there a number of

<sup>64</sup> Byzantine women are said to have fought the Romans along with the city's men (p. 515, quoted below), just as Queen Phidaleia is said to have faced Odryses, the king of the Skythians, in the first tradition (*Patria* I, 16).

<sup>65</sup> *Extraordinary Account*, 513-4.

<sup>66</sup> For the column of the Xerolophos, see Dagron; Paramelle (1979:493ff).

astrological calculations.<sup>67</sup> The astrologer's predictions subsequently began to prove correct, for Severus was able to reduce the Byzantines by hunger and thirst and finally defeat them in open battle.<sup>68</sup>

*Extraordinary Account*, 515

Οὕτως οὖν μὲν, ὡς εἴρηται, ὁ Σευήρος στήσας τὴν στήλην ἐν τῷ Ξηρολόφῳ γλυπτὴν, ὡς ἔχει ἡ ἀλήθεια· μετὰ δὲ ἱκανὰς ἡμέρας τῆ πείνῃ καὶ δίψῃ οἱ ἔνδον ὄντες τῆς πόλεως εἰς ταλαιπωρίαν ἐτράπησαν καὶ οὐκ ἠδύναντο πλέον τι διαπράξασθαι ἢ τι ποιῆσαι [οὐ δύναντο]. Μιᾶ τῶν ἡμερῶν τὰς πύλας πάντας ἀναπετάσαντες καὶ ξιφηφόροι πάντες ἐξέβησαν, οὐκὶ μόνον ἄνδρες—ὡς γεγράφθαι—ἀλλὰ καὶ μερικαὶ γυναῖκες καὶ αὐταὶ μετὰ ξιφῶν ἐξέβησαν, καὶ τοῦ πολέμου ἀρξαμένων καὶ μεγάλην ταραχὴν ποιησάντων, ἐτράπησαν οἱ Βυζαντιαῖοι καὶ νῶτα δεδώκασιν τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις, οἱ δὲ Ῥωμαῖοι κατεδίωξαν ὀπίσω αὐτῶν ἕως οὗ ἔσω τῆς πόλεως κόπτοντας καὶ ἐπαράλαβον αὐτήν.

In this way, then, as they say, Severus set up the engraved column of the Xerolophos, as it is the truth. After several days, those inside the city were driven by hunger and thirst to desperation and did not know how to act or what to do. One day they opened all the gates and went out carrying swords—not only the men, as it is written, but also several women; after engaging in battle and causing great disorder, the Byzantines were put to flight and turned their back on the Romans. The Romans pursued them back into the city, slaughtered them and captured Byzantion.

As noted above, however, Severus' conquest of Byzantion did not end in reconciliation between the adversaries. Unlike the first tradition, in which the outcome of the war had led to a closer integration of the city into the Roman world, this third tradition claims that Severus' victory led to the disappearance of Byzantion. Just as the emperor's astrologer had predicted, the defeated Byzantines were slaughtered, and their city left in ruins.

*Extraordinary Account*, 515

Τῷ θυμῷ δὲ καυχάζων ὁ Σευήρος ξίφει πάντας ἐκέλευσεν ἀναιρεθῆναι ἀπὸ μικρὸν ἕως μέγα, ἀπὸ ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ καὶ παῖδας καὶ παιδίσκας. Μετὰ δὲ τὴν ἄλωσιν τοῦ Βυζαντίου ὁ βασιλεὺς Σευήρος ἐστράφη εἰς Ῥώμην καὶ εἰς τὰ βασίλεια, καὶ ἡ πόλις Βυζαντία ἔρημος μείνασα καὶ ἀοίκητος ἄχρις οὖν τοῦ χρόνου τοῦ ἀοιδίου μεγάλου βασιλέως Κωνσταντίνου καὶ πρώτου ἐν βασιλεῦσι χριστιανῶν.

Foaming with rage, Severus ordered that everyone should be slaughtered by the sword, from the lowly to the great, from men to women, boys, and girls. After the conquest of Byzantion, Emperor Severus returned to Rome and to the palace, leaving the city of Byzantion deserted and uninhabited until the time of the famous and great Emperor Constantine, the first among the kings of the Christians.

Eventually, as Severus' astrologer had also foretold, the city was reconstructed by Constantine the Great.<sup>69</sup> Constantine's first measure upon his arrival

<sup>67</sup> The notion that Severus had performed sacrifices (including human sacrifices) and astrological calculations at the Xerolophos is also attested in *Parastaseis* 20.

