


Article

«Ipse Perspicis Scilicet»: The Relation between Army and Religion in Constantinian Propaganda

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the connection between religious and military spheres in Constantinian propaganda. The extensive use of propaganda and the notorious public discourse which involves the dynamics of power during Late Antiquity show how religion and the military played a key role. This principle reaches a singular meaning in the case of emperor Constantine I. To this extent, this paper considers several kinds of sources, which include legal, literary, and numismatic, among others. An analysis of the political uses of imperial constitutions by the emperor (especially *CTh* 7.20.2) can be of particular interest in order to address the ideas of self-representation and the politics of legitimation. Ultimately, the paper highlights the importance of imperial propaganda in Later Roman society, as well as the transformations in Constantine's public discourse, where the connection between army and religion shows an evolution from the previous ways of understanding imperial power and where the bond of the ruler with a supreme divinity is a central issue.

Keywords: Constantine I; Roman law; Late Antiquity; Roman army; providentia; political propaganda; charisma



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1. Introduction

Emperor Constantine I (*reg.* 306–337) and his political profile have been thoroughly addressed in specialized studies on diverse perspectives of his rule and his own personality. At the same time, the relevance of the Roman army during the Imperial period and, in particular, during Late Antiquity, cannot be understood without the authority figure of Constantine. Therefore, a large number of imperial constitutions related to the army and other interrelated elements (such as military veterans) were issued during the times of Constantine and can be found in the main compilations of Roman law. This circumstance highlights the interventionist approach of Constantine and his vigorous engagement in the legislative field, and, in consequence, it stresses the interest of imperial power in the army as an institution with a fundamental role in Later Roman society.

While there is extensive literature addressing the wide-ranging discussion about the use of religion as an element in the discourses of legitimacy during the age of Constantine and his personal relationship with Christian practice, a lack of studies that focus in detail on the connection between the military and religion from legal and historical perspectives can also be observed. In this regard, an imperial constitution enacted by Constantine and collected in the *Codex Theodosianus* (*CTh* 7.20.2) is a necessary reference to emphasize the public dimension of religion in Late Antiquity. The peculiar nature of the mentioned law illustrates the close bond between religion and military as two of the main pillars of political power, a reality which is seen even before Constantine's rise.

Several well-renowned specialists have discussed the “conversion” of Constantine to Christianity, his religious concerns, and the effect upon his political image with diverse methodologies and results. Among others, the historian Jacob Burckhardt approached Constantine's personality from a political point of view. To some scholars, Burckhardt was clearly influenced by the theses of Gibbon ([Kudrycz 2011](#), p. 153), as well as by the context of the cultural and religious crisis of the period and by his own religious experience

(Sigurdson 2004, p. 34). Therefore, Burckhardt shows an evident ambivalence towards the emperor. The portrayal of Constantine as some sort of Machiavelli *avant la lettre* in his early work *Die Zeit Constantins des Großen* (1853) touches the borders of anachronism or, at least, leads us to question the impartiality of the author. Burckhardt argues that Constantine balances political realism with ambition and uses Christian religion as a mere instrument. As such, his conversion would only be a result of his political skills without a spiritual ground. Despite the worthiness of Burckhardt's contributions to historical theory, several voices have emphasized the possibility of genuine religiosity of Constantine, who has been considered «a sincere believer in the Christian Deity» (Odahl 2004, p. 108) by authors such as Odahl¹. Even though the knowledge of Constantine regarding theological matters could have been limited, we can only challenge the simplified view of Constantine as «a politician interested only in the power that church could help him achieve» (Drake 2006, p. 112). In contrast to Burckhardt's disputed opinion, some moderate positions, as shown by the opinions of Alföldi (1976) or Barnes (1981), accept a genuine conversion to Christianity by Constantine, although with different nuances in each case.

However, Burckhardt's intuition about the political context is indeed appropriate when we take into account that certain actions and decisions made by Constantine did, in fact, have political consequences. This point does not necessarily mean that Constantine's motivations were strictly and solely political. Constantine was to a large extent a product of the Later Roman tetrarchic system and, as a result, the legal and administrative solutions charted during his rule could not be understood but as a gradual continuation from some of the developments that had occurred during the Age of Diocletian and the final decades of the third century.

As for the traditional narrative about Constantine's conversion and his rise to the throne, mainly built over the writings of Eusebius, and later crystallized around Zosimus', it could be a consequence of the alignment of interests between Roman political power and the Christian circles. Eusebius recounts how in a complex context of civil wars and instability, Constantine, seeking for divine help, experiences a waking vision and a subsequent image of «the Christ of God»² that led him to worship the Christian God before the decisive Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. It is well known that sources argue that the victorious legions of Constantine fought under the *labarum*, a military standard with the Greek monogram *chi-rho* (*XP*), a reference to Christ³. Despite the clear hostility towards pagan gods in the narration⁴, it is feasible to argue that at that time there was no clear awareness of Constantine's separation from pagan symbolism (Rodríguez Gervás 1990, p. 52), an aspect that will be verified in the present study from a corpus of diverse sources.

