

Constantine's Devotion to the Sun after 324

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Constantine won his victory over Maxentius *instinctu divinitatis*, as the famous inscription on his triumphal arch reads. It has been debated as to what deity this is referring; in any case there is no iconographic evidence whatsoever to support a Christian interpretation¹. On the other hand, the arch is full of solar symbols. There can be no doubt that at this stage Sol invictus was at least as important to Constantine as Jesus Christ. However, this changed after 324, when Constantine became ruler of the whole empire. After that date, his religious policy was very favourable to the Christians, to say the least. Therefore, it is the *communis opinio*, that solar elements were eliminated². It is the purpose of this paper to re-examine the evidence for this topic.

Firstly, I will try to give a very brief sketch of the belief in the invincible Sun and its significance for religious policy in the Roman empire before 324.

¹ CIL 6,1139 = ILS 694. For the iconography and its interpretation cf. H. P. L'Orange; A. v. Gerkan, *Der spätantike Bildschmuck des Konstantinsbogens* (Berlin, 1939, reprint 1978). Constantine is (and has been for a long time) a preferred topic of scholarly research in late antiquity. Recent studies include Th. Grünwald, *Constantinus Maximus Augustus. Herrschaftspropaganda in der zeitgenössischen Überlieferung* (Stuttgart, 1990); J. Bleicken, *Konstantin der Große und die Christen* (München, 1992); R. Leeb, *Konstantin und Christus. Die Verchristlichung der imperialen Repräsentation unter Konstantin dem Großen als Spiegel seiner Kirchenpolitik und seines Selbstverständnisses als christlicher Kaiser* (Berlin, 1992); P. Weiß, 'Die Vision Konstantins', *Colloquium aus Anlaß des 80. Geburtstages von Alfred Heuß*, ed. J. Bleicken (Kallmünz, 1993), pp. 143-169; K. Bringmann, 'Die konstantinische Wende. Zum Verhältnis von politischer und religiöser Motivation', *Historische Zeitschrift* 260 (1995), pp. 21-47; M. Clauss, *Konstantin der Große und seine Zeit* (München, 1996); B. Bleckmann, *Konstantin der Große* (Reinbek, 1996); A. M. Ritter, 'Konstantin und die Christen', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 87 (1996), pp. 251-268; K. Groß-Albenhausen, 'Zur christlichen Selbstdarstellung Konstantins', *Klio* 78 (1996), pp. 171-185; K. M. Girardet, 'Die Konstantinische Wende und ihre Bedeutung für das Reich. Althistorische Überlegungen zu den geistigen Grundlagen der Religionspolitik Konstantins d. Gr.', *Die Konstantinische Wende*, ed. E. Mühlberg (Gütersloh, 1998), pp. 9-122; F. Winkelmann, 'Die "Konstantinische Wende" und ihre Bedeutung für die Kirche', *ibid.*, pp. 123-143; T. D. Barnes, 'Constantine and Christianity. Ancient Evidence and Modern Interpretations', *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 2 (1998), pp. 274-294; S. Rebenich, 'Vom dreizehnten Gott zum dreizehnten Apostel? Der tote Kaiser in der Spätantike', *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 4 (2000), in print.

I should like to thank Dr. Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (University of Cambridge) who kindly undertook the tedious task of improving my English phrasing.

² The most recent author insisting on this view is Bleicken *op. cit.* (n. 1), who sees a 'conversion' of Constantine in 324.

Then, in the main part of the paper I will aim to draw a careful distinction between two types of material, the archaeological evidence on the one hand, and the literary evidence on the other. The latter, of course, consists mainly of the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea. To attempt methodologically to keep these two apart is not new, it has been tried many times before³. However, in practice it has turned out to be extremely difficult to draw a picture of Constantine, *remoto Eusebio*, as it were. The information handed down by the Christian bishop comes in just too handy, and it is just too extensive to be entirely discarded. As difficult as maintaining both bodies of evidence separate may be in general, however, I think it may well be possible in the limited perspective of one particular aspect, the devotion to the sun in this case. So, the purpose of the present paper is not only 'zu sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen', to use the famous formulation by Leopold Ranke⁴, but also to give a paradigmatic analysis of Eusebius' representation of Constantine which may help us to evaluate his information in other cases as well.

