

## THE CONSTANTINIAN IDEOLOGY

The reign of Constantine represented a marking point in the evolution of the imperial power. The ancient sources have various and contradictory perspectives on his rule – whether the pagan authors blamed the emperor for the destruction of the Roman traditional system of government, the Christian ones did present his rule as a *culmen* of human history, due to the emperor's favor for Christianity.

During the Byzantine age, the figures of Constantine and his mother Helena became central figures in a series of legends with the ultimate goal of glorifying the first Roman emperor<sup>1</sup>. More, his person became a symbol and a source for legitimacy, several emperors assuming the title of "Novus Constantinus"<sup>2</sup>.

But the Constantinian coins present us a rather different image of the emperor. According to this type of sources, Constantine gradually constructed an ideological system that was started in the tetrarchy – as a member of it – to a gradual detachment from it. The intermediary stage was marked by a fictitious descendancy from Claudius II Gothicus, having as *conservator* Sol Invictus/Apollo. Finally, after AD 315 (the date for the first *chrismon* on coins<sup>3</sup>), the emperor adopted Christianity as his favorite religion, without renouncing the Solar cult. The last years of his reign marked the decisive step towards the adoption of Christianity as an official religion.

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<sup>1</sup> S. N. C. Lieu, D. Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian. Pagan and Byzantine Views*, London 1996, 99 sq.; G. Dagron, *Empereur et Prêtre. Étude sur le "césaropapisme" byzantin*, Paris 1996, 156.

<sup>2</sup> For Iovianus as a new Constantine, see Themist., *Or.* V, 70d; the participants at the Concile of Chalcedon, 451, also acclaimed Marcianus as Novus Constantinus: *V. Dioscori*, 3. see also R. W. Burgess, "The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic", *Byz. Zeitschr.*, 86/87, 1993/1994, 51; P. Magdalino, *Constantine. History, Historiography and Legend*, London 1994, 4; Tiberius II adopted the name of Constantine: cf. *ibidem*; for Heraclius as Novus Constantinus after his victory against the Persians, see H. Ahrweiler, *L'ideologie politique de l'empire byzantin*, Paris 1975, 22; The myth of Saint Constantine, the New Moses and the New Paul, appeared by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century –the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century in the Byzantine sources, cf. G. Dagron, *op.cit.*, 156.

<sup>3</sup> See the Ticinum medallion, AD 315: I. Barnea, O. Iliescu, *Constantin cel Mare*, București 1982, 134, fig. 39.1; *RIC* VII, 264, nr. 36.



Fig. 1 Constantine I the Great (Caesar 306-307).

Æ 6.65 grams.

Follis (nummus). Treveri, c. 307.

**Obverse:** FL VAL CONSTANTINVS NOB C. Laureate and cuirassed bust right.

**Reverse:** MARTI PATRI PROPVGNATORI. Mars advancing right holding spear and shield between S and A; in exergue, PTR.

**Reference:** *RIC* VI, 730.

Сл. 1 Фолис Константина I Великог (Цезар 306 -307), Тревери (Treveri), 307. На полеђини, Марс (Mars Pater Propugnator).

Constantine's father was an Illyrian by birth and a soldier, being promoted in the tetrarchic system by Diocletianus. He was a worshipper of Sol Invictus/Apollo<sup>4</sup> and during the Great Persecution (AD 303-311) he only formally enforced Diocletian's edicts against Christians.

The weak point in the organization of the tetrarchic system, the succession, became visible in AD 306 when, on Constantius' death at Eburacum/York, the soldiers proclaimed his son Constantine emperor<sup>5</sup>. A mere usurpation by the standards imposed by Diocletian, the proclamation was legitimized by the subsequent sources, especially by Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>6</sup>. Also, the Constantinian propaganda proved to be an extremely efficient weapon in the construction of a coherent image of Constantine as a rightful emperor.

