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Panegyricus Latinus 12(9): Constantine's Religious
Ideology

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Panegyricus Latinus 12(9): Constantine's Religious Ideology

Taking as its starting point the oration delivered in honor of Constantine in Trier by an anonymous orator in 313, this article examines the characterization of the divine and the way in which Constantine's theology and his perception of the supreme deity is envisioned in the oration in relation to his Italian campaign and his defeat of Maxentius in 312. Constantine's Christianity and his "conversion" are associated by the Christian sources (and in their wake by many modern scholars) with the intervention by the Christian god before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. The panegyric of 313, however, does not refer to divine intervention before Constantine's decisive battle against Maxentius. Christianity is in fact entirely absent from the oration. Examining textual, material, and numismatic sources, I argue that the most likely candidate for the supreme deity referred to in the oration is Sol Invictus and also that the speech expresses in hidden terms Constantine's religious tolerance.

The processes of political negotiation between a sovereign and his subjects are structured by symbols, rituals, and narratives. Among these in antiquity was also epideictic rhetoric. In the early Roman empire, speeches were a useful medium of communication between an emperor and his subjects (and vice versa) as well as an important vehicle for advocating and negotiating imperial rule. The situation was no different in Late Antiquity.

Late Antiquity has been characterized as a golden age of panegyric,¹ and indeed it does seem that the late Roman period produced more speeches addressed to emperors than the centuries before and that these speeches are themselves a peculiar product of late antique rhetorical and political culture. Apart from funeral speeches and invectives, there is a large corpus of imperial

I would like to thank the participants of the conference in Sydney for their comments and questions on the earlier oral version of this paper. Special thanks to Caillan Davenport, Roger Rees, and the anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Late Antiquity*.

¹ MacCormack 1975, 143. On the genre of panegyric see in general MacCormack 1981, 1–14 and throughout; Pernot 2015; Rees 2018.

laudatory speeches in both Greek and Latin, most of them dated to the fourth century.

Panegyrics have long been neglected as historical sources on account of their supposed empty rhetoric and imperial propaganda.² However, in recent years historians have come to realize that these texts are of considerable, although not unproblematic, historical value. In contrast to ancient historiography, which was written sometimes years *post eventum*, these speeches present a contemporary or near-contemporary narrative of events and imperial ideology. They may therefore be closer to historical and ideological reality than historiographical sources. Moreover, panegyrics allow modern-day historians to get an idea of the political and ideological program(s) of an emperor and his regime.³

Panegyrics and other speeches were delivered not only for the emperor (in some cases the emperor was even absent) but also for a large audience consisting of imperial family members, courtiers, high civic and military officials, city elites, and common people. The live audience of an orator must have consisted of hundreds, if not thousands of people. The presence of a large audience that was cognizant of court affairs, imperial ideology, and historical events prevented the orator from lying, embellishing, or making statements that were not in line with the current imperial ideology.⁴

This article focuses on the panegyric from 313 (*Pan. Lat.* 12.[9]), one of the twelve speeches in the collection of the *Panegyrici Latini*. The speech was delivered in all likelihood in the city of Trier in celebration of Constantine's defeat of Maxentius and his conquest of Rome in the previous year, as well as his victories over the Franks in 313. More particularly, I will discuss the orator's characterization of the divine and the way in which he envisioned Constantine's theology and the emperor's perception of the supreme deity. This characterization deserves special attention because Constantine's Christianity often is connected with two events associated with his Italian campaign: his dream and/or vision before the decisive battle against Maxentius on 28 October 312 and the so-called Edict of Milan granting universal religious freedom and return of confiscated property to Christians, issued by Constantine and his eastern colleague Licinius in February 313.⁵ Both

² For example, according to Cameron 1970, 36–37, the primary role of panegyrics was to serve as part of the imperial ceremonials, and it is not likely that the orations had much influence on the conduct and beliefs of either emperor or his subjects.

³ Omissi 2018, 54.

⁴ Omissi 2018, 49–50. According to Menander Rhetor (2.371), invention of details was only allowed when they were plausible.

⁵ There is also, incidentally, no mention in the oration of the political alliance between the two emperors sealed in Milan by the marriage of Constantia, Constantine's half-sister, and Licinius.

episodes are considered a religious turning point in Constantine's reign, but are conspicuously absent from the oration.

Panegyrici Latini

First, a few words should be said about the *Panegyrici Latini*, which among late antique speeches are among the most interesting.⁶ This corpus contains twelve orations starting with Pliny's panegyric for the emperor Trajan and concluding with Pacatus's speech on Theodosius I. Leaving aside Pliny's oration, the speeches cover exactly a century (289–389). It could well be that Pacatus, probably a professor of rhetoric at Bordeaux, was the editor of the corpus.⁷ His reason for collecting the speeches was possibly literary; he wanted to preserve them primarily for their rhetorical style and not for their ideological, political, or historical content. Pliny's speech was included probably because it was considered exemplary. The *Panegyrici Latini* are of Gallic origin and were delivered by Gallic orators on special occasions in the cities of Constantinople (one oration), Autun (one oration), Rome (two orations) and Trier (seven orations) and addressed to the emperors Maximian, Constantius I, Constantine, Julian, and Theodosius I. Most speeches therefore date from the end of the third century and the early decades of the fourth, covering the Tetrarchic period and the early years of Constantine's reign. Four speeches are dedicated exclusively to Constantine: the speeches dated to 310, 311, and 313 by anonymous orators and the speech of 321 by Nazarius. In addition, one speech was delivered for Constantine and his father-in-law Maximian on the occasion of Constantine's marriage to Fausta, Maximian's daughter, in 307.

Scholarly attention to the *Panegyrici Latini* has not been overwhelming. We have a good textual edition by Mynors in the Oxford Classical Texts series, the Budé edition by Galletier with useful annotation, and of course the excellent English translation (based on Mynors's text) by Nixon and Rodgers that introduces the corpus in general and the individual panegyrics and also gives extensive notes mainly on historical issues.⁸ Scholarly interest has mostly focused on Pliny's oration for Trajan and Pacatus's laudatory speech

⁶ On *Panegyrici Latini* in general, see, for example, MacCormack 1975 and 1976 with MacCormack 1981, 1–14; Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 1–37; Rees 2002, 2012a, and 2018; Roche 2011.

⁷ On Pacatus see Cameron 2011, 227–30.