1. Sol invictus before 324

Long before Constantine's time the Sun god had already become a central deity in Roman religion. Indeed, we can follow the growth of this element right from the beginning of the monarchy⁵. This growth is fostered by, among other factors, the old affinity of the one emperor on earth to the one sun in the sky. Two important steps in this development are marked by Augustus and Nero, who both make extensive use of solar symbols in their imperial propaganda. The latter in particular introduced an iconographic element which was to become the solar epithet of the emperors *par excellence*, namely the radiate crown⁶. The big era of the sun cult came during the crisis of the empire in the third century; the reign of Elagabalus at the beginning of that century remained a short, if significant episode⁷. This highly eccentric Syrian tried to impose his local cult of the Sun god of Emesa on the entire empire. The reason for his failure was not so much opposition to the idea of solar monotheism

³ The most recent attempt is by Leeb *op. cit.* (n. 1), cf. however Groß-Albenhausen *op. cit.* (n. 1).

⁴ From the preface of his *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* (1824).

⁵ Cf. now M. Bergmann, *Die Strahlen der Herrscher. Theomorphes Herrscherbild und politische Symbolik im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz, 1998), with reference to further bibliography.

⁶ Cf. Bergmann *op. cit.* (n. 5) 133-230.

⁷ The bizarre figure of this emperor has attracted considerable attention in recent research, cf. R. Turcan, *Héliogabale et le sacre du soleil* (Paris, 1985); M. Pietrzykowski, 'Die Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal', *ANRW*, vol. 2,16,3 (Berlin, 1986), pp. 1806-1825; M. Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal* (Stuttgart, 1989).

in general but rather to the oriental attitude with which he connected it. Half a century later, Aurelian made another attempt at the same goal, but in a more sober, more 'Roman' way, as it were, and he had more success. The form in which he introduced the sun cult as the central cult for the empire was that of Sol invictus. The origins of this particular title are not yet entirely clear. The epithet 'invincible' points in the direction of the military sphere. It seems to be a specific Roman deity, and there is not much evidence for the alleged oriental origin which (following Franz Cumont) is often claimed in older literature⁸.

However, it would not be sufficient to describe the phenomenon merely as a political issue. The official support for the sun cult under Aurelian was in keeping with a general tendency observable in various fields of religion in late antiquity. I can give just a few examples to illustrate the range of the field. The ever growing popularity of astrology certainly added to the estimation in which the sun was held, being the first and most important of the seven planets. The planets in general and the sun in particular also held a certain significance for magic rituals and invocations of the godhead. Astrology and magic, however, must not be seen solely as a religious substitute for the uneducated masses. On the contrary, the veneration of the sun was an important element of the religion of the intellectual elite, the Platonist philosophers. The background to this was formed by the metaphysics of light, which played a major role in late antique philosophy. Finally, many of the popular mystery religions tried to integrate the sun in some way. This is true in particular for the mysteries of Mithras. The relationship between Mithras and Sol invictus is very close, although it never becomes totally transparent⁹. On the one hand, there are many inscriptions devoting altars *Deo Soli Mithrae* or *Soli Invicto Mithrae*, which may imply an identification of the two gods. On the other, there are representations where the two appear as separate godheads. This uncertainty may not only be due to our poor knowledge of Mithraism, but may indeed be characteristic of late antique syncretism in general. The identification of different godheads with the Sun god enabled reconciliation of various beliefs under one roof without totally erasing the identities of the individual traditions. Thus it allowed a 'smooth' transition from polytheism to monotheism¹⁰.

⁸ This point has been made by S. E. Hijmans, 'The Sun which did not rise in the East. The Cult of Sol Invictus in the Light of Non-Literary Evidence', *Babesch. Bulletin antieke beschaving* 71 (1996), pp. 115-150 over against more conventional works such as G. H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden, 1972). Among the numerous and wide-spread writings of Franz Cumont I only quote his famous *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, first published in Paris, 1906, with many reprints and translations in various languages.

⁹ Cf. M. Clauss, 'Sol Invictus Mithras', *Athenaeum* 78 (1990), pp. 423-450.

¹⁰ A characteristic example for this tendency is Macrobius, *sat.* 1,17-23. For more detailed references cf. M. Wallraff, *Christus Verus Sol. Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike* (submitted as *Habilitationsschrift* to the University of Bonn in 1999, publication in preparation), esp. chapter 1.2; on the tendency towards monotheism in general cf. now P. Athanasiadi; M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999).