The recognition by Galerius, the senior Augustus at that moment, of Constantine as Caesar for the West led to the latter's attempt to integrate himself ideologically in the tetrarchic system<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> See Lact., *De mort. pers.*, 8,9; Iulian., *Or.* 7, 228d; *ILS*, 631; 632; 633; see also T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, London 1981, 12.

<sup>5</sup> For the date, see *CIL*, I,2, 302; for Constantine proclaimed Augustus, Lact., *De mort. pers.*, 24,8-9; Aur. Vict., *Caes.*, 40, 3-4; *Epit.*, 41, 2-3; Eutrop., X, 2,2; Hieron., *Chron.*, s. a. 306; according to Anon. Val., 2,4 and Zos., II.9.2, he was proclaimed Caesar.

<sup>6</sup> Lact., *De mort. pers.*, 24; *PanLat.*, VII (6), 3,1; 4, 1-2; Eus., *HE*, VIII, 13,12; 13,4; *VC*, I,22,1; Anon. Val., III, 6; Soz., *HE*, I,6; Theod. Cyr., *HE*, I,1,4.

<sup>7</sup> Lact., *De mort. pers.*, XXIV, 8-9.



Fig. 2 Bronze *follis* of Constantine the Great, Augustus 306-337

**Mint and Date:** Treveri, 310-313

**Size and Weight:** 22mm x 24mm, 3.8g

**Obverse:** Radiate, draped and cuirassed bust right.

CONSTANTINVS P F AVG.

**Reverse:** Radiate, draped bust of Sol right.

SOLI INVICTO COMITI.

**Ref:** *RVC* (1988) 3867; *RIC* VI Trier 893

Сл. 2 Бронзани Константинов *follis*, ископан у Тревери (Treveri), 310. -313. На полеђини, Сол Инвиктус (Sol Invictus), императоров *comes*.

The period (AD 306-310) was marked by the presence on the Constantinian coins of Mars as *conservator*. The deity was also Galerius' choice<sup>8</sup>. It is an odd choice for Constantine, since his father had as *conservator* Sol Invictus/Apollo.

The same period witnessed important changes. Firstly, it is to remember the context: at 28<sup>th</sup> of October 306, Maxentius, the son of the former Augustus Maximian Herculus and son-in-law of Galerius was proclaimed *princeps* in Rome by the praetorian guard<sup>9</sup>. Galerius did not accept Maxentius, due to personal enmities. Lactantius, in *De mortibus persecutorum* 18, 9 states that Galerius and even Maximian hated Maxentius due to the latter's refusal to perform *proskynesis*. Galerius even nominated Fl. Severus, the new Augustus for the West, to attack Maxentius and restore tetrarchic authority in Italy. On the other hand, Maxentius recalled his father to power: Maximian Herculus was saluted as "Augustus for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time" and with his help, Maxentius managed to defeat both Severus and later Galerius<sup>10</sup>.

Subsequently, the relations between Maximian and Constantine were strengthened by the marriage of the latter with Fausta, the former's daughter.

<sup>8</sup> Identification of Galerius with Mars, Lact., *De mort. pers.*, IX,9; for Constantine, *RIC* VI, 130-132 (Londinium); 212-213; 217-218 (Treveri); 260-265 (Lugdunum).

<sup>9</sup> Lact., *De mort. pers.*, XXVI, 1-3; XLIV, 1; *PanLat*, IX (12), 16,2; Zos., II,9,2; Hieron., *Chron.*, s.a. 306; Aur. Vict., *Caes.*, 41, 5; Eutr., X,2,3; Anon. Val., 3,6; Socr., *HE*, I,2,6; Zon., 32; see also T.D. Barnes, *op.cit.*, 30.

<sup>10</sup> D. de Decker, "La politique religieuse de Maxence", *Byzantion*, 38, 1968, 530.