The Christian literature of the period, therefore, displays a providentialist view of the military victories of Constantine⁵. In that context, Eusebius asserts in his *Ecclesiastical History* and his *Life of Constantine* that the emperor was led by divine intervention⁶. According to the bishop of Caesarea, it was piety and faith in the true God that procured the victory in combat (*VC* II, 29) rather than military strength. In contrast to the failures of previous emperors (namely Diocletian) who did not gain God's favor, Eusebius explains how Christian faith granted Constantine those decisive victories. For Constantine, God was «both the God of creation and the God of Battles», as Potter (2013, p. 224) expresses.

That discourse must be placed in the mentioned context of mutual interests. Constantine would welcome a reinforcement of his political legitimacy, whereas Christian theologians longed for an approximation and a more favorable treatment from imperial power in their search for recognition. Accordingly, with the rapprochement to Constantine, the Christian intellectuals of the period could have pondered the necessity to achieve a model of ruler that could be emulated by the future emperors, especially in the defense and protection of Christian belief (Cortés 2018, p. 90).

That circumstance should not lead us to dismiss the presence of a calculated ambiguity in Constantine's public profile, particularly in the religious sphere, and its connection with the army as an argument for his legitimacy. For that reason, two main elements will be examined in this paper: on one hand, the imperial constitution contained in *CTh* 7.20.2, as

a sample of how legal provisions enacted by emperors in this period conveyed normative innovations but, at the same time, were also a powerful ideological resource. On the other hand, a cursory examination regarding several examples from the coinage of the times of Constantine will enable us to reflect on the close links between the army and religion in Constantinian propaganda and discourses of power.

2. The Connection between Army and Religion in Constantine's Ideological Profile with Special Reference to *CTh* 7.20.2

As mentioned in the introduction, we will start to delve into the connection between army and religion in Constantine's public profile from the legislative text collected in *CTh* 7.20.2. In order to elaborate our hypothesis, it is necessary to approximate the homage required in the emperor's presence⁷ during Late Antiquity and the impossibility of ever distinguishing the political and religious spheres of power in this historical context. For that purpose, the Byzantine historian Joannes Zonaras presents some interesting assertions in his *Epitome Historiarum*. In particular, Zonaras (*Epit.* 12.31) reflects about how the emperor came to require elevated gestures of homage and even worship during the Tetrarchy and explicitly mentions the emperor Diocletian, with an obvious aversion:

Καὶ ἄλλους δὲ πολλοὺς πολέμους κατῶρθωσαν Διοκλητιανὸς καὶ Μαξιμιανός, τοὺς μὲν δι' ἑαυτῶν ἢ τῶν Καισάρων, τοὺς δὲ διὰ στρατηγῶν, καὶ τοὺς ὅρους τῆς βασιλείας ἐπλάτυναν. οἷς ἐπαρθεὶς ὁ Διοκλητιανὸς καὶ μέγα φρονήσας οὐκέτι προσαγορεύεσθαι παρὰ τῆς γερουσίας ὡς πρόφην ἠνείχετο, ἀλλὰ προσκυνεῖσθαι ἐθέσπισε, καὶ τὰς ἐσθῆτας ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὰ ὑποδήματα χρυσῷ καὶ λίθοις καὶ μαργάραις ἐκόσμησε, καὶ πλείονα πολυτέλειαν τοῖς βασιλικοῖς παρασῆμοις ἐνέθετο. οἱ πρόφην γὰρ βασιλεῖς κατὰ τοὺς ὑπάτους τετίμηντο, καὶ τῆς βασιλείας παράσημον μόνον εἶχον πορφυροῦν περιβόλαιον.

It is only logical to think that Zonaras could have been influenced by his Orthodox Christian faith in his animosity towards Diocletian, but his account seems historically plausible and shows how the public depiction of emperors would be transformed through time, with the obvious precedent of monarchies to Rome's East (Sassanids in particular)⁸. Therefore, the ceremonial revering of the emperor and the degree of divinization given to Later Roman emperors has been subject to many and diverse interpretations, but it can be concluded that, in a setting of cultural heterogeneity, the emperors and the worship which surrounded them acquired a sense of commonality and were «the main common reference for their inhabitants» (Olmo López 2018, p. 428).

Considering this general framework, we should refer directly to the constitution from which our exposition originates. The mentioned imperial constitution can be found in the chapter dedicated to military veterans in the *Codex Theodosianus* (*CTh* 7.20) and it is a valuable source to understand the behavior of imperial propaganda and the visibility of the imperial cult in that time, a territory where legislation plays a key function. In this sense, the innovations undergone in the legal field during the rule of Constantine cannot be explained only by the influx of Christianity nor be evaluated as a breakaway with the period of the Tetrarchy, for, as Dillon (2012, p. 88) notes, «the changes that legislative style underwent in the final years of the reign of Diocletian were inherited, not by Constantine alone, but by all members of the tetrarchic college».

