THE LAST DAYS OF CONSTANTINE: OPPOSITIONAL VERSIONS AND THEIR INFLUENCE*

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The earliest surviving account of Constantine's last days, April to May 337, was written by Eusebius of Caesarea as instant history, since Eusebius died in May 338 or 339. Parts of this concluding section of the *Vita Constantini*, for example the paragraphs about the first Christian emperor's baptism and mausoleum, have attracted scholarly curiosity, others less so. Here I would like to investigate systematically, for the first time, the versions of Constantine's abortive Iranian campaign provided by Eusebius and others, and then move on to consider the origins of a famous account of Constantine's baptism. Both exercises will show how oppositional versions of Constantine's last days influenced the formation of conventionally accepted narratives — or, more specifically, how polytheist historiography helped to mould the Nicaean or 'orthodox' perspective, parts of which have prevailed to the present day. Discussion of the fictional accounts of Constantine's baptism by 'Eusebius of Rome' and Silvester of Rome will also provide an opportunity to underline the truth of Michel van Esbroeck's observation that 'the historical aspect of propaganda literature eludes positivist history, of which it is, even so, a part'.[1]

I. THE IRANIAN CAMPAIGN

After describing the Council of Tyre (335) and the festivities occasioned by the dedication of the church of the Resurrection at Jerusalem, Eusebius recalls that these happy events in the Holy City coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of Constantine's rule, as had the Council of Nicaea with the twentieth (*V.C.* IV.47). Noting the emperor's displeasure with a hyperbolical priest who 'presumed so far as to his own face to pronounce him blessed, as having been counted worthy in this life to hold imperial sway over all men, and in the life to come to exercise joint rule with the Son of God' (IV.48), Eusebius records also the view that the arrival of 'ambassadors from the Indians',[2] with gifts of jewels and exotic beasts, implied 'that his [Constantine's] sovereignty extended even to the Indian Ocean, and that the princes of the land of the Indians . . . acknowledged him as emperor and king' (IV.50). Eusebius himself, speaking in September 335, had declared that the Roman Empire 'heralds God's kingdom, has already united most of the various peoples, and is further destined to obtain all those not yet united, right up to the very limits of the inhabited world'.[3] The existence of such points of view at Constantine's court in the mid-330s is, unavoidably, part of the intellectual background of the Iranian campaign.

Having thus ordered his affairs, Constantine was called by God 'to pay the debt of nature' (IV.52.4). It is at this point that Eusebius' narrative of Constantine's last days properly begins. The next three chapters reveal with unusual clarity the stresses and strains of the imperial biographer's vocation: Constantine was sound in body (53) and in mind too, since he kept on writing and arguing until the end of his life (55); yet there were those who took advantage of his generosity (54), while 'one of the self-imagined philosophers (δοκησίσοφοι)', the leaders of polytheism, accepted his monotheistic arguments only with reluctance (55.2). By such disagreeable persons, and not least by those who pretended to be Christians, Constantine might even be 'forced into conduct unworthy of himself, of which envy took advantage to cloud in this respect the lustre of his character' (54.3). We are duly forewarned that

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[1] M. van Esbroeck, 'Le soi-disant Roman de Julien l'Apostat', *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 229 (1987), 202 n. 27.

[2] The term 'India' is polyvalent at this period, but here may well mean the subcontinent: see below, p. 149, on the possibility that this is an allusion to Metrodorus. In quoting from the *V.C.*, I have made some use of E. C. Richardson's translation (1890).

[3] Eus., *L.C.* XVI.6, trans. H. A. Drake.

oppositional versions of the reign will have to be dealt with — first and foremost, of course, by Eusebius himself.

The next chapter, 56, should be quoted in its entirety:

> It is also worth recording that at about this time news was heard of stirrings among the barbarians of the East. He [Constantine] observed thereupon that he had yet to gain a victory over these people, and embarked upon an expedition against the Persians. Having decided on this, he mobilized the legions, and announced the [plan of his] march to the bishops around him, since he was concerned to have with him some of those who are needed for divine worship. They for their part said they were eager to comply with his wish and that they did not desire to leave, but to campaign with him and join him in battle by supplicating God. Full of joy at their undertakings, he unfolded to them his projected line of march . . .

At this point all the manuscripts have a lacuna of half a page.[4] We lose the end of 56, the whole of 57 and the beginning of 58. From the chapter headings, which seem to be early if probably not Eusebius',[5] we learn that 56 went on to relate how Constantine 'took with him bishops and a tent in the form of a church', while in 57 he 'received an embassy from the Persians and kept the night vigil with others at the feast of Easter'.

Older editions of the *Vita* print a Renaissance scholar's attempt to plug this lacuna.[6] But the ecclesiastical historian Socrates (d. after 439) preserves, in a passage on Constantine's demolishing of temples and building of churches quite separate from his account of the emperor's death, a clear reference to the lost passage of Eusebius:

> So great was the emperor's devotion to Christianity, that when he was about to enter on a war with Persia he constructed a tent of embroidered linen on the model of a church, just as Moses had done in the wilderness. It was designed to be carried about, in order that he might have a house of prayer ready even in the most desert regions. But the war was not at that time prosecuted, for it had already been extinguished through fear of the king (ἔφθη γὰρ δέει τοῦ βασιλέως σβεσθῆναι). (1.18)

This last sentence's allusiveness indicates that Socrates took the whole passage from some earlier source. Though he is not always a very reliable witness, he certainly knew and used the *Vita Constantini*.[7] But the Church historian Gelasius of Cyzicus, writing *c.* 475, provides similar material in a context which suggests that both he and Socrates were in fact drawing on a source that lay between themselves and Eusebius, namely the *Historia ecclesiastica* written by Gelasius of Caesarea (d. 395).[8] Gelasius of Cyzicus claims that Constantine abandoned the campaign because of his concern for the Christians of Iran. But Socrates' gnomic explanation is likely to be closer to what Eusebius originally wrote.[9]

Chapters 58–60 describe Constantine's construction at Constantinople of a *martyrion* for the apostles, and within it of a last resting-place for himself. At the end of 60 we return from what seems like a digression, though not an irrelevant one, to the feast of Easter, in the course of which Constantine fell seriously ill (61). He betook himself to hot baths near Helenopolis, modern Altınova, on the southern shore of the Gulf of Izmit (Nicomedia).[10] He prayed 'in the church of the martyrs' at Helenopolis, and realized that he was dying. Seeking purification from his sins, he became at last a catechumen, and 'proceeded as far as a suburb of Nicomedia' (62), where he 'summoned the bishops'. Explaining to them that he had hoped to be baptized in the River Jordan, 'wherein our Saviour, for our example, is recorded to have been baptized', he requested the rite without delay, promising to behave in a more Christian fashion should he live. 'They [the bishops] performed the sacred ceremonies according to custom' (62.4). The emperor died soon after, on the last day of the fifty-day festival of Pentecost that directly follows Easter, in other words on 22 May 337 (64).

[4] F. Winkelmann, 'Zur Geschichte des Authentizitätsproblems der Vita Constantini', *Klio* 40 (1962), 232.

[5] On the kephalaia, see F. Winkelmann's edition (1975), xlvi–xlix.

[6] This interpolation is printed by Winkelmann at the bottom of p. 144 of his edition. See also Winkelmann, op. cit. (n. 4), 232.

[7] F. Winkelmann, *Die Textbezeugung der Vita Constantini des Eusebius von Caesarea* (1962), 71–7.

[8] Gel. Cyz., *H.E.* III.10.26–7; F. Winkelmann, *Untersuchungen zur Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia* (1966), 41–3.

[9] See below, p. 148, on Lib., *or.* LIX.72. Gelasius of Cyzicus had no direct knowledge of the *V.C.*: see Winkelmann's edition of the *V.C.* XX.

[10] These are the Pythia Therma: T. Corsten (ed.), *Die Inschriften von Apameia (Bithynien) und Pylai* (1987), 140–7 and maps 1, 3.

As is apparent from this summary, the Iranian campaign plays a subordinate part in Eusebius' account of Constantine's last days; yet enough is said to prick our curiosity. The *Vita*'s only other reference to Sasanian Iran comes when, at some date between 324, presumably, and 337, Constantine addresses a letter to Shapur which, in conjunction with other passages already alluded to, subtly encourages the idea that Iran's subjection to Christ was foreordained:

> Guided by the light of truth, I advance in knowledge of the divine faith . . . Beginning from the very borders of the Ocean, I have systematically aroused the whole world to well-grounded hopes of salvation . . . Imagine then with what joy I heard tidings so accordant with my desire, that the fairest districts of Persia are filled with those men on whose behalf I am writing this whole letter, I mean the Christians . . . (IV.9–13)[11]

When Eusebius eventually gets round to describing the Iranian campaign, he allots it almost two whole chapters and treats it as a matter of some importance, led by Constantine in person along not only with the bishops he took everywhere he went,[12] but also a special mobile church. Why, then, does he suddenly drop the campaign for the sake of a digression? And why is there a lacuna just where the campaign is dropped?

That something is being hidden from us — not only by the Bishop of Caesarea, but also by whoever was responsible for the lacuna — is confirmed by other early accounts of Constantine's last days. Eusebius apparently had Constantine abandon the Iranian campaign after he had received Shapur's ambassadors. But Libanius, Julian, the *Origo Constantini*, Sextus Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, and Festus all state or suggest that Constantine died on campaign. While this was, beyond doubt, the simple truth rather than an oppositional version, the truth was understandably regarded as unfortunate and embarrassing by such as Eusebius. It also, as we shall see, gave ammunition to those who denounced Constantine as morally responsible for starting a conflict with Iran whose eventual outcome was far from satisfactory for Rome.

In his *Oratio* LIX, a panegyric of Constantine's sons Constantius and Constans delivered at Nicomedia in late 344 or early 345,[13] Libanius threw on Iran all the responsibility for the war (59–72). This was easy for him to do — a polytheist rhetor had no need or wish to comment on the implications for Iran of Constantine's adoption of Christianity. In common with Eusebius, Libanius did mention Shapur's embassy; but he made clear that the Roman emperor angrily rejected its arrogant demands (71–2). When Constantine reached Nicomedia, however, God called him to a greater glory, and assigned the laurels of 'barbarian victories' to his sons (72).

Writing a decade or so after Libanius, Julian remarks in the course of a panegyric on Constantius that it was the Sasanians who disturbed the peace at the end of Constantine's reign, but that 'they escaped his punishment, because he died in the middle of his preparations for war' (*or.* I.18b). Likewise, the invaluable account known as the *Origo Constantini*, which was probably composed while Constantius still lived, has Constantine die at Nicomedia, 'while he was preparing war against the Persians (*cum bellum pararet in Persas*)' (35).[14] Though the *Origo*'s brevity precludes explanation of how the war started, there is no implication that Constantine was to blame.

[11] On the date see T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (1981), 258–9, 397 n. 144. Eus., *V.C.* IV.8, notes that Constantine's letter to Shapur was sent in response to an Iranian diplomatic initiative, plausibly identified by P. Petit, 'Libanius et la "Vita Constantini"', *Historia* I (1950), 574–5, with an embassy which, according to Lib., *or.* LIX.67, Shapur had sent some considerable time before the events of 337 (ibid. 71: λογιζόμενος . . . τῆς μελέτης τὸν χρόνον) to request supplies of Roman iron for armaments(!). Having granted the request (the exceptional generosity praised at *V.C.* IV.8), Constantine will have demanded protection for Iranian Christians as a *quid pro quo*. Eastern, including Iranian, conquests are looked forward to in various poems composed, at about the time Constantine gained control of the East, by Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius: V (referring to Crispus, d. 326), XIV, XVIII; and cf. above, p. 146. Constantine had already before 321 received diplomatic overtures from Iran according to *Pan. Lat.* X[IV].38.3.

[12] Eus., *V.C.* I.42.1.

[13] W. Portmann, 'Die 59. Rede des Libanios und das Datum der Schlacht von Singara', *Byz.Z.* 82 (1989), 1–14; T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (1993), 312 n. 19.

[14] On the *Origo*, EKG, Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, and Festus see R. Herzog (ed.), *Handbuch der lateinischen Literatur der Antike* 5 (1989), 195–210. On the *Origo*'s date, see also T. D. Barnes, 'Jerome and the *Origo Constantini Imperatoris*', *Phoenix* 43 (1989), 158–61, and G. Zecchini, *Ricerche di storiografia latina tardoantica* (1993), 29–35, arguing also (35–8) that the *Origo* is in fact the sole surviving fragment of the EKG. Although 35 is marred by an insertion from Orosius, the original sense is clear enough.

Next come three writers who, it is held, depend on the lost but influential 'Enmannsche Kaisergeschichte' or EKG. In the *Historiae abbreviatae* that he published probably in 361, Sextus Aurelius Victor simply records that Constantine died while marching against the Persians, 'who had started the war (*a quis bellum erumpere occeperat*)', at an estate near Nicomedia called Achyrona (XLI.16). In similar fashion, the historical *Breviarium* Eutropius compiled in or after 369 at the bidding of the emperor Valens records that, while preparing to make war against 'the Parthians', who were afflicting Mesopotamia, Constantine died 'in a state villa at Nicomedia' (X.8.2). Another *Breviarium* addressed to the emperor Valens, this time by Festus, and concerned almost exclusively with Romano-Iranian relations, remarks that Constantine 'prepared an expedition against the Persians at the very end of his life' (26). One might deduce from this phrase that Constantine's death had something to do with the campaign, but all Festus actually says is that the emperor descended in full force on the Iranians and terrified them into sending an embassy to beg peace. This idea that Constantine actually invaded Iran was to have a future in certain circles.

