

THE CONVERSION OF CONSTANTINE

c. 283	Born
306	Hailed as Augustus (emperor) by his father's army in Gaul
312	Battle of Milvian Bridge; victory over Maxentius
313	Edict of Milan; toleration for Christians
330	Dedication of Constantinople
337	Died



As Julius Caesar stood at the beginning of the Roman empire, Constantine stood at its end. For more than a century before his rise to power, the civil structure of the empire had been undermined by an increasing militarization of the monarchy that had finally degenerated into a bloody scramble among rival contenders for the imperial throne. Under the stress of nearly constant civil war, the economic system of the empire broke down. Coinage was hopelessly corrupt, trade was replaced by barter and payment in kind, and the empire was pillaged to support the forces of one general after another, one emperor after another. With the empire preoccupied by civil war, hordes of barbarians moved across its undefended frontiers to ravage some of its richest lands. The military system was barbarized, with the greater number of its soldiers recruited from the most remote and backward parts of the empire, from the frontier army camps, even with the direct cooptation of entire barbarian units. Civil law and civil order were almost nonexistent. Classical civilization itself seemed threatened not only by these ruinous assaults upon its economic and political system but by the bankruptcy of paganism as a system of thought and belief, resulting in the influx and chaotic growth of literally hundreds of eastern religious cults to which people of every class and station swarmed in the hope of personal immortality and release from the burdens of their earthly existence. Among these cults was Christianity.

In 305 Constantine joined his father in Gaul and crossed with him

to Britain for a campaign against the Picts. Within months Constantius died in his camp at York in northern England, and his soldiers promptly hailed his son Augustus. Constantine's political career had begun; he was in his early twenties. In the late summer of 312 Constantine took the initiative. Leaving the bulk of his army to protect the Rhine frontier, he took the rest of it south to Italy. Quickly disposing of the armies and overwhelming the fortifications of Maxentius in northern Italy, he pressed on toward Rome. At some point about this time there occurred for Constantine a profound conversion experience, and he became a Christian. It was under the sign and favor of his new Christian God that he defeated Maxentius at the ensuing battle of the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber. Maxentius was routed, and most of his troops perished in the river. On the following day, Maxentius's body was washed up on the shore. His head was cut off and carried into the city on a spear.

Constantine was the master of Rome and Italy. He pushed forward with what now had become a general civil war in the empire. Within two more years, he had eliminated his last remaining rivals and stood forth as sole emperor. But neither Constantine nor the empire was ever to be quite the same again. The emperor's conversion had changed both the man and his state. In 313 he proclaimed the Edict of Milan, which for the first time recognized the legality of the Christian religion throughout the empire. He ordered restitution for wrongs done to Christians under the recent persecutions. And for the rest of his long reign, he favored Christianity in every possible way. By 324 he had decided to establish a new imperial capital at the site of Byzantium in the Greek east. This New Rome was called Constantinople—the city of Constantine. It was dedicated in 330 to the Trinity and the Virgin Mary. Constantine was in the process of creating not only an eastern Roman empire but an empire that, from this time on, for more than a thousand years, would be fundamentally Christian. Thus the conversion of Constantine becomes one of the most important events in the history of Western civilization—and one of the most mysterious. Intriguing questions remain about what inspired Constantine's religious conversion. What really happened on the way to the Milvian Bridge? Why did it happen? And what did it mean?

The Life of Constantine

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA

The only contemporary account of Constantine's conversion is from The Life of Constantine by the Christian ecclesiastic, bishop, theologian, and historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340). He claims to have seen Constantine while still a boy, a member of Diocletian's court when that emperor visited Caesarea. But it was many years later when Eusebius came to know Constantine as emperor himself. Eusebius had been active during the Arian controversy of the 320s and at some point became a court figure and personal friend of the emperor. He was a voluminous writer. His Ecclesiastical History is the best source we have for the early history of the Christian church. After Constantine's death in 337, Eusebius wrote his Life of Constantine.

Eusebius belongs to the group known in early Christian tradition as the apologists—those who undertook specifically to defend Christianity against the claims of classical paganism. It was in this tradition that he wrote his Ecclesiastical History and his Life of Constantine. His intention in both was to prove that historic events moved in such a way as to be “pleasing to God, the Sovereign of all.” Thus, in his Life of Constantine, he says he intends “to pass over the greater part of the royal deeds of this thrice-blessed prince”—his battles, victories, triumphs, his legislative enactments and other imperial labors. Rather, he says, he will treat “of those circumstances only which have reference to his religious character” (1:484). Like the apologist he was, Eusebius sought—and found—every scrap of information that would presage the eventual Christian conversion of Constantine. He comes as close as possible to claiming that his father Constantius was a Christian, saying that he “entered into the friendship of the Supreme God” (1:485), and goes on to extol his clemency toward the Christians under his rule. Later on in his narrative he attributes the knowledge of “the God of his father” to Constantine (1:489). He attributes Constantine's own elevation to the will of God, declaring that of all his fellow rulers, “he is the only one to whose elevation no mortal may boast of having contributed” (ibid.).