For those who are used to the study of Roman legal sources, a *prima facie* examination clearly reveals the unusual nature of the fragment both in its style and content. Beyond the phenomenon of synthesis and abstraction of legal principles and solutions which can be typically perceived in the legal compilations, to which Prof. Archi (1970, p. 159) already referred a few decades ago as the «massimazione» of Roman legal sources, *CTh* 7.20.2 shows a longer and (quite possibly) complete text. This feature provides us with a very relevant context. Along with it, the regulation strikes by its accented literary nature, as it can be observed from the beginning of the excerpt:

Cum introisset principia et salutatus esset a praefectis et tribunis et viris eminentissimis, adclamatum est: Auguste Constantine, dii te nobis servent: vestra salus nostra salus: vere dicimus, iurati dicimus.

This first fragment is a faithful reflection of the transformations experienced in the referred public image of emperors. It contains a remarkable reference to divinity, along with an unequivocal providentialist perspective in the figure of the «Augustus Constantine», as it establishes a connection between the fate of the troops, of Roman society, and the life of the emperor itself («vestra salus nostra salus»)⁹. In our opinion, the reference to the Gods (in plural; «dii te nobis servent») by the rank and file, which was promptly redacted by the Justinian compilers in their *Codex*¹⁰, could be another point to sustain the evidence for the prevalence of pagan beliefs within the Roman Army in this period.

On this subject, Odahl notes that Constantine carried out «specific actions clearly indicating that he henceforth expected Christianity to be accepted as the official religion of the Roman Empire» (Odahl 2004, p. 185). In addition to that, the same author also affirms that «the imperial courts and the military camps of Constantine were thus becoming openly Christian and were setting examples for the remainder of the Roman Empire» (Odahl 2004, p. 173). Such a statement is at least questionable if we consider the writings of Late Antique authors, such as Libanius (*Orat.* 30.6) or Zosimus (II.29.5), where it can be perceived how the majority of the high established bureaucracy and the upper echelons of the army were still pagan. After an introduction in medias res where the acclamation of Constantine by his troops takes place, the constitution then establishes a dialogue between the emperor and a group of the veterans present in the barracks:

Aduati veterani exclamaverunt: Constantine Aug, quo nos veteranos factos, si nullam indulgentiam habemus? Constantinus A. dixit: Magis magisque conveteranis meis beatitudinem augere debeo quam minuere.

The literary style and the dialogue are indeed unusual in the legal compilations, and they reveal a manifest idealization, with the aim, as Marcone (1987, p. 228) suggests, of «non privare il testo de la sua originale vivacità riducendolo al solo dispositivo». The rare literary style of the text, which is hardly recognizable when we consider the expectation of homage for the emperor during the period, emerges again with a new display of the abrupt and dramatic style that Pharr considers as characteristic from the legislation enacted by Constantine (Pharr 1952, p. 179).

Victorinus veteranus dixit: muneribus et oneribus universis locis conveniri non sinamur. Constantinus A. dixit: Apertius indica; quae sunt maxime munera, quae vos contumaciter gravant? Universi veterani dixerunt: ipse perspicis scilicet. Constantinus A. dixit: iam nunc munificentia mea omnibus veteranis id esse concessum perspicuum sit, ne quis eorum nullo munere civili neque in operibus publicis conveniatur neque in nulla conlatione neque a magistratibus neque vectigalibus.

In this sense, it is evident that in a strictly legal context it would be irrelevant to specify the identity of the veteran («Victorinus») who addresses Constantine in the narrated scene. Nonetheless, it is a clever literary device intended to place the addressees of the regulation in place with a masterful liveliness and, as it has been previously noted, the passage «contribuye a eliminar la abstracción propia de los textos jurídicos y a aportar una mayor cercanía a los receptores de la constitución» (Corona Encinas 2021, p. 173). By reducing the typical abstraction of legal sources, Constantine places the soldiers as both the protagonists and the audience of the precept. This trait can also be found in other examples of propaganda issued by Constantine, as it will be later addressed.

The text continues in a more aseptic style with the development of a battery of privileges granted to the veterans, such as exemptions from public service («munere civili»), public works («in operibus publicis»), magistracies («magistratibus»), or taxes («vectigalibus»). However, it is interesting to highlight the generous attitude («munificentia mea»)

tied to Constantine in the law. Constantinian magnanimity and his repeated tendency to extend privileges to other strata and to «all the provinces» are praised by Eusebius (*VC*, II, 22) in a context of ample political and religious concessions. Moreover, we should add the projection of the emperor not just as a seasoned military commander but as a far-reaching and thoroughly engaged leader from the veterans' perspective («Universi veterani dixerunt: ipse perspicis scilicet»). The term «universi» also raises the possibility of a reference to all the army veterans (and not just those who served under Constantine) as the recipients of the precept.