What is notable about all these post-Eusebian sources is that they are early, more or less consistent, and reasonably even-handed in their treatment of Constantine's last days despite being perfectly disposed to criticize him in other respects. Their essentially uncontroversial representation of Constantine as responding to Iranian provocation, mobilizing, and then dying just as he set out on campaign, shows that authors of historical handbooks may not necessarily disagree with panegyrists who dislike their subject, but are easy to tell apart from the panegyrist who speaks from the heart. Even without these other accounts, one could have guessed that the *Vita Constantini*'s narrative, whose present lacunose state does not disguise the fact that it started enthusiastically only to end prematurely, was an attempt to defend Constantine's reputation against what Eusebius saw as a less congenial version of the Iranian campaign. And while our reading of Libanius and the others has made clear that their version was not, in itself, anti-Constantinian, its admission that Constantine died on campaign was unacceptable to many Christians, not just because it seemed embarrassing to their hero's reputation, but also because it might be seen as legitimizing a much more serious accusation, which did deserve to be called an oppositional version.

Of Julian's Iranian campaign, Ammianus Marcellinus remarks that:

> Since his detractors alleged that he had stirred up new tumults of war, to the detriment of the state, they should know clearly through the teachings of truth that it was not Julian but Constantine who kindled the Parthian fires, when he confided too greedily in the lies of Metrodorus, as I explained fully some time ago. (XXV.4.23)

Ammianus' version of Metrodorus' tale is lost, but the twelfth-century historian George Cedrenus preserves it in a form which corresponds well enough to what Ammianus had in mind, and goes back to the 'Leoquelle', a generally anti-Constantinian source of the fourth century.[15] In the reign of Constantine 'a certain Metrodorus, Persian-born, who affected to philosophize', visited India and the Brahmans, was given many precious stones by a king as a present for Constantine, and helped himself to others from temples. Metrodorus duly gave these jewels to Constantine when he got home, but as if they were his own. He also claimed that others, which he had forwarded by the land route, had been confiscated by the Iranians. Constantine wrote to Shapur abruptly demanding their return, was ignored, and accordingly broke the peace.

That somewhere in all this there is a grain of truth is suggested by Eusebius' references to a jewel-laden embassy from India,[16] and by the fact that ecclesiastical writers of the fourth century neither deny Metrodorus' existence nor go into any detail at all about his doings.[17] Probably the story was already circulating in Constantine's lifetime, or sufficiently soon after for Eusebius to have heard it. But the oppositional versions of Constantine's Iranian campaign

[15] George Cedrenus 1.516–17 Bekker; B. Bleckmann, 'Die Chronik des Johannes Zonaras und eine pagane Quelle zur Geschichte Konstantins', *Historia* 40 (1991), especially, on Metrodorus, 358–63 (raising the possibility of a relationship between Ammianus and the 'Leoquelle'). B. H. Warmington, 'Ammianus Marcellinus and the lies of Metrodorus', *C.Q.* 31 (1981), 464–8, suggests the story may have been in Eunapius too.

[16] Eus., *V.C.* IV.7, 50; Bleckmann, op. cit. (n. 15), 360–1.

[17] Eus.-Hieron., *Chron.* a.330: 'Metrodorus philosophus agnoscitur'; Rufinus, *H.E.* X.9: 'Metrodorus quidam filosofus inspiciendorum locorum et orbis perscrutandi gratia ulteriorem dicitur Indiam penetrasse.'

would not really come into their own until Constantius, Julian, and Jovian had between them botched Romano-Iranian relations to the point where scapegoats were needed. Whose interest, then, did these versions serve?

It was, of course, a nice question whether Julian who mounted an unsuccessful campaign and got himself killed, or Jovian who actually signed Nisibis away, was the more to blame. But one thing was certain: Constantius and Valens had been Arians and Julian a polytheist. Between Constantine and Theodosius the Eastern Empire had only one ruler neutral (or, rather, short-lived) enough to pass for orthodox, and that was Jovian. Jovian could not therefore be held responsible for the Iranian debacle by the Nicaean historians who wrote the official version.[18] Nor, needless to say, would these particular scribes have thought of pinning the blame on Constantine; and Arians, in this respect, did not differ from them. There was a lot to be said for making Julian the main culprit. But polytheists could hardly do that, and it seems that it was they who were mainly responsible for the new emphasis on Constantine's role. Libanius, for example, when he delivered *oratio* LIX in 344/45, had seen Constantine's involvement in war with Iran as redounding to his credit.[19] Two decades later, he bitterly criticized Constantius' conduct of the war, while still leaving Constantine reproachless;[20] but in a speech he delivered to Theodosius at the end of his career, Libanius depicted the war Constantine had 'planted' in a frankly negative perspective, as symptomatic of a general process of decline under both Constantine and Constantius.[21] At about the same time, Ammianus was singing a similar tune, which is also to be heard in the 'Leoquelle'. What to Eusebius, but also to the younger Libanius, Julian, Aurelius Victor, and even to Eutropius who wrote under Valens, had seemed a justifiable response to Sasanian aggression, came to be represented, in the light of the dismal subsequent history of Romano-Iranian relations, as frivolous and culpable aggression.

To what extent, then, did these oppositional — effectively, polytheist — versions of Constantine's last days influence Christian accounts up to and including the one eventually codified by the fifth-century ecclesiastical historians? Our first step is to work out how exactly Eusebius recast the actual course of events in order to counter the view that Constantine had died at just the wrong moment.

According to the heading of the lost chapter 57, Constantine 'received (δεξάμενος)' an embassy from Iran, and then celebrated the feast of Easter. Socrates adds that the war 'was extinguished through fear of the king [Constantine]'. Since the campaign against Iran is not subsequently mentioned, Eusebius must have conveyed the impression that the ambassadors had been sent in order to induce Constantine to break off hostilities, and that Constantine was duly persuaded. The other early accounts, though, make Constantine die having already set out on campaign; while Libanius asserts, at a time when and a place where people could have known, that the Iranian envoys, far from cowering, had made outrageous demands. What is more, later Byzantine historians such as Cedrenus and Zonaras preserve certain details about the beginning of the campaign that derive from the 'Leoquelle', which used them in order to bolster its view of Constantine as aggressor.[22] We learn that Constantine set out from Constantinople with his triremes (τριήρεσι), put to shore at Soteropolis/Pythia, and there took the waters. Feeling seriously ill, he proceeded by way of Helenopolis to stay in camp (ἐν τῷ χάρακι) with his army. We may assume that until that point, at the earliest, no decision was taken to abandon the campaign.

The truth must be that Shapur's envoys had indeed been 'received', as the title of *V.C.* IV.57 puts it, but had — on the most charitable interpretation — offered nothing that compelled a suspension of hostilities. Perhaps, as Libanius implies, Constantine kicked them out. But if he did not want to give an immediate answer, he will have strung them along on the first leg of the campaign: they may still have been in the imperial entourage at Helenopolis, at the camp, or even, for that matter, at Nicomedia. In any case, Constantine had no choice but to press on with the campaign, while Eusebius was forced to fudge the narrative at IV.57 in order to make it appear that, merely by preparing for war, his hero had extracted some

[18] See e.g. Socr. Sch., *H.E.* III.22; Soz., *H.E.* VI.3.2; and, for an extreme illustration, below n. 38 (John of Nikiu).

[19] Lib., *or.* LIX.59–61, 67, 72.

[20] Lib., *or.* XVIII.206.

[21] Lib., *or.* XLIX.2.

[22] George Cedrenus I.519 Bekker; Zonaras XIII.4.25–7; and cf. Leo Grammaticus 87–8 Bekker; Bleckmann, op. cit. (n. 15), 356–8.

concession or at least obliged the Iranians to take the initiative in asking for peace. The interesting digression on Constantine's tomb quickly distracts us, and the Iranian campaign is soon forgotten. When we return at IV.61–2 to the narrative of Constantine's last journey (by way of the hot baths and Helenopolis to Nicomedia), it has been stripped of the panoply of war, whose memory only the Byzantine derivatives of the 'Leoquelle' preserve. The longterm effectiveness of this stratagem may be judged from the negligible role the campaign has played in the post-fourth-century historiography of Constantine. Modern accounts may follow Libanius and the others in having Constantine die at Nicomedia while marching against Iran rather than, with Eusebius, treating the Helenopolis excursion as purely therapeutic. But of Iran's larger significance within Constantine's plans for the future, which Eusebius mentions but is then forced to drop, they have little to say. Constantine is represented as having left behind no significant unfinished business — except, of course, for the intractable problem of Arianism.

After 337, controversy over the Iranian campaign tended to shift away from the relatively petty matter of its premature (and anyway temporary) demise toward the more fundamental issue of responsibility — who, in other words, had provoked this war which had dragged on, with disastrous results, for more than a quarter of a century after Constantine's death? Constantine himself, to judge from his letter to Shapur, was a realist, who understood the use that might be made of the Christian communities under Sasanid rule, but did not plan to risk his empire for their sake, for example by incorporating territories he had no means of controlling. He was also, though, the recipient of embassies from foreign potentates who lived far enough away to indulge in extravagant flattery, and of speeches from the likes of Eusebius, who believed that Iran ought to be conquered, and propagated as triumphalist a view of Constantine as he dared. (Eusebius' comment on the fellow-priest who told Constantine he would rule alongside Christ (IV.48) is distinctly Pharisaical.) Hence the good bishop's undisguised delight in hanging around outside the palace gates watching the comings and goings of Indian ambassadors, whom he mentions not only, as already noted, at *V.C.* IV.50, but also earlier, at IV.7 — by way of introducing Constantine's letter to Shapur![23] We cannot assume Constantine was immune to this euphoria.[24] His announcement to the bishops at Nicomedia that he had planned to be baptized in the Jordan sounds more than a little Messianic — the event would have been staged, one imagines, as prelude or postlude to the Iranian campaign. But Eusebius has no difficulty topping that, by elaborately underlining how Constantine finally expired on 'the feast of feasts', the fiftieth day after Easter, which at that time was still celebrated as, simultaneously, the festival of Christ's ascension into heaven and of the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost.[25] Not that this is Pentecost's first appearance in the *Vita*. The feast that celebrates the universality of a polyglot Church, made manifest at an event attended by numerous inhabitants of the regions Constantine was planning to conquer, has already been the victim of an extended comparison with the Council of Nicaea, which itself had been attended, as Eusebius is careful to point out, by a bishop from Iran.[26]

Like other early sources, Eusebius drew attention to 'stirrings of barbarians in the East' (IV.56.1) as the original *casus belli*. Eusebius' own views, though, were decidedly hawkish. He made no very determined effort to dispel the impression that Constantine had wanted and therefore been in some measure responsible for the war against Iran. But as the years of inconclusive eastern campaigning wore on after 337, culminating in the ultimate humiliation of 363, while the conflict between polytheists and Christians became more embittered, the audience receptive to anti-Constantinian versions grew. The Christian emperor came to be seen as more a warmonger than a crusader. Itself little read, at least in the fourth and fifth

[23] Eus., *V.C.* IV.8: ἐπειδὴ δὲ καὶ ὁ Περσῶν βασιλεὺς Κωνσταντίνῳ γνωρίζεσθαι διὰ πρεσβείας ἠξίου. . .

[24] I differ here from, e.g., G. Wirth, 'Hannibalian: Anmerkungen zur Geschichte eines überflüssigen Königs', *BJ* 190 (1990), 217–19; idem, 'Die Mission des Katholikos: Zum Problem armenisch-römischer Beziehungen im 4.Jh.', *Jb.A.C.* 34 (1991), 41–3 (invoking at n. 102 'die Milde' of Eus., *V.C.* IV.57, i.e. the Renaissance interpolation, though we know from Socr. Sch., *H.E.* 1.18, that Eusebius in fact represented Constantine as behaving very fiercely to the Iranian ambassadors). See G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (1993), 93–7, for the view that Constantine, like Eusebius, aspired to subject Iran to the authority of Christian Rome. This does not, though, exclude the possibility that Shapur too was spoiling for a fight.

[25] Eus., *V.C.* IV.64; P. G. Cobb, 'The history of the Christian year', in C. Jones and others (eds), *The Study of Liturgy* (2nd edn, 1992), 463.

[26] Eus., *V.C.* III.7–8.

centuries,[27] and anyway vitiated by its own change of gear, the *Vita Constantini* had no ability to chase these alternatives from the market.

Eusebius' continuators, the ecclesiastical historians from Gelasius of Caesarea (d. 395) onwards, responded by suppressing all reference to the Iranian campaign, at least in connection with Constantine's last days. If Julian's defeat and death on campaign was to be made much of, Constantine's campaign and its inglorious end had to be hushed up. After all, the Apostate had breathed his last in a tent in Mesopotamia, not a comfortable Bithynian villa. Despite or perhaps rather because of his great influence, Gelasius himself is lost. But Rufinus (d. 410) says nothing of the Iranian campaign in his account of Constantine's death; neither do Philostorgius (d. *c.* 439), Socrates (d. after 439), Sozomen (d. after 450), or Theodoret (d. *c.* 466).[28] Elsewhere, in connection with the tent-church, Socrates does indeed allude to the Iranian campaign. So does Gelasius of Cyzicus, who wrote *c.* 475. And it is likely, as we have seen, that both these writers were drawing on a similar passage in Gelasius of Caesarea.[29] But the connection of this material with the story of Constantine's last days is studiously suppressed. And when Sozomen, who was particularly sensitive about polytheists' criticisms of Constantine,[30] borrowed Socrates' passage on the tent-church for his own ecclesiastical history (*H.E.* 1.8.10), he took pains to strip it of its narrative frame, and therefore of any reference to Iran. All this sensitivity about the Iranian campaign, on the part of some of the few writers who can be shown to have used the *Vita*, indicates that it was somebody in their milieu who was responsible for the lacuna. The lacuna was probably not, then, the product of 'pure accident', as T. D. Barnes has recently asserted;[31] but the survival of the first part of chapter 56 shows that the excision was ineptly done. The chapter headings of IV.56 and 57 should have been removed too. They were probably overlooked because these headings were gathered at the beginning of each book rather than being placed separately at the head of each chapter.

