

# The history of emperor constantine



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Heralded as the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great is recognised as the ruler who ended Christian persecutions, changed an entire empire's religion, and founded a new capital city to the east of the once all-powerful Rome. It is not surprising that, due to these achievements, modern-day historians consider this fourth century emperor to be “ one of the outstanding men of Rome's declining years.” (1968: 145) However, secondary historians regularly question aspects of Constantine's reign, as primary sources, though providing an eyewitness account for the events they describe, are influenced by their own biases and religious views.

Overwhelmingly, details of the emperor's reign are portrayed only from the perspective of the primary source, Eusebius (1999: 4), a Christian historian and bishop whose religious beliefs result in a clear admiration of Constantine. Secondary historians are quick to highlight problems with the reliability of primary sources, but can only comment and reflect on Constantine's reign as they are unable to provide further insight on events that occurred nearly two thousand years ago. As Mary Boatwright, the Professor of Ancient History at Duke University, accurately states, the disparity between primary sources' recounts and the opinions offered by secondary historians is so great that “ much discussion has centred on the question of [Constantine's] religious beliefs” (2004: 454), particularly relating to his conversion to Christianity, the official propaganda of the time, and the events that occurred that contradict his faith. Unfortunately, the problematic nature of the primary sources concerning Constantine makes it difficult to discover what aspects of his reign were accurately depicted and what resulted from official propaganda.

One of the first areas of debate concerning Constantine is the events that led to his conversion to Christianity. The leading professor at Durham University in the field of Archaeology, Chris Scarre, suggests that primary and secondary historians agree that Constantine attributed his victory in the Battle at the Milvian Bridge in 312CE to the support of the Christian faith (2000: 216). The recounts of the two major primary sources regarding Constantine's reign, Lactantius and Eusebius, fail to corroborate on any additional information surrounding the emperor's developing religious beliefs. Lactantius, a passionate Christian historian, suggested that, " during the night before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine was commanded in a dream to place the sign of Christ on the shields of his soldiers." (1996: 23) Twenty-five years after this recount, Eusebius wrote in his ' Life of Constantine', " At about noon... he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription ' Conquer by this.' At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on the expedition, and witnessed the miracle." (cited in 2000: 216) The blatant differences between the recounts of the same event have caused great confusion among modern-day historians who are attempting to decipher the truth from these Christian writers. Secondary sources, including renowned German historian and professor, Hans Pohlsander, author of ' The Emperor Constantine', generally accept that Lactantius' account is more reliable than Eusebius', as no surviving primary source substantiates Eusebius' claims that the entire army witnessed the phenomenon with Constantine. The same argument, however, can be applied to Lactantius' recount of the event, forcing secondary sources to assume his evidence is accurate, rather than

proving its reliability by corroborating with other sources. Despite Eusebius' clearly exaggerate narration, Averil Cameron, Professor of Antiquity and an honoured historian at Oxford University, supports the reliability of this primary source, highlighting that “ Eusebius... is one of the most prolific and important writers of the early Church.” (1999: 5) Such is the nature of primary sources relating to Constantine's conversion to Christianity, that it is impossible to establish an entirely accurate depiction of his reign and religious beliefs, as the truth is too frequently distorted by Constantinian propaganda.

Similar to all Roman Emperors, Constantine issued official propaganda that promoted the positive aspects of his reign, leaving historians to interpret the truth from his publicised messages. Prior to his victory at the Milvian Bridge – where he had his first direct encounter with the Christian faith – Constantine was never recorded discussing his religious beliefs; in contrast, he regularly stated that Christianity “ had occupied his whole reign, [including] the wars against both Maxentius and Licinius” (1990: 350) after he became sole emperor in 324CE. Even primary Christian historians who admired every aspect of Constantine, such as Eusebius, concede that the emperor modified his messages depending on the religion of his audience. Eusebius states that letters to the Church in 324 support his Christian beliefs, while the same “ statements to the public were all neutral as regards religion.” (1990: 351) Prominent secondary historians, like Chris Scarre, prove that “ Constantine trod warily in imposing the new official religion on the empire” (2000: 316), indicating that the emperor was more concerned with maintaining his popularity with the masses than expressing his religious beliefs. Charles