⁸ Mynors 1964; Galletier 1949–55 (with French translation); Nixon and Rodgers 1994. Recently Müller-Rettig 2008–14 (with German translation) and Lassandro and Micunco 2013 (with Italian translation) have been published. Latin passages of the *Panegyrici Latini* in this article are derived from Mynors; English translations are by Nixon and Rodgers. The number of commentaries on the panegyrics is still limited; see, for example, Laudani, 2014.

for Theodosius I; Mamertinus' oration to Julian has also been relatively popular.⁹ The other speeches have received only incidental attention.¹⁰

While the *Panegyrici Latini* are in the first place literary and stylistic works, they are also important sources not only for constructing imperial ideology and imperial communication but also for consulting as historical sources. With the growing interest in the late Roman empire and the history and culture of Late Antiquity since the 1970s, historians have quarried the panegyrics for social, political, and military information. The speeches in honor of Constantine, for instance, are invaluable for reconstructing the early years of his reign. However, we should realize that this historical information has its limitations because orators did not write the speeches in the first place to share historical information but to use historical events to honor and praise the emperor. In dealing with panegyrics as historical sources, we should also remain aware of the fact that an orator's objective was not to provide his audience with complete and detailed information about political and military events. Moreover, an orator could not speak freely—freedom of speech was not a quality for which the late Roman empire was known¹¹—and he would leave unmentioned events such as military defeat or political setbacks that would show the emperor in an unfavorable light.

Panegyricus Latinus 12(9)

The panegyric under discussion has not received much scholarly attention in spite of the important historical and ideological information it contains. It is one of the central speeches concerning the early years of Constantine's reign, and was composed and recited by an anonymous Gallic orator, most probably in Trier, Constantine's main residence at the time,¹² in the presence

⁹ See in general Rees 2012b.

¹⁰ It is therefore a welcome development that several years ago Bruce Gibson from Liverpool University and Roger Rees from St. Andrews University started the *Panegyrici Latini* project (<https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/classics/panegyric>). This collaborative project, also involving other European scholars, “coordinates research into the historical contexts and rhetorical, syntactical, stylistic, lexical and intertextual character of all twelve speeches.” The results are to be published in edited volumes and as commentary in book form over the coming years. The website also has a list of recent publications on the Latin panegyrics. Roger Rees and myself are preparing a philological and historical commentary on *Pan. Lat.* 12(9).

¹¹ Fourth-century historians like Eutropius and Ammianus Marcellinus left contemporary history to the *stilus maior* of panegyrists who could sing the praise of reigning emperors; they themselves dealt with past history; Eutr. 10.8.3 (ed. Müller, *Teubner*); Amm. 31.16.9 (ed. Seyfarth, *Teubner*). Straub 1939, 153; MacCormack 1975, 153; Den Boeft and others 2018, 302–3.

¹² The main indication for Trier as city where the speech was held is the orator's remark in 12(9).1.1: *Vnde mihi tantum confidentiae, sacratissime imperator, ut post tot homines disertissimos, quos et in Vrbe sacra et hic rursus audisti, dicere auderem . . .* (“From what source would I

of the emperor himself. It presumably was delivered in the basilica, the main audience hall of the Trier imperial palace. The basilica could hold several thousand people, and apart from Constantine and his family members, we may assume that a multitude of military, civic officials and courtiers were in the audience, as well as the elites from Trier and neighboring cities, not to mention official visitors to the court.¹³ The speech was delivered in late summer or early autumn of 313 as part of the triumphal celebrations in Trier for Constantine's triumph over Maxentius and the conquest of Italy and the African provinces in the previous year, as well as his victory over the Franks in the summer of 313. The contents of the text as we have it probably represent what was spoken by the orator at the occasion, although the oration may have been edited for publication by either the author himself or the compiler of the corpus of the *Panegyrici Latini*.

After his introductory remarks, his description of the qualities of Constantine as supreme commander, and a negative characterization of Maxentius, the orator gives an elaborate account of Constantine's crossing of the Alps with a force of no more than 40,000 men; the conquests of Turin, Milan, Verona, and Aquileia (12[9].5.4–13); the capture of Rome (12[9].14–18); and his entry and sojourn in Rome (12[9].19–21.3). Then the orator refers shortly to the emperor's return to the Rhine frontier in order to fight the Franks (12[9].21.4–24.2). In concluding his speech, the speaker remarks that Constantine's glorious deeds surpass those of all his predecessors and even overshadow those of his divine father Constantius, no mean general himself (12[9].24.4–25). In the peroration as well as throughout the speech, reference is made to Constantine's divine inspiration, protection, and personal contact with the divinity.

The historical significance of the speech can hardly be overestimated. Together with the speech by Nazarius, delivered in Rome in 321, as well as the reliefs on Constantine's triumphal arch in Rome dedicated in 315 by the senate and people of Rome, it is the most contemporary and detailed source of information and therefore invaluable for our knowledge of Constantine's

obtain enough confidence, most sacred Emperor, to dare to speak after you have heard so many of the most eloquent men both in the sacred City and on your return here . . .").

¹³ Omissi 2019, 60, note 94 observes that the basilica had a capacity of 2,500 people. *Pan. Lat.* 5(8).2.1, given in 311 also in Trier, suggests a large and a diverse audience was present when an orator gave his speech of praise: *Nunc itaque cum in hac urbe, quae adhuc adsiduitate praesentiae tuae prae ceteris fruitur . . . totus tibi amicorum tuorum comitatus et omnis imperii apparatus adsistat, [ac] cum omnes homines omnium fere civitatum aut publice missi aut pro se tibi supplices adsint . . .* ("Now, therefore, since the whole retinue of your friends, and all the apparatus of empire, stands at your side in this city, which still enjoys, more than the rest, your continuous presence . . . since all men from almost every city are present, either sent officially or as suppliants before you on their own behalf . . .").

Italian campaign of 312.¹⁴ The speech is largely devoted to Constantine's victory over his brother-in-law Maxentius; the campaign against the Franks hardly gets any attention. Constantine is presented as a liberator who freed the population of Italy and Rome from the tyranny of Maxentius, whose name is never mentioned by the orator.¹⁵

Although the panegyrists during this period were not attached to the court, they presumably had close connections with the imperial chancery and courtiers so that they could gather information for their speeches and gain a sense about the topics that were fashionable at the time as well as about the current imperial ideology. However, for the orator of 313 this must not have been the only source of information. As may be concluded from the opening words of the speech,¹⁶ this oration was not the first about Constantine's Italian campaign. Both in Rome as well as in Trier, Constantine's conquest of Italy had been the topic of laudatory speeches before, and there must therefore have been several contemporary versions of the war between Constantine and Maxentius.¹⁷ These earlier speeches were probably known to the orator of 313, and he may have used them as a source of information and inspiration for his own oration. The fact that yet another laudatory speech was devoted to the victory over Maxentius and the conquest of Italy and Rome emphasizes the political, military, and symbolic importance that the court and the emperor himself attached to this conquest. The successful campaign had made Constantine not only ruler over Italy and the symbolically important city of Rome, but also sole emperor over the western provinces of the empire. Communicating this victory at various occasions—it was Constantine's most important in his still young career—was therefore of tremendous importance for Constantine's status as emperor and for the confirmation of his position vis-à-vis his subjects and his co-emperors. He had, therefore, an obvious interest in broadcasting his triumph over Maxentius.