One could wonder about the reasons that moved the compilers of the Theodosian Code to keep such an uncommon ordinance unaltered and why some centuries later it was also added to the *Codex Iustinianus* with some minor alterations. In this framework, it could be argued that the reason behind its preservation lay, firstly, in the inherent legal value of the content but, at the same time, in this value and uniqueness from a formal point of view as well. Hence, it could have been incorporated as an example of the imperial proceedings of audience (Connolly 2010, p. 93), despite the stylized and shortened nature displayed in the text. Notwithstanding the motivations of Constantine, studying some of the sources of the period allows us to determine that the emperor makes a frequent use of public speeches and discourses, a tendency that only shows his awareness towards propaganda and communication as resources of political usefulness¹¹.

For that reason, Constantine would use legal sources in order to portray a suitable picture of imperial power, and, to that effect, the mentioned imperial constitution, *CTh* 7.20.2, is a singular case. As it has been mentioned, the imperial chancery intended to carry out a highly stylized literary representation of an ordinary situation in the daily life of military camps, which generally would have no place in a legislative piece¹². The goal is no other than to represent the emperor as a caring, generous, and open-to-dialogue leader. At the same time, the troops can be understood as both a featured player and an audience in this constitution. Thus, the excerpt is a new realization of the social and political relevance of the army and the veterans in this period and, ultimately, allows us to confirm the importance of imperial cult and religion in the Later Roman society (and, particularly, in Roman army) as key vectors in the discourses of power.

The complex periodization of the precept¹³ complicates a possible estimation of dates, but as it has been duly observed, the munificent spirit that can be found in texts such as *CTh* 7.20.1 or 7.20.2 would be coherent with the fact that for Constantine, a stronger position could justify the limitation of the privileges granted to the soldiers that were initially more generous (Corona Encinas 2021, p. 177). The argument of the transition from an initial munificent policy by Constantine can be assessed from legal sources as *CTh* 7.20.3, more fitting to the typical features of Late Roman imperial legislation and more restrictive in the concessions granted. While it could be argued that the condition of the military had long been a concern for Roman emperors, the significance of Constantine's initiatives in this regard is shown by the large number of laws issued and their relevance. The title 7.20 of the *Codex Theodosianus*, devoted to the army veterans, contains 13 fragments from constitutions. Five of them have been attributed to Constantine. His relevance is even greater regarding the title 7.22 («Sons of military men, of apparitors, and of veterans») with 5 constitutions out of 12 ascribed to Constantine. This could stress the fact that the army played a fundamental role in Constantine's political agenda.

It is true, though, that legislation is far from being the most usual propaganda media for imperial power, as we have already noted. Therefore, the striking union among religion, imperial adoration, and the army in a legal source could be backed by suggestive sources of comparison in other kinds of primary sources. As an obvious example, we can refer to the central inscription in the notorious Arch of Constantine in Rome [*CIL* 6.1139 (= *ILS* 694)], which includes the expression «INSTINCTV DIVINITATIS». Those terms have been a matter of discussion and analysis for historians¹⁴ and we could only argue that in his search for a legitimacy based on charisma, Constantine would mention an ambiguous

divinity that, as such, would be welcomed by the senatorial ranks and the nobility more attached to pagan beliefs.

Furthermore, certain scenes of military nature displayed in the reliefs of the Arch underpin some of the ideas suggested in the examination of *CTh* 7.20.2. Thus, in the reliefs located in the south side, Constantine is depicted as the charismatic declaimer who pronounces an *adlocutio* in front of his troops. At the same time, the emperor is also represented wearing a plain robe, surrounded by his soldiers in yet another costumbrist scene, which resembles the situation given in *CTh* 7.20.2. Once again, the aim is to show a leader close to his troops, open to dialogue but also pious and observant of traditional cults. Overall, religion emerges once again in the military sphere to be closely tied to the victories of Constantine. For that reason, it should not come as a surprise that one of the main objectives of the Arch was to strengthen «il concetto di immortalità e di eternità del potere imperiale e della dimensione cosmica della vittoria costantiniana» (Pensabene 1999, p. 13). The religious ambiguity in the public representations of Constantine is again at stake, for the pagan symbolism (Bleckmann 2015, p. 319) and, in particular, *Sol Invictus* are ubiquitous in the Arch. This circumstance led to the assertion that the solar divinity would have at least the same importance as Christ in that moment for Constantine (Wallraff 2001, p. 256).