Clearly, the conversion of Constantine must be the central incident in a career so auspiciously begun. Eusebius tells us what happened on the occasion of the conversion.

As soon then as he was established on the throne, he began to care for the interests of his paternal inheritance, and visited with much considerate kindness all those provinces which had previously been under his father's government. . . .

While, therefore, he regarded the entire world as one immense body, and perceived that the head of it all, the royal city of the Roman empire, was bowed down by the weight of a tyrannous oppression; at

first he had left the task of liberation to those who governed the other divisions of the empire, as being his superiors in point of age. But when none of these proved able to afford relief, and those who had attempted it had experienced a disastrous termination of their enterprise, he said that life was without enjoyment to him as long as he saw the imperial city thus afflicted, and prepared himself for the overthrow of the tyranny.

Being convinced, however, that he needed some more powerful aid than his military forces could afford him, on account of the wicked and magical enchantments which were so diligently practiced by the tyrant, he sought Divine assistance, deeming the possession of arms and a numerous soldiery of secondary importance, but believing the cooperating power of Deity invincible and not to be shaken. He considered, therefore, on what God he might rely for protection and assistance. While engaged in this enquiry, the thought occurred to him, that, of the many emperors who had preceded him, those who had rested their hopes in a multitude of gods, and served them with sacrifices and offerings, had in the first place been deceived by flattering predictions, and oracles which promised them all prosperity, and at last had met with an unhappy end, while not one of their gods had stood by to warn them of the impending wrath of heaven; while one alone who had pursued an entirely opposite course, who had condemned their error, and honored the one Supreme God during his whole life, had found him to be the Saviour and Protector of his empire, and the Giver of every good thing. Reflecting on this, and well weighing the fact that they who had trusted in many gods had also fallen by manifold forms of death, without leaving behind them either family or offspring, stock, name, or memorial among men: while the God of his father had given to him, on the other hand, manifestations of his power and very many tokens: and considering farther that those who had already taken arms against the tyrant, had marched to the battle-field under the protection of a multitude of gods, had met with a dishonorable end. . . .

... Reviewing, I say, all these considerations, he judged it to be folly indeed to join in the idle worship of those who were no gods, and, after such convincing evidence, to err from the truth; and therefore felt it incumbent on him to honor his father's God alone.

Accordingly he called on him with earnest prayer and supplications that he would reveal to him who he was, and stretch forth his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he was honored with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the

relation, especially since the testimony of after-time has established its truth? He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, Conquer by This. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle. . . .

He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies. . . .

At dawn of day he arose, and communicated the marvel to his friends: and then, calling together the workers in gold and precious stones, he sat in the midst of them, and described to them the figure of the sign he had seen, bidding them represent it in gold and precious stones. And this representation I myself have had an opportunity of seeing. . . .

Now it was made in the following manner: a long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a transverse bar laid over it. On the top of the whole was fixed a wreath of gold and precious stones; and within this, the symbol of the Saviour's name, two letters indicating the name of Christ by means of its initial characters, the letter P being intersected by X in its centre; and these letters the emperor was in the habit of wearing on his helmet at a later period. From the cross-bar of the spear was suspended a cloth, a royal piece, covered with a profuse embroidery of most brilliant precious stones; and which, being also richly interlaced with gold, presented an indescribable degree of beauty to the beholder. This banner was of a square form, and the upright staff, whose lower section was of great length, bore a golden half-length portrait of the pious emperor and his children on its upper part, beneath the trophy of the cross, and immediately above the embroidered banner.

The emperor constantly made use of this sign of salvation as a safeguard against every adverse and hostile power, and commanded that others similar to it should be carried at the head of all his armies.

These things were done shortly afterwards. But at the time above specified, being struck with amazement at the extraordinary vision, and resolving to worship no other God save Him who had appeared to him, he sent for those who were acquainted with the mysteries of His doctrines, and enquired who that God was, and what was intended by the sign of the vision he had seen.