Divine Intervention

Historians have used the speech of 313 for reconstructing not only Constantine's Italian campaign but also his religious disposition at the time. The Battle of the Milvian Bridge on 28 October 312, his defeat of Maxentius, and

¹⁴ For the band of reliefs narrating the campaign on the Arch of Constantine in Rome, see, for example, Holloway 2004, 36–51. For the campaign in general, see, for example, Barnes 1981, 41–43; Potter 2013, 131–44; Barnes 2011, 80–85; Cowan 2016.

¹⁵ For Constantine as *liberator*, see Warmington 1974, 379.

¹⁶ Quoted in note 12 above.

¹⁷ Lib. Or. 59.20 mentions that *logographoi* and *poiētai* wrote elaborate accounts of the campaign of 312. Also, the lost work of Praxagoras (*FgrH* 219) may have included an account of Constantine's Italian campaign.

his conquest of Rome are closely associated by Christian sources with Constantine's dream and/or vision as a divine intervention by the Christian god, and by modern scholars with the so-called "Konstantinische Wende," that is, Constantine's conversion to the Christian faith. Around 315, the association was implicitly made for the first time by Lactantius, who referred to a dream of Constantine in which he received the advice to mark the heavenly sign of god on the shields of his soldiers before going into battle.¹⁸ This sign is commonly understood as the Chi-Rho symbol or Christogram turned in such a way that it looks like a cross; hence, it is also interpreted as a Staurogram.¹⁹

Remarkably, the sources are silent for more than twenty years thereafter until Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine*, written and published after Constantine's death (22 May 337) at the end of the 330s, included an elaborate account of Constantine's vision of a celestial cross with the text "By this conquer." This vision was accompanied in Eusebius's account by a subsequent dream in which Christ appeared to Constantine, urging him to make a copy of the heavenly sign and to use it in his battle against Maxentius.²⁰ This symbol typically is considered to have been the *labarum*. Eusebius's vision narrative differs from Lactantius's dream story with regard not only to content but also to timing. While Lactantius places Constantine's dream immediately before the decisive Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Eusebius situates the vision at an indistinct time and place either before or during the campaign. As to the sources for these Christian accounts, Eusebius explicitly mentions that he had heard the story from Constantine himself who had confirmed it with oaths. Although this eyewitness report from the main person involved was given more than thirty years after the event, Eusebius saw no reason to doubt Constantine's account.²¹ Nevertheless, Eusebius's record has become

¹⁸ Lact. *Mort. Pers.* 44.1–9.

¹⁹ Lact. *Mort. Pers.* 44.5: *Commonitus est in quiete Constantinus, ut caeleste signum dei notaret in scutis atque ita proelium committeret. Facit ut iussus est et transversa X littera, summo capite circumflexo, Christum in scutis notat* ("Constantine was advised in a dream to mark the heavenly sign of God on the shields of his soldiers and then to engage in battle. He did as he was commanded and by means of a slanted letter X with the top of its head bent round, he marked Christ on their shields"). It is to be noted that the last crucial part of the text is corrupt. For a discussion about the sign, see, for example, Drake 2000, 202–3; Bardill 2012, 160–68; Drake 2017, 51–58.

²⁰ Eus. *V. Const.* 1.28.2: "About the time of the midday sun, when day was just turning, he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it, which said, 'By this conquer.'" The description of the manufacture of the *labarum*, which is a cross-shaped military standard with the Chi-Rho symbol on top, is given in Eus. *V. Const.* 2.31. Eusebius mentions that he had seen the standard himself; see *V. Const.* 1.30. For a discussion about Eusebius's "saving sign," see, for example, Bardill 2012, 174–78.

²¹ Eus. *V. Const.* 1.28.1: "If someone else had reported it, it would perhaps not be easy to accept; but since the victorious Emperor himself told the story to the present writer a long while after . . .

the canonical source of the vision.²² In contrast to Eusebius's apparent reliance on the account of Constantine himself, it is hard to say what Lactantius's source was. Possibly he had seen the Christogram/Staurogram on the shields of returned soldiers in Trier where he was teaching Constantine's son Crispus, or he may have had informers at court, or heard the story from participants in the campaign.²³

Both Lactantius and Eusebius ascribe the victory over Maxentius to the divine intervention of the Christian god. Many modern scholars have associated this divine intervention before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge with the moment of Constantine's choice of the Christian faith.²⁴ The age-old "Konstantinische Frage" was and still is a fascinating question for many historians. This long-running debate about the timing and character of Constantine's "conversion" and the relevance of the accounts by Lactantius and Eusebius as evidence in this debate continues to result in reams of books and articles. The discourse about Constantine's conversion in connection with the events of 312 is so prominent that it has even become part of collective memory, as Raymond Van Dam convincingly has argued.²⁵

Sabine MacCormack has argued that panegyrists did not write history and therefore did not aim at completeness by mentioning all historical facts and did not always present an impression of imperial actions and/or change of imperial policy.²⁶ This is true, of course, but it is not a satisfactory or convincing explanation of the orator's supposed omission in not mentioning either the dream and/or vision and the edict. It is furthermore argued that, when it comes to religious matters as discussed in the *Panegyrici Latini*, these are public matters involving the emperor, officials, and subjects in an official capacity.²⁷ That is why in the panegyric of 310 the religious underpinnings

and confirmed it with oaths, who could hesitate to believe the account, especially when the time which followed provided evidence for the truth of what he said?" Already in the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt had dismissed Eusebius's report as a historical myth: "Das bekannte Wunder aber, welches Euseb und seine Nachschreiber auf dem Zuge gegen Maxentius geschehen lassen, dürfte wohl endlich aus den geschichtlichen Darstellungen wegbleiben, weil es nicht einmal den Werth einer Sage, überhaupt keinen populären Ursprung hat . . ." (Burckhardt 2013, 290). Recently Van Dam 2011, 56–81 has expressed a similar opinion.

²² On how and when Eusebius may have heard the story from Constantine, see Bremmer 2006, 63–65; Van Dam 2011, 56–61; Van Dam 2017, 68.

²³ For Lactantius's possible sources, see Van Dam 2017, 67 and for his whereabouts in 312 to 313 (most likely Trier), Van Dam 2017, 66–67 and DePalma Digeser 2000, 135.

²⁴ The literature on this is vast, and I mention here only a very small selection: Alföldi 1969; Odahl 2004, 98; Barnes 2011, 74. For the various scholarly perspectives on Constantine's conversion, see Girardet 2006, 48–52.

²⁵ Van Dam 2011.

²⁶ MacCormack 1975, 154, 166.

²⁷ MacCormack 1976, 62; Rosen 1993, 857.

of the Tetrarchy are mentioned by the panegyrists, as well as Constantine's vision of Apollo at Grand.²⁸ However, thereafter references to religion as an element of imperial policy ceased in the panegyrics due to Constantine's conversion to Christianity. Christianity was thought to be unfitting for panegyric both as the official and the personal religion of an emperor.²⁹

Frankly, I consider this explanation as to why religion, and in particular Christianity, was not present in later Latin panegyrics to be unconvincing. Religion and the divine are mentioned by the panegyrists, although not as explicitly as in the panegyrics for the Tetrarchic rulers with references to Jupiter and Hercules, or in the early orations in honor of Constantine with references to Apollo. In that respect a change can be observed, and starting with the oration of 313 the divine is referred to less specifically and in a different form: gods are not mentioned anymore by their names.