**Fig. 3** Bronze AE3 of Constantine the Great, Augustus 306-337

**Mint and Date:** Rome, officina 2; 314-315.

**Size and Weight:** 18mm x 20mm, 3.1g

**Obverse:** Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust right.

IMP CONSTANTINVS PF AVG

**Reverse:** Sol standing left, holding globe in left hand, right hand raised palm out.

SOLI INVICTO COMITI

**Field Marks:** R over X in l. field, F in r. field

**Exergue:** R S

**Ref:** *RIC* Vol VII, 27.

**Сл. 3 Бронзани Константинов фолис, искован у Риму, officina 2, 314-315. На полеђини, Сол Инвиктус (Sol Invictus), императоров comes.**

ter. Probably this fact is responsible for Constantine's claim to belong to the Herculean dynasty, as stated in *ILS*, 681 ("Herculus Caes."). The same Maximian was also responsible for the ideological re-orientation of his son-in-law. Due to the deterioration of relations between Maximian and Maxentius (Maximian tried to depose his son, in order to remain the sole emperor in Italy, but the troops remained loyal to Maxentius)<sup>11</sup>, the old emperor sought asylum to his son-in-law in Gallia. He also tried here to usurp Constantine's authority; he was captured and forced to commit suicide (AD 310)<sup>12</sup>. The event marked the rupture of Constantine with the tetrarchic ideological system. Since now (AD 310), he claimed descendancy from Claudius II Gothicus<sup>13</sup>. This also marked the proclamation of Sol Invictus as his official *conservator*, as one can notice on the monetary emissions of the period<sup>14</sup>. The triumphal arch erected in Rome (AD 315) present him as a devotee of Sol – the emperor is depicted with the radiate crown and also other solar images are present on the arch.

The *PanLat* VI (7), 21,5 represents a revealing fragment in this direction: it is the famous "pagan vision" of Constantine, with Apollo and Victories predicting him 30 years of rule. This identification with Sol had some other

<sup>11</sup> A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, Harmondsworth 1972, 70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 72.

<sup>13</sup> *PanLat.*, VII (6), 2, 1-5; see also *SHA*, *Gallienus*, 14; *Divus Claudius*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> J. Maurice, *Numismatique Constantinienne*, 2, Paris 1911, xx sq.; on the triumphal arch from Rome, the emperor has the radiate crown: I. Barnea, O. Iliescu, *op.cit.*, 36.



Fig. 4 The Arch of Constantine in Rome, detail. Medallion with Helios/Sol raising.  
 Сл. 4 Константинов лук у Риму, детаљ са Хелиосом/Солом како се уздиже.



connotations: even since the Principate, some of the emperors had this god as conservator; Caius Caesar/Caligula or Nero, each of them self-proclaimed as Neos Helios<sup>15</sup>. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, the cult of Sol Invictus was extremely popular amongst the soldier emperors, Aurelianus even trying to organize a state cult, with Sol atop of the divine hierarchy<sup>16</sup>.

Another important fact one should consider is that Apollo Grannus, a Gallic god with the main temple located in Gand, was identified in the epoch with Sol and gained extraordinary success in Gallia, at that time the main base for Constantine's power. Also, victory was essential in Constantinian propaganda – during his reign, the coinage is mostly related to the ideology of victory. Or, Sol Invictus addressed this type of message – so it was fit for Constantine to use this god, together with Mars, as key points for his propaganda. Mars and Sol Invictus are to be found in the period 310-317 on the coins struck on the *officinae* from the Western part of the Empire, usually Mars as *conservator*, Sol as *comes* of the emperor. After 317, Mars nearly disappeared from the Constantinian coinage, leaving Sol Invictus as the most important pagan god represented on coins. Other motifs used after this date were mainly related to military victory.

