

Raymond van Dam

## Converting Constantine

Interpreting Constantine's relationship with Christianity requires a modern perspective on religion as a symbolic medium for expressing meaning and identity. Conversion signified a new way of understanding, not simply a new way of believing. Constantine and others hence used Christian ideas and images to redefine the nature of Roman emperorship and the dynamics of empire.

Constantine ruled as a Roman emperor from 306 to 337. His long reign provides modern scholars with repeated opportunities to celebrate important centennial anniversaries at the beginning of each century. Initially Constantine campaigned in Britain and on the Rhine frontier. Exhibitions and conferences at York and at Trier have already produced outstanding catalogues with wonderful illustrations.<sup>1</sup>

For the next twenty-five years scholars will no doubt be highlighting Constantine's relationship with Christianity. Later in his reign Constantine himself would claim that, before his victory on 28 October 312 at the battle of the Milvian Bridge outside Rome, he had witnessed a vision of a cross in the sky, followed by a dream in which Jesus Christ had explained the protective power of the cross. According to the account subsequently recorded in the biography of the emperor written by bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, after the dream Constantine had a military standard constructed in the shape of a cross. That military standard then led his army to multiple successes.

The battle at the Milvian Bridge has been interpreted as a turning point in Constantine's life and reign, in Roman history, and in ecclesiastical history. In a recent book Klaus Girardet has asserted that *'the*

1 E. Hartley, J. Hawkes, M. Henig, and F. Mees ed., *Constantine the Great: York's Roman Emperor* (York 2006); A. Demandt and J. Engemann ed., *Imperator Caesar Flavius Constantinus: Konstantin der Grosse. Ausstellungskatalog* (Mainz 2007).

“Constantinian Revolution,” that is, the process of the emperor’s turning away from paganism and his turning toward the Christian God as his protector and his champion of victory, . . . was concluded in 312. Perhaps this battle even had global consequences. In another book Girardet has proposed the more extravagant claim that ‘without the Constantinian Revolution . . . world history would have taken a different direction.’<sup>2</sup>

Over the subsequent centuries many of the reactions to the battle have come from churchmen, who hoped to requisition the battle for their own specific interests. To interpret was to appropriate. During the medieval period the battle was included among the legends supporting the fictitious *Donation* of Constantine. In the early sixteenth century Raphael decorated a papal apartment with magnificent frescoes depicting the vision and the battle. In the seventeenth century Bernini carved a luminous marble statue of the emperor at the moment of his epiphany, now on display in the *portico* of the Church of St. Peter. In 1912 pope Pius X erected a dedication outside Rome commemorating the 1600th anniversary of Constantine’s victory. Directly or indirectly, the papacy has clearly been instrumental in shaping memories of the battle.<sup>3</sup>

In 2012 scholars (and perhaps the pope too) will have another occasion to commemorate the battle and the vision. Anniversaries of significant ecclesiastical and political events from Constantine’s reign can then fuel a long sequence of academic conferences: the proclamation of religious toleration in 2013, the council of Nicaea in 2025, the foundation of Constantinople in 2030. Even Constantine’s death should not halt this tide of commemoration and retrospection. Eusebius declared that Constantine had continued to reign as emperor still after his death; among modern scholars Constantine has had probably the most celebrated afterlife of all the Roman and Byzantine emperors.

- 2 Quotations translated from K. M. Girardet, *Der Kaiser und sein Gott: Das Christentum im Denken und in der Religionspolitik Konstantins des Grossen*. Millennium-Studien 27 (Berlin 2010) 76, and *Die Konstantinische Wende: Voraussetzungen und geistige Grundlagen der Religionspolitik Konstantins des Großen* (Darmstadt 2006) 155.
- 3 For the influence of the papacy, see R. Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (Cambridge 2011) 19-25. Text of pope Pius’ dedication in W. Kuhoff, ‘Ein Mythos in der römischen Geschichte: Der Sieg Konstantins des Großen über Maxentius vor den Toren Roms am 28. Oktober 312 n. Chr.’, *Chiron* 21 (1991) 127-74, here 157n. 80.