They affirmed that He was God, the only begotten Son of the one and only God: that the sign which had appeared was the symbol of

years elapsed, and several avocations intervened" before the first volume of his famous book appeared in 1776. It was an immediate sensation and something of a scandal, mainly because of Gibbon's treatment of the history of early Christianity. The scandal, however, was more apparent than real. Unlike Voltaire, Gibbon was not a thoroughgoing skeptic in matters of religion. While it is true that his most famous dictum on the decline of Rome was, "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion," his more circumspect judgment is contained in another: "If the decline of the Roman empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine, his victorious religion broke the violence of the fall" (4:163).

If Gibbon was not a skeptic in matters of religion, he was still a figure of the Enlightenment and, as such, he introduced into historical writing and thinking the concept of natural causation, the idea that in the case of the decline of the Roman empire, that great and complex phenomenon ought to be explained in natural and rational terms arising out of the events themselves and not as a matter of prophecy or portent, predetermined destiny or the intervention of supernatural forces.

The conversion of Constantine is as central to Gibbon's history as it was to that of Eusebius. And Gibbon had, of course, to treat Eusebius as his primary source. But he does so with the greatest caution. He accepts Eusebius's judgment—now discredited—that Constantine may have had some earlier disposition to Christianity. But he questions Eusebius's readiness to turn to the supernatural for the explanation of events, even the strangest ones. He questions the methodology and the judgment of Eusebius, who was willing to rely only upon the single unsupported statement of Constantine himself about the fiery sign in the sky rather than confirming it by resort to the many others still living who must have seen it. But while he admits that many, especially of Protestant or philosophic disposition, might "arraign the truth of the first Christian emperor," he does not do so. He sees the conversion of Constantine rather as a matter of enlightened self-interest and a willingness to be flattered that he had been chosen by heaven for this singular favor. This, Gibbon tells us, is why the conversion happened. And he concludes that even if the piety of Constantine was a specious piety at the time of his conversion, it matured into a "serious faith and fervent devotion."

We turn now to Gibbon's analysis, beginning with his assessment of Eusebius.

He affirms, with the most perfect confidence, that, in the night which preceded the last battle against Maxentius, Constantine was admonished in a dream to inscribe the shields of his soldiers with the *celestial sign of God*, the sacred monogram of the name of Christ; that he executed the commands of heaven; and that his valour and obedience were rewarded by the decisive victory of the Milvian Bridge. Some considerations might perhaps incline a sceptical mind to suspect the judgment or the veracity of the rhetorician, whose pen, either from zeal or interest, was devoted to the cause of the prevailing faction. . . .

In favor of Licinius, who still dissembled his animosity to the Christians, the same author has provided a similar vision, of a form of prayer, which was communicated by an angel, and repeated by the

whole army before they engaged the legions of the tyrant Maximin. The frequent repetition of miracles serves to provoke, where it does not subdue, the reason of mankind; but, if the dream of Constantine is separately considered, it may be naturally explained either by the policy or the enthusiasm of the emperor. Whilst his anxiety for the approaching day, which must decide the fate of the empire, was suspended by a short and interrupted slumber, the venerable form of Christ, and the well-known symbol of his religion, might forcibly offer themselves to the active fancy of a prince who revered the name, and had perhaps secretly implored the power, of the God of the Christians. . . .

The praeternatural origin of dreams was universally admitted by the nations of antiquity, and a considerable part of the Gallic army was already prepared to place their confidence in the salutary sign of the Christian religion. The secret vision of Constantine could be disproved only by the event; and the intrepid hero who had passed the Alps and the Apennine might view with careless despair the consequences of a defeat under the walls of Rome. . . .

The philosopher, who with calm suspicion examines the dreams and omens, the miracles and prodigies, of profane or even of ecclesiastical history, will probably conclude that, if the eyes of the spectators have sometimes been deceived by fraud, the understanding of the readers has much more frequently been insulted by fiction. Every event, or appearance, or accident, which seems to deviate from the ordinary course of nature, has been rashly ascribed to the immediate action of the Deity; and the astonished fancy of the multitude has sometimes given shape and colour, language and motion, to the fleeting but uncommon meteors of the air. . . .