In fact, Constantine, at the beginning of his reign, lacked legitimacy. He was a mere usurper by the tetrarchic - and even dynastic – standards. The whole period 306-313 was marked, in propaganda terms, by this lack of legitimacy and the search for ways to acquire it. The emperor used various means in order to acquire the much-desired legitimacy – propaganda on coins, where there were proclaimed as *conservatores* Mars, Sol or Hercules, and later even Iupiter; written sources, such as panegyrics and inscriptions proclaimed him as being protected by the divine<sup>17</sup>, or liberator of Rome from the Maxentian tyranny.

<sup>15</sup> N. Hannestad, *Monumentale publice ale artei romane*, București 1989, I, 215; see also a *dupondius* of Nero, obv. Nero radiate, rev. Apollo: *BMC*, I, no. 344 and N. Hannestad, *Monmente*, I, fig. 72.

<sup>16</sup> N. Hannestad, *Monumente* I, 269; for the coins, see *RIC* V.1, nos. 319-322; *SHA*, *Divus Aurelianus*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> See the inscription from the triumphal arch "...INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS..".



Fig. 5 Constantine I, c. 312 A.D.

**Dimensions:** 21mm 5gm

**Obverse:** IMP C FL VAL CONSTANTINVS P F AVG

**Reverse:** HERCVLI VICTORI [To Hercules, the victor] Hercules standing right, right hand behind back, left leaning on club covered by lion's skin. In left field star above delta.

**Exergue:** SMN

This type is only listed in *RIC VI* for Maximinus, but examples are also known for Licinius and Constantine.

It should be *RIC VI* Nicomedia 75c.

**Сл. 5 Бронзани Константинов фолис, искован у Риму, officina 2, 314-315. На полеђини, Сол Инвиктус (Sol Invictus), императоров comes.**



Fig. 7 Of approximately 1,363 coins of Constantine I in *RIC VII*, covering the period of 313-337, roughly one percent might be classified as having Christian symbols.

**Obverse:** IMP CONSTANTINVS P F AVG

**Reverse:** SA LVS REI PVBLIC AE.

**Сл. 7 Бронзани Константинов фолис, искован у Риму, officina 2, 314-315. На полеђини, Сол Инвиктус (Sol Invictus), императоров comes.**



Fig. 6 Bronze follis of Constantine the Great, Augustus 306-337. note the short “tetrarchic” beard of the emperor, which later will disappear from the official Constantinian portraiture.

**Mint and Date:** Thessalonica, officina 2; c. 313-324.

**Size and Weight:** 23mm x 20mm, 3.75g

**Obverse:** Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust right.

IMP CONSTANTINVS PF AVG

**Reverse:** Nude Jupiter standing left. holding a tall sceptre and a statuette of Victory who crowns him, eagle at feet holding up a wreath.

IOVI CONSERVATORI AVGG NN

**Exergue:** •TS•B

**Ref:** RIC VI 61b.

Сл. 6 Бронзани фолис Константина Великог. Обратите пажњу на императорову кратку „тетрархијску“ браду, која ће се изгубити у каснијим званичним Константиновим портретима. Исковано у Солуну, officina 2, 313. -324. На полеђини, Јупитер Заштитник (Jupiter Conservator).



Fig. 8 Siliqua of Constantine I (306-337), minted at Thessalonica, AD 326-327.

**Obverse:** Diademed head right.

**Reverse:** CONSTANTINVS AVG / SMTS

Victory left, holding wreath and branch.

**Reference:** RIC VII 152.

Сл. 8 Силиква Константина I (306-337), искована у Солуну, 326-327. Император носи дијадему, његова сличност подржава сличност са хеленским владарима.



A special notice here deserves the image of the “savior of the state” constructed by the Constantinian propaganda around the emperor. Even since Augustus established the empire, the image of the emperor as “savior of the state” had a special place in the public propaganda. The motif was engrossed during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century crisis, when the vast majority of the emperors proclaimed themselves as saviors of the state<sup>18</sup>.