## Conversion

But in 2012 should scholars also be commemorating Constantine's conversion to Christianity? Constantine's support for Christianity has consistently been highlighted as the most important feature of his reign. Beyond this general acknowledgement of Constantine as a Christian emperor, however, the details are strongly contested. Both the timing of his conversion and the level of his commitment are repeatedly disputed. One possibility is that he had become a Christian before 312, perhaps already as a boy or a young man. Some traditions claimed that he had been raised as a Christian by his mother, Helena, and Eusebius thought that his father, the emperor Constantius, had already been a supporter of Christianity. After defeating his final rival in 324, Constantine himself announced in a letter that he had advanced from Britain to the eastern provinces in order to promote 'the most blessed faith'. This statement might imply that he was projecting himself as 'a servant of God' all the way back to his initial proclamation as emperor in Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Another possibility, however, is that Constantine's religious preferences included non-Christian beliefs, even after 312. Constantine had spent his early years in the army, eventually serving as a military tribune at the court of the emperor Diocletian. As patron deities Diocletian promoted Jupiter and Hercules. He and his fellow emperors, including Constantius, identified themselves with Jupiter and Hercules, and one orator claimed that Constantius, after his death, had been welcomed to heaven by Jupiter himself. These religious associations continued to influence Constantine. During the early years of his reign Constantine added the name of Herculus to his official titulature.<sup>5</sup>

In 310 an orator reported that during a visit to a temple in Gaul, Constantine had had a vision of Apollo, or rather, of himself as Apollo. This vision reassured the emperor of his eventual success: '*...you recognized yourself in the appearance of him to whom the poets' divine verses have prophesied that rule over the entire world is owed.*' After-

4 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.13-18, 27, Constantius, 2.24-42, Constantine's letter, with T. G. Elliot, *The Christianity of Constantine the Great* (Scranton 1996), arguing that Constantine had been a Christian at least since 303. An English translation of Eusebius' Life is available in A. Cameron and S. G. Hall, *Eusebius, Life of Constantine: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford 1999).

5 For Diocletian's theology of emperorship, see R. Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (Cambridge 2007) 228-51.



Constantine the Great - Bronze statue.

ward Constantine continued to be affiliated with Apollo, sometimes in his guise as Sol (or Helios), the Sun-god. A coin minted in 316 identified Sol as Constantine's 'companion'; another coin depicted Apollo and Constantine with matching profiles. In Asia Minor the citizens of one town dedicated a statue to Constantine as 'all-seeing Helios'.<sup>6</sup>

According to Elizabeth Digser, during the later years of his reign the emperor promoted a 'policy of concord toward polytheism and the temple cults'. Perhaps his policy was more personal than political. A pagan priest from Athens would thank the emperor for funding his research

in Egypt: '*I am grateful to the gods and to the most pious emperor Constantine*'. In the mid-330s Constantine replied to a petition from cities in central Italy by allowing the construction of a new temple at Spello dedicated to his own family dynasty.<sup>7</sup>

Constantine was hence certainly a supporter of Christianity. He patronized bishops, he attended their councils, and he participated in their disputations over theology. But there were also limits to his support. On the one hand it is difficult to detect the influence of Christianity on his legislation about various social practices, such as marriage

- 6 Vision of Apollo: Panegyrici latini 6(7).21.4-5. Coins: P. M. Bruun, *The Roman Imperial Coinage, VII: Constantine and Licinius A.D. 313-337* (London 1966) 368, nos. 53, 56, with F. Kolb, *Herrscherideologie in der Spätantike* (Berlin 2001). Dedication at Termessus: I. Tantillo, 'Costantino e Helios Pantepoptês: la statua equestre di Termessos', *Epigraphica* 65 (2003) 159-84. An English translation of the Latin panegyrics is available in C. E. V. Nixon and B. S. Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley 1994).
- 7 E. D. Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca 2000) 129. Funding for Nicagoras: W. Dittenberger, *Orientalis graeci inscriptiones selectae: Supplementum sylloges inscriptionum graecarum* (Leipzig 1903-1905) 2:462, no. 721. Temple at Spello: Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution*, 23-34, 363-67.