All this must be borne in mind in order to understand the attractiveness of solar monotheism for emperors like Aurelian and, half a century later, Constantine. What these two emperors have in common is the fact that both attempted to integrate the religion of the whole empire under the umbrella of the cult of the sun. The difference between the two, however, was their attitude towards Christianity. Whereas to Aurelian Christianity was a marginal issue, to which he did not devote much attention, Constantine was very aware of its significance right from the beginning of his reign. When he had a solar vision in 310 he ensured that a Christian interpretation was also circulated¹¹. As I mentioned above, the triumphal arch in Rome shows an extensive use of solar symbols. On the east side there is a representation of the rising Sun god (fig. 1); the most characteristic feature which links the emperors in particular to the sun is the use of the nimbus behind the emperors' heads¹². In this case, there is no concrete disposition for a Christian interpretation. However, it is not excluded, and certainly the formulation *instinctu divinitatis* is deliberately open and diffuse.

Let me adduce some further evidence to illustrate the profile of Constantine's religious policy between 312 and 324. There is, of course, the well-known Ticinum silver coin of 315 with the small christogram on a soldier's helmet¹³. It is justly famous because it is the first instance of the use of a Christian symbol in official imperial propaganda. But one must not lose sight of the correlation. Alongside this one coin displaying a Christian background there are a large number of sol-comes-coins, where the emperor and the Sun god are represented as companions (cf. e.g. fig. 3)¹⁴.

The results of the recent excavations of the imperial palace on the premises of the Laterani in Rome are still very little known¹⁵. In particular one fresco with two interesting features has been preserved. The main motif is a huge charioteer who is holding the reins of two horses or rather fabulous animals, half-horse, half-fish, which are about to emerge from the sea. This iconography leaves no doubt but that we are dealing with a representation of the Sun god rising from the Okeanos. The other remarkable feature on the same wall is one of the earliest known christograms (or, to be precise, stau-

¹¹ Weiß *op. cit.* (n. 1) 160 has shown that in all likelihood there was one vision only. The pagan and the Christian sources (*Paneg.lat.* 6[7],21,3-7; Lactantius, *mort.* 44,5; Eusebius, *v.C.* 1,28 f.) both refer to the same event in 310. Therefore, the connection with the battle at the Milvian bridge in 312 is secondary.

¹² Cf. L'Orange/von Gerkan *op. cit.* (n. 1) 162-181.

¹³ Cf. (among many others) Leeb *op. cit.* (n. 1) 29-42 and fig. 7.

¹⁴ This fact is not new but it sometimes tends to fall into oblivion. Therefore, Bleicken *op. cit.* (n. 1) 39 f. justly draws our attention to it.

¹⁵ Cf. the excavation report by V. Santa Maria Scrinari, *Il Laterano imperiale*, 3 vols (Roma, 1991-97).

rograms), bearing the inscription 'signo [h]oc est patris victoria', dated 315¹⁶. The peaceful juxtaposition of the two motifs, the pagan and the Christian one, does not seem to suggest that the author saw a fundamental contradiction between the two symbols. But again one has to take notice of the correlation: whereas one horse alone is more than 3 feet high, the Christian symbol is part of one inscription among others, and its size is only about 4 inches.

I cannot provide more details here, since my main focus is the period after 324. It would be interesting, for instance, to analyse the law on the *dies solis*, whose intention is certainly not as Christian as Eusebius wants us to believe¹⁷. For the moment we can keep in mind as a provisional result that Constantine's religious policy prior to 324 shows an explicit interest both in Christianity and solar monotheism, but that emphasis falls clearly on the latter. Furthermore, these two aspects should not and cannot be seen as two divergent or even contradictory tendencies, but as an attempt at integrating the religious culture of the whole empire.

2. Archaeological evidence after 324

As I mentioned already, the *communis opinio* is that the ambiguity of Constantine's religious policy came to an end after his victory over Licinius in 324 at the latest. It is certainly true that the focus of Constantine's attention shifted to the East once he had become ruler of this part of the empire as well. Moreover, this automatically meant that Christianity assumed a greater significance, since the East was christianised to a much higher degree than the West. It is also true that a number of small but significant changes in imperial propaganda indicated a loss of interest in references to the sun. The title *invictus* on official inscriptions for the emperor was replaced by *victor*¹⁸, thereby removing the allusion to Sol invictus without changing the meaning. Furthermore, the sol-comes coinage gradually disappeared. This transformation, however, did not occur overnight. There are instances of sol-comes coins after 324, and the same applies to the radiate crown on coins which was used less after that date, but not immediately abandoned¹⁹. The nimbus, on the other hand, remained in use in imperial iconography even after Constan-

¹⁶ For the fresco cf. Santa Maria Scrinari *op. cit.* (n. 15) vol. 1, fig. 106, described on p. 139 f., for the inscription cf. fig. 129 f., described on p. 163 f., deciphered on p. 172.