But the moment 312 proved to be decisive in Christian historiography. Then, Constantine invaded Italy, in the attempt to defeat Maxentius. He fought and won some battles before the decisive one, that of Pons Milvius (28 Oct. 312). Eusebius of Caesarea narrates the vision Constantine had before the battle<sup>19</sup>. Most probably a later Christian work, the episode tries to justify the subsequent religious policy of the emperor. It is beyond the goals of the present study whether the vision took place or not; what is important is that from this time on, the imperial religious policy moved towards the acceptance of Christianity amongst the official religions of the empire.

The year 315 marked the first appearance on an official document of a Christian symbol – the chi-rho mark on Constantine’s helmet, present on a medallion minted at Ticinum.

Marta Sordi pointed the fact that, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, there existed some confusion between Christianity and the solar cult – some believers identified even Jesus Christ with Sol Iustitiae<sup>20</sup>. Another important point of view is related to the religious behavior. The ancient rulers strongly relied on the concept of *mimesis*. Its origins were in the Near Middle East. The Hellenistic rulers adopted this idea and finally it was transferred into the Roman political thinking. It was essentially the idea that the humane world mirrors the divine one. The rulers, as preservers of the world order, were somehow perceived superior to their subjects, “as the shepherd is superior to his flock”. They also mimicked their conservator, even by dressing with their god’s attributes. In the military, the battles between two rivals were carried not only on Earth, but also in Heavens, between their protective gods. So, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> century emperors the *conservator* became extremely important – his protection could give victory in battle over the enemy.

This idea was once more strengthened during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, together with the development of neo-platonism.

As a product of his age, Constantine was no exception. He simply tried to have the protection of the best god. Whether it was Mars, Sol, Jupiter or Christ, it did not matter very much to him. What mattered was the victory that the *conservator* could bring him in wars – civil or external ones. The panegyrists adapted themselves quickly to these changes – whether the *PanLat* from 310 openly speaks of Apollo, that from AD 313 - *PanLat* XII (9) carefully avoid to mention any pagan god.

The period 312-324 in fact marked the coexistence of both pagan and Christian symbols on the coins issued<sup>21</sup>. The identification of Sol with Christ

<sup>18</sup> Em. Demougeot, *De l'unité à la division de l'empire romain 395-410. Essai sur le gouvernement impérial*, Paris 1951, 88.

<sup>19</sup> Euseb., *VC*, I, 28.2.

<sup>20</sup> M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, London, New York 1994, 122.

<sup>21</sup> According to Ph. Grierson, the solar symbols were maintained on coins until at



could be assumed when one analyzes the triumphal arch erected in Rome after Constantine's victory over Maxentius. Even if after the battle, Constantine refused to climb on Capitolium to bring sacrifices to the pagan gods for his victory, on the triumphal arch there are solar symbols: Victoria and Sol, the last having even a bust on the eastern architrave<sup>22</sup>. Only after 330 one can assume that pagan symbols disappeared completely from Constantinian propaganda.

But Constantine did not use only religious themes in his propaganda; he used illustrious predecessors as well. We already know that Claudius II Gothicus was his supposed ancestor. Another model was provided by Trajan, the conqueror of Dacia and the Middle East. Constantine erected statues of Trajan, and as early as AD 312, the figure of Constantine resembles that of Trajan in official portraits<sup>23</sup>.