and slavery. On the other, he was quite openminded regarding other religions. In early 313 he joined his fellow emperor Licinius to extend 'to both Christians and all people the free power of following the religion that each wishes'. In 324, even as he indicated a preference for Christianity, he again extended toleration to supporters of pagan cults. '*Those who persist in their errors are to receive a similar gift of peace and tranquility as the believers.*'<sup>8</sup>

### Old questions

These apparent inconsistencies in Constantine's attitudes have generated a spectrum of modern interpretations about his religious preferences that extends from pietistic to dismissive. Some interpretations are quite certain about Constantine's sudden change of mind and his subsequent firm commitment to Christianity. According to Ramsay MacMullen, '*Nothing counts for more than the year 312.*' According to Charles Odahl, '*At this moment, Constantine converted.*'<sup>9</sup>

Other interpretations have instead explained the emperor's seemingly inconsistent religiosity in terms of politics. Hartwin Brandt has suggested that Constantine allowed himself to be depicted offering sacrifices on a large commemorative arch at Rome because he was 'a political pragmatist and realist'. H. A. Drake has suggested that bishops forced him to dilute his religious toleration. In order to include bishops' courts in the administration of imperial justice, he had to agree to their demands for edicts against heretics. The increasing prominence of bishops was hence a consequence of 'political horse trading'. Politics trumped religion.<sup>10</sup>

8 For Constantine's legislation on slavery, see now K. Harper, 'The *SC Claudianum* in the *Codex Theodosianus*: Social History and Legal Texts', *Classical Quarterly* 60 (2010) 610-38, here 638: 'This reading... cannot sustain any interpretation which posits massive religious or social change as the underlying cause of the laws'. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 10.5.1-14, proclamation of 313, *Vita Constantini* 2.56.1, letter of 324. An English translation of Eusebius' History is available in K. Lake, J. E. L. Oulton, and H. J. Lawlor, *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History*. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. 1926-1932), 2 vols.

9 R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven 1984) 102; C. M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (London 2004) 106.

10 Quotation translated from H. Brandt, *Konstantin der Grosse: Der erste christliche Kaiser. Eine Biographie* (Munich 2006) 65; H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore 2000) 348.

The underlying weakness of these interpretations is not the answers. Overall this is splendid scholarship, consistently thoughtful and learned. It has furthermore been supplemented with extensive catalogues, such as the relevant volumes of Roman Imperial Coinage, comprehensive compilations, such as the collection of Latin inscriptions by Thomas Grünewald, and new editions and translations of important ancient texts. Constantinian studies has never had such a firm foundation.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, the fundamental handicap of these interpretations about Constantine's religious beliefs is the questions being asked. Modern historians have continued to approach Constantine's relationship to Christianity with perspectives developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two memorable historians in particular have cast long shadows over Constantinian studies. One is Edward Gibbon, in his *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in the later eighteenth century. Gibbon was prepared to concede that Constantine had been a sincere Christian. In some respects the emperor might appear to have been opportunistic, as if he had 'used the altars of the church as a convenient footstool to the throne of the empire'. But he gradually became more devout: 'the specious piety of Constantine, if at first it was only specious, might gradually... be matured into serious faith and fervent devotion'. The other ghost haunting modern scholarship is Jacob Burckhardt, whose evaluation of Constantine was a cynical counterblast to Gibbon's generosity. In his *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen*, published in the mid-nineteenth century, Burckhardt outright dismissed the possibility of religious sincerity. His Constantine was motivated only by 'ambition and lust for power': 'such a man is essentially unreligious.'<sup>12</sup> Gibbon and Burckhardt disagreed about the motives behind the emperor's religiosity. They nevertheless agreed that religiosity, whether sincere as true devotion or disingenuous as unrestrained ambition, was the central issue for understanding his reign. As a result, modern scholarship too tends to emphasize the emperor's inner psychology and his personal commitment. In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, Noel Lenski has concluded that

11 T. Grünewald, *Constantinus Maximus Augustus: Herrschaftspropaganda in der zeitgenössischen Überlieferung. Historia, Einzelschriften 64* (Stuttgart 1990).