This expurgation of Eusebius was only one example of the rewriting or selective remembering of history that went on under Constantine's successors. Libanius aimed his *Oratio* LIX at those who, far from depicting Constantine as the aggressor, represented the war as an attempt by Iran to take advantage of Constantius' weakness.[32] As for the ecclesiastical writers, they too showed considerable variety of approach. Jerome and Orosius repeated the EKG's version known to us from Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, and Festus[33] — a reflection of the fact that, in the fourth century, Nicaean writers might be much cooler in their assessment of Constantine than the Arian Eusebius had been.[34] Later, parts of Orosius' account of Constantine were interpolated into the *Origo Constantini*, perhaps to replace passages that had come to be regarded as insufficiently sympathetic.[35] One of the *Origo*'s passages that suffered in this way was, precisely, its last paragraph, on the death of Constantine. The Church historians from Rufinus onward all, as we have seen, narrate Constantine's death without reference to the Iranian campaign, despite their indebtedness to Eusebius in other respects. It may have been partly their fault that the last of the polytheist historians, Zosimus, could accuse Constantine of being utterly unwarlike (ἀπόλεμος).[36] But the references by Socrates

[27] On the *V.C.*'s readership, see Fowden, op. cit. (n. 24), 86 n. 25. Petit's argument, op. cit. (n. 11), that Lib., *or.* LIX depends on the *V.C.* rests on unconvincing parallels and on the view that the Renaissance humanist's interpolation at IV.57 is genuine, at least in the sense that it had entered the text by 340: see Winkelmann, op. cit. (n. 4), 224–6, 232.

[28] Ruf., *H.E.* X.12; Philost., *H.E.* II.16; Socr. Sch., *H.E.* I.39; Soz., *H.E.* II.34.1; Thdt., *H.E.* I.32.

[29] See above, p. 147.

[30] M. Mazza, 'Costantino nella storiografia ecclesiastica (dopo Eusebio)', in G. Bonamente and F. Fusco (eds), *Costantino il Grande dall'antichità all'umanesimo: Colloquio sul Cristianesimo nel mondo antico, Macerata 18–20 Dicembre 1990* (1992–93), 659–92 (without discussion of the Iranian campaign).

[31] T. D. Barnes, 'Panegyric, history and hagiography in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*', in R. Williams (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (1989), 107.

[32] Lib., *or.* LIX.60–1; Petit, op. cit. (n. 11), 576.

[33] Eus.-Hieron., *Chron.* a.337, p. 234 Helm; Orosius, *Hist.* VII.28.31. The EKG material also appears in the *Chronicon paschale* a.337, p. 532 (Dindorf), and in Theophanes, *Chron.* 33 de Boor, along with an allusion to Constantine's Arian baptism by Eusebius of Nicomedia/Constantinople. Theophanes makes explicit reference to an Arian source, and J. Bidez and F. Winkelmann, *Philostorgius, Kirchengeschichte* (3rd edn, 1981), 208–9, derive both texts from the 'Arian historiographer', who perhaps wrote as early as the reign of Theodosius I: H. C. Brennecke, *Studien zur Geschichte der Homöer: Der Osten bis zum Ende der homöischen Reichskirche* (1988), 93–4, 114–16, 127 n. 65, 152–7). That need not mean that the Ar. hist. had already absorbed the EKG material too, though Jerome had made the connection by *c.* 380 (loc. cit., with a strongly disapprobatory remark on Arianism). On the complicated question of the *Chronicon paschale*'s sources, see the introduction by M. and M. Whitby to their translation, esp. xvi–xviii. On whether Jerome used the Ar. hist., note the comments of Portmann, op. cit. (n. 13), 5–7.

[34] V. Aiello, 'Costantino, la lebbra e il battesimo di Silvestro', in Bonamente and Fusco, op. cit. (n. 30), 38–48.

[35] See I. König's edition of the *Origo* (1987), 12, 15, 19.

[36] Zos. II.32.1, and see below, p. 165.

and Gelasius of Cyzicus to an Iranian campaign, and their failure to provide any particularly convincing explanation of its abandonment, perhaps encouraged others to pretend that the campaign had in fact been led to a triumphant conclusion. This version, anticipated by Festus, was adopted by the sixth-century Antiochene chronicler John Malalas:

> He [Constantine] began a campaign against the Persians, was victorious, and made a peace treaty with Shapur, the emperor of the Persians. It was the Persian who asked to have peace with the Romans.[37]

And toward the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century in Egypt, John of Nikiu expanded Malalas in order to create his own version of Constantine's last campaign:

> He went to war against the cities of Persia and he conquered them. And when he had conquered them, he established them in peace and confirmed to them presents together with a horn which they used to blow for the king. And he received with kindness all the Christians who were there. And he removed the city magistrates and all the officials and replaced them with Christians. And he built beautiful churches in all the cities and villages.

A little later, John of Nikiu remarks how Shapur, 'who was of a pacific disposition and had paid tribute to the God-loving Emperor Constantine', was nonetheless stirred to war by the apostate Julian, on whom God took vengeance.[38]

These, then, were the devices by which many Christian writers, especially in the fifth century, avoided having to engage with the view, expressed even by a historian of Ammianus' stature, that ultimate responsibility for the disastrous course of Romano-Iranian relations in the fourth century lay, not with Julian, but with Constantine. The influence of the oppositional versions can be seen to have been profounder than the exiguousness of their remains suggests. It is hardly surprising that they did not often survive in their own right; but the responses they evoked are audible on all sides. In the light of hindsight, though, it was Constantine's baptism, not his Iranian campaign, that had imparted permanent significance to his last days. To the telling of this story, opposition and orthodox alike bent the richest resources of their imagination.

II. CONSTANTINE'S BAPTISM

(see Table 1, p. 166)

'They [the bishops] performed the sacred ceremonies according to custom' is the diplomatic phrase with which Eusebius of Caesarea reports Constantine's baptism in May 337 (*V.C.* IV.62.4). The Bishop of Nicomedia was the well-known Arian Eusebius, and his therefore was the primary responsibility for the sacrament.[39] In his *Chronicon*, Jerome does not hesitate to name Eusebius (a.337, p. 234 Helm), which suggests that his responsibility was still, *c.* 380, recognized both in Constantinople, where the chronicle was written, and in the West, at which it was aimed. But within months of the baptism, probably in October 337, Eusebius moved from the see of Nicomedia to that of Constantinople, the New Rome. It was only a matter of time until someone confused the New Rome[40] with the Old and decided Constantine had been baptized by 'Eusebius of Rome'.[41] Perusal of the pontifical lists did indeed reveal a Eusebius who had briefly sat on Peter's throne within Constantine's reign

[37] Io. Mal., *Chron.* XIII.317 Dindorf (trans. E. Jeffreys and others).

[38] John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXVII.61–2 (with R. H. Charles's note ad loc.); LXXX.3, 28. But John's glowing account of Jovian's treaty with Iran in 363 is a much more thoroughgoing travesty: LXXX.34–6.

[39] F. J. Dölger, 'Die Taufe Konstantins und ihre Probleme', in idem, *Konstantin der Grosse und seine Zeit* (1913), 385–6.

[40] The seventh-century *Chronicon paschale*, a.337, p. 532 Dindorf, has the baptism performed by 'Eusebius of Constantinople'. This passage may derive from the 'Arian historiographer': see above, n. 33.

[41] See below, Sections c, d.

(308);[42] but Silvester (314–35) was eventually fixed upon,[43] for reasons which must have included the prosaic matter of chronology[44] and Silvester's growing personal reputation.[45]

The Silvester version of Constantine's baptism received its classic expression in the Latin *Actus beati Silvestri*, a highly inventive and colourful narrative that profoundly influenced the imaginative world of the Middle Ages. But although the *Actus* provided, until the Renaissance, the sole widely-known account of the first Christian emperor,[46] students of the historical Constantine do not these days dirty their hands with it. As for students of the *Actus Silvestri*, they have usually fixed their gaze on the text's *Nachleben*, and especially its part in the notorious papal forgery known as the Donation of Constantine. For these reasons, and because those who occupy themselves with the Greek and Latin historians are relatively unconcerned with the rich Armenian historiography of late antiquity, the structural similarities between the *Actus* and stories told about Constantine in Greek, and in Armenian about the first Christian ruler of Armenia, have been given less weight than they deserve in discussion of the Silvester narrative's origin. It will be argued here that behind not only the Silvester narrative, but also the epic tale of Armenia's conversion to Christianity, lies a Platonist's slanderous story about how Constantine turned to Christ.[47]

a. *The Actus beati Silvestri*

Allusions to the *Actus beati Silvestri* begin to show up soon after the year 500 in Roman sources[48] and from at the latest *c.* 526 in Constantinopolitan and other Eastern texts.[49] In the case of a work which could hardly fail to make some impression at Rome, at least in milieux unsophisticated enough to have disbelieved or not even heard of Jerome, one should avoid positing too great a lapse of time between composition and first testimonia.[50] It is difficult, in other words, to imagine that the earliest version of the *Actus* was written much before 450. If, as has been argued by Wilhelm Pohlkamp,[51] this earliest version, which he calls A(1), reveals knowledge of and sensitivity to the relatively fluid and tolerant religious situation in late fourth-century Rome, we should allow for the possibility of a well-informed or even just long-lived author, perhaps of a conservative and very moderately antiquarian bent,[52] rather than hastening to deduce the existence of a written version of the Silvester narrative composed in the 390s[53] but universally ignored until *c.* 500. Oral versions of part or all of the tale of

[42] Barnes, op. cit. (n. 11), 38.

[43] Study of the traditions relating to Pope Silvester is now being put on a new footing by Wilhelm Pohlkamp (Münster), to whom I am obliged for offprints and other help. I refer to Pohlkamp's publications as follows:
Pohlkamp (1983) 'Tradition und Topographie: Papst Silvester I. (314–335) und der Drache vom Forum Romanum', *R.Q.A.* 78 (1983), 1–100.
Pohlkamp (1984) 'Kaiser Konstantin, der heidnische und der christliche Kult in den Actus Silvestri', *F.M.S.* 18 (1984), 357–400.
Pohlkamp (1988) '*Privilegium ecclesiae Romanae pontifici contulit*: Zur Vorgeschichte der Konstantinischen Schenkung', in *Fälschungen im Mittelalter. Internationaler Kongress der Monumenta Germaniae Historica, München, 16.–19. September 1986, 2: Gefälschte Rechtstexte - Der bestrafte Fälscher* (1988), 413–90.
Pohlkamp (1992) 'Textfassungen, literarische Formen und geschichtliche Funktionen der römischen Silvester-Akten', *Francia* 19 (1992), 115–96.

[44] Note though that Silvester's reign was backdated to 310 as early as Jerome, so that later generations commonly regarded him as the pope under whom the Church was recognized: E. Ewig (ed. H. Atsma), *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien: Gesammelte Schriften (1952–1973)* (1976–79), 1.82–3; Pohlkamp (1992), 195.

[45] Pohlkamp (1992), 187–96.

[46] Pohlkamp (1992), 116–31.

[47] The argument of Sections b–e is summarized in table 1 on p. 166 below. Both the argument and the diagram are meant to draw attention to relationships between various narratives, some written and others oral, some extant and some hypothetical. The process involved was, needless to say, much more diffuse and imprecise than that implied in, for example, the stemmata prefaced to text-editions and destined to show which specific manuscript(s) a given scribe worked with.

[48] W. Levison, 'Konstantinische Schenkung und Silvester-Legende', in *Miscellanea Francesco Ehrle: Scritti di storia e paleografia* (1924)(reprinted with a few bibliographical additions in idem, *Aus rheinischer und fränkischer Frühzeit: Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (1948), 390–465), 176–7, 181–2; Pohlkamp (1992), 126–7, 149–50, 181–3, and note also 128 on a fragment of a fifth-century palimpsest manuscript of Italian origin, now at Klagenfurt, which contained at least that part of the *Actus Silvestri* which tells of Silvester's disputation with the Jews.

[49] G. Fowden, 'Constantine, Silvester and the church of S. Polyeuctus in Constantinople', *JRA* 7 (1994).

[50] cf., e.g., the apparently very rapid dissemination of the stories, closely related to the *Actus*, concerning the empress Helena's discovery of the True Cross: below, p. 159.

[51] Pohlkamp (1983), 31–44; idem (1984), esp. 358–9, 373–4, 377, 379, 380, 395–400; idem (1988), 464–90.

[52] Note the comments of L. Duchesne, *Le Liber pontificalis* (2nd edn, 1955–57), 1.CXIII, on his limited interest in buildings.

[53] 'Noch ans Ende des 4.Jh.' (Pohlkamp (1992), 149 n. 160); 'nicht vor 391', and clearly not known to Ambrose in 395 (Pohlkamp (1988), 482 and n. 251) or for that matter to Prudentius in 402/3 (Pohlkamp (1992), 159 n. 208). At (1988), 486 n. 264, Pohlkamp allows the possibility of a date as late as *c.* 420.