¹⁷ The main sources are *cod.Iust.* 3,12,2; *cod.Theod.* 2,8,1; Eusebius, *v.C.* 4,18 f. 23; cf. the discussion of this material in Wallraff *op. cit.* (n. 10) chapter 2.3.

¹⁸ Cf. Grünwald *op. cit.* (n. 1) 136 f.

¹⁹ Cf. M. R. Alföldi, 'Die Sol comes-Münze vom Jahre 325. Neues zur Bekehrung Konstantins', *Mullus. Festschrift Theodor Klauser* (Münster, 1964), pp. 10-16. The radiate crown is still used on a golden multiplum of 326 (Antioch, RIC 7,689, Nr. 70).

tine, whence it made its way into the world of Christian iconography, as is well known²⁰.

Nevertheless, on the whole, the interest in solar symbolism in imperial propaganda seems to fade. However, a number of remarkable monuments with political as well as religious significance appear to contradict this impression. In Termessos in Asia minor, for instance, the local government dedicated a statue 'to Constantine, the all-seeing Sun (Ἡλίῳ Παντεπόπτη)'²¹. This inscription cannot be dismissed as a provincial lapse. A statue for the emperor had a certain political impact, and it is unlikely, therefore, that it was not approved by the official authorities. All the more so since a parallel inscription is found on a distinguished monument in the new capital of the East.

In 324 Constantine founded the city on the Bosporus which is named after him, building it as a 'new Rome', the political focus of the East with the attendant burden and beauty that such entailed. It is significant therefore that he had a porphyry column erected on the crest of the hill, at the highest point of the peninsula²². About two thirds of the column is still standing, and even in its present state the *Çemberlitaş*, as it is called nowadays, dominates the city and, of course, the surrounding sea. It must have been even more impressive when the statue on top of this column was still there. In the medieval *Tabula Peutingeriana* a representation of this symbol of the city has been preserved, depicting a huge man with a lance in one hand and a globe in the other (fig. 4). From various Byzantine literary sources we know that the statue was facing east and that its head was surrounded by a radiate crown²³. Hence, the iconography

²⁰ For the nimbus in early Christian art A. Krücke, *Der Nimbus und verwandte Attribute in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (Straßburg, 1905) is still indispensable, cf. furthermore D. Korol, 'Zum Bild der Vertreibung Adams und Evas in der neuen Katakomba an der Via Latina und zur anthropomorphen Darstellung Gottvaters', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 22 (1979), pp. 175-190; J. Miziolek, 'Transfiguratio Domini in the Apsse at Mount Sinai and the Symbolism of Light', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 53 (1990), pp. 42-60; A. Böck, 'Mandorla', *RBK*, vol. 6, part 41 (Stuttgart, 1997), coll. 1-17.

²¹ *Tituli Asiae Minoris*, vol. 3, *Tituli Pisidiae*, fasc. 1, *Tituli Termessi et Agri Termessensis*, ed. R. Heberdey (Wien, 1941), nr. 45. The dating given by Heberdey (before 324) is not based on archaeological evidence but on the (alleged) fact that no solar symbols were used after 324. As we shall see this is not true. On the contrary, it can be ruled out that a city in Asia minor dedicated a monument to Constantine before his victory over Licinius in 324.

²² The key study is still Th. Preger, 'Konstantin-Helios', *Hermes* 36 (1901), pp. 457-469, where all relevant sources are collected. For the interpretation cf. also I. Karayannopoulos, 'Konstantin der Große und der Kaiserkult', *Historia* 5 (1956), pp. 341-357 (= *Römischer Kaiserkult*, ed. A. Wlosok [Darmstadt, 1978], pp. 485-508); G. Dagron, *Naissance d'une Capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris, 1974), pp. 38 f.; A. Berger, *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* (Bonn, 1988), pp. 297-299; Leeb *op. cit.* (n. 1) 12-17; P. Speck, 'Urbs, quam Deo donavimus. Konstantins Konzept für Konstantinopel', *Boreas* 18 (1995), pp. 143-173: 160-168; Bergmann *op. cit.* (n. 5) 284-287. The scholarly debate leaves no doubt about the solar iconography of the statue.

