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## THE *HISTORIA AUGUSTA* ON CONSTANTINE'S LINEAGE

H. W. BIRD

In the summer of 310 a great secret was finally disclosed by a panegyrist addressing Constantine. Claudius II was the emperor's grandfather. "Quod plerique adhuc forte nesciunt, sed qui te amant plurimum sciunt. Ab illo enim divo Claudio manat in te *avita cognatio*".<sup>1</sup> Hereditary monarchy had made a come-back. Constantine was born in Moesia at Naissus (Nish in Yugoslavia/Serbia) on Feb. 17th, c. 272. His mother Helena was a humble bar maid<sup>2</sup> (at best), his father, Constantius, a young subaltern in the officer cadet corps (*protectores*) of the emperor Aurelian (270–275). Constantius' career was as follows: born c. 250, he was a *protector* in 271, then Tribune, governor of Dalmatia in 284–5, praetorian prefect of Maximian 288–293, Caesar 293 and Augustus 305–306. But from 310 onwards Constantine officially became the grandson of Claudius II, a necessary invention given the political climate of the day. Earlier that year his father-in-law, Maximian, who had supported Constantine's appointment as Augustus in 307, was left in charge of Constantine's southern army while the latter fought on the lower Rhine. He now attempted to supplant Constantine just as he had tried to depose Maxentius at Rome in April, 308. At Arles he declared Constantine dead and bribed the army to acclaim him Augustus. Fausta informed her husband Constantine, who hurried back to southern France and besieged Maximian at Marseilles. The citizens opened their gates to Constantine who captured Maximian and either executed him or ordered him to commit suicide (c. July). The story in Eutropius that Maximian engineered his rift with Maxentius in order to dupe and eliminate Constantine is presumably another aspect of Constantinian disinformation. In 310, therefore, the time was plainly ripe for Constantine to discard his

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<sup>1</sup> Pan. lat. VI.2.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ambrose. De Obitu Theod. 4.2.

connections with his treacherous old father-in-law Maximian, whom he condemned as a traitor and murderer the following year. But first a few words about Fausta, Constantine's second wife and Maximian's daughter. She was born at Rome probably in 290 and engaged to Constantine in 293, very soon after the Tetrarchy had been established. In September 307, when she was c. sixteen and he c. thirty-five the two were married for obvious dynastic purposes, thus Maxentius, who was then ruling in Rome and on friendly terms with his father and Constantine, became Constantine's brother-in-law and Augustus. The reason for this is clear. In the spring and summer of 307, Severus, Galerius' Caesar, marched from Milan, and besieged Rome, but his army, which had formerly belonged to Maximian, deserted to the latter and Maxentius. Severus fled to Ravenna, was captured there, and was finally executed near Rome. That left an open place in the official Imperial College for Maximian again, or for Maxentius. In September Galerius also entered Italy with his army. His enterprise was similarly unsuccessful though he escaped intact. Soon afterwards an arrangement was agreed upon by Constantine, Maxentius and Maximian which included the marriage alliance, Maximian's support for Constantine's promotion to Augustus, Maximian's return to power as Augustus, and a mutually recognized Augustusship for Maxentius. Subsequently, however, Maximian refused to play second fiddle to his son, hence the rift and Maximian's attempted coup in April, 308.

At any rate in the latter half of 310, with the seriousness of Galerius' illness now evident, Constantine's ambitions began to grow. But he needed new legitimation to bolster his designs, hence the sudden discovery: a political fraud duly accompanied by supernatural sanction, so Syme asserted.<sup>3</sup> In a temple in Gaul Constantine supposedly saw Apollo offering him the laurels of victory and realized that he was destined to rule the whole world.<sup>4</sup> Apollo and Claudius both support the claim of Constantine to supreme power, until the more potent vision at the Milvian Bridge dislodges Apollo and substitutes the new, revolutionary, celestial backer. Yet the Claudian connection remained vital. In inscriptions Constantine appears first as *divi Claudii nepos*,<sup>5</sup> but his son Constans is both *divi Claudii abnepos*, (i.e.

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<sup>3</sup> R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford, 1971), 204.

<sup>4</sup> Pan. lat. VI.21.4.