Silvester are another matter. The possibility that such existed has been neglected by Pohlkamp, whose primary concern is the editing of the manuscripts. But Pohlkamp allows that our texts contain allusions best understood as reflections of earlier stories about Silvester.[54] The gap between the late fourth- or early fifth-century context detected by Pohlkamp and the early sixth-century date of the first external allusions to the *Actus* is best bridged by supposing that early oral traditions gradually congealed into the first literary version, A(1), detectable behind the manuscripts.[55]

Numerous surviving manuscripts — over 350 in Latin, 90 in Greek, and some in Syriac and Armenian too — contain various recensions of the *Actus beati Silvestri*.[56] The oldest of the Latin versions is considered to represent the original composition, A(1). But the scholarly public still depends, for knowledge of the Latin *Actus*, on the text Boninus Mombritius printed *c.* 1475–80 from a late and composite manuscript version.[57] Progress has of late been made, though, toward a critical edition.[58] The story of Constantine's baptism runs as follows, according to the A(1) version:

When the holy Silvester was Bishop of Rome, while Constantine was sole emperor ('monarchiam tenens'),[59] in other words after 324, the Christians were subjected to a terrible persecution. Silvester and his clergy left the city and took refuge in caves on Mount Soracte.[60] Then the emperor was stricken with leprosy. Troops of magi and doctors availed not to help him, but the Capitoline priests bade him visit the Capitol and there bathe in the blood of infants. Groaning and weeping, mothers brought their offspring to be slaughtered. Constantine, overcome by 'pietas' and appalled by the priests' cruelty, stopped the carriage which already was bearing him to the dreadful rite, and confessed in a speech to the crowd that this was indeed no way for a valiant soldier like himself to seek deliverance from affliction. He immediately ordered that the children be returned to their mothers. That night SS. Peter and Paul appeared to him in a vision and told him that Christ, in recognition of his noble action, wished him to send for Silvester and be healed through baptism. Silvester was duly brought to the palace, expecting martyrdom; but when Constantine related what had come to pass, the bishop explained to him that Peter and Paul were apostles not gods, and showed him a picture of them. Silvester then made Constantine a catechumen, having first explained that he should prepare for baptism by repentance and fasting. On the appointed day (apparently Easter eve), Silvester duly baptized Constantine in the baths of the Lateran palace; the emperor's leprosy was washed away; a bright light shone all about; and the emperor afterwards related how he had seen a vision of Christ. In the days following he promulgated many laws in favour of the Church, and some 7,000 Romans (not counting women and children) converted to Christianity. Constantine helped with his own hands to dig out the foundations of the new basilica of S. Peter; he founded a basilica for Christ himself in the Lateran; and he preached to the senate, which was resisting the new religion, in the Basilica Ulpia.

b. *Polytheist Versions*

In December 362, exactly a quarter of a century after Constantine's historical baptism, his half-nephew the emperor Julian penned an imaginative account of a competition on Mount

[54] Pohlkamp (1984), 370–1.

[55] On the disparate origin of the *Actus*' constituent parts, of which the conversion narrative is only one, see Aiello, op. cit. (n. 34), 22–4, 30–2. The *Actus* imply that Constantine's baptism occurred after 324, but then have him preside over a debate between Silvester and some Jews in 315.

[56] The development of the manuscript tradition is surveyed by Pohlkamp (1992), 136–48.

[57] B. Mombritius, *Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum* (Milan, *c.*1475–80, ff. 279v–293v; Paris, 2nd edn, 1910, 2.508–31; also in P. De Leo, *Ricerche sui falsi medioevali* 1: *Il Constitutum Constantini: Compilazione agiografica del sec.* VIII. *Note e documenti per una nuova lettura* (1974), 151–221). On other printed versions, see Pohlkamp (1992), 132–8.

[58] W. Pohlkamp, *Die Actus Silvestri (Silvester-Legende): Text der ältesten Fassung A(1)* (forthcoming). In his articles (above, n. 43), Pohlkamp provides abundant extracts from both A(1) and the somewhat later version B(1), which he dates *c.* 500, and from which Mombritius' version derives. For a comparison of versions A(1) and B(1) see Pohlkamp (1992), 170–81. The differences between the printed version and Pohlkamp's as yet unpublished edition of A(1), a draft of which he kindly sent me, appear to be insufficiently substantial to undermine the historical arguments advanced in the present article. I quote from Pohlkamp's edition, using De Leo's subdivision of the text.

[59] Text at Pohlkamp (1988), 449 n. 132.

[60] The MS variants are listed by Pohlkamp (1988), 451 n. 142.

Olympus, in which the gods chose who had been Rome's best emperor. In a bitter passage toward the end of the *Caesares*, we read the following:

> As for Constantine, he could not discover among the gods the model of his own career; but when he caught sight of Pleasure, who was not far off, he ran to her. She received him tenderly and embraced him, then after dressing him in raiment of many colours and otherwise making him beautiful, she led him away to Incontinence. There too he found Jesus, who had taken up his abode with her and cried aloud to all comers: 'He that is a seducer, he that is a murderer, he that is sacrilegious and infamous, let him approach without fear! For with this water will I wash him and straightway make him clean. And though he should be guilty of those same sins a second time, let him but smite his breast and beat his head and I will make him clean again.' To him Constantine came gladly, when he had conducted his sons forth from the assembly of the gods. But the avenging deities none the less punished both him and them for their impiety, and exacted the penalty for the shedding of the blood of their kindred, until Zeus granted them a respite for the sake of Claudius [Gothicus] and Constantius [I]. (336ab, trans. W. C. Wright)

And in Julian's *Contra Galilaeos*, written in the same winter of 362–63, there is a related passage about the meaning of baptism:

> Here is how [the apostle] Paul writes, about his followers, to those selfsame people: 'Make no mistake: idolaters, adulterers, the effeminate, sodomites, thieves, misers, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers, none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And you are not unaware, my brothers, that you too were of this kind; but you have been washed clean, you have been sanctified in the name of Jesus Christ.' [1 Cor. VI.9–11] You see that he says that they too were of this kind, but they were sanctified and washed clean, having found water capable of washing and thoroughly purging them, and penetrating even to their soul. So this baptism, that neither relieves the leper of his leprosy, [nor cures] scabs or white leprosy [vitiligo alba, a mild form of the disease] or warts or gout or dysentery or dropsy or whitlow or any of the body's failings small or great, will it drive out adulteries and swindlings and, in a word, all the soul's transgressions? (fr.59 Masaracchia)

The student of the Silvester version immediately discerns how certain themes that converge in the *Actus* also appear together in these two passages: the guilt of Constantine; Christ's or his apostles' sollicitation of his repentance in return for purification; baptism's (in)ability to wash away physical as well as moral pollution; even leprosy. Writing some seventy years later, Cyril of Alexandria inveighed at length in his *Contra Julianum* against Julian's comments on baptism, though without specific reference to Constantine.[61] That specific reference is present, though, in another Christian text of the same period, the *Historia ecclesiastica* that Sozomen seems to have stopped writing (rather than finished) in 450.[62] Sozomen is the earliest surviving source that allows us to discern the outline of a polytheist narrative of Constantine's conversion, which we glimpse only fleetingly in the *Caesares*. The ecclesiastical historian also proves that the polytheist version was enjoying enough success, in the second quarter of the fifth century, to seem worth refuting.

> I am not unaware [Sozomen writes] that the Hellenes tell how Constantine, after slaying certain members of his closest family circle and conniving at the death of his own son Crispus, repented and enquired of Sopater the philosopher, who was at that time the foremost representative of the succession (διαδοχή) of Plotinus, concerning the means by which he might be purified. He [Sopater] replied that such sins admit no purification. The king, dismayed at this ban, happened to encounter some bishops, who promised that he would be cleansed from sin through repentance and baptism. These words found their mark, and he [Constantine] was delighted with them. He admired the doctrine [of the Church], and became a Christian, and led his subjects to the same faith. (1.5.1)

This is all invention, Sozomen continues, and for one very simple reason. Constantine could not have killed his son after his own conversion to Christianity, which occurred before he entered Rome in 312. But Sopater did not meet Constantine during that early, Western phase of his reign, while Crispus was still alive in the twentieth year of his father's rule. Even supposing he corresponded with the emperor, Sopater could not possibly have been unaware

[61] Cyr. Al., *Jul.* VII, *P.G.* 76.876–80.

[62] On the date, see Barnes, op. cit. (n. 13), 206.

'that Heracles, the son of Alcmene, obtained purification at Athens by the mysteries of Demeter after the murder of his children, and of Iphitus, whom he unjustly killed though he was his guest and friend.' (1.5.4)

Sozomen attributes the story he refutes to certain polytheists — 'the Hellenes'. It is plain enough that he had no incentive to invent it himself. It involved embarrassing reference to Constantine's penchant for dynastic murder, which Eusebius had, of course, completely omitted from the *Vita Constantini*;[63] while Sopater, though a leading pupil of the Syrian theurgist Iamblichus and known to have spent some time at Constantine's court at Constantinople, was hardly a sufficiently prominent figure to compel, on his own, inclusion of this story in a general Church history. Clearly, polytheists were indeed going round telling this rather distasteful tale about the first Christian emperor's conversion.

Most of what we know about Sopater is to be found in the *Vitae philosophorum et sophistarum* composed at the end of the fourth century by the polytheist rhetor Eunapius of Sardis. Eunapius' biography of Sopater highlights his acquisition of great and publicly visible influence over Constantine, whom he might have succeeded in converting to philosophy had his enemies not succeeded in turning the emperor against him.[64] But the *Vitae* do not include the specific story told by Sozomen, which must therefore have appeared in Eunapius' other work, the *Historia*.[65] Save a number of fragments, the *Historia* is now lost; but Eunapius frequently divided his material on particular individuals — even learned personages whose natural place was in the *Vitae* rather than the more political *Historia* — between his two literary projects.[66] Apparently, Sozomen was familiar with both works.[67] His curious description of Sopater as 'at that time the foremost representative of the succession of Plotinus' probably reflects the fact that Plotinus comes first in Eunapius' sequence of biographies; while his reference to Heracles will have been prompted by Eunapius' passing allusion to Heracles and the Cercopes.[68]

Sozomen's source, then, was Eunapius. In other words, we know that in the closing years of the fourth century, at the latest, there was in circulation a polytheist narrative of Constantine's conversion whose basic elements were similar to those of the *Actus Silvestri*: Constantine's guilt; involvement of polytheist authorities in the search for a means of expiation; their refusal of such means; the king's resort to a bishop or bishops; his baptism; and finally his conversion of his subjects. And just as the *Actus* represent Constantine as sole emperor at the time of his conversion, so Eunapius sets his story in 326, the year of Fausta's and Crispus' death. But where did Eunapius get this story from?

As already noticed in the first part of this article, Eusebius of Caesarea alludes in his *Vita Constantini* to a 'self-imagined philosopher (δοκησίσοφος)' who even at the very end of the reign gave only grudging assent to the emperor's insistent sermonizing (IV.55.2). The effects of baptism were prominent among the subjects debated in this environment. In an oration delivered in 335, Eusebius attacks δοκησισόφους who defend the cult of the old gods against Constantine's policies. He then goes straight on to proclaim the baptism that Christ has brought to all sorts and conditions of men:

> Declaring to all in ringing tones amnesty for former wrongs, he cried out and said: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest', and again: 'I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'.[69]

Likewise Lactantius proclaims the immediate erasure of all sins in the baptismal font free of charge — 'nos aquam non vendimus' — and enquires whether all the studies of the philosophers ever brought about such a result.[70] Nor was Julian the first to answer this propaganda: Porphyry (d. *c.* 305) had already made a very aggressive case for the opposition, in tones that Julian merely imitated.[71] There was too the whole question of what happened to

[63] Barnes, op. cit. (n. 11), 270, and cf. 267 on Constantius.

[64] Eun., *V.Phil.* VI.2.

[65] For further evidence pointing in this direction, see below, p. 163. That the *Hist.* contained numerous stories designed to discredit Constantine is certain: fr.9.1–2 (Blockley).

[66] Eun., *V.Phil.* VII.1.5; R. J. Penella, *Greek Philosophers and Sophists in the Fourth Century A.D.: Studies in Eunapius of Sardis* (1990), 13–19.

[67] On Sozomen's use of Eunapius, see G. C. Hansen's introduction to J. Bidez's edition of Sozomen (1960), li.

[68] Eun., *V.phil.* VI.2.3.

[69] Eus., *L.C.* XI.5 (trans. H. A. Drake).

[70] Lact., *Div. inst.* III.26.

[71] Porph., *Chr.* fr.88 von Harnack; and note also Libanius, *or.* XVIII.178.

sins committed after baptism. At the end of the Council of Nicaea, Constantine asked the Novatian bishop Acesius why he had not subscribed to the declaration of faith. Acesius explained how the Novatians' separation from the rest of the Church went back to the Decian persecution: only God, not his priests, could forgive those who had betrayed the faith into which they had been baptized. 'When Acesius had said this, the emperor replied: "Set up a ladder, Acesius, and climb alone into heaven."'[72] If they ever met, Acesius and Sopater will at least have agreed that it is not for men to make concessions to human weakness.

In short, Sopater and Constantine may well have had a conversation similar to that which Sozomen extracted from Eunapius. Even if they did not, Sopater's eventual fall from grace gave him and his circle every reason — in case Constantine's cocktail of dynastic murder and assault on polytheism had not already suggested one — to circulate an unofficial version of how the emperor came to Christ, though Sopater, at least, did not live long enough to hear about the imperial baptism. And this version capitalized on the considerable vagueness that seems to have prevailed about when exactly Constantine became committed to Christianity. The polytheist narrative can, in other words, be traced back a generation before Julian. Its long history underlines what has anyway become obvious in the preceding pages, namely that this oppositional version, and Christian interest in refuting it, together provided some of the fertile soil in which the tale of Silvester first sprang up, and was then written down not long after Sozomen composed his history of the Church.

