

# THE CHRISTIAN TAKEOVER

**Research Question: How can we deal with (and reconcile) sources with opposing viewpoints?**

## **Constantine I (the Great)**

Constantine was born in *c.* 275 in Naissus as the son of Constantius and Helena. After the elevation of his father to the position of Caesar, he served under Diocletian and Galerius. After his father, who had become Augustus of the West in 305, died in 306, the army hailed Constantine Augustus, but Galerius, the highest-ranking Augustus, only recognised him as Caesar. In the power-struggle after Diocletian's abdication, he took advantage of the infighting between his enemies and finally defeated his main contestant to the throne, Maxentius, on 28 October 312 at the Milvian Bridge, and was elevated to highest-ranking Augustus by the senate. He shared power with Licinius for several years until he defeated him in 324, and ruled as sole Augustus until his death in 337.

According to Eusebius, Constantine had a vision before the battle at the Milvian Bridge where a deity told him that he would win in his sign (☩). This has been interpreted as the beginning of Constantine's Christianisation, but it is narrated differently by Lactantius and Eusebius, thus rendering the whole episode quite doubtful. Nevertheless, Constantine himself used this claim later on his arch in Rome, and also depicts himself with Christian symbols on some of his coins. While the inner beliefs of Constantine are inaccessible for historians, there is no doubt that he favoured that particular religion, confirming Galerius' 311 Edict of Toleration with the joint "Edict of Milan" (with Licinius) of 313. While he continued some traditional imagery, he also adopted Christian insignia, and worked closely with the bishops to settle the theological and more secular issues (Donatism, Arianism), and to create an organised church, thus integrating Christians into the state.<sup>1</sup>

## **Eusebius of Caesarea**

Born shortly after 260, Eusebius trained under the presbyter Pamphilos and became bishop of Caesarea after the "Great Persecution" of 303–313 and a major church father. He was active in the Arianism controversy, briefly excommunicated, and had good connections to Constantine whom he wrote his panegyric ("Life of Constantine") for. He was instrumental in interpreting the Roman emperor as divine and Christ's successor, and wrote extensively on Christian theology.<sup>2</sup>

## **Zosimus**

The pagan lawyer and historian Zosimus lived at the turn of the sixth century and wrote his *New History* in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. His account is based on earlier historians (Dexippus [until 270]; Eunapios [270–404]; Olympiodorus [after 404]) and is thus at times contradictory and contains several errors. He writes in the tradition of Polybius, but instead of the rise of Rome, his focus is on its downfall. The account is thus dominated by narratives of pessimism, horror, and fatalism, and the decline of traditional religion is key in his narrative. Nevertheless, he is a central source for Late Antiquity and for most parts, he refrains from polemics against Christians but argues for tolerance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bleckmann 2006; Boatwright *et al.* 2012: 411–465; Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1–41; Lact. *De mort. Pers.* 34; Zos. *Hist.* 28–30.

<sup>2</sup> Rist 2006; Boatwright *et al.* 2012: 428.

<sup>3</sup> Meier 2006; Boatwright *et al.* 2012: 427.

## Comparison of Eusebius and Zosimus

### Zos. Hist. 29

“Constantine [...] acted as he pleased with unlimited power. He still practiced the ancestral religion, though not so much out of honor as necessity, and he believed the soothsayers, since he had learned by experience that they predicted the truth in all his successes, but when he came to Rome, he was filled with arrogance and thought fit to begin his impious actions at home.”

### Zos. Hist. 29

“A certain Egyptian, who had come from Spain and was intimate with the court ladies, met with Constantine, and assured him that the Christian religion was able to absolve him from guilt and that it promised every wicked man who was converted to it immediate release from all their sins. Constantine readily believed what was told to him, and abandoning his ancestral religion, embraced the one which the Egyptian offered him.”

### Euseb. Vit. Const. 25

“As soon then as he was established on the throne, he began to care for the interests of his paternal inheritance, and visited with much considerate kindness all those provinces which had previously been under this father’s government. Some tribes of the barbarians who dwelt on the banks of the Rhine, and the shores of the Western ocean, having ventured to revolt, he reduced them all to obedience, and brought them from their savage state to one of gentleness. He contented himself with checking the inroads of others, and drove from these dominions, like untamed and savage beasts, those whom he perceived to be altogether incapable of the settled order of civilized life.”

### Euseb. Vit. Const. 39

“But [Constantine], being possessed of inward piety toward God, was neither rendered arrogant by these plaudits, nor uplifted by the praises he heard: but being sensible that he had received help from God, he immediately rendered a thanksgiving to him as the Author of his victory.”

## Bibliography

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