²³ John Malalas, *chron.* 13 (320,12 Dindorf); *Chronicon Paschale*, ad ann. 328 (528 Dindorf); further material is quoted by Preger *op. cit.* (n. 22).

leaves little doubt but that we are dealing with a representation of Helios, the Sun god. The original inscription of the column has been preserved in literary sources as well, and it confirms this identification. It reads very much like the above mentioned inscription of Termessos: 'For Constantine who is shining like the Sun (Κωνσταντίνῳ λάμποντι ἡλίου δίκην)'²⁴. In this way, the old Byzantium became the new City of Constantine, Κωνσταντινούπολις, but at the same time it also became the new City of the imperial Sun. The statue certainly asserts a political claim, the claim of the emperor to see everything and to rule over everything like the sun. But in addition it also had a religious dimension. This is apparent in the form of veneration it received from the beginning. Already during the official inauguration ceremonies of the new city the statue played an important role, although it is not entirely clear to what extent the character of these ceremonies was Christian²⁵. More significantly, the statue remained a popular centre of veneration even during the following Christian centuries. Philostorgius reports in the middle of the 5th century that 'the Christians try to appease with sacrifices the image of Constantine, which stands on the porphyry column, they venerate it with incense and candles, and they worship it like a god, and perform apotropaic rites against mischief'²⁶. The cult of the emperor (and of the sun at the same time), for the sake of which Christians had once suffered martyrdom, had now become part of Christian popular religion.

This statue is not the only piece of evidence for Constantine's particular affinity with the sun. At the beginning of the 18th century a bronze statuette of about 20 inches was found in Tømmerby, Denmark²⁷. It represents a male person wearing a long tunic with a diadem on his forehead and a radiate crown around his head. This iconography clearly points to the Constantinian era — the diadem was not used earlier nor the radiate crown later²⁸ — but it cannot be a copy of the statue on the porphyry column, since the latter constitutes a nude figure. What it does resemble in fact is another statue of Constantine, likewise known from literary sources²⁹. These describe a rite which was per-

²⁴ According to the group of chronicles named after Symeon Logothetes (or Magistros), 10th cent., e.g. Leo Grammaticus (CSHB 34, 87, 17 Bekker); cf. also *Patria* 1,45 (138, 13 Preger). For more detailed references cf. Preger *op. cit.* (n. 22) 462.

²⁵ The sources are various passages from the *Patria Konstantinupoleos*, cf. Dagron *op. cit.* (n. 22) 37-42.

²⁶ *h.e.* 2,17, cf. also Theodoret, *h.e.* 1,34,3.

²⁷ Only in recent years has a serious discussion of this piece of evidence developed, cf. Leeb *op. cit.* (n. 1) 17-21; E. Poulsen, 'A Bronze Portrait Statuette of the Sovereign-Sun of about 500 AD (Theoderic?)', *Bronces y religion romana, Actas del XI Congreso internacional de bronceos antiguos*, ed. J. Arce and F. Burkhalter (Madrid, 1993), pp. 349-360; Bergmann *op. cit.* (n. 5) 287 f.

²⁸ Cf. Poulsen *op. cit.* (n. 27) 354.

²⁹ *Chronicon Paschale*, ad ann. 330 (530 Dindorf); John Malalas, *chron.* 13 (322,6-15 Dindorf); *Patria* 2,87 (196,1-11 Preger), on this passage cf. Berger *op. cit.* (n. 22) 550-555.

formed on 11 May to commemorate the inauguration of the city in 330. On this occasion a statue of Constantine was carried into the hippodrome, accompanied by a solemn procession of citizens wearing white garments and carrying candles in their hands. This ritual repetition of the *adventus* of the emperor obviously had strong religious connotations in a pagan sense — which is probably why it was abolished later in the fourth century. The sources identify the vehicle on which the statue was standing with the chariot of the sun³⁰, an identification which seems to imply that the statue showed elements of solar iconography. This is certainly true for the Copenhagen statue with the radiate crown and the garment resembling that of the charioteer on Constantine's arch. However, the statue is probably not the original since the hairstyle is not that of the Constantinian era. The most likely solution is that it is a copy of the statue which was used in the hippodrome³¹.

The most significant and most interesting use of solar symbols by Constantine is found on his consecration coin (fig. 2). It is the last word and the legacy of the dead emperor and his religious policy. Here too we find a person on a quadriga, driving upwards towards the sky. From above a hand is stretching out to receive the charioteer. The precise significance of this iconography has been debated³², as a result of which two important statements can be made. Firstly, this coin cannot be understood without the tradition of solar iconography. Here it may be sufficient to recall the Sol on Constantine's arch in Rome. And secondly, the coin contains no hint of a Christian background. In particular the ascension of Christ or Elijah is not being alluded to since both these scenes only develop much later³³. Furthermore, the ascension of Christ cannot be said to draw upon solar motifs, and the ascension of Elijah needs further iconographic details to be qualified as such. This does not mean that it was impossible for a Christian to be reminded of Christ's ascension on seeing the coin, but that the association was rather remote; in any case the primary interpretation, that is the solar one, was dominant. Even Eusebius was not able to offer a Christian reading, as we shall see below³⁴.