One would like to know how the polytheist version became known in the West; but certainly there was nothing difficult or improbable in the transmission of such a story, nor was it the only anti-Constantine tale of Constantinopolitan reference and probably provenance to be heard in the old capital.[73] Indeed, François Paschoud has gone so far as to argue that Eunapius' *Historia* depended heavily on a Latin history composed in the polytheist and aristocratic milieu, perhaps the *Annales* of Virius Nicomachus Flavianus.[74] But since Eunapius was closely linked to the narrow philosophical circles he describes, we do not need to suppose he got the Sopater story from Rome. It suffices to say that the polytheist version could very easily — and early — have reached Rome, and that once it did, a Christian response was to be expected.

c. *From Eusebius of Nicomedia to Eusebius of Rome*

There is no reason to quarrel with the natural and common assumption, recently much elaborated by Pohlkamp, that the *Actus beati Silvestri* were composed at Rome.[75] One needs to be cautious, though, about exactly how the *Actus* were composed. Pohlkamp likes Wilhelm Levison's notion that an author created it 'ganz aus eigener Phantasie';[76] but other scholars, following in the wake of Louis Duchesne, have been attracted by the idea that some of its elements were imported from the East.[77] So far I have argued that the Silvester version was indeed a reaction to a story that reached Rome from the Greek world; and one might add that it would have been strange if Christians in the Greek world had not already answered the polytheist version in this imaginative fashion, as well as refuting it in the drier, more scholarly manner of Sozomen. Is it possible, in other words, that not just elements of the tale, but the storyline itself, was an import? 'Eusebius of Rome' is, in this context, an intriguing phantom.

During the century or more that elapsed between 337 and the crystallization of the *Actus*, Christian apologists reacted in several different ways to the oppositional accounts that placed

[72] Socr. Sch., *H.E.* 1.10; Soz., *H.E.* 1.22.

[73] G. Fowden, 'Constantine's porphyry column: The earliest literary allusion', *JRS* 81 (1991), 119–31.

[74] See most recently Paschoud's edition of Zosimus (1971–89), 3(2). 84–7, but also the scepticism of, e.g., J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (1989), 476 n. 6, 479 n. 7.

[75] Note especially Pohlkamp's interesting suggestion, (1992), 157 n. 203, that the *Actus* may have in part been inspired by the reliefs on the Arch of Constantine.

[76] Levison, op. cit. (n. 48), 239; Pohlkamp (1988), 430, although at (1992), 158 n. 206 he concedes that the *Actus* were a counterblast to Greek polytheist traditions about Constantine's conversion. He is compelled to do this because, ignoring Sozomen, he takes Zosimus' account of Constantine's conversion to be a simple transcript of Eunapius, which I doubt: see below, Section e. But I do not, of course, dispute that such polytheist slanders circulated in the fourth century, whether or not Zosimus is a good guide to them.

[77] Pohlkamp (1992), 132 n. 76, lists those who have followed Duchesne, op. cit. (n. 54), 1.CXIII-CXIV. But Duchesne denied any connection between the polytheist versions and the *Actus* (1.CXVII).

Constantine's conversion in 326. The simplest and most straightforward response is exemplified by Sozomen, who insists on the truth of what Eusebius says in the *Vita*, namely that Constantine became a Christian at the time of his famous vision in 312. Sozomen sees no need to deny that the emperor received the sacrament of baptism only at the end of his life. Others, though, were embarrassed by this quarter-century gap between conversion and baptism. They felt an irresistible need to move the baptism to 312, as well as to deny that being baptized by an Arian meant that Constantine had died an Arian.

This version is known to us from a brief text called the *Visio Constantini*. The *Visio* forms the introduction to the well-known Judas Cyriacus narrative of the empress Helena's discovery of the True Cross, the *Inventio Sanctae Crucis*, which was composed in Greek in Palestine between about 415 and 450, and very soon afterwards translated into both Latin and Syriac.[78] The *Visio* states that, in the seventh year of his reign, Constantine was forced to confront a vast barbarian horde on the Danube frontier. Eventually the barbarians began to advance, and Constantine was in despair about what to do. During the night before battle was to be joined, he saw the vision of the cross — 'In this sign conquer'. After the great victory he then won, he asked the priests of the many gods about the meaning of this sign. They replied that it belonged to none of their gods, and that when the cross was carried through their temples, the images fell and were broken. Then the Christians in the army told Constantine that the cross was the sign of Jesus Christ the living God, who was crucified to save mankind. 'Hearing these things, the emperor summoned Eusebius the Bishop of Rome, and was instructed by him, and believed sincerely with all his soul, and was baptized along with his mother and a crowd of courtiers.' Thereupon he sent Helena off to search for the True Cross itself.

It seems that the *Visio* did not originally belong with the *Inventio*, though it is likely that the two texts came together very early in the *Inventio*'s history.[79] The *Visio* may therefore go back before the *terminus post quem* of 415 that has been assigned to the *Inventio*. A very aged 'Eusebius of Rome' also plays a leading part in Syriac narratives about the emperor Julian, and it has recently been argued that these may already have begun to circulate in the fourth century.[80] There is every reason, then, to suppose that 'Eusebius of Rome' was introduced quite early into the evolving Christian story of Constantine's conversion. Certainly he must predate Silvester in this role. 'Eusebius of Rome' is an easy and probably therefore early corruption of 'Eusebius of Nicomedia/Constantinople' ('New Rome'). We also have much less evidence for the 'Eusebius of Rome' version, very probably because the Silvester version's success deprived it of its audience. One can see this process at work in the manuscripts of the *Visio*, as Eusebius' name gradually falls out and is replaced by Silvester's.[81] As for the 'Eusebius of Rome' version's place of origin, one should probably look to the East, whence much of our evidence derives. The chances are that it was born in Nicaean circles eager to mask Arian involvement in Constantine's baptism, probably in some provincial milieu where a distortion of this sort might not incur fatal criticism. Together it circulated with the Judas Cyriacus narrative,[82] and together they migrated to the West, thanks to the Latin translation.

Although this 'Eusebius of Rome' version is a far more radical answer to the polytheists than Sozomen was prepared to offer, some felt it did not go far enough. It had, after all, remained quite close to Eusebius of Caesarea's *Vita*, in the sense that it took two well-attested events in Constantine's biography, the vision and the baptism, and simply moved them into

[78] The oldest known version of the Greek text, in an eighth- or ninth-century manuscript at S. Catherine's, Sinai, is printed by E. Nestle, 'Die Kreuzauffindungslegende: Nach einer Handschrift von Sinai', *Byz.Z.* 4 (1895), 324–31. There is no critical edition of the Greek *Inventio*: other versions are listed by S. Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found: From Event to Medieval Legend* (1991), 226–9, who also provides a critical edition of the Latin translation, 255–71, and discusses the Syriac translation, 246–9. On the historical environment of these successive versions, see ibid., 146–50, 201–4.

[79] Borgehammar, op. cit. (n. 78), 151, 241–2.

[80] van Esbroeck, op. cit. (n. 1), 193, 201–2. The first part of the fragmentary narrative printed by J. G. E. Hoffmann, *Iulianos der Abtruennige: Syrische Erzaehlungen* (1880), ends as follows: 'Finished is the glorious history of King Constantine the Christian and of his sons, and the history of the blessed Eusebius, Bishop of Rome' (p. 59, trans. H. Gollancz, *Julian the Apostate, Now Translated for the First Time from the Syriac Original* (1928), 65).

[81] De Leo, op. cit. (n. 57), 148; A. Holder (ed.), *Inventio Sanctae Crucis* (1889), 16. See also below, p. 161, on Agathangelos, and Io. Mal., *Chron.* XIII.316–17 Dindorf, who follows the *Visio*'s account of Constantine's campaign and vision, but then diverges by explicitly locating the baptism at Rome, and having Silvester rather than Eusebius administer it.

[82] M. van Esbroeck, 'Legends about Constantine in Armenian', in T. J. Samuelian (ed.), *Classical Armenian Culture: Influences and Creativity* (1982), 85, 93–4, draws attention to the way in which, *c.* 460, Agathangelos too (see below) draws on both the baptism and the *inventio* narratives. Io. Mal., *Chron.* XIII.316–17 Dindorf, has the same combination: see also the previous note.

close proximity, in order to exclude the notion that Constantine had only converted in 326. The polytheist version was neatly subverted, without the need to add any fresh element to the tale.[83] The *Actus Silvestri*, by contrast, offered something very novel. Constantine the persecutor of Christians was just an exaggeration of Constantine the polytheist, well attested before 312. Even Constantine the physically stricken ruler who is forced to seek baptism was no more than the historical truth as recorded in the *Vita Constantini*. But Constantine the leper — and neither in 312 nor in 337, but in mid-career, soon after he gained control of the whole empire — was something one might not have foreseen. It was a clever move to steal the moral disease that the polytheists had attributed to Constantine, and transform it into a physical affliction that symbolized what everybody knew anyway: that Constantine too had worshiped the old gods, once upon a time. The allusion to the *mortes persecutorum* was unmistakable, except that Constantine, unlike Galerius, had repented in time.[84] There were, of course, powerful precedents even for this polemical ploy. The idea of a ruler being struck down by a terrible disease, and then healed by a man of God to whom he shows sympathy and from whom he may even accept conversion, was current in the popular story about Abgar of Edessa: Eusebius had included it in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (1.13). And then, in the Old Testament, there was Naaman the Syrian, a mighty soldier but also a leper, who sought a cure from the prophet Elisha and was sent to wash seven times in the Jordan, where he was healed and thereby impelled to acknowledge the One God of the Jews. Naaman is specifically invoked by Silvester in the *Actus*, at the moment he baptizes Constantine.[85] These popular stories not only helped mould the Silvester version, but also eased its dissemination. There is some evidence, though, that this narrative first emerged in the East, and at a time when the bishop who baptized Constantine was still called 'Eusebius of Rome'.

d. *Agathangelos and the 'Eusebius of Rome' Version*

Agathangelos' *History of the Armenians* is our earliest surviving narrative of how King Trdat (Tiridates) of Armenia converted to Christianity. Although the text of the original Armenian version of Agathangelos that we now read is certainly, like all such epics, the product of an evolutionary process, it seems to have reached more or less its present shape *c.* 460,[86] at much the same time as the *Actus Silvestri*. Agathangelos 'from the great city of Rome, trained in the art of the ancients, proficient in Latin and Greek and not unskilled in literary composition' (12), tells how 'in those times the ruler of the Greeks was engaged in persecuting the Church of God. And when Trdat discovered that Gregory [the future Bishop Gregory the Illuminator] was a member of the Christian cult, . . . he tormented him, that he might abandon the worship of Christ' (38). But Gregory remained steadfast, so Trdat had him cast into a deep pit and left him there for thirteen years, with only snakes for company. Following the example set by 'the kings of the Greeks' (129), Trdat mounted a general persecution of Armenian Christians, and especially of the aristocratic Roman nuns Gaiane and the beautiful Rhipsime — whom he tried unsuccessfully to rape — and their companions, fugitives from Diocletian. After relating their martyrdom, Agathangelos says of Trdat: 'He should have been ashamed, he who was so renowned for bravery in battle . . . He who was such a powerful soldier and strong of body, by the will of God was defeated by a single girl' (202). For his sins, Trdat was turned into a wild boar, and 'all the populace in the city went mad through similar demon-possession' (213).

[83] The solution proposed by the 'Eusebius of Rome' version to the intrinsic problems of Constantine's *Vita* is so obvious and elegant that one might be tempted to object that it needed no stimulus from any polytheist version. But note the markedly anti-polytheist slant of the 'Eusebius of Rome' episode in the Syriac Julian romance: above, p. 159.

[84] Lact., *Mort. pers.* XXXIII–XXXV.

[85] 2 *Kings* V; *Actus Silvestri* 1.10 (=Pohlkamp (1988), 480 n. 248).

[86] See the introduction to R. W. Thomson's reprint and translation (1976) of the 1914 Tiflis edition of Agathangelos (to which I am indebted for quotations, though note also the reviews by D. M. Lang, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 41 (1978), 175–6, and G. Winkler, *Catholic Historical Review* 65 (1979), 312–16), xc. Thomson's discussion of Agathangelos' sources (lxxix–xciii) says nothing about the narratives of Constantine's baptism. The connection is briefly noted by van Esbroeck, op. cit. (n. 82), 93–4 (but on this article see below, n. 88).

> Then there appeared a vision from God to the king's sister, whose name was Khosrovidukht. So she came to speak with the people and related the vision, saying: 'A vision appeared to me this night. A man in the likeness of light came and told me: "There is no other cure for these torments that have come upon you, unless you send to the city of Artashat and bring thence the prisoner Gregory. When he comes he will teach you the remedy for your ills"'. (214)

So Gregory returned; 'and the king, in the form of a boar, cried out in a loud voice, he called out, grunted and slobbered and foamed at the mouth in his snout-like face' (728), and used his voice, the only human attribute left him, to beg forgiveness. Gregory delivered, thereupon, an extremely long homily, at the end of which he demanded the construction of chapels for the martyrs, and a general fast. He first cured Trdat's hands and feet, that he might help dig the martyrs' graves; and afterwards he restored the king completely to human shape. Then came the destruction of the temples, the preaching of the Gospel throughout Armenia, and Gregory's journey to Cappadocian Caesarea for ordination. After further missionary efforts and more fasting at court, Gregory baptized Trdat, his family, retinue, and army in the River Euphrates, to the accompaniment of the usual signs and wonders. Trdat passed the rest of his life as a philosopher king (863, 889) along the lines of Eusebius of Caesarea's Constantine. Indeed, when he heard of the emperor's conversion to Christianity, Trdat set out with Gregory to visit Rome. He entered into cordial relations with Constantine, and sent a bishop to represent Armenia at the Council of Nicaea.