Notwithstanding the evidence of this monument, it is true that the Christian authors of the period speak highly of Constantine as a leader who champions Christian faith since a relatively early moment, and, as a consequence, the emperor would firmly legislate against traditional cults, according to Eusebius' *De Vita Constantini* (VC II, 43–45). Several of those laws would affect the military, but if we consider the evidence, the authenticity of many of such alleged anti-pagan laws is questionable, since the only available source is Eusebius himself¹⁵. As an example, Eusebius mentions that Constantine decreed Sunday as a public feast day in 321 and, subsequently, every soldier should gather during that day for a common prayer (VC IV, 18). However, the so-called *Law of Dies Solis*, whose text has not been fully preserved, must be understood in a scenario of control of traditional of cults, as a reaction to the political measures carried out by Licinius, and, therefore, we should assume that the disposition was not intended to «Christianize» the official calendar, as Moreno Resano (2009, p. 189) points.

Eusebius' narration of Constantine as an anti-pagan legislator can be contrasted with the cautious and pragmatic attitude shown by the emperor in his actions, and, consequentially, it seems clear that the presence of an openly anti-pagan policy by the emperor in the *Life of Constantine* responds to partial (and quite possibly distorted) use of the context by Eusebius (Guillén Arró 2015, p. 296). As vehement as Eusebius was, legal evidence seems to be in accordance with the pragmatic tolerance displayed by Constantine also in the military sphere. At most, scholars such as Bradbury admit that even if certain anti-pagan laws were issued, the actual enforcement is questionable (Bradbury 1994, p. 139). With that in mind, the alleged initiatives opposing traditional religious cults would have had no direct effects over the army in that period, as it can be drawn from a brief analysis of *CTh* 7.20.2 and the rest of the sources presented. In this sense, Barbero (2016, p. 669) goes in the same direction when he tackles the attitude displayed by Constantine:

[. . .] nel caso delle leggi a favore della Chiesa, significa piuttosto segnalare che anche quando innovava, l'imperatore lo fece sempre nei termini più mascherati e meno traumatici, presentando i suoi provvedimenti in termini tali da suscitare il minimo possibili di opposizione e di scandalo. L'immagine che ne esce è quella di un sovrano estremamente coerente nei suoi procedimenti, sempre attento a non urtare nessun interesse costituito e con un'estrema sensibilità, anche verbale, alla costruzione del consenso.

As a result, Constantine's legislative measures that would favor Christian religion did not entail an anti-pagan stance. Additionally, the providentialist perspective of Constantine in the military field, which, to a certain extent, can be found in *CTh* 7.20.2, is not exclusive of Christian authors. In this regard, the panegyrics elaborate their own arguments and

exhibit a pronounced military triumphalism. Constantine's victories are considered within the special bond of the emperor with the divine sphere, similarly to the style posed in the mentioned inscription in the Arch of Constantine. For the authors of the panegyrics, the triumphs of Constantine also have a providentialist character, as the divine promise of victory («divinitus») in *Paneg.* IX (12).3.3 reveals. In a similar fashion, the discourse also alludes to the divine connections of Constantine:

Habes profecto aliquod cum illa mente divina, Constantine, secretum, quae delegata nostri diis minoribus cura uni se tibi dignatur ostendere [*Paneg.* IX (12).2.5].

Here, the author of the panegyric refers to a special relationship between Constantine and a supreme divinity («mente divina») which has only been revealed to him. Because of this, it is noticeable that the visions do not only have a Christian shade in Constantinian propaganda since the pagan sources had equally referred to episodes with apparent similarities before. It is also worth mentioning that the expression «diis minoribus» could lead to a henotheistic interpretation before a gradual shift towards monotheism, which again supports the thesis of the transition and the uniqueness of Constantine's propaganda. As [Lenski \(2015, p. 53\)](#) notes, Constantine made «little effort to repress traditional victory imagery, not even when it verged into polytheism».

Another of the panegyrics expounds the vision experienced by Constantine in 310, before the famous event of Milvian Bridge, although in this case, the author expressly mentions the god Apollo. It is true that there is a common feature between them, stemming from the solar nature of both incidents and, therefore, one can understand that the undetermined divinity referenced would be *Sol Invictus*. This argument is closely related with the presence of *Sol Invictus* and Victory as the protective divinities of the army in a remarkable number of public representations from Constantinian Age ([Bergmann 1997, p. 115](#)), which will be briefly considered in the next section and in our opinion deserves more scholarly attention.

Similarly, Nazarius' panegyric on Constantine (321) broaches the idea of military success as a consequence of divine favor. Before praising Constantine's military skills and virtues as a leader, the orator refers to God («deus») in singular and without any specific name [*Paneg.* IV (10).7.3]. Immediately after, Nazarius transcends political and military arguments and justifies divine intervention as the main cause of Constantine's fortune:

[...] illa pietatem tuam texit, illa nefariam illius tyranni fregit amentiam, illa inuictum exercitum tuum tot uictoriarum conscientia plenis pectoribus ardentem tantis insuper uiribus iuuat, quantas praestare aut deus potuit aut amor tuus debuit, ut horrendas acies, ut incognita ferri et corporum robora fulmineus miles euerteret, ut, quidquid instruxerat diuturni sceleris longa molitio, felici congressione consumeres [*Paneg.* IV (12).7.4].