12 E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York 1932) 1:650; J. Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great, tr. M. Hadas* (Berkeley 1983) 292.

‘the “Constantinian question” *par excellence*’ is, exactly, ‘the question of conversion and faith’. This focus on personal faith has hence made scholarship on Constantine a bit schizoid. Modern interpretations argue about the small details of the emperor’s titles, while at the same time claiming overarching insights into the emperor’s state of mind. Insistent positivism and glib psychology make odd bedfellows.<sup>13</sup>

### New questions

Our improved resources deserve to be applied to more fruitful and more contemporary questions. Our data about Constantine is cutting edge, but too often interpretations of Constantine and Christianity are still derivative from perspectives developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular, historians need to think about religion differently.

The traditional approach is to highlight beliefs and hence to evaluate the degree of Constantine’s conviction. A more sophisticated approach would define religion as an epistemology, a symbolic idiom that people used to understand and articulate aspects of their personal identities, the boundaries of their communities, and, at the level of emperors, the dynamics of the state. Rather than focusing only on belief in gods or God, this approach emphasizes thinking with gods or God about other aspects of society. Religious choices were a tactic for people to locate themselves, to define themselves, and to let others know about themselves. This perspective is especially helpful for our interpretations of Constantine, in two complementary ways.

One useful outcome is an emphasis on representation, in particular on self-representation. As Constantine decided how to present himself as emperor, he had many choices to make. Over his long reign he constantly had to reinvent himself, as a military emperor on the frontiers but also as a civilian emperor during his visits to Rome, as an heir of his immediate *Tetrarchic* predecessors but also as a guardian of the poli-

13 N. Lenski, ‘Introduction’ in: N. Lenski ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge 2006) 1-13, here 3. Likewise Brandt, *Konstantin der Grosse*, 17: “Es ist die Omnipräsenz des Religiösen, die das Leben und Wirken Konstantins erst recht verstehbar werden läßt”; with the excellent survey of opinions about Constantine’s religiosity in E. Herrmann-Otto, *Konstantin der Große. Gestalten der Antike* (Darmstadt 2007) 42-48.

tical traditions of the old Roman Republic, as a patron of both Latin and Greek literature, as a supporter of Christianity while remaining respectful toward antiquarian, sometimes even pagan, practices. This emphasis on representation has the positive consequence of making Constantine into more of a public figure. Conversion seems to be such a solitary act, but representation implies that the emperor was always interacting with other people. His religion, including Christianity in particular, was only one medium that Constantine might adopt to represent himself as an emperor. If religion is thought of as a form of self-representation, then Constantine could, and did, have many 'conversions'. His religion was an aspect of his many interactions, an ongoing negotiation with different audiences rather than a result of a particular moment.<sup>14</sup>

A second useful outcome is an emphasis on narrative, or rather, the construction of narratives. Modern historians often read ancient texts as 'sources', as compilations of data, as forensic reports about people and events. In fact, these texts were already retrospective accounts, interpretations of earlier events and not simple descriptions. In his own writings and pronouncements, compiled over the decades of his reign, Constantine created a series of backstories that each validated a current situation. The authors of other texts, including historians, the architects of buildings, and the patrons of monuments, likewise had their own agendas. In their narratives they offered distinct images of the emperor that corresponded to their own immediate concerns. In these stories relevance was more important than strict accuracy.<sup>15</sup>

Narrative seems to look back, in particular to the construction of a past that supported current circumstances. Representation seems to look forward, as the emperor was hoping for the support of his soldiers, senators at Rome, and Christian bishops and their congregations. An emphasis on narrative and representation hence allows us to acknow-

14 For conversions, see R. Van Dam, 'The Many Conversions of the Emperor Constantine' in: K. Mills and A. Grafton ed., *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Rochester 2003) 127-51.