<sup>5</sup> I.L.S. 699, 702.

great-great-grandson) and *pronepos* (great-grandson).<sup>6</sup> Eutropius, writing in 369, mentions that Constantius is said to have been *per filiam nepos Claudii*<sup>7</sup> (i.e. grandson through Claudius' daughter), whereas at the very beginning of Anonymus Valesianus (c. 390) we find *Constantius, divi Claudii optimi nepos ex fratre*, that is to say grandnephew *via* Claudius' brother. The falsification is patent, Eutropius is wary, but the Anonymus Valesianus perpetuates the myth. There is more to come.

Claudius died of the plague at Sirmium, probably in late August, 270.<sup>8</sup>

For the newly-discovered great-grandfather or great-granduncle of Constantine this mundane manner of death was totally inappropriate. Hence a new myth was created, that Claudius, following the *devotio* tradition of the republican Decii, willingly gave his life for the state.<sup>9</sup> As he was preparing to fight the Goths in 269 he consulted the Sibylline books which revealed that the foremost man of the senate had to be consecrated to victory. When the leading senator, Pomponius Bassus, presented himself Claudius heroically revealed that he, in fact, was the real leader of the senate. Consequently, in the ensuing battle with the Goths near Naissus (Nish) in Moesia, coincidentally the birthplace of Constantine soon afterwards, Claudius died a hero's death and Rome prevailed. Probably Constantius fought under Claudius in this battle and one might surmise that Constantine was conceived amid the general euphoria following the Roman victory and was therefore born in February, 270. At any rate, as he was writing in 360/361 Aurelius Victor, who apparently believed the Claudius myth, provides us with an intriguing comment: "Good emperors consider the safety of their fellow citizens and their own enduring reputation more valuable (than their lives), for these contribute not only to their own glory, but also to the good fortune of their successors. If, indeed, Constantius and Constantine and our own emperors...."<sup>10</sup> Here, unfortunately, a *lacuna* obtrudes. If Victor was taken in by the story, presumably in the *KG*, Eutropius, writing nine years

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 723, 725.

<sup>7</sup> Eutrop. IX.22.1.

<sup>8</sup> Eutrop. IX.11; Zos. I.43.1–2; Zon. XII.26; Chronog. A.D. 354.

<sup>9</sup> De Caes. 34.5; Epit. 34.2–3 (written c. 396).

<sup>10</sup> De Caes. 34.6.

later under a different emperor, apparently was not.<sup>11</sup> But Ammianus may have been. In 31.5.17 he writes: "*Sed assumpto in imperium Claudio, glorioso ductore, et eodem honesta morte praerepto.*" So much for Claudius' death: his accession also needed expurgation. It would hardly be fitting for Constantine's grandfather to have become emperor through a murderous coup, as had Diocletian. According to the Greek tradition (Zos. I.40.2; Zon. XII.25), when the generals outside of Milan in August 268 contrived a plot against Gallienus, Claudius was brought into it. The *KG* plainly carried a different account, one which Eutropius carefully omitted: perhaps he knew better.

Aurelius Victor, however, maintains that Gallienus, as he lay dying, designated Claudius as his successor and the latter was commanding the garrison at Ticinum (Pavia, about thirty-five km. south of Milan), when the assassination occurred. The *Epitome* corroborates this, adding for good measure the name of the intermediary charged with taking the *indumenta regia* to Ticinum and presenting them to Claudius, Gallonius Basilius, a suspiciously appropriate name, as Syme<sup>12</sup> remarks, for one conveying regal ornaments. But the matter does not end there. The *Epitome* also notes that many think that Claudius was the son of a Gordian, by a mature woman servant who was preparing him sexually for his wife, *Gordiano satum, dum adulescens a muliere matura institueretur ad uxorem.*<sup>13</sup> This and other suspicious scraps of information in the *Epitome* demonstrate an apparent feature of the times, fraudulent scholarship on the origins of emperors.<sup>14</sup> Licinius, too, comes into the reckoning. In April, 311 Licinius signed, and perhaps urged his friend Galerius to draw up the Edict of Toleration at Serdica. Galerius died in early May. Prior to that, however, and possibly following Constantine's example, Licinius allegedly discovered and published his descent from the Emperor Philip (*H.A. Gord.* 34.5), that is, if we can trust the *H.A.* at this point. The *H.A.* concludes this *vita* (34.6) by writing "*Quae omnia, Constantine Maxime, idcirco sum persecutus, ne quid tuae cognitioni deesset, quod dignum scientia videretur.*" The author, so I

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<sup>11</sup> Eutrop. Brev. 9.22.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., 205.