Along with yet another example of the connection between military and religious sphere found in the discourse of the period, two minor points need to be highlighted. Firstly, the use of the term «invictum». The formula «Invictus», with obvious divine reverberations, was frequently used in Constantinian propaganda, although its use drastically decays after 324. Secondly, Nazarius refers to Constantine's rival as a «tyrant» («tyranni»). This mention to Maxentius is particularly interesting amidst of the complicated relations between Constantine and Licinius that led to the resumption of the civil war in 324 and, ultimately, to Constantine's victory. Nazarius' speech could pave the way for Constantine's final campaign and, as [Omissi \(2018, p. 152\)](#) believes, the text can be considered as a «subtle invective that must have been beginning to be levelled at Licinius during this period».

As a result of the evidence presented, it is only safe to assume the will of Constantine to be perceived as a leader with monotheistic beliefs, with a privileged connection with a sole supreme god whose identity is not openly developed at this stage and who had a direct effect over the results of the emperor in his military actions. It is safe to assume that these messages would have been especially intended for the troops. However, an approach

to this side of Constantinian propaganda would be fragmentary if the ample coinage of the period, a fundamental resource to enlighten the public visibility of imperial power, was not taken into account.

3. Some Cases of Interest Regarding Army, Religion and Reverence for the Emperors in the Coinage of Constantine

The coinage in the Age of Constantine indeed represents a broad and substantial corpus, covering a period of roughly three decades. To this we should add special interest in coins as a particularly suitable propaganda resource because of their simplicity in interpretation by any recipient, as currency «serviva anche a comunicare con le masse, a creare un universo simbolico condiviso e trasmettere l'ideologia del potere» (Barbero 2016, p. 239). Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the public discourse based on the influence of religion on military aspects has a remarkable presence in Constantine's coinage. In order to ponder the argued relationship between army and religion in Constantine's propaganda, we should mainly refer to three cases of interest, which strengthen the links between religious and military spheres, both of them related to the idea of imperial cult.

In dealing with Constantine's coinage, firstly, we will mention the coins under the legend «BEATA TRANQVILLITAS». The series, circumscribed to the mints in Londinium, Lugdunum and Treveri, shares some elements which can be considered as unequivocally symbolic and spiritual. Such elements are, in most cases, an orb and an altar under three stars. Along with this, the inscription «VOT/IS/XX» is frequent and refers to the vows (*uota*) taken after the first 15 years of Constantine's rule in order to secure the divine favor. It is worth noting that some issuances of the *Beata tranquillitas* series (*RIC VII Londinium* 208–215; 218, 229–235, among others) do not display Constantine but his son Crispus instead, emphasizing the dynastic vision of power by Constantine¹⁶. On these coins, the orb does not have a modern meaning, representing the Earth. In contrast, it can be understood as a Roman depiction of Cosmos under the shape of a celestial orb. Therefore, the sense is purely spiritual and not as pragmatic as the usual concept of the Roman «pax». Along with this, the concept of «tranquillitas» can later be found in pagan philosophers such as Seneca but also in the writings of Christian authors, such as St. Augustine. In sum, the symbolism of this series allows Constantine to present himself as a sovereign ruler and expands on his divine bonding.

Among the relevant motifs used, Constantine also makes extensive use of the *topos* of military victory in his coins. That is not an innovation developed by our ruler but a common place in the imperial public discourses since the Early Roman empire, for the idea of imperial victory was especially used in numismatic propaganda with the intention to glorify military triumphs (González-Conde Puente 1991, p. 19).

Secondly, it is necessary to touch on the coinage with the legend «PROVIDENTIA», which connects with the providentialist vision of military victories. Because of that, on the head of the mentioned example, Constantine is shown as an authority figure, wearing a crown and in military attire, whereas the reverse displays the cited legend. The idea of *providentia* in the coinage and the public discourse in Rome is neither an original construction elaborated by Constantine since it is relatively common since the times of Caesar (Stevenson et al., p. 659). Generally speaking, the term has an implicit religious sense, which alludes to the direct intervention of divine forces in the human sphere. Nevertheless, *providentia*, as Noreña (2011, p. 95) notes, can also be connected to the imperial will to grant political stability, peace, and prosperity to their subjects. The use of a plural form in these cases («PROVIDENTIAE CAESS», «PROVIDENTIAE AVGG») is meaningful, as perhaps it could again be linked to the dynastic project undertaken by Constantine.

In the particular case of Constantine's coinage, that legend is always paired with reverses where the entrance to a military fortress or barrack is shown, and it is concentrated in from 324 to 328–329. Hence, it has been postulated that the series could aim to praise the reinforcement of the Danubian «limes» undertaken by Constantine during that time lapse (Alföldi 2001, p. 207)¹⁷. Therefore, the associations between imperial providence and the

military are clear in this series. Imperial providence would watch over the security of the borders and the success of the troops led by Constantine. This idea can again be tied to the eloquent acclamation found in *CTh* 7.20.2, where the well-being of the emperor was paired with the wellness of his forces and where the constant worry of the emperor about his troops is lauded («vestra salus nostra salus»).

