

2007

The Controversy of Constantine's Conversion to Christianity

Tyler Yung Laughlin
Western Oregon University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [History of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Laughlin, Tyler Yung, "The Controversy of Constantine's Conversion to Christianity" (2007). *Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History)*. 172.

<https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his/172>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Digital Commons@WOU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History) by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@WOU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@wou.edu.

The Controversy of Constantine's Conversion to Christianity

By

Tyler Yung Laughlin

**Senior Seminar: HST 499
Professor Bau-Hwa Hsieh
Western Oregon University
June 15, 2007**

**Readers
Professor Benedict Lowe
Professor Narasingha Sil**

Copyright © Tyler Laughlin, 2007

The vision of Constantine in the summer of 312 before the Battle of Milvian Bridge has been a source of considerable debate. The controversy of Constantine's conversion comes from the debate over his legitimacy as a convert to Christianity. Constantine had many Christian influences throughout his life. As a child the impact of his father, Constantius (250-306), played a major role in Constantine's view toward Christians and the Battle of Milvian Bridge was a turning point in the view of Christianity for Constantine personally. The coins issued as the sole Roman Emperor, his edicts, and his presidency at the famous Council of Nicaea in 325 all show him as a conscious Christian not only personally as an individual, but also as an emperor. Constantine was convinced that Christianity would be beneficial for him and his empire, but led two lives, public and private.

Two contemporary accounts that provide details of the event were recorded by Eusebius (263-339), the Bishop of Caesarea and Lactantius (250-325), a professor of rhetoric and personal tutor to Cripus, son of Constantine. Eusebius was an early ecclesiastical historian who wrote two accounts to understanding Constantine; the *Ecclesiastical History* (324-325), and the *Vita Constantini*, or *Life of Constantine* (335-339). Lactantius wrote *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, or *On the Death of Persecutors* (314-315). These two men record two different accounts of the vision in 312. Modern historians have sided either with Eusebius and Lactantius, or against them.

Historians have often debated the validity of both Eusebius and Lactantius and their record of the vision. For years the authenticity of Eusebius and Lactantius were challenged, becoming the mainstream school of thought. However, leading historians T. D. Barnes and H. A. Drake both cite new evidence recently found that lends credence to

the veracity of Eusebius's claims.¹ As a result, there is now little, if any debate whether Lactantius and Eusebius wrote true accounts of what Constantine claimed what happened. However, the nature and sincerity of Constantine's conversion is still a prevalent argument.

The first major influence over Constantine was his father, Constantius. Constantius was part a member of the tetrarchy established by Diocletian (236-316). The tetrarchy was a four man body consisting of two Augusti and two Caesars, one of each in the Western and Eastern halves of the Empire. The tetrarchs were established as a way to keep order in the vastness of the Roman Empire while simultaneously shifting the base of power from Rome to the Eastern half of the Empire. Galerius was proclaimed the head Augusti after the abdication of Diocletian in 305, and Constantius was promoted from Caesar to Augustus of the Western Empire. Two new Caesars were also appointed, Maximinus in the east and Severus in the west. Constantius' authority was over Northern Italy, Gaul, and Britannia. During the authority of Constantius, persecution of Christians started under the decree of Galerius. Persecutions had occurred off and on since the time of Nero, and it was nothing new to the Empire. In turn, Constantius issued his own edicts of persecution. However, the enforcement of persecution was not strict; likewise, punishment of those guilty of Christianity was not severe. Constantius was much more tolerant of Christians than his three other peers.

It is likely that Constantius' tolerance of Christians came from his wife, Helena, who was allegedly Christian.² Helena is credited with encouraging Constantius to believe that Christians did not deserve to be persecuted; in his eyes they had done nothing

¹ Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), v.

²Ibid., 194.

to deserve persecution; rather, they were exercising their ability to worship their god as other peoples absorbed into the empire did. Further evidence of Constantius' tolerance, or at least, acceptance, of Christianity was the name of his daughter, Anastasia, a Christian name. Name selection in Roman times was not something that was done arbitrarily, but planned process. A Christian name was a good indication of Constantius' acceptance of Christianity.