Early in the speech the word *deus* is used by the orator. As observed by C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Rodgers, this is the first time in Latin panegyric that *deus* occurs in the singular and without further specification.³⁰ Also elsewhere in the text indeterminate terms are used by the rhetor to designate the divine: *divina mens* (2.5, 16.2, 26.1), *divinum numen* (4.1), *deus ille mundi creator et dominus* (13.2), and *summus rerum sator* (26.1).

Debate continues about which *deus* the orator means. Given that he avoids explicit references to pagan gods—unlike the orators of 307, 310, and 311 had done—it seems that Constantine was distancing himself from the traditional deities. It has therefore been suggested that *deus* refers to the Christian god. The first to make this suggestion, to the best of my knowledge, was Johannes Straub in his *Vom Herrscherideal in der Spätantike*, published in 1939.³¹ He refers to the peroration where the orator addresses the divinity as the supreme creator of things:

For this reason, **you, supreme creator of things**, whose names you wished to be as many as the tongues of the nations (for what you yourself wish to be called we cannot know), whether you are some kind of force and divine mind

²⁸ *Pan. Lat.* 6(7).21. Constantine himself was also called a divinity in this oration (*Pan. Lat.* 6(7).9 and 22). See Ware 2018, 127–30.

²⁹ MacCormack 1975, 168–69. Rosen 1993, 857 argues that there were literary reasons for not mentioning religious matters: “Die Regeln des Genus waren stärker als das eigene Glaubensbekenntnis oder das des Adressaten . . . Daneben gab für das Schweigen der Panegyriker historische Gründe: Constantins religiöse Einstellung vermochte ein Aussenstehender 313 kaum deutlich zu bestimmen . . .” According to MacCormack 1976, 64, Christians had qualms about the genre of the imperial eulogy.

³⁰ Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 295, note 8.

³¹ Straub 1939, 99–100.

spread over the whole world and mingled with all the elements and move of your own accord without the influence of any outside force acting upon you, or whether you are some power above all heaven which look down upon this work of yours from a higher pinnacle of Nature: you, I say, we beg and beseech to preserve this prince for all ages.³²

After rejecting Jupiter and Sol as candidates for the “supreme creator of things,” Straub suggests: “Galt der Dank nicht in Wirklichkeit den Gott, der ihm zum Sieg verholfen hatte?” He refers here of course to the divine assistance by the Christian god in Constantine’s victory over Maxentius—he undoubtedly must have had the narratives of Lactantius and Eusebius in mind when writing these words. Timothy Barnes also sees a Christian touch conveyed in this passage: “What is less obvious (and appears to have escaped scholarly attention entirely) is the Christian tinge which has been imparted to this passage” and “[t]he divinity whom the orator evokes is the supreme creator of all things, who decided that every nation should speak its own language—just as the God of the Christians did when he saw the Tower of Babel reaching up towards heaven.”³³ However, it seems to me there is nothing particularly Christian to this peroration.³⁴ All references in the speech to the divinity are to a supreme deity not specifically defined,³⁵ who is on Constantine’s side and whose *divina mens* inspired the emperor and helped him to conquer Maxentius.

Constantine is said to be in direct communication with this supreme deity.³⁶ But which deity is it? He may have been Jupiter; the orator, after all, refers to the divinity’s thunderbolt.³⁷ But Sol Invictus and Apollo are also possible candidates. It is very unlikely that the orator refers to the Christian

³² *Pan. Lat.* 12(9).26.1: *Quamobrem te, summe rerum sator, cuius tot nomina sunt quot gentium linguas esse voluisti (quem enim te ipse dici velis, scire non possumus), sive tute quaedam vis mensque divina es, quae toto infusa mundo omnibus miscearis elementis, et sine ullo extrinsecus accedente vigoris impulsu per te ipsa movearis, sive aliqua supra omne caelum potestas es, quae hoc opus tuum ex altiore Naturae arce despicias: te, inquam, oramus et quaesumus ut hunc in omnia saecula principem serves.*

³³ Barnes 2011, 99.

³⁴ The orator refers to an unnamed supreme divine force and mind that is in heaven and has an influence on the emperor.

³⁵ On the expressions of divinity in the *Panegyrici Latini*, see Béranger 1970. On the special relationship between the Constantine and the supreme deity as well as the divinity of the emperor, see Rodgers 1986, 85–87.

³⁶ *Pan. Lat.* 12(9).2.5, 4.1.

³⁷ *Pan. Lat.* 12(9).13.2: *Vt deus ille mundi creator et dominus eodem fulmine suo nunc tristes nunc laetos nuntios mittit* (“As that god, creator and master of the world, sends messages now sad, now glad, with his same thunderbolt”).

god,³⁸ since he remarks that the supreme deity delegates to lesser gods.³⁹ This is clearly polytheistic, and possibly a reference to the Neoplatonic single unifying principle, and would be unacceptable to Christians, and hence to Constantine, if he were a Christian at the time. In much modern literature Constantine's religious position at this time is generally labelled as already being monotheistic. However, I would prefer to characterize his position as henotheistic, or as softly monotheistic, since there are no indications that he turned away from the traditional Roman cults.⁴⁰

Testimonies of the Divine

The scholarly discussion about the events preceding the Battle of the Milvian Bridge has become extremely complex because many scholars, as referred to above, have associated these happenings with the moment of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. These scholars oddly enough have a firm trust in the reliability of the short account by Lactantius written some three years after the battle and the elaborate narrative about Constantine's vision as told by Eusebius in the *Life of Constantine*, even though that story was written down more than twenty-five years after the battle, and its source, Constantine himself, seems not to be the most dependable one. In particular, Eusebius's unreliable historical account about Constantine's vision and dream has become influential among modern historians.⁴¹ Moreover, according to these authors Constantine became Christian almost overnight in 312, even though the narratives of both Lactantius and Eusebius give no occasion for such a conclusion: neither mentions Constantine's conversion. In addition, modern research has shown that conversion is a process which takes place over a longer period of time (see below). In general, when it comes to Constantine's transformation of his religious position not much attention is paid to earlier

³⁸ Compare Rosen 1993, 857: "Der Standpunkt des Kaisers lag 313 irgendwo in einem Quadrat, das aus traditioneller römischer Religion, Solkult, philosophische Monotheismus und Christentum gebildet wurde." According to Rosen 1993, 858, the orator of 313 and also Nazarius used unspecified terms to designate the divinity because of the religiously mixed audience: "Unter Begriffen wie *deus ille mundi creator et deus* (12, 13, 2), *summus rerum sator* (12, 26, 1), *rerum arbiter deus* (4, 7, 3), *summa illa maiestas* (4, 16, 1) möchten Hörer und Leser nach Belieben Juppiter, Sol, das höchste Wesen der Philosophen oder den Christengott verstehen."