<sup>68</sup> See Dagron (1984:75-76).

<sup>69</sup> Constantine is said to have arrived in Byzantion after failed attempts to found his city at Troy and Chalcedon (the *Extraordinary Account* is one of the few sources that combine the failed attempts at both these cities). The fact that the *Account* attests an early version of the failed foundation attempt at Chalcedon



in the deserted Byzantion was to raise a wall to define the perimeter of the future Constantinople. It is not clear whether this wall was a 'reconstruction' of the one built by Byzas, but it is significant in any case that the description of its perimeter begins and ends with the topographic site of "Byzantion": the first section of the wall is said to have stretched from "Byzantion" to the Kynegos;<sup>70</sup> the second, from the Kynegos to the Acropolis; and the third, from the Acropolis back to "Byzantion."

*Extraordinary Account, 516*

Ἀπὸ τὸ Βυζάντιον ἕως ἄκρον τοῦ Κυνηγοῦ τὸ πρῶτο<v> τεῖχος ἀνήγειρε, ὃ ἐστὶ μίλια ἕξ, ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ ἄκρου τοῦ Κυνηγοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶ ὁ Κεράτιος κόλπος, τὸ μέρος τῆς στερεᾶς ἕως τὴν θάλασσαν τῆς Εὐρώπης, ἕτερα μίλια ἕξ, ὃ καὶ Ἀκρόπολι οἱ παλαιοὶ ὠνόμαζων, ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς Ἀκροπόλεως ἕως ὅλον τὸ παραθαλάσσιον κατὰ τοῦ νότου μέχρι τῆς ἐτέρας ἄκρας τῆς Βυζαντίδος, καὶ αὐτὸ τεῖχος μίλια ἕξ· καὶ πεπλήρωτο ἡ Κωνσταντινούπολις.

From Byzantion until the farthest edge of the Kynegos, he built the first wall, which is six miles long; from the farthest edge of the Kynegos, which is the gulf of the Horn, the part of dry land, until the sea of Europe, another six miles, [the place] that the ancients called Acropolis; from the Acropolis, [including] all the sea front towards the south, until the other farthest edge of Byzantion, another wall of six miles; and Constantinople was completed.

The author's understanding of 'Byzantion' as a topographic location is unclear. It would be logical to think that the toponym referred to the city of that name, located in the north-eastern area of the later Constantinople, with its center at the ancient Acropolis. Yet the account's description precludes that possibility, because the Acropolis is clearly identified as being at a different, quite distant location from the site named 'Byzantion'. What then was the place identified by the account as the starting (and ending) point of Constantine's wall? Evidence suggests that 'Byzantion' was in fact thought to be the area of the Xerolophos.

The identification of 'Byzantion' with the Xerolophos is supported by the fact that Severus is said to have set up his imperial tent "at the Xerolophos" when he began his siege of Byzantion; he is unlikely to have set up his camp at the Xerolophos if the city had been thought to be more or less circumscribed to the area of the Acropolis. Yet the implications of this are not clear. Surely, the author of the account did not believe that ancient Byzantion was located at the area of the Xerolophos. Furthermore, the possibility that the perimeter of ancient Byzantion was large enough to comprise the Xerolophos is contradicted by the notion that the column was set up by Severus 'outside' the boundaries of the city. It is not impossible, though, that the ancient city was thought to be much larger than it actually was—large enough for its wall to stretch, if not to the Xerolophos itself, at least to its immediate vicinity. However puzzling, this would allow us at least to make sense of the notion that Severus had set up his camp—and the column itself—at the Xerolophos, for both would have otherwise been quite distant from the ancient city. If this is correct, it would mean that Byzantion had approximately the same

reaffirms that its author was familiar with traditions that had been in circulation at least since the dark centuries.

70 It is likely that the Kynegion mentioned here is the area of the same name above the Golden Horn, identified as modern Ayvansaray (Janin, 1964:377; Müller-Wiener, 1977:58-59).

perimeter as Constantine's Constantinople, and that the Christian emperor's building of the wall was, in fact, a 'reconstruction' of Byzas' urban perimeter.