The third case refers to the series with direct mentions of *Sol Invictus*. This divinity can be found in Constantine's coinage from 310, approximately¹⁸. Even when Constantine included representations of other deities, such as the goddess Victory, popular among Roman troops (De Giovanni 1989, p. 121), *Sol Invictus* prevails and will be the most common divine image in Constantine's numismatics until 324, a date that matches his definitive victory over Licinius.

Most of the time, the legend can be found in series of military themes, and, for this reason, it is necessary to point out that solar cults, even if not alien to different strata of the Late Roman society, had been broadly popular among rank and file (Shean 2010, p. 66). This can be substantiated by the public image of emperors such as Gallienus¹⁹ and, especially, Aurelian, a leader of military background who had favored the official worshipping of Deus Sol (Dmitriev 2004, p. 577). Therefore, it should be highlighted that in the times of Constantine, Mithraism, a solar cult, was still strongly present in military barracks, where Christian faith had a limited extent (Helgeland 1974, p. 163). As a result, the mentioned thesis by Odahl regarding the open expansion of Christianity in military circles during that period is, at least, questionable.

In this respect, solar divinity has a special significance in Constantinian propaganda. In some examples, the emperor is personally linked to the monotheistic solar deity as a trusted adviser («comes») under the legend «SOLI INVICTO COMITI»²⁰, claiming to act under his inspiration and protection, and, as it has been mentioned, it will disappear from the issued coins only after Constantine had consolidated his position as a unique ruler and started identifying as Christian openly.

These examples are just a selection of cases that show how the association between army and divinity can be found in Constantine's ideological discourse. The more obvious pagan symbols and some ambiguous representations from the religious perspective were replaced with distinct Christian imagery at a later stage, but the topic of *providentia* and military success would still be present in Constantine's coinage after that.

4. Conclusions

By studying the sources presented in our paper, it is evident that the social relevance of the army transcends the military context and should be considered from a broader perspective when we approach Constantinian propaganda. The role of the military in Roman society during the Age of Constantine is a logical evolution from the socio-political context preceding it. The proliferation of the so-called Barrack emperors amidst a panorama of convulsions, instability, and protracted civil wars during the third century is just one of the signs of transformation in the understanding of political power during Later Roman empire and illustrates how the military would be an essential support in the seek for legitimacy and consolidation of an absolute hegemony. That is also the reason why legal texts are an oft-neglected historical resource of importance in order to advance in the comprehension of such high-level political mechanisms and the emergence of personal homage for emperors during Late Antiquity, where military triumphalism and the providentialist perspective associated with Constantine are extensively used.

We have formulated that it might be complicated to admit the enactment (or, even so, the actual enforcement) of the alleged anti-pagan legislation by Constantine, at least within the military sphere, in the terms proposed by Eusebius in his *De Vita Constantini*. The legislative initiatives performed by Constantine in the religious field actually seem to be in accordance with a model of restitution and tolerance, as the (wrongly known as) Edict of Milan (313) exemplifies.

Likewise, it seems clear that from an early stage in his public life, Constantine intended to present the special bond with a supreme divinity from a monotheistic conception. In accordance with this, the emperor was not oblivious to the context of major political and religious changes and shaped his public profile in agreement with the events and with his own vital experience. Constantinian public discourse transitioned from direct references to *Sol Invictus* towards the ambiguous “divine Mind” referred in several sources in a context of henotheistic religiosity until reaching the Christian god. This does not necessarily imply an abandonment or a complete turnabout but more of a gradual adaptation and a selective use of the narrative to address different audiences.

Beyond the thesis that limits the conversion of Constantine to Christianity to reasons of strict political convenience, the religious evolution of the emperor is a long process where both personal motivations and cultural-political factors could have been determinant. It is through propaganda (Christian as well as pagan) that the connection between army and religion shows an evolution from the previous ways of understanding imperial power. In contrast with previous rulers, Constantine shows that the mystique of his victories and his political legitimacy were based not so much in his own divine nature but in the fact that he had been designated by a superior deity, which had only revealed itself to him. This point is essential as an intermediate step in the development of the dynamics of power legitimation between politics and religion in the centuries that followed, where the notion of charisma was fully developed and played a fundamental role. However, this way of understanding the roots of power by Constantine does not oppose his strong will to establish a dynastic conception of power so that both religious and dynastic foundations were crucial supports in the legitimation of Constantine’s principate.

Opposing the conclusions of the classical narration of Christian imprint that Constantine himself could have possibly supported, we can observe how, until a relatively late period, *Sol Invictus* had a prominent role in the public projection. Thus, Constantine not only appeals to his personal relation with the Solar god, but in many cases, he identifies himself as a divinity, an element which was later abandoned. It is striking that Constantine maintained the references to military victories in his aggressive propaganda efforts but, at the same time, tried to find a delicate balance between the Christian views and the imperial cult, which was still an efficient resource of social cohesion around the emperor and his dynasty.