³⁹ *Pan. Lat.* 12(9).2.5: *Habes profecto aliquod cum illa mente divina, Constantine, secretum, quae delegate nostri diis minoribus cura uni se tibi dignatur ostendere* ("You must share some secret with that divine mind, Constantine, which has delegated care of us to lesser gods and deigns to reveal itself to you alone"). See also Béranger 1970, 249–50.

⁴⁰ The fact that Constantine ignored the warnings of soothsayers (*haruspices*) who advised against the Italian expedition (*Pan. Lat.* 12[9].2.4) is sometimes interpreted as the distancing by Constantine from traditional religious practices. However, he could have had other reasons for disregarding the soothsayers.

⁴¹ See Van Dam 2011, 56.

sources, including the panegyric of 313.⁴² Yet, it is a sound historical approach to first look at contemporary sources.⁴³

Which sources do we have? There is of course Lactantius. As mentioned, the Christian author implies that the Christogram (or Staurogram) was applied to the shields of all soldiers, pagan and Christian alike. Apart from the fact that this is the only instance that we know of when an emperor had applied a symbol to the shields of his soldiers just before battle and may therefore be considered to be very uncommon, it is assumed by most scholars that all soldiers of Constantine's army put the sign on their shields. However, as Klaus Rosen has convincingly suggested, probably only Christian soldiers in Constantine's army affixed the Christogram (or Staurogram) on their shields, which Rosen ascribes to Constantine's religious tolerance.⁴⁴ Pagan soldiers would probably not have expected any divine protection or aid from this sign.

In the same year as Lactantius wrote his short account, only three years after his victory over Maxentius, Constantine's triumphal arch in Rome was inaugurated in the presence of the emperor during the celebrations for his *Decennalia* in Rome (in 315). The reliefs on the arch refer not in any way to Christianity, let alone to a vision or dream. Instead, the pre-Constantinian reliefs show, among other things, sacrificial acts and depictions of Luna and Sol. The original band depicting Constantine's Italian campaign also makes no allusions to Christianity. Instead, the divinities that are depicted are Victoria and Sol Invictus, as has been made convincingly clear by Noel Lenski.⁴⁵ The references to Sol are overwhelming, not only on the arch itself but also in the environmental setting of the arch. The arch was built in such a way that it made a topographical and visual connection with the colossal statue of Sol standing close to it. Moreover, within a short distance of the arch was the temple of Sol Invictus built several decades earlier by the emperor Aurelian (reigned 270 to 275).⁴⁶

There has been considerable discussion about the arch's inscription.⁴⁷ It mentions that Constantine was victorious over the tyrant Maxentius *instinctu*

⁴² An exception is Van Dam 2011.

⁴³ Bremmer 2006, 59.

⁴⁴ Rosen 1993, 861: "Tatsache ist, dass christliche Soldaten einen Staurogramm, so Lactanz, oder ein Christogramm auf ihren Schilden trugen. Constantin hatte im Zuge seiner Toleranzpolitik dazu seine Zustimmung gegeben."

⁴⁵ Lenski 2008.

⁴⁶ Marlowe 2006; Bardill 2012, 92–109.

⁴⁷ *CIL* 6.1139 = *ILS* 694: IMP(ERATORI) CAES(ARI) FL(AVIO) CONSTANTINO MAXIMO/P(IO) F(ELICI) AVGVSTO S(ENATVS) P(OPVLVS)Q(VE) R(OMANVS)/QVOD INSTINCTV DIVINITATIS MENTIS/MAGNITVDINE CVM EXERCITV SVO/TAM DE TYRANNO QVAM DE OMNI EIVS/FACTIONE VNO TEMPORE IVSTIS/REMPVBLCAM VLTVS EST ARMIS/ARCVM TRIVMPHIS INSIGNEM DICAVIT. For the inscription, see Grünwald 1990, 78–86, 217.

divinitatis, “at the instigation of the divinity.” Scholars have focused on the interpretation of the term *divinitas*. Some have interpreted *divinitas* as a reference to the Christian god, while others consider it a neutral designation alluding to a supreme deity.⁴⁸ But considering that the topographical setting of the arch close to the colossal statue of Nero converted into Sol and that its reliefs leave little doubt of the close relationship with Sol, it is hard to believe that *divinitas* would allude to another deity, let alone the Christian god.⁴⁹ In addition, a study by Noel Lenski has demonstrated that in Latin pagan texts, the word *instinctus* has positive connotations and in 25% of the cases is associated with Apollo, who is often identified with Sol.⁵⁰ Presumably, the term *divinitas* in the inscription of the arch therefore refers to Sol Invictus, who had been Constantine’s favorite god since at least the vision at Grand in 310 onward,⁵¹ a preference which must have been widely known in the part of the empire under Constantine’s rule. The deity indicated by the orator of 313 when using terms reminiscent of the inscription on the arch—terms like *deus*, *divina mens*, *divinum numen*, *deus ille mundi creator et dominus*, and *summus rerum sator*—may therefore be an implied reference to Sol Invictus. It is, moreover, telling that, as in the inscription, the orator also connects the word *divinus* with *instinctus: divino monitus instinctu*.⁵² One may ask whether the arch and its inscription reflect Constantine’s own religious ideas or those of the senate of Rome which together with the people dedicated the arch. According to Lenski, this was not the case: the agents of the arch were the senators of Rome who were eager “to portray Constantine’s victory as the result of his devotion to the traditional gods,” in particular Victoria and Sol.⁵³ In Lenski’s opinion, Constantine was not responsible, partly due to his absence from Rome, for the religious message of the arch. It is, however, hard to imagine that Constantine had no influence or gave the pagan senate a free reign on the religious expressions displayed on the arch.

Likewise, Nazarius’s laudatory speech for Constantine held in Rome in 321 in the absence of the emperor, contains no overt allusions to Christianity.

⁴⁸ Compare Kolb, 2004, 34–35 who has the unlikely suggestion that *divinitas* refers to the *numen* present in Constantine himself.

⁴⁹ Lenski, 2008, 231: “The arch’s more abstract designation *divinitas* . . . was not in any obvious way a reference to the one Christian God.” For *instinctu divinitatis*, see also Grünwald 1990, 78–86.

⁵⁰ Lenski 2008. Lenski has also made clear that for Christians, *instinctus* is not the appropriate term to characterize inspiration by God. Christian authors prefer *inspiratio*.

⁵¹ *Pan. Lat.* 6(7).21.4–5. From 310 onward, mints started to strike coins referring to Sol; see, for example, Barnes, 2011, 18; Bardill, 2012, 86–87. Constantine’s father, Constantius I, had already been a venerator of Sol; see Bardill, 2012, 89–92. For Constantine and Sol, see also Tantillo 2003.