However, despite all of these indications of benevolence toward Christianity, there is no proof that Constantius was a convert to the religion. At the time of his reign, Christians made up only 10% of the entire Roman population, hardly enough to make Christianity a mainstream and accepted practice. Additionally, Constantius, while perhaps wanting to end persecution, was too weak politically to do so. He had no choice but to obey Galerius. Galerius and the other two Caesars both advocated a position of persecution; appearing to favor Christians and going against his peers would have been political suicide.

The truth of Constantius' Christianity can never be known; the time was not right for it to be public, and there is no hard evidence on which to base it. But the influence on Constantine cannot be understated. Constantine's mother undoubtedly played an important part of his life, and Constantius' tolerance reflected onto the values of Constantine. The two primary sources mentioned above, Eusebius and Lactantius, embellish Constantius as a savior figure along with Constantine in part to the fact that Constantine emerged victorious.

Yet the fact remains that Constantius never ended persecution in his realm. Despite the praise that he received, it is important to remember that Constantius was a

persecutor, killing Christians. After being in command of the Western half of the empire for a little over a year, Constantius' influence on his son ended. In July 306, Constantius was killed while on campaign in Britannia with Constantine at his side.

Constantine's ascent to power came at a time in Roman history where nothing was certain. The tetrarchy which Diocletian established was not working. Four leaders within the empire could not coherently rule an empire; at least not with any uniformity. Fallacies of the tetrarchy were beginning to play out in the most dreaded form, civil war.

Civil War erupted when Maxentius, son of Maximian, took control of Rome in 306 after the death of Constantius. After leading a revolt of the Praetorian Guard in the city, he set himself up as the Augustus of the Western half of the empire.³ The four reigning tetrarchs would all try to reestablish legitimate rule over the next six years. Severus, closest Caesar to the revolt, led an army to retake Rome in 307. Severus failed to retake the city, costing him his life after being captured by Maxentius.⁴ The following year, 308, Galerius and Maximian attempted to retake Rome again. They met the same results, failing to defeat Maxentius, but did manage to escape with their lives. Yet another attempt was undertaken from within by Alexander, one of Maxentius' own generals in 312. He failed as well. After six years of triumphs, it appeared that Maxentius was undefeatable. However, Maxentius' luck was about to run out.

Constantine, while most famously known as the first Christian emperor, was also a brilliant tactician. In the late spring and early summer, Constantine swept down through Northern Italy en route to Rome to face Maxentius. Often outnumbered two to one, Constantine was still never truly hindered in his campaign. Towns loyal to Maxentius

³ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

were attacked and looted, but not destroyed; other towns defected to Constantine, perhaps sensing a weak Maxentius, or wanting a change in the leadership of Rome. Whatever the circumstances, Constantine made it to Milvian Bridge in the third week of October. However, the bridge had been destroyed by Maxentius as a precaution to the bridge. But Maxentius was about to make a fatal mistake. Consulting oracles in the pagan temples of Rome, Maxentius was told that after the battle, that the enemy of Rome would be destroyed.⁵ Thus, Maxentius believed he would be victorious. Leaving the safety of the walls, Maxentius' army began to construct a pontoon bridge to cross the river and face Constantine's army. On October 28, 312, Maxentius got his wish. Maxentius' forces stormed across the bridge and crashed into Constantine's forces. Constantine's forces held fast and pushed back Maxentius' forces. Forcing them back against the river, they pushed the force into it, breaking the pontoon bridge, and drowning a majority of Maxentius' army. Maxentius was also a victim of drowning. With Maxentius and much of his army destroyed, remaining forces surrendered and Constantine marched into Rome triumphantly.

The victory of Constantine is attributed to his faith in the Christian God according to both Eusebius and Lactantius. In *Vita* and *Mortibus* respectively, the vision of Constantine in the days preceding the Battle of Milvian Bridge is recorded. Eusebius' account says that when Constantine was praying at around noon, "a remarkable sign appeared in the heavens above the sun, the trophy of a cross of light with the message, 'by this conquer.'"⁶ The entire army was witness to this sight. Lactantius lacks this information that Eusebius has, but both contain the story of the vision the following

⁵ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History: Volume II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 359.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 367.

night. That night, while Constantine was sleeping, he had a dream of Christ standing before him with the Greek symbol of Christ, Chi with Rho affixed on the top, and a voice commanding him to conquer his name.⁷ The following day he constructed a battle standard, a *labarum*, with the Chi and Rho on top. The symbol of Christ was also painted on the shields and helmets of some of Constantine's soldiers.