There is a great deal in Agathangelos that recalls the *Actus Silvestri*.[87] In both narratives a wicked king attacks Christ's flock, is punished by a terrible transformation of his body, resorts to a confessor whom he has just been persecuting, and is eventually baptized by him, so that they undertake together the Christianization of the kingdom. But the two texts share important details as well, for example Constantine's and Trdat's physical participation in the construction of martyria designed as spiritual focal points of their respective kingdoms. The Roman origin of Gaiane, Rhipsime, and their companions, and indeed (allegedly) of Agathangelos himself, and Trdat's visit to Constantine at Rome, are likewise suggestive. But there are divergences too: Trdat's healing precedes his baptism, for example. And it is significant that he is welcomed to the royal palace in Rome by Constantine and 'Bishop Eusebius', not Silvester (875 and Thomson's note ad loc.).[88] This struck some copyists of the Armenian text of Agathangelos as so surprising that they substituted the name of Silvester. But the Silvester narrative was probably not even orally familiar in the East in Agathangelos' day, while the *Actus* themselves were in all likelihood written just then, or later.

Agathangelos' passing allusion *c.* 460 to Constantine and Bishop 'Eusebius of Rome', in the context of Constantine's recent conversion, proves that he was familiar with the *Visio*. But

[87] C. Bush Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (1914), one of the few writers to consider, even in passing, the similarities between Agathangelos and the narratives of Constantine's baptism, concluded from them that they represent a very early stage in the evolution of the Silvester version, which therefore arose in either Armenia or Syria (157–8). Like Duchesne, *Liber pontificalis* 1.cxiii–cxiv, Coleman rejected any connection between the Silvester version and the polytheist slander (129).

[88] The sixth-century Greek translation (Ag) of the Armenian Agathangelos (Aa) has Eusebius (165: G. Lafontaine, *La version grecque ancienne du livre arménien d'Agathange. Edition critique* (1973), 336; and cf. 39 for the date), as does the early Greek *Vita* of Gregory (Vg), which is a different recension of the same story told by Agathangelos (182: G. Garitte, *Documents pour l'étude du livre d'Agathange* (1946), 110; and cf. 334, 344 for the early date). But V also inserts a letter not in Agathangelos, in which Constantine bids Trdat visit Rome and alludes to his own baptism by Silvester (176: Garitte, *Documents*, 107). The early seventh-century Syriac 'résumé of Agathangelos' (S), which assimilated both A and V and is in fact our earliest evidence for the existence of either (M. van Esbroeck, 'Le résumé syriaque de l'Agathange', *AB* 95 (1977), 291–358; cf. idem, 'Un nouveau témoin du livre d'Agathange', *R.E.Arm.* 8 (1971), 19–20), knows only a bishop of Rome called Leontius (an allusion to Leontius of Caesarea, who consecrated Gregory the Illuminator). For a summary of the various versions of A and V, see G. Winkler, 'Our present knowledge of the History of Agat'angelos and its oriental versions', *R.E.Arm.* 14 (1980), 125–41. M. van Esbroeck, 'Le résumé syriaque de l'Agathange et sa portée pour l'histoire du développement de la légende', *Handes Amsorya* 90 (1976), 493–510, and in the article cited above, n. 82, regards the whole of V, including Constantine's letter, as a version of the Trdat-Gregory story earlier than Aa and more tolerant of Roman claims, while Aa emphasizes Armenian priority, initiative, and independence. Though a plausible analysis of the text's intention, this presupposes a very early date for the arrival of the Silvester version in the East (A being placed *c.* 460), and indeed for the composition of the *Actus Silvestri* (if we assume that Agathangelos encountered the story in a written version). There is no good evidence for either of these propositions: see above, pp. 154–5, and below, p. 164. If, then, V is to be assigned to the fifth century, Constantine's letter must be a sixth-century insertion, a strengthening of the Chalcedonian version (see Garitte's comments, *Documents*, 343–5) just when, as van Esbroeck himself argues, A was being adjusted to reflect a relatively (Garitte, *Documents*, 345 n. 1) Armenocentric viewpoint. V's sixth-century editor (or author?) left Eusebius in because he regarded him as Silvester's successor, or by oversight.

his narrative has to do with another royal conversion in another land, and his protagonists are Trdat and Gregory. If the story he tells reminds us of the *Actus Silvestri*, which were compiled in Rome, that may be no more than coincidence — especially since Abgar and Naaman were as present to Agathangelos' mind as they were to that of the *Actus*' compiler. But it is also possible that the story of Constantine's conversion known to Agathangelos, presumably in Greek, was one which still had 'Eusebius of Rome' playing the bishop, but in a drama whose plot had already moved on from rearrangement of known events in Constantine's life to invention of an at least partly fresh scenario. There is every possibility that this happened or began to happen somewhere in the East during the first half of the fifth century. Even the local, Roman references in the *Actus* are not so obscure that they could only have been thought up in the Eternal City: the Capitol,[89] the Lateran palace and basilica, S. Peter's and the Basilica Ulpia.[90] But these may equally well have been added by the Roman compiler to an evolved 'Eusebius of Rome' version that reached him from the East at much the same time as Agathangelos was writing in Armenia. Silvester himself was almost certainly Rome's own contribution to the story; and so, surely, was the dating of Constantine's conversion in the middle of his reign, of which more will be said below.

Support for this hypothesis of an evolved 'Eusebius of Rome' version is perhaps to be found in a Syriac homily *On the Emperor Constantine and the Healing of his Leprosy* that claims to have been composed by Jacob of Serugh (*c.* 451–521),[91] though this attribution has been quite widely questioned.[92] The structure of the conversion story here offered recalls the *Actus Silvestri*, though there are variations, and no local colour of any sort, or personal names except Constantine's.[93] In common with Agathangelos, the homily has the ruler's cure precede his baptism, whereas in the *Actus* it follows. It is at least possible that this was one of the distinguishing marks of the evolved 'Eusebius of Rome' version. And if the assignment of the homily to Jacob of Serugh and therefore to a date before 521 is correct, it becomes less likely that the *Actus Silvestri* could have provided its model — albeit not impossible, as we shall shortly see in our discussion of Zosimus.

Some still remembered, though, that 'Eusebius' had originally been the Arian Bishop of Nicomedia. The anxiety that continued to play around this problem is apparent in the ecclesiastical historian Gelasius of Cyzicus who, writing *c.* 475, shows extreme concern about the orthodoxy of the bishop who baptized Constantine. Unfortunately, all we have to go on is a fragment of Gelasius preserved by Photius, and we do not know which version of the story he himself used.[94] But it is easy to imagine how eagerly, in these circumstances, an alternative and unambiguously different version was welcomed. I have argued elsewhere that the Silvester version arrived in the East in the first quarter of the sixth century, and enjoyed considerable success as a symbol of that persistent ideal of Roman unity, and particularly of the harmony of the emperor in Constantinople with the pope in Rome, to which Justinian was to devote so much energy.[95] It is against this background that we should now at last turn to read what is usually regarded as our best source for Eunapius' version of the polytheist account, namely Zosimus.

[89] Influenced, perhaps, by polytheist versions of Constantine's entry into Rome and refusal to visit the Capitol, on which see Section e.

[90] On Roman colour in the *Actus*, see Levison, op. cit. (n. 48), 182–6; Pohlkamp (1983); above, n. 75. Was the idea that Constantine was baptized in the Lateran encouraged by his lavish embellishment in porphyry and precious metals of the Lateran baptistery (*Liber pontificalis* 34 (1.174 Duchesne))?

[91] Ed. and trans. A. L. Frothingham, 'L'omelia di Giacomo di Sarûg sul battesimo di Costantino imperatore', *MAL* 8 (1883), 167–242.

[92] W. Cramer, 'Irrtum und Lüge: Zum Urteil des Jakob von Sarug über Reste paganer Religion und Kultur', *JbAC* 23 (1980), 100 n. 36.

[93] This feature recalls the *Vita Constantini*: Barnes, op. cit. (n. 11), 268.

[94] Gel. Cyz. ap. Phot., *Bibl.* 88.67a; cf. Theophanes, *Chron.* 17–18 de Boor.

[95] Fowden, op. cit. (n. 49).

e. *Zosimus and the Silvester Version*

Zosimus, a polytheist like Eunapius, probably wrote his very anti-Constantinian *Historia nova* at Constantinople between 498 and the 520s.[96] He has exercised a considerable influence on modern views of Constantine.[97] Zosimus' main source was Eunapius' *Historia*, which — it is generally held — he followed slavishly.[98] For his latest editor, François Paschoud, 'Zosime n'a pas la capacité de combiner ou d'harmoniser même deux sources'.[99] But a cursory reading of Zosimus on Constantine's conversion suggests that this assessment of his use of sources may be a little insensitive:

> When the whole empire devolved on Constantine alone, he no longer hid his natural malignity, but took the liberty of acting in all matters according to his own will. He was still celebrating the ancestral rites, though more out of necessity than respectfulness . . . When he came to Rome, he was full of arrogance, and thought fit to begin his impiety at home. Without any consideration for natural law he killed his son Crispus who, as I related before, had been considered worthy of the rank of Caesar, but had come under suspicion of having had intercourse with his step-mother, Fausta. And when Constantine's mother, Helena, was saddened by this atrocity and was inconsolable at the young man's death, Constantine, as if to comfort her, applied a remedy worse than the disease: he ordered a bath to be overheated, and shut Fausta up in it until she was dead. Since he had these crimes on his conscience, and in addition had broken oaths, he approached the priests, seeking to expiate his sins; but they declared that there was no known method of purification capable of purging such impieties. A certain Egyptian[100] who had come to Rome from Iberia, and who had become familiar with the ladies of the palace, encountered Constantine and averred that the teaching of the Christians does away with all sinfulness and promises that as many of the impious as partake of it shall immediately be released from all sin. Constantine readily believed what he was told, deserted the ancestral religion and embraced that which the Egyptian proposed . . . On the occasion of the traditional festival, during which it was required that the army ascend to the Capitol and accomplish the customary rites, Constantine took part in (ἐκοινώνησε) the festival because he feared the soldiers. But when the Egyptian sent him an apparition which unrestrainedly abused this ascent to the Capitol, he [Constantine] kept aloof from (ἀποστατήσας) the holy ritual, and incurred the hatred of the senate and the people. (II.29)

In its broad shape this story corresponds, self-evidently, to what Sozomen read in Eunapius, and constitutes in fact our surest proof that Sozomen's main source was indeed Eunapius' *Historia*. But the student of the *Actus Silvestri* finds himself on much more familiar territory here than when reading Sozomen. What he recognizes falls into two categories. The emphasis on Constantine's having become the Empire's sole ruler, and on his susceptibility to visions, may have been in Eunapius too. Nothing in Sozomen disallows this possibility, and a date after Constantine reunited the Empire is indeed imposed by Eunapius' location of his narrative at Constantinople, and by his allusion to the death of Crispus. Several other polytheist historians noted explicitly the ill effect on Constantine of his assumption of sole power.[101] But Zosimus' removal of the story to the city of Rome, the consequent mixing of events that occurred in 312 and 326 (see below), and the role allotted to formal ceremonial at the Capitol, have nothing to do with Eunapius' narrative. Again, in Zosimus' version Sopater has been metamorphosed into 'priests' — as in the *Actus Silvestri*.[102] One is struck too by the

[96] T. Damsholt, 'Das Zeitalter des Zosimos: Euagrios, Eustathios und die Aufhebung des chrysargyron', *ARID* 8 (1977), 89–102, showed that there are no irrefragable arguments for dating Zosimus more exactly than between 430 and 590, though probably he wrote after the 450s and before the 530s. Paschoud, in his edition of Zosimus, 3(2).80–1, and see also I.IX–XX, continues to regard the abolition of the chrysargyron in 498 as a virtually certain *terminus post quem*, and the 530s as the *terminus ante quem*.

[97] Barnes, op. cit. (n. 11), 273–4.

[98] See, e.g., Paschoud in his edition of Zosimus, 3(2).84.

[99] Paschoud's edition, 3(2).83.

[100] See below, n. 133.

[101] e.g. *Epitome de Caesaribus* XLI.11–18; and cf. G. Bonamente, 'Eutropio e la tradizione pagana su Costantino', in L. Gasperini (ed.), *Scritti storico-epigrafici in memoria di Marcello Zambelli* (1978), 43–5.

[102] cf. also Zosimus' direct transition from the passage under discussion (II.29) to an account of the foundation of Constantinople (II.30), with the addition of a *fundatio* narrative to certain versions of the *Actus*. Since Eunapius' account of Constantine's conversion was set at Constantinople, he will not have placed the story of the city's foundation after it, so Zosimus cannot here be used as evidence for the structure of Eunapius' narrative. But we cannot here be sure that Zosimus is following the *Actus*: with regard to the date of the *fundatio*'s addition to the *Actus*, Pohlkamp will commit himself only to 'spätestens im 7. Jahrhundert', (1992), 184–7.

way in which both Zosimus and the *Actus* describe Constantine as first agreeing to participate in rites on the Capitol, and then refusing.

In short, several major divergences between Zosimus and the Eunapian version are identical with elements shared by Zosimus with the *Actus Silvestri*, which first became known in Constantinople under either Anastasius or Justin — in any event before 526.[103] We may see in Zosimus' account something more than just 'ein heidnisches Pendant zur Bekehrungsgeschichte der Silvesterlegende', as Johannes Straub put it.[104] If Zosimus was writing when the Silvester narrative — perhaps to begin with orally rather than textually transmitted[105] — was already known at Constantinople, what more pointed than this remodelling, in the light of the Silvester version, of the story which had been the Silvester version's own inspiration? Certainly it is difficult to imagine any other reason why a sixth-century eastern polytheist such as Zosimus would have bothered to transfer Eunapius' story of Constantine's conversion from Constantinople to Rome. And Zosimus knows how to make effective symbolic use of the transference once it has been made. Just as, for the author of the *Actus*, Constantine's conversion marks the foundation of Christian Rome, so for Zosimus it heralds the start of the Empire's tragic decline.