The *Extraordinary Account's* understanding of the remaining section of the wall is also problematic. If we assume that 'Byzantion' is indeed to be identified with the area of the Xerolophos, then the southern extreme of Constantine's legendary wall would not have been far from its historical counterpart. However, the notion that the wall had its northern extreme in the Kynegos—an area much further west than the wall's historical limit—is rather surprising and probably should not be attributed to mere ignorance of the city's ancient layout. The location of the wall's northern extreme at the Kynegos may reflect a desire to highlight the north-western area of Constantinople—an area that had gained special symbolic meaning after the Ottoman conquest, and which, as Dagron has observed, seems to have been the object of special consideration by post-Byzantine authors<sup>71</sup>—though it is also possible that the description was meant to move the wall of Constantine closer to the wall of Theodosius. Although the overall meaning of the text is difficult to grasp, it would appear that the author imagined the existence of two (and only two) successive walls. In its southern extreme the Byzantion wall would have been in the vicinity of Constantine's wall, while in its northern extreme Constantine's wall would have been in the vicinity of Theodosius' wall. This absolute disregard for the city's historical topography was probably not innocent. The fact that Byzantion's and Constantinople's walls had one point in common—the Xerolophos—may have been meant to imply a symbolic connection between Byzas and Constantine, between the pagan and the Christian history of the city.

If this was the case, the connection remained rather vague. The author of the account, in fact, had an ambiguous way of defining the relationship between Constantine and the pagan past of the city. On the one hand, he highlights that the emperor had no relationship with his predecessors, whether Greek or Roman—he arrived at a deserted city and only knew about Byzas and Severus through history books—but, on the other hand, he admits that the emperor was eager to learn about their deeds and requested his philosophers to enlighten him with regard to the only pagan relic to be found in the area (the column of the Xerolophos). Although the emperor is not presented as an 'heir' of Byzas and/or Severus—there is a well-defined time gap between the pagan and the Christian history of the city—Constantine was not hostile towards the former rulers, and his Christian faith, which is only vaguely evoked,<sup>72</sup> did not predispose him against the city's pagan past.

*Extraordinary Account*, 516-517

Καὶ ἦταν γοῦν πάντα τὰ κοιλώματα καὶ <αἰ> ῥύμναι καὶ αἱ ἀγυαὶ ἃς προεῖπομεν ἔσω τῆς πόλεως, πλὴν μεμεστωμένα ὕδωρ θαλάσσιον, καὶ ὁ Ξηρόλοφος ἔσω ἐγένετο, καὶ ἐπὶ κορυφαὶ ὡς λόφοι λεγόμενοι ἔσω καὶ αὐτοὶ ἦταν τῆς πόλεως. ὁ δὲ ἀοίδιμος Κωνσταντῖνος νουεχῆς ὧν εἶχεν ὑπόνοιαν πολλὴν περὶ τῆς στήλης τῆς <τοῦ> Ξηρολόφου, τί ἄρα τοῦτο ἐστὶ καὶ πῶς ἐνίδρυτο ταύτη ἢ στήλη καὶ τίς ὁ ταύτην ποιήσας καὶ πῆξας καὶ τίνι καιρῷ ἐγένετο καὶ διὰ ποῖαν αἰτίαν ταύτην κατέστησαν. Συναθροίσας οὖν τοὺς τε σοφοὺς καὶ φιλοσόφους, ῥήτοράς τε καὶ τοὺς τὴν ἐπιστήμην τῶν γραμμάτων ἔχοντας, ἠρώτησεν αὐτοὺς περὶ τοῦ

<sup>71</sup> Dagron; Paramelle (1979:492). For the influence of historical circumstances on the shaping of the *Extraordinary Account*, see Dagron (1984:77).

<sup>72</sup> Constantine's Christian faith is only clearly asserted in the context of his failed foundation attempt at Chalcedon, when the emperor realized that the birds' miraculous transportation of the workers' tools was meant as a divine indication that the new city was to be founded in Byzantion (*Extraordinary Account*, p. 516).