Eusebius and Lactantius not only differ in their accounts, but also in their importance of the vision. Eusebius hypes up its importance, claiming that the vision and dream were incredibly important to the conversion of Constantine. Lactantius does not play up the vision like Eusebius does, Lactantius' account is based much more on the acts of those before Constantine, and while Constantine is seen as a savior figure, the importance of his vision before the Battle of Milvian Bridge is downplayed.

The vision of Constantine is not a new phenomenon by any means. During Constantine's travels, he also had a vision of Apollo near Marseilles. However, the symbol of the cross to a Christian in the early centuries after Christ's death is obviously and inexplicably important. However, Constantine may not have even known the significance of it at the time he witnessed it, and realized its significance after the fact. Additionally, with the facts of Constantine's life, it is likely that this vision did little or nothing to affect the conversion of Constantine. Eusebius and Lactantius both downplay the importance toward the vision as a key in bringing Constantine to Christianity. It is clear that Constantine was sympathetic toward Christians early in his life, and it is probable that Constantine may have already been Christian before the battle against Maxentius.

⁷ Lactantius, 63.

Visions of deities by oracles, emperors, and everyday Roman citizens were commonplace. The life of a Roman citizen was purged in religious affairs. Traditional Roman gods had been a part of life since the foundation of the city by Romulus and Remus, and Constantine was no exception. Superstition was just as much a part of Roman religion as the gods themselves. Signs, wonders, and miracles were performed along with rituals to assure the passive and satisfied nature of the gods. Emperors were expected to perform rituals such as entrails reading and ceremonious rites with incredible seriousness.⁸

To add to the superstitions, early Christians also had their own beliefs juxtaposed with the pagan ones. The book of Acts in the Bible contains numerous stories of how Peter, through Christ's power, outdid the works of a sorcerer, Simon Magus. Every act that Magus did, Peter countered and outdid, showing the power of a supreme deity over the lesser demons and spirits that others conjured power from.

The early Christians in the Roman Empire, wanting to protect themselves from demons and idol worship would often paint a cross on their forehead to ward off evil spirits. Because of this inadvertent practice, a new persecution developed. When Diocletian went to read entrails as a religious omen, his priests told him that the ritual had been interrupted by Christians. Christians protecting themselves from harmful spirits who had painted the symbol on their forehead had inadvertently kept spirits intended for the ritual at bay, and interfered in it. Seen as traitors to the Empire and Diocletian's own Imperial Cult, Diocletian visited the Oracle of Apollo to determine what to do. After his

⁸ Charles Odahl, "Constantine's Conversion to Christianity," *Problems in European History* (Durham, 1979), 4.

visit, of which he told no one the response, he issued a general edict of persecution for all Christians in February, 303.⁹

Another popular movement of this time was the growing fashion of accepting a highest divinity or one all powerful god. The Olympian Jupiter/Jove had been a natural selection to go to, and Diocletian promoted as much of a “monotheistic” view of Jove as he could. However, the citizen of the Roman Empire all knew of the importance and commonalities of one deity being more prevalent or “powerful” than the rest.

Furthermore, all of the cultures that had been brought into the Empire had one thing in common, the development of a sun cult. Persians, Egyptians, Palestinians, Syrians, Greeks, and others all had a central role of the sun imbedded within their religions. And although seemingly counterintuitive to Christianity, followers were still able to find a connection with it. The Bible refers to God as “the Sun of Righteousness,” that “God is light,” and shows Christ as “a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower.”¹⁰ While the Old Testament strictly forbade the idea of idol worship in the form of the sun, the Christians were still willing to work with the idea. However, this was not enough to Diocletian or Galerius. However, as mentioned above, Constantius was sympathetic to the Christian cause.¹¹

Constantine was influenced by his father’s compassion toward Christians. The vision and dream preceding the Battle of Milvian Bridge showed Constantine the power behind Christianity. He must have also been impressed with their power of Christians to ward off spirits with the aforementioned story of Diocletian and persecution. Following persecution and the will of many of them to endure martyrdom, he must have been

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Malachi 4:2, 1 John 5, and John 1:5 New International Version.