³⁰ *Parastaseis* 38 (42,8-14 Preger); *Patria* 42 (173,1-3 Preger).

³¹ Poulsen *op. cit.* (n. 27) favours a similar solution, but his article suffers from the fact that he is unaware of the literary evidence for this (second) statue. He only refers to the one on the porphyry column.

³² Cf. P. Bruun, 'The Consecration Coins of Constantine the Great', *Arctos* 1 (1957), pp. 19-31; L. Koep, 'Die Konsekrationsmünzen Kaiser Konstantins und ihre religionspolitische Bedeutung', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 1 (1958), pp. 94-104 (= *Römischer Kaiserkult*, ed. A. Wlosok [Darmstadt, 1978], pp. 509-527); L. Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, 'Zur Darstellung der Himmelfahrt Constantins des Großen', *Jenseitsvorstellungen in Antike und Christentum. Gedenkschrift für Alfred Stuiber* (Münster, 1982), pp. 215-224; Leeb *op. cit.* (n. 1) 21 f.; Claus *op. cit.* (n. 1) 97 f.

³³ Cf. Kötzsche-Breitenbruch *op. cit.* (n. 32) 217.

³⁴ v.C. 4,73, see below n. 46.

What is certainly unusual on the consecration coin is the hand from the sky: there are no parallels in similar imperial representations. However, the enigma cannot be resolved by an appeal to Christian tradition, because there are no parallels there either³⁵. The nearest we can get is a pagan text, a panegyric to Constantine's father, who is consecrated, *Iove ipso dexteram porrigente*³⁶. If Jove stretched out his right hand to receive Constantius, the identity of the deity to whom the hand on Constantine's coin belongs needs to be addressed. As in the case of the *divinitas* on his triumphal arch, there is no clear answer, and the ambiguity is probably deliberate. However, attempts to find the answer cannot ignore the context of the solar iconography.

Finally, an examination of the architecture in Constantinople should also prove useful, in particular the most representative buildings of the new city, the Church of the Apostles and the Hagia Sophia. The problem in both cases, however, is that absolutely nothing has survived, and in the case of Hagia Sophia it is not even certain that a Constantinian structure ever existed. Hence, what I say about these buildings remains highly hypothetical and sketchy. When Justinian built the new Hagia Sophia, he had a number of statues removed. These included the twelve *zodia*, the moon and other astrological figures. It can be argued that these statues formed part of a Constantinian sanctuary of imperial wisdom³⁷. If this was the case, it would be surprising if the sun had not played a major role in this ensemble.

When we turn to the Church of the Apostles, it is totally impossible to adhere to the principle of not using Eusebius. Without him we would know virtually nothing about the Constantinian building which served primarily as the mausoleum of the emperor. Not surprisingly, Eusebius gives an *interpretatio christiana* of the construction³⁸. The imperial sarcophagus was in the middle of twelve holy monuments (στυλαί ἱεραί), which in Eusebius's interpretation are symbols of the twelve apostles. From a Christian perspective, the problem was that this clearly implied an identification of the emperor with Christ. This problem was resolved at a later period by the removal of the emperor's sarcophagus³⁹. It can be asked whether from a pagan perspective the original disposition could not also be seen as the symbols of the twelve *zodia*

³⁵ Cf. K. Groß, *Menschenhand und Gotteshand in Antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart, 1985), pp. 412-416; L. Kötzsche, 'Hand II (ikonographisch)', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 13 (Stuttgart, 1986), coll. 402-482: 423-425.

³⁶ *Paneg.lat.* 6[7],7,3.

³⁷ Cf. my forthcoming article 'Gab es eine konstantinische Hagia Sophia in Konstantinopel?', paper presented at the *Congressus Internationalis XIV Archaeologiae Christianae*, Vienna, 19-26.ix.1999.

³⁸ v.C. 4,58-60. The concrete shape of the monument is and always will be debated. In my opinion, the most likely hypothesis is by C. Mango, 'Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83 (1990), pp. 51-62.

³⁹ John Chrysostom, *Contra Iudaeos et gentiles* 9 (PG 48,825).

with the sun in the centre. We will probably never find an answer to this question, not even with the results of excavations on the site of the modern *Mehmet Fâtih Camii*.

Rather than resorting to further guesswork, let us summarise. It would be erroneous to say that after 324 Constantine totally dismissed every reference to the Sun god in his policy. On the contrary, the profile of the new capital on the Bosphorus which had high programmatic value showed a new and intensified interest in solar symbols. At this point the question arises, how this interest related to the clear promotion of Christianity. I will return to this question after a brief analysis of the picture presented by Eusebius.