⁵² *Pan. Lat.* 12(9).11.4.

⁵³ Lenski 2015, 196; also Lenski 2008, 226.

Like the panegyrist of 313, he refers to a singular deity in terms like *divinum numen*, *divinitas*, and *rerum arbiter*. The word most used by Nazarius is *deus*, which is close to monotheistic terminology but certainly need not refer to the Christian god.⁵⁴ Similar to the terminology used in the inscription on the arch, also in Nazarius's speech the pagan *instinctus* is used in connection to the divine.⁵⁵

Moreover, it is striking, as has been observed by Hal Drake,⁵⁶ that in Lactantius's version of the Edict of Milan the divinity is referred to in terms strikingly similar to those in the speech of 313 and on the arch. Lactantius alludes three times to Constantine's godhead with the words (*summa*) *divinitas* who has his seat in heaven.⁵⁷ Although one might suppose that Lactantius refers to the Christian god, that is not at all evident and is even unlikely. If he meant the Christian god, he would most likely have explicitly said so. In addition, in his letter to Aelafius of 314 about the Donatist controversy, Constantine himself uses the term *summa divinitas*.⁵⁸ In this case also it is uncertain whether the Christian god is meant.

Eusebius's *Church History*, of which the last redaction appeared in 324 or 325 when Constantine had defeated Licinius and had become sole ruler over the empire,⁵⁹ has an elaborate account of Constantine's confrontation with Maxentius.⁶⁰ According to this account, after having called upon God and His Word Jesus Christ to come to his aid, Constantine won the battle with the help of the Christian God. After he had entered Rome in triumph, Eusebius reports that he ordered the trophy of the Savior's passion to be set up. Many consider the Savior's passion to be a reference to the cross that complemented Constantine's colossal statue that once adorned the basilica of Maxentius and is now fragmentarily preserved in Rome's Musei Capitolini. An accompanying inscription declared that "By this saving sign . . . I saved your city from the yoke of the tyrant and set her free."⁶¹ However, it is questionable whether

⁵⁴ Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 335–36.

⁵⁵ *Pan. Lat.* 4(10).17.1 (*divino instinctu, quo regis omnia*).

⁵⁶ Drake 2000, 197.

⁵⁷ Lact. *Mors. Pers.* 48.2–3: *Quibus divinitatis reverentia continebatur; divinitatis in sede caelesti; summa divinitas*. In his account about the Edict, Eusebius uses the neutral term τὸ θεῖον; see *HE* 10.5.3 and 5 (ed. Schwartz, GCS).

⁵⁸ Opt. *Appendix* 3 (CSEL 26: 206). See also Lenski 2017a, 35–36.

⁵⁹ Barnes 1980, 196–201; Burgess 1997, 483–86; Van Dam 2011, 82–95. The redaction of the *HE* from 313/314 may already have contained an account of Constantine's Italian campaign. For Eusebius's possible source(s), see Van Dam 2017, 61–64.

⁶⁰ Eus. *HE* 9.9.1–8.

⁶¹ Eus. *HE* 9.9.11: "By this salutary sign, the true proof of bravery, I saved and delivered your city from the yoke of the tyrant; and moreover, I freed and restored to their ancient fame and splendor both the Senate and People of Rome." Compare Ruf. *HE* 9.9.11 (ed. GCS Schwartz). See Bardill 2012, 203–17 for Constantine's colossal statue and the inscription.

the saving sign refers to the cross. More likely, Constantine's statue held the *vexillum*, a military standard, rather than the cross.⁶²

There are considerable resemblances between Eusebius's report in the *Church History* and his account of Maxentius's defeat in the *Life of Constantine*.⁶³ It is, however, important to note that the *Church History* also does not in its last redaction of again 324 or 325 include a mention of a dream, a vision, or a combination of the two, as was the case in the *Life*. By the time Eusebius edited his text after Constantine's defeat of Licinius in 324, he clearly was not yet familiar with the story of the vision and/or the dream. It is likewise important to emphasize that neither Eusebius nor Lactantius bring up the topic or the moment of Constantine's conversion in connection with his defeat of Maxentius.

What are we to make of all this vis-à-vis the panegyric of 313? Why is the orator silent about the Christogram or Staurogram on the shields of the soldiers, the dream, and the vision mentioned by the Christian sources, as well as Constantine's conversion?

Constantine's Religious Position in 313

The starting point of most investigations into the so-called "Konstantinische Frage" is Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*, which is not only a relatively late source but also one with an agenda of eulogizing Constantine as a Christian from his early years as emperor. Methodologically, however, investigation should start with the earliest available sources, in this case the panegyric of 313, as the primary, most complete, and detailed account of Constantine's Italian campaign and the events preceding the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.⁶⁴ This speech does not refer to the vision because there was not yet a narrative about this heavenly revelation. Similarly, the speech does not refer to Constantine's conversion because there was not yet a question of the acceptance by Constantine of Christianity as the exclusive faith to which he adhered. Evidently Constantine believed in a supreme deity, but that was not exceptional for the time. Whether this deity was Jupiter, Sol Invictus, the Platonic deity, or the Christian God is not easy to establish, but Sol Invictus is definitely the

⁶² For example, Bleicken 1992, 36–38. With some imagination one could see a cross in the *vexillum*. Note, for example, Lenski 2018, 256–57, who sees in the saving sign a clear indication that Constantine was advertising his Christianity publicly in Rome by 314. However, as a Christian symbol the cross was at the time not yet widely accepted; only in the course of the fourth century did it become a sign of victory and was it seen and displayed everywhere (Jensen 2017, 25–48).

⁶³ Eus. *V. Const.* 2.37–40.

⁶⁴ Compare Bleicken 1992, 65: "Wer . . . die Entscheidung in die Person Constantins verlegt und von 'Bekehrung' im Jahre 312 spricht . . . verzichte von vornherein darauf, einen historischen Prozess aus einer quellenkritischen Analyse der politischen Entwicklung verstehbar zu begründen."

best candidate.⁶⁵ Sol is not only well attested on Constantine's arch in Rome but also on Constantinian coins and medallions, both in bronze and in gold from the 310s and early 320s.⁶⁶ It is important to note that at the same time there are hardly any numismatic epigraphic traces of Constantine's Christianity.⁶⁷ The well-known Ticinum medallion with the Chi-Rho emblem is the best known instance. The medallion is traditionally dated around 315, but it has recently been convincingly argued that the medallion is most likely to be dated to 321.⁶⁸ The *labarum* only appeared on coins from 327 onwards. Overall, Constantinian coins show a remarkable continuity when it comes to Constantine's association with the solar god. While Sol was already prominent on Constantinian coinage in the period from 306 to 312 (169 of 749 coins—that is, 22.5%), the importance of Sol increased in the years from 313 to 324: 331 of 953 Constantine's coins—that is, almost 35%—have a religious association with the solar deity, including a long run of *Soli Invicto comiti* coins.⁶⁹ It appears, therefore, that Sol Invictus after 312 remained Constantine's favorite deity and may have even become more significant in the emperor's religious principles. Based on coinage, there is therefore remarkable continuity and consistency in Constantine's and the empire's religious ideology, and 312 does not seem to have been a turning point in his official religious convictions. This is not to say that Constantine cannot have had a personal sympathy for the Christian god, but he definitely did not openly declare himself a Christian or provide an official definition of his own religious position. Nor did he make Christianity part of the official state ideology at this point. After 324 Sol remained a prominent deity for Constantine as appears not only from coinage but also from statues of Constantine as Sol/Helios or with solar attributes in

⁶⁵ See, for example, Bleckmann, 2015, 319.