¹¹ Odahl, 8.

impressed with them. He referred to them as having a “modesty of character” and spoke out about the scorn that others felt toward them.¹²

The reign of Constantine after the Battle of Milvian Bridge gives the main source of controversy about his Christianity. While it is more than likely that Constantine was a Christian preceding the events of 312, the evidence for his conversion after becoming sole emperor is vague at best. Interpretation is required to understand the hidden meanings behind his vague public displays of Christianity. Publicly, it was impossible for Constantine to openly embrace Christianity and denounce paganism. Privately he could. But the public eye is what stems the controversy. Subtleties in public monuments and edicts give veracity to his legitimacy as a Christian.

Immediately following the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine rode into Rome, parading in the victory of battle over the evil and illegitimate Maxentius, though in a bit of irony, Constantine was also an illegitimate leader. Notably though, as mentioned above, were the Greek symbols on the battle standards and shields of Constantine’s troops, the Chi and Rho. Another notable action that Constantine did not take was the final ascent up to Jupiter’s temple on the Capitoline Hill. Since the civil wars in the Republic Era, triumphant leaders would parade through Rome, ending at the Capitoline Hill to sacrifice to Jupiter, praising him for the victory. The final symbol in Rome of Constantine’s changes was a lessening of importance for the pagan rites in the form of a display of a gigantic statue of Constantine, victorious with the Chi and Rho, saying, “by this saving sign, the true proof of bravery, that I have saved and freed your city from the

¹² Ibid., 6.

yoke of tyranny.”¹³ This symbol became the start of Constantine’s political tolerance and acceptance, and a loud statement to those that questioned his devotion.

The actions of Constantine speak volumes about his beliefs and devotion to Christ and his vision. What is important to remember, is that in taking these seemingly insignificant actions to the modern readers, contemporary citizens would have seen an obvious break in tradition. The now famous *labarum* and the Chi and Rho were physical manifestations of what happened in the days preceding the Battle of Milvian Bridge. Citizens seeing these symbols on the victorious soldiers, marching with golden *labarum* in tow, and parading but avoiding the Capitoline Hill would definitely sense a change in the air. The keen citizen knew that Rome was not to be the same as it had been.

The most ironic fact of the so called conversion of Constantine is the fact that the conversion in question may have never actually taken place. As stated above, evidence suggests that Constantine was probably Christian or at least extremely sympathetic to Christianity before adulthood. Some of the best forms of empirical evidence are the coins from reigning emperors. The money in the time of Constantius shows the Sol Invictus from pagan panegyrics, suggesting that he did not actually believe in the Christian God, but rather leaned toward the suggestion of a supreme deity in different form. However, these arguments can be invalidated by one phrase, lack of control. Constantius was not the sole emperor of Rome, he had three other competitors that could quell anything that they did not agree with, and as it turns out, they had no problem with the persecution edict of Diocletian; in fact they encouraged it. Constantius had no power compared to the influence that Constantine did over the empire, and it showed. Constantine’s own Christianity is still the primary question though. It is unlikely that he

¹³ Odahl, 11.

did not at least appreciate the religion of the time, because edicts and coinage showed that he did.

After the death of Severus in 307, Galerius appointed Licinius as Caesar to take his place. Licinius was appointed in 308, and after the death of Galerius, became the Augustus of the East. Constantine had a strained relationship with Licinius, having tenuous alliances frequent civil wars. However, one of the key tenets between the relationship of Constantine and Licinius was the Edict of Milan written in 313. The Edict was not a full fledged support of Christianity and banning of pagan rituals. Instead, Licinius and Constantine agreed that an “empire wide religious policy” should be instated.¹⁴ The two Augusti compromised between their views and Rome adopted an official state of neutrality and accepted complete religious freedom. The official edict states that:

“Accordingly, with salutary and most upright reasoning, we [Constantine and Licinius] resolved on adopting this policy, namely that we should consider that no one whatsoever should be denied freedom to devote himself either to the cult of the Christians or to such religion as he deems best suited for himself, so that the highest divinity, to whose worship we pay allegiance with free minds, may grant us in all things his wonted favor and benevolence ... free and untrammelled freedom in their religion or cult has similarly been granted to others also, in keeping with the peace of our times, so that each person may have unrestricted freedom to practice the cult he has chosen.”¹⁵

Constantine is clear to make sure that this toleration is across the board. It seems that he does not want to necessarily pinpoint Christians as the beneficiaries of the Edict of Milan. He is further strengthened by his actions because Licinius also endorses this newfound freedom enjoyed mainly by Christians. It is clearly granted by both Augusti of the

¹⁴ Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization Selected Reasons: The Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 572.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 573.

empire, officially ending persecution and allowing toleration. But while other religions and cults are also included in this all-encompassing spectrum, there is no question that Constantine did in fact want this legislation to be directed specifically toward Christians.