15 For memories, narratives, and the construction of the past, see Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine*, 5-11. Recent research on Augustine's Confessions has been especially invigorating: see J. D. BeDuhn, 'Augustine Accused: Megalium, Manichaeism, and the Inception of the Confessions', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009) 85-124, here 124, on Augustine's imagined self: 'the story well-told is...more important, more lasting, more effective than the mere facts of history'.

ledge the many people who participated in the negotiations, some as authors, others as audiences.

The battle at the Milvian Bridge is one good example of such historical refraction. Each ancient narrative about the battle represented a distinctive point of view. Constantine marched on Rome in 312 to defeat a rival emperor; but when he returned to Rome in 315, he attended the dedication of a commemorative arch whose iconography offered a model for behaving like an emperor who would respect the senate and its traditions. Late in his reign Constantine recalled for Eusebius and other bishops the stories about his vision and his dream before the battle at Rome. But after the emperor's death Eusebius recorded those stories in his *Life of Constantine* in order to support his own theological position. The builders of the arch at Rome, Eusebius and other bishops, various historians, as well as the emperor himself, all contributed to the making of myths about Constantine and his vision.

Interpreting religion in terms of representation and narrative has significant consequences for our understanding of Constantine. If the emperor was deploying Christian ideas to help articulate and manage his situation, then we can interpret his role as instrumental, but not necessarily manipulative. If both the emperor and others, including churchmen and pagans, were constantly reconstructing stories about his past, then his relationship with Christianity was repeatedly being rewritten during his life and afterward. Rather than interpreting his Christianity in terms of a sudden change followed by a steady commitment (and occasional lapses), we can think about his religiosity as a constant, extended struggle to define and represent himself as emperor. For Constantine religiosity, including his relationship with Christianity, was a way of knowing rather than simply of believing. His ideas about God (and sometimes also gods) were one aspect of a larger epistemology.

### New 'texts'

Constantine and Christianity will remain a significant topic for historians to chew on for a long time. But defining Christianity as a symbolic idiom, like other religions, offers the prospect of a more productive way of analyzing the relationship. Rather than focusing on personal motives, such as religious sincerity or political scheming, it is possible to analyse the significance of various media, such as building projects and arguments

over theology, as techniques for representation and narrative.

Rudolf Leeb has highlighted the persistent association with Jesus Christ in the promotion of Constantine as emperor. '*All of the Christian iconographical motifs that are newly introduced are symbols of Christ, or rather they are oriented toward Christ*'. As a result, the typology of these symbols presented Constantine as 'the representative and the imitator of Christ, appointed by divine providence'. The roles of a Christian emperor and of Jesus Christ seemed to blur together.<sup>16</sup>

The making of Christian emperorship and the articulation of a theology of Jesus Christ during the fourth century are longstanding topics for modern scholarship. The role of Constantine suggests that both processes were not simply concurrent and parallel, but somehow intertwined, with the same participants, the same issues, and the same terminology and imagery. Theologians too were concerned about representation and narrative, that is, how to represent God and how to provide a proper narrative for the life of Jesus. But as they argued about the similarity or the subordination of Jesus Christ the Son to God the Father, they were also implicitly arguing about the possibility that a Christian emperor might be an analogue of the Son, another 'angel' representing the Father. Just as images of emperor might offer analogies for imagining deities, including the Christian God, so Christian theology provided an indirect medium for imagining emperors and their power.<sup>17</sup>

Patristics scholars sometimes worry that new-fangled 'scholarly styles' will devalue the development of doctrines into 'an epiphenomenon of political, cultural, and social contexts.'<sup>18</sup> But by turning historical theology into a history of abstract doctrines, patristics scholars have already marginalized their field from the overall development of late antique studies. A more comprehensive notion of theology as narrative and as representation would allow patristics studies to reconnect with Constantinian studies. The doctrinal arguments at the council of Nicaea were as much about imagining a Christian emperor as about defining

16 Quotations translated from R. Leeb, *Konstantin und Christus: Die Verchristlichung der imperialen Repräsentation unter Konstantin dem Großen als Spiegel seiner Kirchenpolitik und seines Selbstverständnisses als christlicher Kaiser. Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 58 (Berlin 1992) 121, 122.