On the other hand, Constantine used fictitious genealogy in the competition against the other Augustus, Licinius. Both of them proclaimed to be descendants of 3rd century emperors: Constantine, of Claudius II, while Licinius proclaimed Philippus Arabs as his ancestor<sup>24</sup>. A first conflict between the two was decided in favor of Constantine – in AD 317, the war was concluded in favor of Constantine. Then, in AD 324, the final victory was achieved at Chrysopolis, leaving Constantine as sole emperor. After the victory, Constantine adopted the diadem as the sign for absolute power, thus marking the complete hellenization of Roman monarchy<sup>25</sup>. This was the final step of a process that begun even since Augustus established the Principate, a process marked by several attempts by the so-called “les Césars fous” to establish a Hellenistic form of monarchy, so often rejected by the other members of the Roman political elite. After 324, with no competitor left, Constantine dedicated his time to organize the empire according to the new political and religious realities. His coins present him as an Hellenistic ruler – with diadem, his look gazing upwards, a mark of devotion towards the divinity. Furthermore, since 326, there appeared a new image of the emperor – a nimbus encircled his head, such as that of the ancient gods<sup>26</sup>. The Roman emperor became a supernatural being, superior to all mankind. He was no longer a *princeps*, he was a *dominus*, entrusted by God with the supreme power on earth. The transformation was complete.

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least AD 324: Ph. Grierson, “Six Late Roman Medallions in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection”, *DOP*, 50, 1996, 139-145.

<sup>22</sup> See N. Hannestad, *Monumente.*, II, 303.

<sup>23</sup> I. Barnea, O. Iliescu, *Constantin cel Mare*, fig. 39, 1-8 (312-317); in fig. 39,1 (Ostia) there appeared for the first time this image, with the legend SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI on the reverse; for Trajan as model for Constantine, see Iulian., *Caes.*, 328d-329.

<sup>24</sup> For Licinius and Philippus Arabs, see *SHA*, *Gordianus Iunior*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> For the diadem, see S. G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1981; 1990 (2nd edition), 180; Stanley Ireland, Soner Ateşoğullari, “The Ancient Coins in Amasra Museum”, in R. Ashton, ed., *Studies in Ancient Coinage from Turkey*, London 1996, 129, no. 215, follies having on the obverse Constantine with diadem, dated AD 324-330 by the authors.

<sup>26</sup> For the description of coin, see Euseb., *VC*, IV,73; the image in I. Barnea, O. Iliescu, *Constantin cel Mare*, 131, fig. 41.5.

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Кристијан Олариу  
КОНСТАНТИНОВСКА ИДЕОЛОГИЈА

Константинова владавина представљала је одлучујући тренутак у развоју римске империјалне моћи. Извори су контрадикторни када се ради о његовој владавини: док су га пагански аутори окривљивали за уништавање традиционалног владиног система и старих паганских веровања, хришћански аутори су, за узврат, представљали његову владавину као *culmen* за историју човечанства, због царевог одлучног деловања у правцу хришћанства.

У византијско доба, ликови Константина и његове мајке Јелене постали су централни делови *vitae* циклуса, чији је крајњи циљ био глорификовање првог римског хришћанског императора. Осим тога, његова личност постала је легитимизирајући извор за касније императоре, а неки од њих су тако преузели назив *Novus Constantinus*.

Али, Константинови новчићи представљају сасвим другачију причу. Као бивши узурпатор, Константину је очајнички био потребан легитимитет и прихваћеност од стране чланова тетрархије. Желео је да се интегрише у компликован тетрархијски систем а његова пропаганда то и демонстрира. Император је користио различита средства да би био признат као владар: склапање брака са припадницом породице Максимијана Херкулијуса (Maximian Herculus), признавање од стране Галерија Августа (Galerius Augustus), пропагандни новчићи који проглашавају Марса или Сол Инуиктуса (Sol Inuictus) његовим *conseruatores*. Након тога, успео је да буде прихваћен као легитиман члан тетрархије. Али, након 310. године променио је стране: након неуспелог покушаја Максимијана Херкула да га свргне, Константин је почео да се приближава свом „претку“ Клаудију II Готикусу (Claudius II Gothicus). Његови новчићи проглашавају ову нову родбинску лозу и такође стављају нагласак на слику Сол Инуиктуса као његовог *comes*. Тек након 315. године нове ере појавили су се хришћански симболи на новчићима и Константин је почео да отворено штити хришћанство. Коначно, при крају своје владавине, император се приближио хришћанској религији довољно да постане један од верника.