Further in the edict:

“And moreover, with special regard to the Christians we have decided that the following regulation should be set down: ... if any person should appear to have purchase them in prior times ... they shall restore the said places to the Christians without any payment or any demand for compensation, setting aside all fraud and ambiguity.”¹⁶

Not only were Christians getting a freedom to worship as they pleased, confiscated property, regardless of how it was obtained, was to be given back to their original Christian owners. In essence, they were receiving reparations for the wrongs that had been committed against them.

While the Edict of Milan is a public display to show the tolerance of Christianity, Constantine also wrote personal letters to various bishops and governors. Two of the letters that Eusebius recorded in the *Ecclesiastical History* are to Anulinus, proconsul of Africa in 313, and to Caecilianus, Bishop of Carthage, also 313. In the letter to Anulinus, a public figure, Constantine is to the point declaring clerics “not be dragged away from the worship due the Divinity through any mistake of irreverent error...”¹⁷ In his letter to Caecilianus, Constantine describes his orders to Anulinus and what Caecilianus should expect to receive. He also ends his letter differently, not just referring to a Divinity, but “the Divinity of the great God.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 574.

¹⁷ Ibid., 575.

¹⁸ Eusebius, 461.

This difference does not seem like much, but the private and public eye are two extremely different things. Anulinus' letter only received reference to a vague 'Divinity' which could essentially be interpreted as Jupiter, Apollo, Minerva, or any other god the reader may pick. The difference in the private letter to Caecilianus is the 'divinity' is also referred to as the great God. Clearly, these two letters written in conjunction with one another, are mentioning the same divinity. From the letter to the bishop Caecilianus, it is clear that the divinity in Anulinus' letter is Christ. Again, along with the Edict of Milan, these official and personal letters show the benevolence toward Christianity. Clearly Constantine has a sincere interest in Christianity.

While previous discussions have already been established as affirming the validity to true conversion claims, another point is left to be argued, the Council of Nicaea. The first council of all calling themselves Christians, the Council of Nicaea, was called in response to the schisms occurring in the Egyptian quarter of the empire, the Arian controversy, and the warlike attitudes prevalent of bishops against bishops. Calling the council was necessary because of what Constantine referred to as "graver than any war or fierce battle," the division of the ecclesiastical church.¹⁹ After delivering a speech to rouse the hearts of all present, the council concluded that a unanimous body should rule the church; doctrine, believe and attitude should remain one under the Christian church, and to officially make a church as an institution rather than just a body of believers.

The motivation behind this act of piety after being established as a Christian ruler is lacking. If Constantine were just the first Christian ruler by name only, what reason would he have for calling the Council of Nicaea and to work out theological and doctrinal

¹⁹ Nels M. Bailkey and Richard Lim, *Readings in Ancient History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 555.

details? There is no logical reason to take time out of the entire empire's way to satisfy a division of a religion that only represented ten percent of the empire's population.²⁰

Other claims have also been made against the sincerity of Constantine's conversion. The continuation of the pagan ways was still in effect for a majority of the population; although Christianity would be made into the official state religion eventually, the traditional practices still applied. Critics argue that if Constantine's conversion were at a truly spiritual level, all pagan gods and the emperor's personal cult following would have had to be abandoned, yet, they were not. Simply put, this argument follows the same dictates of the arguments about the Christianity of Constantius. Constantius, just like Constantine and the rest of political leaders, are victims of the time and society in which they live. Just as Constantius was unable to completely abolish the edict of persecution by Diocletian, so too was Constantine unable to act on his beliefs. It would be nearly impossible to uproot the traditional Roman society without severe backlash and repercussion, and Constantine knew that. However, this in itself is not concrete proof that Constantine was Christian.