<sup>13</sup> Epit. 34.2

<sup>14</sup> Syme, op. cit., 234.

believe, is simply making fun of Constantine's "discovery". In concluding his *vita* of Elagabalus (35) he makes the following comments: "Now I shall begin to write of emperors who followed after (Elagabalus). Of these the most righteous and the most worthy of careful narration was Alexander, the most distinguished was Aurelian, but the glory of them all was Claudius, the founder of your family. About this man I fear to tell the truth as I write to Your Clemency, lest I may seem to the malicious to be a flatterer; yet I shall be delivered from the envy of evil men, since I have seen that in the eyes of others too he was most illustrious. To these emperors we must add Licinius and Maxentius, all whose power has been made subject to your sway, writing of them, however, in such a way that full justice shall be done to their prowess. For I will not, as is the custom of many writers, detract from the greatness of those who have been vanquished, since I realize that in writing of them it will but enhance *your* glory if I tell the whole truth about their good qualities."

So much emphasis on the truth should alert us to the author's intent, as should the mention of the good qualities of Licinius and Maxentius, long buried by Constantinian propaganda.

It is in his biography of Claudius, however, that the author really demonstrates his ironical mockery of this Constantinian myth. In the prologue he observes that he must take care with Claudius' *vita* out of concern for Constantius Caesar.<sup>15</sup> Supposedly this refers to Constantius Chlorus, but the reader will know full well that it was Constantius II who was particularly concerned with his reputation. Furthermore, "it would not be right to keep silent about an emperor who left so splendid a scion of his race ... who thrust from power the monstrous Gallienus, even if he was not the author of the plot." It is almost with malicious glee that the writer underlines the inconsistencies in the official version. He proceeds to mock the panegyric practice:<sup>16</sup> "For what was there in him that was not admirable?, that was not outstanding? that was not superior to the triumphant generals of remote antiquity? The valour of Trajan, the righteousness of Antoninus, the self-restraint of Augustus..." Now for a few other fabrications about Claudius which appear to be aimed at Constantine and his sons.

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<sup>15</sup> H.A., Claud. 1.1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 2.2.

”For what great quality did not that man exhibit both at home and abroad? He loved his parents; no surprise in that? He even loved his brothers; that, indeed, may cause surprise. He loved his kinsmen; and that, in our times, may be compared to a miracle.” Here one should observe that Constantine was responsible for the deaths of his son Crispus (326), his wife Fausta (326), his father-in-law Maximian (310), his brothers-in-law Maxentius (312), Bassianus (316), Licinius (325), and his nephew Licinius Licinianus (325). His sons orchestrated the massacre of Constantine’s brothers, their sons and other relatives in September, 337. But to continue: ”Indeed, so great a man did he show himself in public affairs that the greatest princes chose a descendant of his to hold the imperial power, and an improved senate desired him.

Someone, perhaps, may believe that I am speaking like this to win the favour of Constantius Caesar, but your sense of justice and my own past life will bear witness that I have never thought or said or done anything to curry favour. I am speaking of the Emperor Claudius, whose manner of life, whose uprightness, and whose whole career in the state have brought him such fame among later generations that after his death the senate and people of Rome bestowed on him unprecedented rewards. In his honour the Roman people, at their own expense, erected a golden statue ten feet high on the Capitol.... He enlarged the Flavian Gentes..., all ranks, ages, and communities honoured this noble emperor with statues, banners, crowns, shrines and arches, altars and temples....<sup>17</sup> ”He was noted for the gravity of his character, his matchless life, his singular purity.... He was tall with flashing eyes, a broad full face and fingers so strong that often, with a single blow he knocked out the teeth of a horse or mule.”<sup>18</sup> This is a typical *H.A.* tidbit.

”I must relate the oracle given to Claudius in Comagena,<sup>19</sup> so it is said, in order that all may know that the family of Claudius was divinely appointed to bring happiness to the state. For when he inquired, after being made emperor, how long he was destined to rule, there came forth the following oracle<sup>20</sup>:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 3.1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 13.5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 10.1 ff. Comagena is the modern Tulln, about 35 km. N.W. of Vienna.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Alex. IV.6; Firm. III.4.



"Thou, who dost now direct thy fathers' empire  
 Who dost govern the world, the gods' viceregent,  
 Shalt surpass men of old in thy descendants;  
 For those children of thine shall rule as monarchs,  
 And make their children into monarchs also."