3. Literary Evidence in Eusebius

The bishop of Caesarea dealt with Constantine at some length, in particular in his 'Life of Constantine' and the panegyric writings, which are grouped together under the title 'In Praise of Constantine', though they consist of two distinct pieces. These works were written in the second half of the fourth decade of the fourth century, so they reflect the state of the Constantinian era in its last phase⁴⁰. Obviously the learned bishop gives a very Christian and a very positive image of Constantine, he presents him as the first Christian emperor. Even a superficial reading of Eusebius's writings will suffice to confirm this impression, and he has been reproached more than once for his uncritical and sycophantic attitude⁴¹. It is not the topic of this paper to discuss whether or not such reproaches are justified.

What matters here is this: how does Eusebius deal with Constantine's particular interest in solar religion? First of all, it is not true to say that he totally conceals this interest. On the contrary, at various occasions he takes up the solar ideology of monarchy and presents Constantine as *roi soleil*: 'As the sun, when it rises upon the earth, liberally imparts his rays of light to all, so did Constantine, proceeding at early dawn from the imperial palace, and rising as it were with the heavenly luminary, impart the rays of his own beneficence to all who came into his presence.'⁴² In the euphoria of his panegyric style he does not even refrain from using the old pagan mythical picture of the Sun god on his chariot driving across the sky. The four horses are compared with the Caesars: 'Thus, having yoked the four valiant Caesars like colts beneath the single yoke of the Imperial chariot, [Constantine] controls them with the reins

⁴⁰ Cf. F. Winkelmann, *Euseb von Kaisareia. Der Vater der Kirchengeschichte* (Berlin, 1991), pp. 147 f.

⁴¹ Cf. Winkelmann *op. cit.* (n. 40) 9-15.

⁴² v.C. 1,43,3, tr. NPNF. The new translation and commentary of Eusebius' Life of Constantine by A. Cameron and S. G. Hall (Oxford, 1999) was not yet available to me.

of holy harmony and concord. Holding the reins high above them, he rides along, traversing all lands alike that the sun gazes upon, himself present everywhere and watching over everything.⁴³

What is surprising about these statements is not so much the rhetorical exaggeration and the idealised image of the emperor — in this genre nobody expected critical historiography — but the extensive use of pagan motifs in a religiously sensitive field. In Eusebius, this concession to imperial ideology is combined with and made possible by a very critical and restrictive attitude when it comes to religion in the narrow sense. Even in his panegyric writings he leaves no doubt about his rejection of all syncretistic attempts at combining Christianity with other religions. He praises the religious policy of Constantine which has led to the official recognition and positive development of Christianity. 'Everywhere men have organised for the study of Holy Scripture and are edified by the saving doctrines, so as no longer to be frightened of any creature visible to eyes of flesh nor to look with awe upon the sun or moon or stars and attribute miracles to these, but rather to acknowledge the One above these, the invisible and imperceptible Universal Creator, having learned to worship Him alone.'⁴⁴ It is certainly not by chance that Eusebius does not mention forms of pagan religion other than the particular devotion to celestial bodies. The emperor, who was present when this text was recited on the occasion of the thirtieth jubilee of his reign, cannot have failed to notice the critical attitude towards solar religion. In another panegyric Eusebius goes even further. He describes astral religion as the fall of mankind which necessitated the incarnation of the *logos*⁴⁵.

It is precisely this radical criticism which enables Eusebius, on the other hand, to praise the emperor as sun-king. In an offhand manner one might say that Eusebius suggests a compromise with Constantine: I am prepared to accept that the emperor is the true sun, if the emperor is prepared to accept that the sun is no god, but a creature of the one Christian God.

Finally, we might ask how Eusebius deals with the above mentioned measures where the emperor used solar symbolism overtly and programmatically, and not only in a political sense. Three different tactics can be observed. Wherever possible Eusebius tries to give a Christian interpretation, as was the case with the imperial mausoleum, the so-called Church of the Apostles. We do not know to what extent this Christian interpretation was justified by the building itself. Where such an interpretation was not possible, Eusebius sometimes confined himself to a mere description without any further comment. This is the case with the consecration coin, about which he writes: 'A Coinage was also

⁴³ I.C. 3,4, tr. H. A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine. A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations* (Berkeley, 1976).

⁴⁴ I.C. 10,2, tr. Drake.