Ξηρολόφου, αὐτοὶ δὲ ἀπεκρίθησαν· ὦ βασιλεῦ, ἠύρισκομεν ἐν τῷ ἱστορικῷ τοῦ Δίωνος καὶ Ἀφρικανοῦ πῶς ὁ Βύζας πόλιν ἐπὶ τῷ ἰδίῳ ὀνόματι ἀνήγειρεν, καὶ μετὰ καιροῦς ὁ δεῖνας Σεβήρος ὁ βασιλεὺς Ῥωμαίων τὴν πόλιν ταύτην μαχαίρα ἠνάλωσεν καὶ ταύτην τὴν στήλην ἐνίδρυσεν. Εἶπεν ὁ βασιλεὺς· μὴ εἰς μνήμην τῆς ἀλώσεως ταύτην ἀνέθετο· καὶ οἱ μὲν ἔλεγον οὕτως, ἄλλοι δὲ ἔλεγον ἄλλως, ἕτεροι δὲ ὡς ἄνθρωποι ὄντες τὰ ὀδεῖνα καὶ ὀδεῖνα ἃ οὐκ ἐπίσταντο. Καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς εἶπεν· στέργω τοῦτο, καὶ τὰς γνώμας πάντων· τί δὲ τὰ γλυπτὰ τῶν ἱστοριῶν, μᾶλλον εἰπεῖν ἀνθρώπων μορφὰς ἐκτετυπωμένας, ἔτι τε ζῶων πτηνῶν τε καὶ κερσαίων, ἢ μᾶλλον εἰπεῖν καὶ ἀγγέλων μορφὰς καὶ τύπος σταυροῦ καὶ μαχαίρας καὶ σπέλτα διάφορα· οἱ δὲ φιλόσοφοι πάντες μιᾷ φωνῇ καὶ γνώμῃ εἶπον· οὐκ ἐπιστάμεθα, ὦ βασιλεῦ, οὐ γινώσκομεν περὶ τούτου τοῦ ζητήματος.

And all the basins, channels, and paths—which, as we have said, were inside the city—were full of sea water, and the Xerolophos came [also] to be inside, and the seven high points called hills were also inside the city. The famous Constantine, who was very smart, was quite intrigued by the column of the Xerolophos. [He wondered] what it was, how it was built, who had made it and set it up, when this had occurred, and for what reason. Having gathered the wise men, the philosophers, the rhetors, and the ones who knew the science of letters, he asked them about the Xerolophos. They answered: ‘oh emperor, we found in the history of Dio and Africanos that Byzas built a city after his own name, and that sometime later the terrible Severus, the emperor of the Romans, destroyed it with the sword and built this column.’ The emperor said: ‘He set it up perhaps in commemoration of his conquest?’ Some of them said one thing, others something else, and others, as human beings [do], spoke about things they did not know. And the emperor said: ‘I request the opinions of all. What are these carvings of stories? Are they depictions of human beings, of birds, and of terrestrial animals? Or rather of angels, of crosses, of swords, and of different kinds of wheat? All the philosophers, however, answered with one voice and one opinion: ‘We do not know, oh emperor, we have no knowledge about this matter.’

In this last version of events, Byzantium’s paganism is neither a source of admiration nor of concern. It is rather a source of wonder and speculation, seeming to derive from the notion that the city’s mysterious past held the key to its future—and, along with it, to the future of the Empire itself. Both the city’s natural landscape (once again, the sources of water) and its only material relic (the column of the Xerolophos) were believed to have eschatological connotations. In its origins, we are told, the area was covered by sea water and the only dry place was the Xerolophos, whose name is understood, through paronymy, as the “dry hill” (ξηρολόφος). The image, as Dagron has noted, is clearly evocative of the end of time, for in the city’s last days it would be once again covered by sea water and the column of the Xerolophos would be the only relic to emerge from the sea.<sup>73</sup> In the *Extraordinary Account*, therefore, the city’s past was understood to mirror its future, and its history was in itself a prophecy of its destiny.

#### 4. Synthesis and Conclusions

As we have seen, the legends associated with Constantine’s arrival in Byzantium preserve three different interpretations of the pagan city, its inhabitants, its

<sup>73</sup> Other versions claim that it would be the column of Constantine in the Forum of his name. See Rydén (1974:235, 254); Dagron; Paramelle (1979:497); Berger (2016:19).

natural surroundings and its material remains. The first considers Byzantion to be an integral part of the history of Constantinople. Its authors reveal a sense of pride in the city's pre-Constantinian past, a deep respect for Greek and Roman civilization, and an undisguised sympathy for paganism. Their depiction of Byzantion is of a civilized and sophisticated city that can be recognized a worthy precursor of Constantinople.

The second tradition, on the contrary, considers Byzantion to be a city that had to be destroyed for Constantinople to emerge. The Christian city—for Constantinople is almost exclusively defined in religious terms—is one that thrives on the ruins of its predecessor, though it cannot free itself completely from its pagan past. The authors of this tradition denote a distrust of the city's natural surroundings, of its architecture and its monuments, which are not only regarded as reminiscences of pagan times but, more concretely, as depositories of a threatening presence. Byzantion, in a certain way, haunts Constantinople.