Again, when he asked about his descendants:

"Neither a goal nor a limit of time will I set for their power."  
 "His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora ponam" (Virgil, *Aen.* I.278)

Likewise, when he asked about his brother Quintillus, whom he was planning to make his associate in the imperial power, the reply was:

"Him shall the Fates but display to the earth."  
 "Ostendent terris hunc tantum fata neque ultra." (Virgil, *Aen.* VI.869)

This was one of the author's favourite quotations. He had used it in *Aelius* IV.1 and *Gord.* XX.5. "These oracles I have included, in order that it may be clear to all that Constantius, scion of a family divinely appointed, our most venerated Caesar, himself springs from a house of Augusti and will give us, likewise, many Augusti of his own. Some say he was Dardanian and derived his descent from Ilus, a king of the Trojans and from Dardanus himself."<sup>21</sup>

Practically all of this is fanciful fiction, as is the attribution to Claudius of the names Flavius and Valerius, i.e. the names of Constantine. Claudius may indeed have come from Dardania in Moesia Superior but if so the author of the *H.A.* probably hit upon it accidentally as he concocted the Trojan connection or took it from the birthplace of Constantine. Naissus was in Dardania from Diocletian's time. A further observation: soon after 395 the Sibylline verses, by now associated with militant paganism, were officially burned.<sup>22</sup> Does one perhaps detect here a shrewd dig both at Constantine and at the current Christian hierarchy?

In chapter XIII of the *vita* the author finally and imaginatively deals with the lineal connections of Constantine with Claudius. The latter had two

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 11.9.

<sup>22</sup> Rut. Namat. 2.52.

brothers, Quintillus (authentic) and Crispus (fictitious and presumably named after Constantine's eldest son). This Crispus had a daughter, Claudia, who had married a Eutropius, "*nobilissimo gentis Dardanae viro.*" Constantius was supposedly their son. So far a nice blend of fact and fiction, with a possibly malicious finger pointed at the Emperor Arcadius' minister from 395 to 399, also a Eutropius. In 399 he was the first eunuch ever to become consul, a fact widely known and generally censured. As Claudian wrote, "*Omnia cesserunt eunucho consule monstra.*"<sup>23</sup> Eutropius fell from favour later that year and was fortunate merely to suffer banishment to Cyprus. The *H.A.* then throws in a few sisters, including a Constantina who supposedly married an Assyrian tribune but died early. An equally fanciful eulogy follows, quite fitting for an emperor who seemed to be making the state secure for his "*nepoti futuro, Constantio Caesari*" (IX.9). In his concluding chapter (XVIII) the author takes his parting shots:

*"Claudi, dux fortissime, aveas! virtutibus tuis devotioni tuae! Claudio statuam omnes dicamus...."*

"Claudius our most valiant leader, hail! Hail to your courage and your *devotio!*

Let us all decree a statue to Claudius."

Ironically the author had consciously omitted the *devotio* story from the biography. He also knew that practically everyone at Rome was aware of Constantine's huge statue in his Basilica. Constantinian mementoes probably littered Rome in the late fourth century as Lenin mementoes did Moscow and Leningrad until the eighties. Then, too, many people were eager to set the record straight, to mock and humiliate the erstwhile mighty.

## **ADDENDUM:**

Why did Constantine, or his advisers, choose Claudius II? Decius, Valerian and Aurelian had persecuted Christians. They were plainly unacceptable. Apart from his involvement in the plot to assassinate the unpopular (in the Latin sources) Gallienus, an involvement subsequently expurgated,

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<sup>23</sup> In Eutrop. liber I.

Claudius' reputation was unsullied, his background murky, if not unknown. He had, after all, ruled just under two years, but during them he defeated the Alamanni near Lake Benacus (Lago di Garda) in the winter of 268/9 and the following summer defeated the Goths at Doberus in Macedonia and again near Nish (Naissus) in Moesia. Constantine was born at Nish perhaps less than a year after that celebrated battle and as a result of it, and his mother Helena, of whom he seems to have been genuinely fond, was almost certainly a local lass. It was a master stroke to make his home-town hero his own great-grandfather. Furthermore, "it is not easy to refute authorities that never existed," as Quintilian (I.8.21) remarked, and as the author of the *Historia Augusta* knew, and one must bear in mind that in 310, when the "discovery" was made, Constantine was ruling in the west, far from Nish. In his later years, however, he renovated and beautified his native city,<sup>24</sup> and presumably paid suitable honours to the memory of his serendipitously-discovered "grandfather".

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<sup>24</sup> Anon. Val.2.2.