The Christian fable of Eusebius, which in the space of twenty-six years might arise from the original dream, is cast in a much more correct and elegant mould. In one of the marches of Constantine, he is reported to have seen with his own eyes the luminous trophy of the cross, placed above the meridian sun, and inscribed with the following words: By This Conquer. This amazing object in the sky astonished the whole army, as well as the emperor himself, who was yet undetermined in the choice of a religion; but his astonishment was converted into faith by the vision of the ensuing night. Christ appeared before his eyes, and, displaying the same celestial sign of the cross, he directed Constantine to frame a similar standard, and to march, with an assurance of victory, against Maxentius and all his enemies. The learned bishop of Caesarea appears to be sensible that the recent discovery of this marvellous anecdote would excite some surprise and distrust among the most pious of his readers. Yet instead of ascertaining the precise circumstances of time and place, which always serve to detect falsehood or establish truth; instead of collecting and recording the evidence of so many living witnesses, who must

have been spectators of this stupendous miracle; Eusebius contents himself with alleging a very singular testimony; that of the deceased Constantine, who, many years after the event, in the freedom of conversation, had related to him this extraordinary incident of his own life, and had attested the truth of it by a solemn oath. The prudence and gratitude of the learned prelate forbade him to suspect the veracity of his victorious master; but he plainly intimates that in a fact of such a nature, he should have refused his assent to any meaner authority. . . .

The vision of Constantine maintained an honourable place in the legend of superstition, till the bold and sagacious spirit of criticism presumed to depreciate the triumph and to arraign the truth of the first Christian emperor.

The protestant and philosophic readers of the present age will incline to believe that, in the account of his own conversion, Constantine attested a wilful falsehood by a solemn and deliberate perjury. They may not hesitate to pronounce that, in the choice of a religion, his mind was determined only by a sense of interest; and that . . . he used the altars of the church as a convenient footstool to the throne of the empire. A conclusion so harsh and so absolute is not, however, warranted by our knowledge of human nature, of Constantine, or of Christianity. In an age of religious fervour, the most artful statesmen are observed to feel some part of the enthusiasm which they inspire; and the most orthodox saints assume the dangerous privilege of defending the cause of truth by the arms of deceit and falsehood. Personal interest is often the standard of our belief, as well as of our practice; and the same motives of temporal advantage which might influence the public conduct and professions of Constantine would insensibly dispose his mind to embrace a religion so propitious to his fame and fortunes. His vanity was gratified by the flattering assurance that *he* had been chosen by Heaven to reign over the earth; success had justified his divine title to the throne, and that title was founded on the truth of the Christian revelation. As real virtue is sometimes excited by undeserved applause, the specious piety of Constantine, if at first it was only specious, might gradually, by the influence of praise, of habit, and of example, be matured into serious faith and fervent devotion.

Constantine and the "Great Thaw"

PETER BROWN

The preponderance of more modern scholars have tended to follow the cautious rationalism of Gibbon in the matter of the conversion of Constantine and what it meant. Some, it is true, have followed the lead of the great nineteenth-century historian Jakob Burckhardt, who regarded Constantine as "essentially unreligious" and "driven without surcease by ambition and lust for power" and who characterized Eusebius as "guilty of so many distortions, dissimulations, and inventions that he has forfeited all claim to figure as a decisive source."³

More typically, A. H. M. Jones regards Constantine as "an impulsive man of violent temper" and "above all things ambitious for power"; but that he was in some sense converted to Christianity in the year 312 "there is no manner of doubt."⁴ He rejects out of hand the possibility that his conversion was an act of political expediency.

*This is the position as well of Peter Brown, the Oxford historian of late Roman antiquity from whose provocative *The World of Late Antiquity* the following selection is taken. In this selection, while accepting the genuineness of Constantine's conversion experience, Brown turns it around and looks at it from the point of view of the Christian cult rather than the soldier-emperor who became a member of that cult in 312. And he sees it as the event that decisively affected the shape of the Christian Roman empire that Constantine founded. This, Brown argues, is what the conversion of Constantine meant.*

With the return of peace after the accession of Diocletian, the wound began to close between the new, military governing class and the urban civilization of the Mediterranean. But there were now two groups who claimed to represent this civilization: the traditional pagan governing class, whose resilience and high standards had been shown in the revival and spread of Platonic philosophy in the late third century, were in danger of being outbid by the new, "middle-brow" culture of the Christian bishops, whose organizing power and adaptability had been proved conclusively in the previous generation.

At first, organization for survival was more important to the emperor-

³Jakob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Pantheon, 1949 [1852]), pp. 292-93.