Whatever its symbolic effectiveness, though, Zosimus' story of Constantine's conversion has ever since the sixteenth century baffled both philologists concerned with the text and those historians who have attempted to use it as the basis for a narrative of events.[106] It is commonly regarded as our only explicit source for Constantine's refusal to visit the Capitol and perform the rites of the old religion. Constantine visited Rome in 312, 315, and 326. Ceremonies at the Capitol were *de rigueur* on such occasions, and were normally mentioned in accounts of imperial arrivals in the Eternal City. But Constantine's panegyrists are curiously reticent on the subject.[107] The anonymous panegyrist of 313, describing Constantine's entry in 312, remarks delicately that the crowd complained because he hastened to the palace and disappeared too quickly from the public gaze. Johannes Straub rightly concluded that already in 312 he did not go to the Capitol.[108] Against Straub, François Paschoud insists that Zosimus speaks of two occasions, on the first of which (312) Constantine 'took part in' the proceedings, and on the second of which (315) he 'held aloof'. The panegyrist of 313 omits reference to the Capitol because, somehow, he knew that Constantine had not really wanted to go there(!).[109] But there is another possible solution, retaining the single date of 312.

Paschoud himself draws attention to the confused state of Zosimus' text, and the probability that here, as elsewhere, Zosimus has carelessly left something out in the process of summarizing his source(s). 'Mi pare in questa situazione indispensabile . . . supporre dietro Zosimo 2,29,5 un testo più longo, con dettagli che ne sciolgano le contraddizioni e ne completino almeno in parte i dati.'[110] That missing narrative — whether or not known to Zosimus in the form of a text — is in fact the *Actus Silvestri*, which represents Constantine as, in the course of one and the same day, setting out to take part in the rite at the Capitol which was to purge him of his leprosy, and then departing (a legitimate sense of ἀποστατήσας) and abandoning the ritual out of 'pietas'. That very night he saw his vision of SS. Peter and Paul. The small divergences between Zosimus and the *Actus* are to be expected in such a confused

[103] Fowden, op. cit. (n. 49).

[104] J. Straub, *Regeneratio imperii: Aufsätze über Roms Kaisertum und Reich im Spiegel der heidnischen und christlichen Publizistik* (1972), 107.

[105] This point escaped Pohlkamp (1984), 390 n. 143, who unjustifiably argued against Straub that (1) the Silvester story could only have reached the East as a text — the *Actus Silvestri* known to us — rather than an oral narrative and/or picture: see Fowden, op. cit. (n. 49); (2) the text Zosimus depended on must have been in Greek, not Latin — though it would have been possible for the Latin to be translated, even orally; (3) Zosimus wrote earlier rather than later in the reign of Anastasius — which can be asserted but not proved. It should also be borne in mind that the basic story (how close in detail to the Silvester version we cannot know) had long been familiar in the East in the shape of the 'Eusebius of Rome' version. Pohlkamp is followed in his denial of Zosimus' use of the Silvester version by Aiello, op. cit. (n. 34), 32, 50 n. 60, who offers the somewhat desperate solution that Sozomen used the first edition of Eunapius' *Historia*, and Zosimus the second.

[106] F. Paschoud, 'Ancora sul rifiuto di Constantino di salire al Campidoglio', in Bonamente and Fusco, op. cit. (n. 30), 737–48, with all necessary references.

[107] *Panegyrici latini* IX[XII].19.3 on Constantine's entry into Rome in 312; Eus., *V.C.* I.48, III.15; idem, *L.C.* II.5.

[108] Straub, op. cit. (n. 104), 102–5.

[109] F. Paschoud, *Cinq études sur Zosime* (1975), 58–9. Paschoud also feels that the serious deterioration mentioned by Zosimus in relations between Constantine and Rome cannot have occurred as early as 312. But Roman views of Constantine can never have been homogeneous, and it is easy to imagine that, in the immediate aftermath of 312, one party will have celebrated his triumph over Maxentius while others sulked about the Capitol. Zosimus merely emphasizes and magnifies the significance of the latter viewpoint — surely that is what one expects of polemicists?

[110] Paschoud, op. cit. (n. 106), 747.

text, and anyway the presence of the mysterious Egyptian underlines the fact that Zosimus is manufacturing a narrative that adapts rather than adopts its sources. Even so, some of the differences can be explained. For example, Zosimus places the vision before, rather than after, the refusal because he knew from his sources that it actually happened that way — first the vision at the Milvian Bridge, then the entry into the city — and/or in order to give Constantine no credit for 'pietas' and emphasize the Egyptian's malevolent power over him. Similarly, the *Actus*' special event at the Capitol becomes a 'traditional festival' because an arriving emperor's visit to the Capitol *was* a traditional festival, and/or because Constantine's neglect of traditional religion is one of Zosimus' pet themes. Zosimus deliberately mixes history with a Christian version, to the disadvantage (he intends) of the latter.

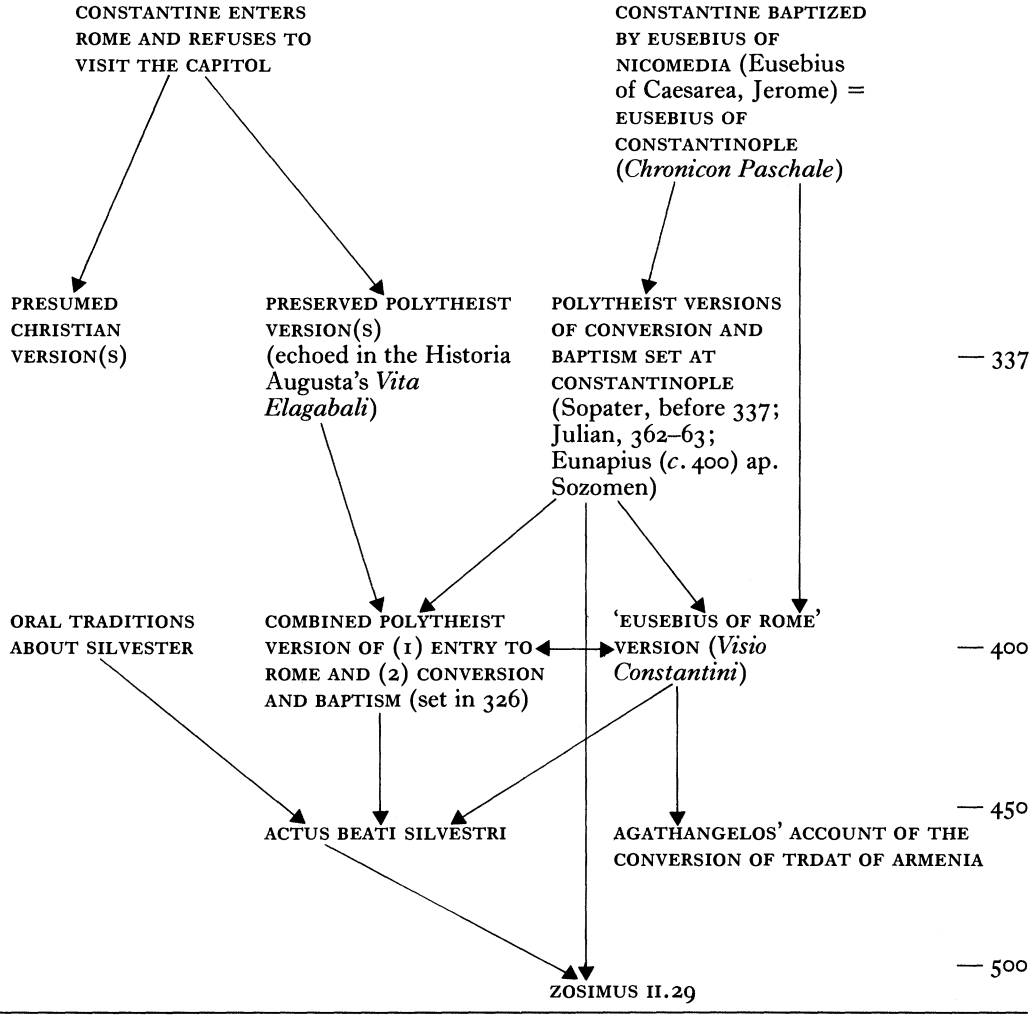
If for polemical purposes Zosimus was following the *Actus* against Eunapius in setting the story of Constantine's conversion at Rome, the question remains, how exactly the *Actus* themselves came to make this move. Obviously their predecessor, the 'Eusebius of Rome' version, was a factor; and, no less obviously, there was a lot of profit to be drawn by Christians, especially western Christians, from a story that linked Constantine closely to the ancient and prestigious capital. But Zosimus' narrative points to an additional possibility, and indeed inherent probability, namely that there was (or had been) a polytheist version not only of Constantine's baptism, but also of his relations with Rome.[111] The polytheists of Rome will certainly have formulated their own version of the emperor's disagreeable behaviour in their city, both in 312 and on his subsequent visits. We may suppose that the central element in their narrative was the emperor's refusal to visit and sacrifice at the Capitol, and his justification of this refusal (as in Zosimus) by reference to a Christian vision he had seen — presumably at the Milvian Bridge. Since the *Vita* of Elagabalus in the *Historia Augusta* contains a number of pointedly hostile allusions to Constantine,[112] its assertion — supported by no other source — that Elagabalus refused to perform traditional rites on the Capitol[113] should be seen as a reference to this polytheist narrative of Constantine's refusal.

Even an apologist of no exceptional acuity will have understood the greater effectiveness of combining this version with the polytheist narrative of Constantine's conversion and baptism, so that the conversion's direct consequences for all that Rome held holiest could be firmly underlined. This meant transferring Constantine's doings at Rome to his last visit in 326, so that they meshed with the murders of Fausta and Crispus;[114] but the new story's dramatic force was ample compensation for the chronological problem that so preoccupies modern scholars. It was this combined polytheist narrative, rather than Eunapius' partial account, that the *Actus* were designed to upstage; and in order to do so, they made the concession that Sozomen was at the same period refusing to make to Eunapius' less powerful narrative, and moved Constantine's conversion to the period after 324. This specific chronological consequence of interaction with a combined polytheist narrative, very probably of Roman provenance, is, together with Silvester himself, the element in the *Actus* that is least likely to have been anticipated by any evolved form of the 'Eusebius of Rome' version.

Zosimus, who had heard of or even read the Silvester version, kept it in mind as he remodelled Eunapius. Although it is possible that he found in Eunapius an account of Constantine's visit to Rome as well as of his conversion, we know that Eunapius did not set Constantine's conversion at Rome. On Paschoud's view of Zosimus, one would expect him to have done as little work as possible; so the *Actus*, which had already made the combination, may be regarded as the more likely source.[115] This fits well enough with the view that one of Zosimus' aims was to respond to the ecclesiastical historians. His simplified style, compared to Eunapius, proclaims his audience: 'un public beaucoup plus populaire, celui précisément qui lisait pieusement Socrate et Sozomène'[116] and was soon to become extremely familiar with Greek versions of the *Actus beati Silvestri*.

[111] If Virius Nicomachus Flavianus' *Annales* have to be invoked, this is where they fit best.
[112] Fowden, op. cit. (n. 73), 120–1.
[113] Hist. Aug., *V.Elag.* XV.7.
[114] See on this Paschoud, op. cit. (n. 109), 126–7.
[115] Theoretically Zosimus may have known the 'Eusebius of Rome' version and/or the combined polytheist narrative. But it seems more economical and probable to suppose he used the Silvester narrative, which was tributary to both these earlier versions, and is known to have circulated at Constantinople in Zosimus' day.
[116] Paschoud, op. cit. (n. 109), 214.

TABLE I



f. *The Influence of the Polytheist Versions on the Image of Constantine*

If Zosimus, rather than just summarizing Eunapius, was engaging with the ecclesiastical historians and texts such as the *Actus Silvestri* that moulded his own generation's historical consciousness, it becomes easier to understand why still, at the end of the sixth century, the Church historian Evagrius thought him worth refuting on precisely the issue of Constantine's conversion and baptism.[117] As late as the early ninth century, the chronicler Theophanes was careful to assert that Silvester baptized Crispus as well as his father.[118] Polytheist narratives of Constantine's conversion had provided opponents of the Christian Empire with an essential alternative history, a single significant event to whose malign influence could be attributed most or all of the Roman state's subsequent misfortunes.[119]

By exploiting and therefore drawing attention to the weak points in Constantine's history, the polytheist versions also helped to mould a new, revised Christian history, in a fashion somewhat analogous to that in which doctrinal orthodoxy was formulated piecemeal and

[117] Evagrius, *H.E.* III.40–1.
[118] Theophanes, *Chron.* 17 de Boor, followed by George Cedrenus 1.476 Bekker.
[119] Paschoud, op. cit. (n. 109), 126–8.

apophatically, in response to the emergence of heretical ideas.[120] Of this revised Christian history, the *Actus Silvestri* was to be the most cogent and influential exponent. Like all good remakes, the Silvester narrative had something new and very powerful to say; and like a lot of other things in late antique Christianity, it grew not in an airtight vessel but in a hostile atmosphere. Before the *Actus* turned its attention to these matters, the polytheist versions had already noticed that Constantine's sole rule had made him irresponsible and unaccountable, that the Church's offer of baptism in return for repentance was a temptation to the unscrupulous, and that redating Constantine's baptism (which he himself, after all, had not intended to occur when it did) could produce interesting 'coincidences'. Whether exploiting or rejecting these perceptions, the author of the *Actus* was always party to a dialogue. In the Syriac homily *On the Emperor Constantine and the Healing of his Leprosy* attributed to Jacob of Serugh, we read how Constantine resolved not to burn down the temple where he himself had offered impure sacrifices, and instead commanded an unnamed bishop, either 'Eusebius of Rome' or Silvester, to consecrate the building to the Christian God, that He might henceforth be seen to be worshipped in the selfsame place where once He was impiously denied.[121] The same intention lies behind the *Actus*. By reusing polytheist materials, they repattern the past without destroying it, achieving an interweaving rather than polarization of polytheist and Christian in order to place the latter's eventual triumph and the former's eventual obliteration on the securest possible foundations.