17 For the intersections between theological controversies and political philosophy, see Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution*, 252-316.

18 L. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford 2004) 5.

Jesus Christ.

Urban topographies provide other 'texts' that await more extensive analysis. Constantine visited Rome three times, but for a total residence of only five months. His patronage for Christianity nevertheless significantly altered the urban landscape, both physically and symbolically. The construction projects during his reign included both secular monuments, such as a new bath complex, and Christian shrines, such as churches.

For interpreting the symbolic meanings of Constantinian Rome, scholars hence should distinguish different objectives. Some new monuments were designed as messages to Constantine. According to the dedication on the famous commemorative arch near the Colosseum, for instance, 'the senate and the people' wanted to celebrate the emperor's liberation of the city. This arch had presumably been constructed and decorated under the supervision of the prefects of the city, and its iconography was a reminder of how emperors were expected to behave at Rome. Other new monuments were meant to be messages from Constantine about his own priorities. In particular, the emperor now funded the construction of new churches, including the Church of St. John Lateran and the Church of St. Peter. Some of these churches obliterated a barracks and cemeteries used by the military units that had opposed Constantine during the battle of 312. Some commemorated martyrs who were thought to have been executed during persecutions sponsored by earlier emperors. All of these churches were in the outskirts, either just inside the city's wall or in outlying suburbs. Through his construction projects Constantine initiated the process of rewriting imperial Rome, focused on the old *Forum* downtown, into ecclesiastical Rome, focused on a hinterland of new churches.<sup>19</sup>

### The future of Constantinian studies

Interpreting Constantine remains a flourishing enterprise, and understanding his life and reign would certainly benefit from the use of new approaches. Two objectives in particular deserve brief emphasis.

19 For Constantinian monuments at Rome, see Van Dam, *Roman Revolution*, 46-50, and *Remembering Constantine* 124-40, 190-215. One excellent exemplar of rethinking late antique Rome is E. Marlowe, 'Framing the Sun: The Arch of Constantine and the Roman Cityscape', *Art Bulletin* 88 (2006) 223-42, whose perspective is stimulating for suggesting a linkage between the arch and the nearby

One is to abandon the goal of finding a definitive master narrative for Constantine's life and reign. Writing a biography typically seems to oblige scholars to weigh the ancient 'sources' against each other, with the hope of establishing a basic factual framework. Empiricism rules... and in the process so much subtlety and nuance are lost.

Because Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* is the most important account of the emperor's reign, he might seem to have established a paradigm for our writing more biographies. In fact, Eusebius' writings about Constantine at the Milvian Bridge should serve as a warning. Not only did he know little about the battle. In addition, over the decades he kept modifying his interpretation.

Eusebius provided no fewer than four distinct accounts of the battle. The first was in the edition of his *Ecclesiastical History* published in late 313 or 314, a little more than a year after the battle. Eusebius based his account on an anonymous written source; his primary contribution was to provide a biblical gloss by interpreting the emperor as the equivalent of Moses. In the second edition of his *History*, published before autumn of 316, he added a new book that highlighted the support of both Constantine in the western provinces and Licinius in the eastern provinces for Christianity. But because Eusebius was a resident of Palestine, Licinius might well have seemed to be the more important emperor. In the third edition Eusebius finally highlighted Constantine's final victory over his rival Licinius in 324. By making this victory the conclusion of *History*, he had effectively demoted the significance of the earlier battle at the Milvian Bridge.<sup>20</sup>