⁴A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 1:78; Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London: English Universities Press, 1949), p. 79.

ors than culture. Diocletian was a sincere, Roman traditionalist; yet he ruled for nineteen years without giving a thought to the Christians. The "Great Persecution," which began in 302 and continued spasmodically for a decade, came as a brutal shock to respectable Christians. They found themselves officially outcastes in the society with which they had so strenuously identified themselves. It was a terrifying and, on the whole, a deeply demoralizing experience. They were saved by an obscure event. In 312, a usurping emperor, Constantine, won a battle over his rival at the Milvian Bridge, outside Rome. He ascribed this victory to the protection of the Christian God, vouchsafed in a vision.

If God helps those who help themselves, then no group better deserved the miracle of the "conversion" of Constantine in 312 than did the Christians. For the Christian leaders seized their opportunity with astonishing pertinacity and intelligence. They besieged Constantine in his new mood: provincial bishops, notably Hosius of Cordova (c. 257–357), attached themselves to his court; other bishops, from Africa, swept him into their local affairs as a judge; Lactantius emerged as tutor to his son; and, when Constantine finally conquered the eastern provinces in 324, he was greeted by Eusebius of Caesarea, who placed his pen at the emperor's disposal with a skill and enthusiasm such as no traditional Greek rhetor had seemed able to summon up for Constantine's grim and old-fashioned predecessors—Diocletian and Galerius.

This prolonged exposure to Christian propaganda was the true "conversion" of Constantine. It began on a modest scale when he controlled only the under-Christianized western provinces; but it reached its peak after 324, when the densely Christianized territories of Asia Minor were united to his empire. Its results were decisive. Constantine could easily have been merely a "god-fearing" emperor, who, for reasons of his own, was prepared to tolerate the Christians: there had been many such in the third century (one of whom, Philip (244–249), was even regarded as a crypto-Christian). Given the religious climate of the age, there was no reason, either, why his decision to tolerate the Church might not have been ascribed to intimations from the Christian God. Constantine rejected this easy and obvious solution. He came to be the emperor we know from his speeches and edicts: a crowned Christian Apologist. He viewed himself and his mission as a Christian emperor in the light of the interpretation of Christianity that had been presented to the average educated layman by the Christian Apologists of his age. In becoming a Christian, Constantine publicly claimed to be saving the Roman empire: even more—in mixing with bishops, this middle-aged Latin soldier sincerely believed that he had entered the charmed circle of "true" civilization, and had turned his back on the Philistinism of the raw men who had recently attacked the Church.

One suspects that Constantine was converted to many more aspects of Mediterranean life than to Christianity alone. The son of a soldier, he threw in his lot with a civilian way of life that had been largely ignored by the grey administrators of the age of Diocletian. From 311 onwards, Constantine put the landed aristocracy on its feet again: he is the "restorer of the Senate," to whom the aristocracy of the West owed so much. In 332, he gave these landowners extensive powers over their tenants. After 324, he grouped a new civilian governing class round himself in the Greek East. He gave the provincial gentry of Asia Minor what they had long wanted: Constantinople, a "new" Rome, placed within convenient range of the imperial court as it moved along the routes connecting the Danube to Asia Minor. For the Greek senator and bureaucrat, roads that had long ceased to lead to Rome converged quite naturally at this new capital.

Constantine, very wisely, seldom said "no." The first Christian emperor accepted pagan honours from the citizens of Athens. He ranked the Aegean for pagan classical statuary to adorn Constantinople. He treated a pagan philosopher as a colleague. He paid the travelling expenses of a pagan priest who visited the pagan monuments of Egypt. After a generation of "austerity" for everyone, and of "terror" for the Christians, Constantine, with calculated flamboyance, instituted the "Great Thaw" of the early fourth century: it was a whole restored civilian world, pagan as well as Christian, that was pressing in round the emperor.

In this restored world, the Christians had the advantage of being the most flexible and open group. The bishops could accept an uncultivated emperor. They were used to autodidacts, to men of genuine eccentric talent who—so they claimed—were taught by God alone. Constantine, one should remember, was the younger contemporary of the first Christian hermit, St. Anthony. Neither the Latin-speaking soldier nor the Coptic-speaking farmer's son would have been regarded as acceptable human material for a classical schoolmaster: yet Eusebius of Caesarea wrote the life of Constantine the soldier, and Athanasius of Alexandria—an equally sophisticated Greek—the life of Anthony the Egyptian. It was over the wide bridge of a "middlebrow" identification of Christianity with a lowest common denominator of classical culture, and not through the narrow gate of a pagan aristocracy of letters, that Constantine and his successors entered the civilian civilization of the Mediterranean.

Questions for Review and Study

1. Why is the conversion of Constantine an important topic in the history of Western civilization?
2. Why do you suppose Eusebius made no effort to verify Constantine's