In the substitution of persecution of the Church for private wrongdoing, and in the carefully paradigmatic description of Constantine's baptism offered by the *Actus*, we may also detect an attempt to impart universal moral but also political applicability to what had started as an *ad hominem* story, and indeed as a slander. If anyone thought they remembered Constantine had been baptized by an Arian, they were disabused of that too. The harmony of Empire and Church, prince and bishop, was intended to be as lethal for heretics as for polytheists. The Silvester narrative also offered a radical remedy for two other specific and significant shortcomings of the historical Constantine as founder of the Christian Empire.

Firstly, there was the quarter-century that Constantine took to get from conversion to baptism, and which included — ἀτοπώτατον exclaims Theophanes, p. 18 — his participation in the First Ecumenical Council. Here, the 'Eusebius of Rome' version attested in the *Visio Constantini* had already moved the baptism forward, and the *Actus* had only to follow suit. The *Actus*' Constantine allows, from the very outset, no eroding doubt regarding his religious allegiance. Addressing the Roman senate, he announces that he will build a church inside the very palace, 'ut hominum universitas comprobet nulla dubietatis in corde meo vel praeteriti erroris remansisse vestigia'.[122] Eusebius of Caesarea's Constantine, by contrast, is forced even in 337 to explain to the bishops at Nicomedia that he wishes to be baptized so that 'there should be no doubt (ἀμφιβολία)'.[123] Still in our own times some scholars take this as Constantine's confession that he had hesitated between polytheism and Christianity, while others search anxiously for an explanation that avoids such an admission by emphasizing, for example, Constantine's awareness of the inevitability that an emperor will sin.[124]

Secondly, there was the problem created by what seemed, in the light of hindsight, the first Christian emperor's curious lack of an episcopal *alter ego*. It tells us something about the structure and historical experience of the Byzantine Church, that it allowed Constantine to go down in history as the emperor who had not one but 318 episcopal *Doppelgänger*. In the West they were, understandably and perhaps (in the light of subsequent history) necessarily, less subtle. The monarchical emperor implied, even demanded, a monarchical bishop; and in the Silvester of the *Actus* Constantine met the match he had missed in real life. Of course, the historical Constantine thought he was himself something of a bishop,[125] while in the East posterity made him a saint. He became a bearer and symbol of spiritual authority — and

[120] P. Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: A Study in the Christian Tradition* (1959; rev. 1992), 58–61.
[121] Frothingham, op. cit. (n. 91), 215.
[122] *Actus Silvestri* I.13 = Pohlkamp (1984), 391 n. 148, (1988), 483. Interpreting Lact., *Mort. pers.* LII.5, F. Winkelmann has wondered whether 'Konstantin zu dieser Zeit [*c.* 314–15] den Christen doch noch nicht so eindeutig in seiner Haltung erschien': 'Konstantins Religionspolitik und ihre Motive im Urteil der literarischen Quellen des 4. und 5. Jahrhunderts', *A.Ant.Hung.* 9 (1961), 240.
[123] Eus., *V.C.* IV.62.3.
[124] Dölger, op. cit. (n. 39), 426–9; H. Kraft, 'Zur Taufe Kaiser Konstantins', in K. Aland and F. L. Cross (eds), *Studia patristica* I (1957), 642–8. One suspects that in a less scrupulous age someone would have been found to cut the Gordian knot and remove the offending phrase.
[125] Eus., *V.C.* IV.24.

therefore all the more urgently in need of a spiritual experience. What the sign at the Milvian Bridge had hinted at or promised, but not fully imparted, the Constantine of the *Actus* found at length in his vision of SS. Peter and Paul and in the baptismal font, where he was cured of his illness and granted another vision, this time of Christ himself. Repentance and conversion after the terrible sin of persecuting Christ's flock identified Constantine as a worthy imitator of the apostle Paul[126] and underlined the revolution in Roman affairs since the *mortes persecutorum*. But the emperor's spiritual transformation — and indeed his bodily healing — was not completed until *after* his baptism at the hands of an authoritative bishop; and on the fourth day after the sacrament Constantine issued an imperial privilege to the head of the Roman Church, 'ut in toto orbe Romano sacerdotes ita hunc caput habeant sicut omnes iudices regem' (*Actus Silvestri* 1.10 = Pohlkamp (1988), 467). With that, the role models were ready and it was up to posterity to use them as it saw fit — to cement entente when things were going well, or to establish the precedence of the spiritual arm in times of conflict.[127]

As for Agathangelos' story of Trdat and Gregory, perhaps it too derives from the evolving Christian versions of Constantine's baptism that dramatic force which so surpasses anything in Eusebius' *Vita*, and provides the ideal point of reference for all subsequent Armenian accounts of the relationship between throne and altar. Had Eusebius lived later and persevered in his high view of the Christian emperor's office, he might well have found something worth imitating in Agathangelos or the *Actus Silvestri*. There is nothing more powerful than the grace that dwells in a repentant autocrat. The Old Testament typology obliges, as always, with the story of David, Bathsheba, and Nathan; but Byzantium could only benefit from having a precedent nearer home. When Basil I (867–86) waded to power through the blood of his mentor and protector Michael III, his apologists, such as the Patriarch Photius, understood perfectly that it was no good just ignoring or denying the new emperor's sins. To those who could not or would not forget them, Basil's encomiasts recalled obliquely but tellingly the models of repentance (and, needless to say, much else too) from the past: David, Constantine, and Tiridates, from the last two of whom Basil (who was of Armenian origin) was said to be descended.[128] From a slander when first uttered, to the foundation narrative of Christian Armenia and a point of reference for the imperial ideal of Orthodox Byzantium as well as the cornerstone of the mediaeval papacy's claims, an oppositional version of Constantine's conversion and baptism had enjoyed a long if often invisible career, and exercised an enormous if at times indirect influence.

III. CONCLUSION

The baptism of Constantine, so closely linked in historical reality to the Iranian campaign, became separated from it as the polytheist and Christian narratives evolved. But even among those who, faced with Eusebius' version and the *Actus Silvestri*, thought they had every reason to choose the latter, some sense of the connection between these two events remained. The chronicler John Malalas, for example, writing in the early 530s, mentions them in the same breath, and for good measure adds that Constantine defeated Shapur and forced him to beg for peace.[129] Clearly there was a view that Constantine's baptism and (intended) triumph over Iran constituted, together, one of the defining moments of his reign — a view he himself had encouraged by declaring at Nicomedia that his original intention was to be baptized in the River Jordan,[130] presumably on his way to or return from an Eastern victory. Nor is our evidence exclusively literary: it seems that the famous church of S. Polyeuctus in

[126] On the comparison, already implicit in Eusebius, see H. Montgomery, 'Konstantin, Paulus und das Lichtkreuz', *S.O.* 63 (1988), 84–109.

[127] See, e.g., *Liber pontificalis* 55 (1.275 Duchesne), with Fowden, op. cit. (n. 48); Gregory of Tours, *Historia francorum* 11.31; H. Lavagne, 'Triomphe et baptême de Constantin: Recherche iconographique à propos d'une mosaïque médiévale de Riez', *JS* (1977), 176–7, 190.

[128] See, e.g., G. Moravcsik, 'Sagen und Legenden über Kaiser Basileios I', *DOP* 15 (1961), 59–126; A. Markopoulos, 'Constantine the Great in Macedonian historiography: models and approaches', in P. Magdalino (ed.), *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th Centuries* (1994) — I am grateful to the author for an advance copy of this article.

[129] Io. Mal., *Chron.* XIII.317–18 Dindorf; likewise John of Nikiu, *Chron.* LXXVII.60–2, LXXX.3.

[130] Eus., *V.C.* IV.62.1–2.

Constantinople, built by Anicia Juliana in the reign of the emperor Justin I, was designed partly to recall and underline this interpretation of the first Christian emperor's career.[131]

Martin Harrison's recent excavation and publication of S. Polyeuctus, along with the fundamental work now being done on the texts of the *Actus beati Silvestri* by Wilhelm Pohlkamp, are symptomatic of the newly favourable environment for study of imaginary Constantines.[132] Yet there is profit in all this for the positivist too: indeed, any student of the historical Constantine should be simultaneously a student of the 'Constantine legend'. Even imaginary narratives can affect our understanding of the events and of their protagonist's character.

As regards the events, we anyway reconstruct the history of the years from 306 to 337 much more on the basis of narrative versions than of primary materials such as inscriptions, papyri, laws, and so forth. Even the laws are mediated to us, most of them, through the *Codex Theodosianus*, which selects and arranges in accord with the interests and prejudices of its compilers. Of the narrative versions, each has its own specific point of view, which may lead to distortion or reinvention of the events. Zosimus, for example, tells us that Constantine refused to visit the Capitol, after he had become the Empire's sole ruler (324). Although the *Actus Silvestri*, an earlier source than Zosimus, tells us exactly the same thing, no modern historian of Constantine quotes it, because Zosimus is a 'historian' while the *Actus* purvey 'legend'. Yet nor do many modern authorities actually believe Zosimus' date. Instead, they evoke an unusual silence in a Latin panegyrist who wrote in 313, just a year after Constantine's first entry into Rome. The silence would perhaps never have been noticed, and if it had it would probably have been regarded as fortuitous, were it not for Zosimus. In this way a late and unreliable source activates an early and reliable one. But the date Zosimus gives, and his reason for mentioning the story at all, can only be understood if we read his version in conjunction with the 'legend' in the *Actus*.

As for our general assessment of Constantine's reign: by putting a finger on its weak spots, the slanderer and the hagiographer alike force us to see with fresh eyes its originality and improvisatory character. Constantine himself did not always take pains to advertise these features of his rule, partly out of a desire not to make too disorientating a break with the past, and partly because he was by nature not an improviser but a planner — one of those who succeed because they aim at specific goals. His goals were a little out of the ordinary, though, and hitches were only to be expected. Not everything could be done at once, and the Iranian campaign, for example, was certainly left too long in the planning stage. Constantine had not even thought of some things that posterity deemed indispensable to his image. If he had, he would certainly have been baptized immediately after entering Rome from the Milvian Bridge in 312. Of other desiderata — collaboration, for example, in the affairs of the Church with a strong but like-minded bishop — Constantine was well aware; but the tumultuous state of ecclesiastical politics, especially after the conquest of the East in 324, made it impossible for an adviser such as Eusebius of Nicomedia to build anything durable on the foundations laid — perhaps — by Ossius of Corduba from 312 until his return to Spain soon after Nicaea.[133] As Eusebius of Caesarea recognizes implicitly when he compares his hero to Moses, and explicitly when reporting the emperor's description of himself as a bishop, Constantine was forced to be his own episcopal *alter ego*. There was to be no very bright future for this simple solution to the problematic relationship between monarchy and monotheism — at least, not in the Christian world.

It would be wrong, though, to end by throwing crumbs to positivists. The most important conclusion is that Constantine was much too big a figure to be buried in 337, even among memorials of the apostles. And the Constantine who lived on and indeed grew in stature after 337 can only be studied through the narrative 'versions', which profess to tell us about his own life and times but were increasingly coloured by the consequences of the changes he had brought about. There is no one moment when 'legend' prevails over 'history' — there

[131] Fowden, op. cit. (n. 49).

[132] A. Kazhdan, '"Constantin imaginaire": Byzantine legends of the ninth century about Constantine the Great', *Byzantion* 57 (1987), 196–250; Bonamente and Fusco, op. cit. (n. 30); Magdalino, op. cit. (n. 128).

[133] 'Possibly in disgust at the execution of Crispus': Barnes, op. cit. (n. 11), 384 n. 10. If so, and Ossius, as has been suggested, was Zosimus' 'Egyptian', we have an example of how propaganda is often a simple inversion of the truth. For a sceptical view of Ossius' role in Constantine's career, see A. Lippold, 'Bischof Ossius von Cordova und Konstantin der Grosse', *ZKG* 92 (1981), 1–15.

are only successive and interdependent versions, which add to and subtract from the historical Constantine in reaction to historical circumstances which he himself had created. For example, posterity made Constantine a more successful propagator of the Nicaean definition than he had been in reality. That was because the failure of his ecclesiastical diplomacy prepared the ground for the Arian *Reichskirche* that dominated the mid-fourth century and whose eventual elimination provoked a Nicaean version of history which, in its more imaginative manifestations, tended to write the achievement of Theodosius I back into the reign of Constantine. Likewise but more fundamentally: posterity emphasized God's direct interventions in Constantine's reign, through not only his vision at the Milvian Bridge but also his baptism and Helena's inspired discovery of the True Cross. It did this because, for all its shortcomings, Constantine's adoption of Christianity had become a turning-point in history deserving of some explanation beyond mere human agency, some parallel to the coincidence in time of the Incarnation and the reign of Augustus. This, then, is the task that confronts us: to reintegrate the Constantine of 'legend' into the Constantine of history, and to consider seriously whether Gilbert Dagron's and Alexander Kazhdan's successful efforts to place 'imaginary Constantines' on our scholarly agenda[134] have not tended also to maintain the isolation of posterity's Constantines from their prototype. The imagining of new Constantines was not just an exercise in playfulness or even perversity,[135] but a serious attempt to create symbolic events around which to articulate — or, in the case of the polytheists, disarticulate — a Christian view of history.

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[134] G. Dagron, *Constantinople imaginaire: Etudes sur le recueil des Patria* (1984); Kazhdan, op. cit. (n. 132).

[135] cf. Kazhdan, op. cit. (n. 132), 250, on the *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai*.