⁶⁶ See Lenski 2015, 164–65 and references to literature there. Sol Invictus disappeared from bronze coinage in 318 and from gold coinage in 325.

⁶⁷ Compare Lenski 2016, 9–12 for a few bronze coins with the Chi-Rho sign; also Bardill 2012, 142–43. It is, however, uncertain whether this should be interpreted as Christian and as *the* Constantinian symbol or as one of the many symbols Constantine used. Two inscriptions from Africa dedicated to Constantine and dated to 313 and 319 (a third one dates from 329) have the Chi-Rho symbol, but these are exceptions and probably coincidental, and not reflecting religious imperial ideology; for the inscriptions, see Tantillo 2017, 134–43.

⁶⁸ Lenski 2018.

⁶⁹ Manders 2014, 4–7. Manders's research is based on the coins published in *RIC* 7. For the years 306 to 312, 4.4% (33) of the 749 coins are associated with Jupiter, 1.7% (13) with Hercules, and 16% (120) with Mars, while the rest of coins (414, that is, almost 45%) have no clear religious associations. For the years 313 to 324, Hercules has disappeared from Constantine's coins, Jupiter is represented on 43 of the 953 coins (that is, 4.5%), and Mars on 57 coins (or almost 6%); 521 coins (that is, 54.5%) have no religious references. See also Drake 2000, 182–83; Bardill 2012, 55–57, 84–89. Alföldi's (1969, 6) opinion that “from the autumn of A.D. 312 the attractions of the Sun-god in Constantine's world of thought were steadily on the decline” is evidently in contradiction with the numismatic evidence.

the eastern part of the empire; the most famous example being, of course, the statue on the porphyry column on Constantine's forum in Constantinople.⁷⁰

If Sol Invictus is the most likely candidate for the supreme deity mentioned in the oration, the question emerges why the orator does not call the godhead by its name. Perhaps Constantine's personal religious views had already started to change by 313, and the orator was aware of it but did not quite grasp what the change denoted. He played it safe, therefore, and intentionally referred in abstract and vague terms to the supreme godhead. However, it could also be that the orator was cognizant of the religious changes that had taken place after 312, in particular Constantine's policy of religious liberty and tolerance as expressed in the so-called Edict of Milan, even though he does not mention the Edict. Referring in abstractions to the supreme deity may reflect this tolerance. Those making up his undoubtedly religiously mixed audience could, so to speak, fill in the name of their own god of preference when the orator voiced the words *deus*, *divina mens*, *divinum numen*, *deus ille mundi creator et dominus*, and *summus rerum sator*.

By 313 Constantine's religious policy was characterized by religious tolerance and freedom. Personally, he may have taken an interest in Christianity without leaving or giving up the traditional religions. This can explain his interest for the well-being of Christian communities in the cities under his control; his sponsoring of church building in Rome, such as S. Giovanni in Laterano; his privileging of Christian clergy through legislation;⁷¹ and the presence of clergy at his court—among them Lactantius as tutor of his son Crispus and bishop Hosius as one of his advisors. Constantine's interference in issues dividing the church, such as his attempt to solve the Donatist controversy by convening the Council of Arles (in 314), may have had nothing to do with the emperor's personal religious inclinations and are perfectly understandable from the perspective of suppressing problems that endangered the safety of the state.⁷²

“Conversion”

Many scholars date Constantine's personal conversion to the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in connection with the dream and/or vision, despite the fact that Lactantius and Eusebius do not mention Constantine's conversion in their descriptions of the events before the battle or thereafter. The term

⁷⁰ Bardill 2012, 104–9 has the most recent discussion with references to relevant literature. An exclusively Christian message is also not detected after 324 in the emperor's public communication.

⁷¹ Constantinian legislation granting privileges to the Christian clergy, such as exemption from compulsory public services, is limited and relatively late; most laws date from the 320s. The earliest law probably dates from 319; see *CTh* 16.2.1.

⁷² See, for example, Bleicken 1992, 43–47.

conversion suggests suddenness. However, in most cases conversion was not a Pauline, momentary change of view but a more gradual process taking place over a period of time in defining a new religious identity.⁷³ It has recently been convincingly argued by Hal Drake that Constantine's transition to Christianity was a long and slow process and not "a single, sublime moment, a 180-degree turn from one set of beliefs to another."⁷⁴ Over a long period of years, Constantine became familiar with Christian beliefs and customs and steadily became Christian himself. This developing conversion only was completed by his baptism on his deathbed in 337. It is perhaps telling that Libanius reports that Constantine only after the defeat of Licinius in 324 "thought it to his own advantage to recognize some other as god."⁷⁵ Moreover, social scientists have made clear that it is naive to think that conversion narratives are accounts of what really happened. Constantine's explanation of his encounter with the Christian god by way of the dream and vision, as told by Lactantius and Eusebius, is a paradigm by which the emperor shaped his life and religious transformation in hindsight. His supposed religious experience before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge was not a "real" experience but the "testimonial account of an interpreted experience of spiritual transformation" and the re-examination of his own life in the form of public representation.⁷⁶ Hence, the account in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* of the emperor's vision and his transformation into a Christian has no, or at its best very little, historical validity.⁷⁷

Apart from tolerating Christianity in his part of the empire, there are hardly any solid indications of Constantine's sympathy towards Christianity before 312. It may be that Constantine personally became more aware of the Christian god as a consequence of the events preceding the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and thereafter. He may have flirted with the Christian god, but he definitely did not yet convert or present himself as a declared and fully-fledged Christian.⁷⁸ Only later in his life during his process of Christianization did Constantine and/or others pinpoint the particular moment at which the religious balance shifted towards Christianity in 312 as the consequence of the

⁷³ See, for example, Gooren 2006. Gooren distinguishes various stages in the conversion career: Dis-affiliation – Pre-affiliation – Affiliation – Conversion – Confession; see also Drake 2000 187–91; Bremmer 2006, 67–68. According to Stephenson 2009, 167–69, Eusebius is responsible for the presentation of Constantine's conversion as a Pauline revelation preceding the Battle at the Milvian Bridge.

⁷⁴ Drake 2017, 65.