Odahl, Professor of Ancient and Medieval History and Boise University, argues the opposite, suggesting that Constantine's developing religious beliefs were evident in the changing coins and medallions of the time. Published by The Catholic University of America Press, Odahl's work possesses a clear religious undertone, and implies that the globes once used on pagan coinage no longer portrayed the imperial 'Sol Invictus', instead representing "the earth which God had created" (1995: 24). Unlike Odahl, other contemporary historians believe that the lasting image of the globe on Constantinian coinage proves that paganism was evident until at least 323CE (2004: 454). In one of her many acclaimed histories about Rome and its emperors, Mary Boatwright highlights that Constantine even permitted the city of Hispellum to build a traditional temple from imperial times for celebrations of gladiatorial games in the mid-330s, providing no pagan sacrifices were performed (2004: 454). The archaeological remains and recorded events of the time contradict the messages that Constantine and his associated Christian writers were expressing to the public. While secondary historians can never conclusively explain the discrepancies between Constantine's messages and the recorded evidence, they are able to separate themselves from a religious bias more effectively than primary sources. Furthermore, the reliability and bias of Eusebius, Lactantius, and other primary sources from the fourth century is constantly questioned by secondary historians due to their changing assessments of Constantine's rivals. Eusebius' portrayal of Licinius highlights the impact that time and circumstances had on primary sources' evaluations of historical personalities. Licinius was described as a man of virtue and piety when he was Constantine's ally, but "his good deeds were excised from the historical

record and he became a monster of depravity and lust” (1973: 29) after turning against the emperor. Pohlsander reflects on the primary sources of the period to further this argument, showing that although Maxentius proclaimed tolerance for the Christians when he was emperor, “Constantinian propaganda... would later denounce Maxentius as a ‘tyrant’.” (1996: 21) Tailored statements, changes in primary sources’ assessment of rivals, and differences between archaeological evidence and Constantine’s messages combine to create a history of the emperor’s reign that is based too heavily on propaganda and biased primary recounts. Constantine’s reign cannot be accurately depicted due to the problematic nature of the primary sources; sources that regularly cover-up, gloss over, or do not address the emperor’s contradictory religious actions.

During his reign, Constantine was involved in a number of events that appear to contradict his supposed religious beliefs. All primary Christian historians, and therefore the overwhelming majority of primary sources from the fourth century, include a blatant religious bias towards Constantine which results in romanticised recounts of the emperor’s reign. However, significant silences in the recounts of primary sources are evident at times when Constantine was involved in events that went against his Christian beliefs. Most notably, Constantine’s primary sources “have difficulty explaining his execution in 320 (on adultery charges) of Crispus, his son by his first wife, and Fausta, his wife.” (2006: 1) Eusebius offers limited commentary on this event, leaving secondary historians to refer to fictitious tales and legends to establish the truth. In his chronological history of the Roman emperors, Chris Scarre states, “One version of the story says that

Constantine's wife Fausta was in love with her stepson and accused him of adultery when he rejected her" (2000: 215), leading to Crispus' immediate execution and Fausta's eventual death by boiling water, where " the temperature [was] raised until she suffocated in the steam and died." (2000: 216) Modern-day historians stress the fact that the truth behind Constantine's execution of his wife and son can only be interpreted by using ancient stories and tales. In an effort to save Constantine from embarrassment by remaining silent about the emperor's execution of his immediate family, Eusebius has allowed secondary historians to use potentially unreliable and inaccurate tales to conjure an interpretation of events. The lack of primary recounts offering explanation for the clearly un-Christian actions of Constantine, in particular the execution of Crispus and Fausta, prove that society will never completely understand the reign of Constantine the Great.

Primary and secondary historians will forever debate the influence that official propaganda had on the depiction of Emperor Constantine's reign, but, as Mary Boatwright writes, " There is no question ... that once Constantine had finally achieved sole control in 324, he worked with fresh energy and self-assurance to strengthen his empire." (2004: 457) Modern-day historians agree with primary Christian sources from the fourth century, including Eusebius and Lactantius, when they argue that the emperor's changing religious beliefs were genuine. How genuine these beliefs were, and to what extent Constantine used his faith to unite the Roman Empire, remains open to discussion among religious and historical scholars. Primary historians were subject to their religious beliefs – the overwhelmingly majority of surviving

primary sources are from Christian writers – and these views directly influenced their evaluation of Constantine. Christian primary sources portrayed Constantine the way he wanted to be remembered, and only represent the biased view that people of their faith had of the emperor. Secondary historians outline the problems with reliability of primary sources, but struggle to provide insight into the life of an emperor from fourth century Rome. There is no doubt that Constantine was “ one of the outstanding men of Rome’s declining years” (1968: 145), but the fragmented, biased, and unreliable nature of primary sources concerning the emperor make it impossible to distinguish the facts of his reign from the official propaganda of the time.