Even though Eusebius had been writing and rewriting these final books of his *History* for over fifteen years, he had apparently still not heard about the emperor's vision. In his *Life of Constantine*, completed after the emperor's death, Eusebius repeated much of his earlier account of the battle from *History*. But by then he had also heard Constantine's

colossal statue of Apollo, but problematic for assuming that Constantine himself initiated the linkage. P. Liverani, 'L'architettura costantiniana, tra committenza imperiale e contributo delle élites locali', in: A. Demandt and J. Engemann ed., *Konstantin der Grosse: Geschichte-Archäologie-Rezeption. Schriftenreihe des Rheinischen Landesmuseums Trier 32* (Trier 2006) 235-44, stresses instead the important influence of senators, churchmen, and local authorities in designing Constantinian buildings and monuments.

20 For the different viewpoints of the editions of Eusebius' *History*, see Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine*, 82-100.

own stories about his vision of the cross and his dream of Jesus Christ. As a result, the narrative in *Life* made Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge a direct outcome of divine intervention, which resulted in the emperor's personal conversion.<sup>21</sup>

Eusebius hence wrote not a singular biography of Constantine, but instead many versions, many drafts of his life. When writing about Constantine, Eusebius 'stuttered'. But so had the emperor himself. During his long reign Constantine had repeatedly represented himself differently, and he had repeatedly modified the backstory of his life. As he had learned more about the emperor, Eusebius too had modified his own narrative. The experiences and writings of both Constantine and Eusebius imply the need for modern accounts with multiple perspectives. We modern historians should hence highlight the vagaries of Constantine's reign, and not try to dissolve them into a smooth biographical account.<sup>22</sup>

A second objective is to downplay the role of Christianity in discussions of Constantine's reign, in favor of highlighting other significant transformations. Not only does the focus on Constantine's Christianity tend to obliterate consideration of other important historical trends; it also overstates his capacity as a consequential agent for influencing events. All the usual constraints on imperial authority, such as slow communication, lack of information, and resistance from local notables and even imperial magistrates, remained as obstacles for Constantine. Becoming a Christian did not suddenly make it easier for him to impose his preferences.

The larger historical transformations included reconsiderations of the dynamics of empire and the nature of emperorship. The Roman empire was already caught up in significant changes, regarding the decreasing importance of Rome as a political capital, the increasing importance of cities close to the frontiers that became replacement imperial residences, and the relative value of different regions of the empire. As a preview of the medieval period, northern Europe, where emperors such as

21 For Constantine's memories as recorded in Eusebius' *Life*, see Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine*, 56-81.

22 For the notion of 'stuttering' when constructing narratives of the past, see R. Van Dam, *Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia 2003) 171-85, discussing Gregory of Nazianzus and his attempts at finding a consistent trajectory for his life's story.

Constantine campaigned and resided, was already becoming more significant than southern Mediterranean regions, including Italy. As a preview of the Byzantine period, frontiers and provinces in the Greek East were becoming more autonomous from the Latin West.

Ideas about Roman emperorship were likewise in flux. Augustus and his early successors had represented themselves as the heirs and guardians of the traditions of the old Republic. At the same time emperors had always been dependent on the support of their armies. By the later third century Diocletian and his co-emperors in the *Tetrarchy* were defining their imperial rule in terms of divine legitimation.<sup>23</sup>

The enhanced role of Christianity must be located in the context of these larger transformations. For Constantine, Christianity provided a symbolic idiom for defining himself as emperor. Even as he distanced himself from Diocletian and the *Tetrarchic* emperors by supporting rather than persecuting Christians, he nevertheless followed the lead of his predecessors by associating himself with God and Jesus Christ. He too was an emperor somehow sanctioned by a God. His attendance at the council of Nicaea and his foundation of Constantinople furthermore allowed him to shift the fulcrum of his empire from the West to the East. Religious preferences had become a force that could pull an emperor away from his concerns about western frontiers.

As a result, Christianity became so much more than a new way of believing. Under Constantine it also served as a new medium for thinking about emperorship and empire.

23 For changes in empire and emperorship, see Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution*, 35-78, and *Remembering Constantine*, 224-52.