⁷⁵ Lib. *Or.* 30.6. See also Zos. 2.29, who dates Constantine's turn to Christianity in 326 as a result of the family disasters in that year. Paschoud 1975.

⁷⁶ Sremac 2016, 556 and 558.

⁷⁷ Bleicken 1992, 5 argues correctly to my mind that the sources do not support a conversion or "die Wende in der Religionspolitik des Reiches in 312."

⁷⁸ He may also have not been able to clearly distinguish between the solar deity, Apollo, and the Christian god. For the closeness between the three, see Wallraff 2001.

vision described by Eusebius.⁷⁹ Recently Raymond Van Dam made the attractive suggestion that the narrative by Lactantius and Eusebius's account of the events of 312 in the early redactions of his *Church History* (without references to dream and/or vision) were not only constructing a past but also became sources for the development of Constantine's own ideas.⁸⁰

Although it is not uncommon that before important battles or in moments of stress commanding generals received divine signs by way of dreams or visions—and Constantine seems to have been particularly susceptible to these phenomena—it remains questionable whether that vision actually took place. It may very well be, as has been suggested before, that the vision of 310 at the Apollo temple at Grand stood as its example and was transferred to 312.⁸¹ Based on the information that is available we can only conclude that Constantine did not have the vision as described by Eusebius at the end of the 330s and did not convert to Christianity as the result of a dream and/or vision in 312. That vision was a much later (probably only in the 330s) refashioning of the events of 312 by Constantine himself (or his Christian courtiers) in order to create a religious memory of the battle against Maxentius, to shape his own religious self-representation, and to pinpoint the moment of his conversion to Christianity.⁸²

Apart from his own development over time towards Christianity—a development of personal convictions which is largely irrecoverable—with regard to official religious policy Constantine advocated religious tolerance. Whatever his personal religious affiliations may have been, Constantine did not convert and Christianity did not become part of the official religious ideology of the Roman state in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. If we may take coinage and the imagery and the inscription on the arch in Rome as indicators, it would seem also that Sol Invictus remained the most important deity of the Roman state in the years after 312 for Constantine and for the empire's religious ideology

Concluding Remarks

The panegyric of 313 is obviously not Constantine's own account of the events it describes but rather an external presentation by a third person who did not know the emperor personally. Nevertheless, the contents of the speech must

⁷⁹ Nock 1933, 266 describes it as “a sense of perceiving truths not known before, a sense of clean and beautiful newness . . . [often] accompanied by hallucinatory or quasi-hallucinatory phenomena.”

⁸⁰ Van Dam 2017, 71.

⁸¹ For the 310 vision, see *Pan. Lat.* 6(7).21.3–6; Rodgers 1980.

⁸² See the chapter “Constantine's Memories,” in Van Dam 2011 about the construction of the conversion narrative.

have been well-considered, did not contain surprises for the audience (which included the emperor himself), and were in accordance with the emperor's self-representation; the oration, after all, was part of the collective consciousness that Constantine tried to shape of himself and his reign. The panegyric shows no traces of Constantine's Christianity and of the Christian faith as the divine foundation of Constantine's imperial position. The oration presents the emperor as an adherent of the supreme deity with whom he is in direct communication.⁸³ It has been said that the orator, who in all likelihood was pagan, did not quite understand what Christianity required, or that he refers to a neutral supreme deity because the emperor's religious position was not entirely clear to him.⁸⁴ This is unlikely. The orator must have been well aware of what he was talking about in referring to the supreme deity.

Scholars who like to connect Constantine's turn to Christianity to the events of 312 argue that the supreme deity is a concealed reference to the Christian god. However, by 313 Constantine had not yet defined his own religious stance towards Christianity. Only gradually did he personally become more inclined towards the Christian faith, but this was a process of many years as conversion in general was and is. The narratives about the vision and/or dream and the Christo-Staurogram on the soldiers' shields (which perhaps has some basis in reality) on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, as told by Lactantius in 315 and many years later by Eusebius, were not mentioned by the orator of 313 for the simple reason that he was not familiar with them. These narratives were later constructions, and only in the later years of Constantine's reign did they become part of his religious ideology.⁸⁵

Imperial speeches are an important medium for communicating messages and expressing, producing, and sustaining imperial ideology. This is exactly what the oration of 313 did. Considering that the central theme of the oration was the presentation of Constantine as the restorer of liberty and as a ruler displaying clemency, it is remarkable that the orator does not refer to the religious liberation the emperor introduced by the Edict of Milan with his co-*Augustus* Licinius.⁸⁶ Although Constantine's personal position seems

⁸³ Liebeschuetz 1979, 285.

⁸⁴ Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 293.

⁸⁵ And in case there had been a "vision," this most probably was a solar halo; Weiss 1993; compare Drake 2009.

⁸⁶ On the Edict, see, for example, Lenski 2017a, a somewhat abbreviated version of Lenski 2017b. Lenski 2017a and 2017b, as well as Barnes 2011, 93–97, who does not believe an edict was issued, refer in extenso to the scholarly literature concerning the Edict. Regardless of the question whether the "Edict of Milan" was an edict, Christianity was one of the matters which Constantine and Licinius discussed when they met in Milan. The reason that the orator omits mentioning the edict may be because the measure as promulgated by the two emperors was already practiced in Constantine's part of the empire, if we can believe Eusebius and Lactantius, who mention that

to have been gradually moving in the direction of Christianity, in particular after 324, above all his rule was characterized by religious tolerance and free choice as expressed by the Edict.⁸⁷ The speech does betray, although in a hidden way, Constantine's religious principles and the current religious imperial ideology. That there was a supreme deity for Constantine is evident from the use by the orator of terms like *divina mens* and *summus rerum sator*. This was not the Christian god but a universal god acceptable for everybody, whatever his or her beliefs. However, if the supreme deity should be identified with a god, Sol Invictus is the most likely contender as the inscription, the reliefs and the setting of the triumphal arch in Rome, the text of the Edict of Milan, and in particular the coinage testify. Sol had been Constantine's preferred deity before 312 and, in spite of his growing interest in the Christian faith, it remained the favorite divinity in his public communication regarding the empire's religious ideology for several years after 312. In that sense, Constantine's religious ideology shows significant continuity and solidity after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

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Christians were hardly persecuted in the west under Constantius, Constantine's father, and that Constantine himself restored to the Christians the exercise of their worship when he came to power. See Eus. *V. Const.* 1.13–17 (ed. GCS, Winkermann); Lact. *Mort. Pers.* 24 (ed. Creed 1984); see also Lact. *Div. Inst.* 1.1.13 (ed. Heck and Wlosok). So, without formally giving the Christians freedom of religion, Constantine already tolerated Christianity in his part of the empire prior to 313; see, for example, Barceló 1988, 78–83; Girardet 2006, 52–56; Lenski 2017a, 30–31, 33.

⁸⁷ See Digeser, 2000, 117–33 on Constantine's religious policy of tolerance and concord.

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