⁴⁵ I.C. 13,1. Chapters 11-18 originally formed a distinct work.

struck which bore the following device. On one side appeared the figure of our blessed prince, with the head closely veiled: the reverse exhibited him as a charioteer, drawn by four horses, with a hand stretched downward from above to receive him up to heaven.⁴⁶ And, thirdly, where even a mere description was too offensive for Christian readers, he passed over it in silence. This is the case with the column with the Helios statue on top. If he knew Constantinople (which he certainly did⁴⁷) he must have known this statue as well. However, it is not mentioned in his writings.

What conclusions can be drawn from the material I have presented? What can we learn about Constantine's religious policy? Is the traditional picture which presents him as the first Christian emperor who brought about the *Konstantinische Wende* incorrect? There is no point in denying the clear pro-Christian religious policy, especially after 324, which is well attested in Eusebius and many other sources. However, there are a number of facts which at first sight seem to contradict this picture. Within a few days Constantine had himself baptised, and he had the coin struck where he is represented as Sun god. What does that mean? Was he a schizoid person? Or did his different ministers and advisers act independently because the old emperor was no longer able to co-ordinate his policy?

The latter is, in my opinion, the worst possible hypothesis. It is much more plausible to assume that Constantine did not see contradictions where we see them. Very much along the lines of his predecessors, especially Aurelian, he started from the old equation: one god — one sun — one emperor. So, Constantine added, why not also one Christ? From the beginning his policy was characterised by support for both Christianity and solar monotheism. Whereas before 324 emphasis was clearly on the latter, Christianity became more significant after that date, but as we have seen this did not mean at all that Constantine abandoned his devotion to the sun. He still adhered to the idea of the integration of the whole religious culture of the empire. Later on, this was achieved within the framework of the Christian Church, leading to the total rupture of all other religious traditions. Constantine did not wish and could not imagine such a solution.

We can probably assume correctly that he considered himself a Christian, but what he understood by Christianity was quite different from what we understand, and from what even the contemporary theologians understood by Christianity. Therefore, the theologians found themselves in an embarrassing situation. On the one hand, they had to acknowledge that the situation for the Church had improved very much thanks to Constantine's initiative, and they were sincerely grateful for that. On the other hand, they did not know what to

⁴⁶ v.C. 4,73, tr. NPNF altered.

⁴⁷ Cf. T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Ma., 1981), p. 253.

make of the highly individual form of Christianity Constantine claimed for himself. This can be seen particularly well in the case of the imperial mausoleum where he was buried as a new Christ. It took several generations to adapt this situation to orthodoxy. The beginning of this adaptation process is the description given by Eusebius.

As far as the devotion to the sun is concerned, Eusebius tried to resolve the problem by a neat separation between the realm of politics and the realm of religion. Such a separation, intelligent as it may be, was never intended by Constantine. On the contrary, for him like every Roman emperor before him, religion and politics were closely related and depended on each other.

Likewise, it is not by chance that we have ample literary evidence for Constantine's promotion of the Christian Church, but mainly archaeological evidence for his devotion to the sun. The reason is not that the emperor was very careful not to leave any written traces, but the simple fact that Christian authors were highly selective in what they reported and what they omitted. In this sense Eusebius in particular was very biased, but at the same time, he rarely seems to be factually wrong.

In the long run, however, another strategy turned out to be more successful. The veneration of Constantine's statue shows that it was not easy to eliminate the sun from the people's belief. The best thing to do was to claim the true sun for the Christian faith. So, up to this day, Christians praise Jesus Christ as the Sun of righteousness.



fig. 1 Sol on Constantine's triumphal arch, Rome



fig. 2 Constantine, Consecration coin



fig. 3 Sol-comes coin

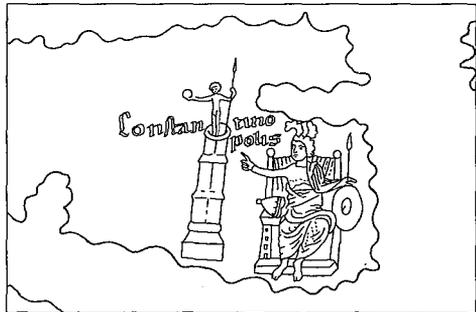


fig. 4 Tabula Peutingeriana

fig. 1 Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Rome

fig. 2 from A. Grabar, *Die Kunst des frühen Christentums* (München, 1967), fig. 214

fig. 3 from J. P. C. Kent e.a., *Die römische Münze* (München, 1973), Tafel XXIV

fig. 4 from M. Clauss, *Konstantin der Große und seine Zeit* (München, 1996), p. 92