As a result, religion is not just a political resort aimed toward most of the society. The particular relevance of religion in the Later Roman army becomes ever more apparent when we confront the relevant sources of the period, and, thus, we can only highlight the need to not bypass the connection between both elements as anchors for the ideological bases of Constantine and the imperial power. The emperor makes use of religion and imperial adoration as devices to unify the support of the army. Constantine’s self-representation as a divinity does not exclude his intention of being perceived, even in legal sources (as *CTh* 7.20.2 has proved), as a dedicated and generous leader with his troops and subjects. The evidence presented could lead us to connect Constantine with the theme of *imitatio Dei*. In Constantinian propaganda, the emperor watches over his subjects, just as God takes care of the universe, an idea that Christian authors such as Eusebius (e.g., *VC* IV, 29, 4) embrace. Nonetheless, his special relationship with a supreme deity would favor Constantine against other rivals who had embraced different beliefs and cults. Behind that discourse lies the connection between only one god and a sole emperor, which was intended to put an end to the troubled phase of the final stages of the tetrarchical regime so as to consolidate a firm autocratic power, which was the core upon which many of the distinctive features of power during Late Antiquity and, ultimately, Middle Ages were built.

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Notes

- ¹ See also (Wallraff 2001, p. 267).
- ² Eusebius, *De Vita Constantini* (=VC), I, 28. Epiphanies had been present in pagan propaganda associated with Constantine before, as *Paneg.* VI (7).21.3–6, dated in 310, shows. On this see (Escribano Paño 2002).
- ³ Eusebius, VC, I, 29–31. Although his description is less detailed, cf., Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, 44, 4–6.
- ⁴ Eusebius, VC, I, 27; I, 58; III, 2; III, 48; III, 54; III, 57.
- ⁵ See, for example, Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, 44, 8, with a reference to the hand of God («manus Dei») in the result of the Battle of Milvian Bridge.
- ⁶ As an example, see Eusebius, VC, I, 28.
- ⁷ Compare to the earlier cult of Roman emperors that had long provoked Christian imaginations, see (Brent 1999; Fishwick 1987–2005).
- ⁸ See (Drijvers 2009).
- ⁹ The reference to Constantine and the connection with the *salus* of his subjects is also expressed in *Paneg.* VI (7).21: «Quod ego nunc demum arbitror contigisse, cum tu sis, ut ille, iuuenis et laetus et salutifer et pulcherrimus, imperator».
- ¹⁰ The same divine acclamation was altered in Justinian's *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (CJ 12.46.1), where «dii te nobis seruent» was altered for «deus te nobis servet». That expression seems to be more appropriate for the Christian orthodoxy of the period. About the “cristianization” of certain legal precepts with pagan reminiscences by Justinian's compilers, see (González Fernández 1997, p. 81).
- ¹¹ On this issue, although particularly related to the theological sphere, see Eusebius, VC, IV, 29, 2–4.
- ¹² Based mainly on two papyri from Egypt, Corcoran (2000, pp. 257–259) argues that the emperor could have prepared an answer to the veterans in advance.
- ¹³ We consider the year 320 AD as a plausible date of enactment. Among others, De Giovanni leans towards 320 AD (see De Giovanni 1989, p. 92). So does Corcoran (2000, p. 259). However, Barnes suggests 307 AD as the moment when the law was passed (Barnes 1982, p. 69) and Connolly supports that possibility (Connolly 2010, pp. 96–98). Additionally, Pharr defends the existence of a textual corruption, but maintains the years 320 and 326 as possible (Pharr 1952, p. 197).
- ¹⁴ See (Claus 2013, pp. 294–96; Lenski 2008, pp. 204–57; Shean 2010, p. 276).
- ¹⁵ The most comprehensive study of the controversial ban of blood sacrifices by Constantine is still (Bradbury 1994). See also (Curran 1996).
- ¹⁶ On Constantine's dynasticism see (Barnes 2011, pp. 144–72; Lenski 2015, esp. pp. 60–65; Usherwood 2022).
- ¹⁷ Ramskold notices the subsequent minting with military themes (in particular, «GLORIA EXERCITUS»; ca. 330) in several mints after the production of the series under the legend «PROVIDENTIAE» had stopped. On this, cf. (Ramskold 2019, p. 207).
- ¹⁸ RIC VI Londinium 101, 102, 113, 114, 115; RIC VI Lugdunum 308–312, among others. More on this in (Chandler 2019, p. 61).
- ¹⁹ About this, see (Serrano Ordozgoiti 2022, pp. 7–24).
- ²⁰ RIC VI Aquileia 142–144; RIC VI Lugdunum 312; RIC VI Treveri 886–895; RIC VII Sirmium 3, 21.

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