While letters and edicts are excellent sources of Constantine's propaganda, they were limited in their scope. The ordinary citizen would probably not read an official edict or letter, but hear it first hand, or perhaps through the mouths of others. On the other hand, Constantine's coinage was a way to reach the masses in a medium that everyone was familiar with. Circulating coinage with his values was perhaps the easiest way to get his message across, albeit, again, subtly. Below are two examples of coinage from the life of Constantine.

²⁰ Odahl, 2.



The above coin shows an image of a young Constantine with the now famous *labarum* on the reverse. Affixed atop the *labarum* is the Chi and Rho for the symbol of Christ, just as Eusebius and Lactantius record. On the front is inscribed “by the will of the people.”

The *labarum* at this time was a known image and the story of Constantine’s victory was widespread throughout the empire. People using this coin would instantly know what the reverse was a reference to. However, the front leaves a bit up to interpretation. The “will of the people” may be the emphasis of Constantine on his victory over Maxentius, and that the populous of Rome was ready for Maxentius to be overthrown.



This next coin again shows Constantine on the front side, but with Sol Invictus, the sun god, on the reverse. The inscription on the reverse side reads *soli invicto comit*, or “to the invincible sun, companion [of the emperor].”²¹ To understand the significance of this coin, Constantine’s relationship with traditional and pagan religions of Rome must be further examined.

²¹ Elizabeth Marlowe, “Framing the Sun: The Arch of Constantine and the Roman Cityscape,” *Art Bulletin* 88 (2006): 225.

Constantine did not completely abolish pagan worship during his reign. It may have been because he did not want to, but it is more likely that he was not in the position to eradicate it. Just as Constantius could not completely end persecution because of Galerius, Constantine could not end pagan worship because of the masses. To eliminate pagan worship would be to undermine 800 years of religious tradition. Because Christians made up only a small portion of the population, about 10 percent, alienating the other 90 percent of the populous would have been political suicide. This is not to say that Constantine did not at least limit pagan worship, but common sense made him keep the most important pagan aspects; the Imperial Cult and the worship of Sol Invictus.

It is certain that the Imperial Cult survived the reign of Constantine. Fortunately a letter from Constantine in reply to the citizens of Hispellum has survived. In it, Constantine allows the citizens to dedicate a temple to his family, the Flavian line. In fact, Constantine agreed to their request with “ready assent.”²² In order to keep with tradition, Constantine was sure to remind the people that “not very much will seem to have been detracted from old institutions.”²³ Because Constantine kept this key element of Roman religion, there was no major qualm with his toleration of Christianity. However, the Cult of Sol Invictus in relation to Christians is more significant.

Sol had been worshiped throughout the previous century and was a popular cult. Images of the sun had been associated with Apollo as well, and Christians also related Christ to the sun. Because of this commonality, coinage depicting Sol Invictus and allowing the cult to remain. Public depictions of Sol on coinage, a very public display, could be interpreted by whoever viewed it. Christians could easily picture Christ in the

²² Lewis, 580.

²³ Ibid.

form of Sol, pagan worshiper of Sol would notice nothing out of the ordinary, and more so, a respect by Constantine for an established god. Therefore, this coin is an excellent example of how Constantine's public display of Christianity remains vague.

Another prominent place that Sol Invictus is seen is on the Arch of Constantine. Sol Invictus is found on three separate areas of the arch, and also at the base. The arch depicts many different scenes from Constantine's life, the Battle of Milvian, his victory over Licinius, and important religious figures. The arch is one of the most public places to display his newfound faith in Christianity. The images of Sol along with the inscription on both sides of the arch again lend credence to Constantine's conversion.

The inscription reads:

“To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine, the Greatest, *Pius, Felix,*
Augustus: inspired by (a) divinity, in the greatness of his mind, he used his
army to save the state by the just force of arms from a tyrant on the one
hand and very kind of factionalism on the other; therefore the Senate and
the People of Rome have dedicated this exceptional arch to his
triumphs.”²⁴

The significant portion of this text is in the second line. In his rescue of the city of Rome, Constantine was ‘inspired by a divinity.’ Undoubtedly, this is a reference to his vision before the Battle of Milvian Bridge. However, the divinity is not named. Constantine did not construct his arch, but the trend of his vague statements lived on. Divinity is any god figure, and thusly, in a public eye, remains obscure. Constantine never publicly declared his conversion to Christianity in any of the sources that have been examined this far, but has always alluded to the fact.