For its part, the third tradition shows curiosity about Byzantion's history, but only insofar as it is considered to hold the key to Constantinople's future. Although there is no strict continuity between Byzantion and Constantinople—the first had long disappeared before the second was founded<sup>74</sup>—the two share a transcendent connection symbolized by the column of the Xerolophos. For the authors of this tradition, the pagan city is somehow a prefiguration of its Christian counterpart.

The changing perception of the relationship between Byzantion and Constantinople clearly determines the role that Constantine is set to play. In the first case, the emperor, whose Christian faith is vaguely evoked, is depicted as an heir of his pagan predecessors, Byzas and Septimius Severus. In the second case, the emperor is presented as a Christian conqueror, whose religious fervor together with the assistance of God leads him to defeat his pagan foes, among whom are Byzas and Severus themselves. In the third case, the emperor is portrayed as a keen, though ultimately unsuccessful, researcher of Byzantion's past, who remains nevertheless unaware of the role he was meant to play in the city's destiny. But what is the reason for this changing description of the emperor's arrival in ancient Byzantion? The chronology of the various versions is, perhaps, the best indicator of a shift in the perception of Constantinople's pagan past. The depiction of Constantine as an heir of the pagan rulers, as preserved by Hesychius, Malalas, and the *Chronicon Paschale*, probably developed between the fifth and the sixth centuries, when Christianity was sufficiently consolidated to permit a sympathetic glance at a decaying paganism that was not considered to pose a threat to the new religion. In a confident Christian Empire, in which the pagan world remained highly appreciated for its culture, its worldliness, and its sophistication, literary authors could indulge in paganizing tendencies without endangering the status quo. This, however, would have changed during the seventh and eighth centuries, when the rise of Islam and the Arab invasions left the Empire struggling for its own survival. In this sense it is probably no coincidence that the reformulation of Constantine's role took place at around that same time. The *Parastaseis* as well as the later testimonies of the *Guidi-Vita*, the *Passio Artemii*, and the *Extraordinary Account* would have relied on a common kernel of traditions that most likely emerged during the seventh to eighth centuries. In these traditions, Constantine is

<sup>74</sup> Though the destruction of Byzantion is common to the second and third traditions (Dagron, 1984:77), the role of Constantine is different in each of them. In one case, Constantine is the one bringing destruction; in the other, he is the one who reconstructs.

widely described as a champion of Christianity (and Orthodoxy), as well as a possessor of eschatological knowledge. In the adverse circumstances of the dark centuries, in which the existence of the Christian Empire was itself under threat, literary authors could not afford—and would likely have considered it inappropriate—to continue their predecessors' favorable treatment of paganism. This redefinition was not, of course, about paganism itself—pagans, if any remained, were less of a threat than at any previous time in Christianity's history—but about strengthening the Christian faith, and, particularly, the highly symbolic figure of Constantine the Great, in the context of challenging conditions. Both the defeat of Christianity's enemies as well as the quest to uncover the secrets of Constantinople's future—two well-known concerns of the dark centuries—are projected in Constantine's figure, whose literary exploits are nothing but a reflection of the society that gave rise to his legend.

Nor is it a coincidence that this was also the time in which Constantine began to emerge formally as a Christian saint. Although his exceptional piety and special favor in the eyes of God were underscored since an early date—Eusebius of Caesarea's *Vita Constantini* providing the best example of this—the emperor's definition as a saint is not clearly attested until a few centuries later. The circumstances and the exact political dimension of Constantine's imperial sanctity remain elusive—this is clearly not an issue that we can approach within the narrow boundaries of this paper—but it is worth noting nevertheless that the changing circumstances of the seventh and eighth centuries may well have given new meaning to the way in which the sacredness of his figure and his distinctive role in the destiny of the Christian Empire were perceived. If this was indeed the case, it is not surprising that Constantine's record as a conqueror and founder of a city was expunged of those elements that failed to meet the highest standards of Christian zeal. This gradual rewriting of Constantine's past, however imperfect (we know that numerous pagan elements remained in circulation throughout the Middle and Late Byzantine periods), may help explain the anti-pagan rhetoric of the new legendary accounts and the almost exclusively religious nuance in terms of which the emperor and his city were beginning to be defined.

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- » *PG* = Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca

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