However, perhaps the most important evidence of Constantine's Christianity is the famous Council of Nicaea in 325. The council was called at the behest of

²⁴ Marlowe, 236.

Constantine, inviting 3,000 bishops and ecumenical leaders to discuss religious doctrines and practices. Only 250 to 300 bishops and leaders actually showed up at Nicaea. But despite the low turnout, debates of significant importance still took place. The discussion of the heresy of Arius, who claimed that Jesus was not divine or a trinity, directly opposed the belief of many others, including Constantine. Arius was found guilty of heresy and asked to recant his ways and beliefs. Another debate that was undertaken was the recognition of Easter. Before the council, there was no uniform date for its celebration, and Constantine wanted succinct observance to occur.²⁵

Other significant rites and displays also took place. The entrance of Constantine into the council chambers was not preceded with the traditional imperial bodyguard but was instead flanked by bishops and other religious leaders.²⁶ At other ecumenical councils, bishops were usually the moderators or leaders of debate. Constantine's control over the council set a new precedent with a seemingly secular public figure in control of church affairs.

The Council of Nicaea was a very public act in 325 despite the vague precautions that Constantine had taken before 324. This was likely due to his newfound leadership as the uncontested emperor of Rome after his defeat of Licinius. No other emperor had called such a profound and wide scale council before stressing Constantine's importance of Christianity that he placed on the Roman Empire. The fact that he not only called, but headed the council to discuss religious doctrine shows a clear interest in what was the growing religion. Another factor of the Council of Nicaea was not just its religious ramifications, but also its uniformity throughout the empire. Because the church

²⁵ Barnes, 216.

²⁶ Ibid., 215.

received instructions on uniform doctrines and standardized beliefs, the divisions and sects ceased to exist. In turn, unifying a religion that was beginning to permeate the entire empire was to bring unification in it as well. Constantine's involvement was genius in the fact that it served a two-fold purpose for control in both aspects of the empire.

The sincerity of Constantine's conversion through the above evidence is clear. His father Constantius, like so many fathers do, had a clear influence over the young Constantine. The vision of Constantine preceding the Battle of Milvian Bridge and the victory over Maxentius was likely the event that was the ultimate catalyst in the legitimacy of his conversion. The triumphal entry into Rome was a direct result following the battle. The Edict of Milan and letters to Caecilianus and Anulinus showed the difference that Constantine had to live in two different lives, public and private. The arch and coinage of Constantine also showed his devotion to tradition while using a symbol that could be interpreted in multiple ways. Finally, the Council of Nicaea was the ultimate display of Constantine's interest and sincerity in Christianity for religious and secular reasons. This battery of evidence throughout Constantine's life shows his conversion as a sincere act despite the public and private lives that Constantine had to lead.

Bibliography

- Alfoldi, Andrew. *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- Barnes, Timothy D. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- _____. "Constantine's Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice." *The American Journal of Philology* 105, issue 1 (Spring 1984): 69-72.
- Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Age of Constantine the Great*. New York: Panteon Books, 1949.
- Croke, Brian. "The Originality of Eusebius' Chronicle." *The American Journal of Philology* 103, issue 2 (Summer 1982): 195-200.
- Drake, H. A. *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Elliot, Thomas G. "The Language of Constantine's Propaganda." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 120, (1990): 349-353.
- Eusebius. *The Ecclesiastical History Volume II*. London: Harvard University Press, 1964.
- _____. *Vita Constantini*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.
- Hadas, Moses. "Review: The Conversion of Constantine." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 41, issue 4 (April 1951): 423-424.
- Jones, A. H. M. *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978.
- Laistner, M. "Review: Untitled." *American Journal of Archaeology* 53, issue 4 (October – December 1949): 421-422.
- Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Lenski, Noel. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Lewis, Naphtali and Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Empire Selected Readings: The Empire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Lissner, Ivar. *The Caesars: Might and Madness*. New York: Van Reese Press, 1958.

Mackay, Christopher S. "Lactantius and the Succession of Diocletian." *Classical Philology* 94, issue 2 (April 1999): 198-209.

Marlowe, Elizabeth. "Framing the Sun: The Arch of Constantine and the Roman Cityscape." *Art Bulletin* 88, issue 2 (June 2006): 223-242.