

Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*. New York: Routledge 2004. Pp. xvii + 400, incl. endnotes and bibliography. ISBN 0-415-17485-6.

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The figure of Constantine has been variously interpreted in the scholarship of the last two centuries. If for Burckhardt, who wrote his *Die Zeit Constantins des Grossen* (1859) influenced by the scepticism of the Reformation, Constantine was an opportunist who used the “vision” to fulfil his secular goals, Baynes (*Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*, 1930), on the contrary, believed that Constantine was a genuine Christian convert and asserted that “the true starting-point for any comprehension of the reign must be Constantine’s own letters and edicts”.

Odahl’s book is a painstakingly documented biography of the emperor Constantine, which attempts to combine the gravitas of a historical biography with the zest of a travel book. This study, according to the publisher’s blurb, is designed for “scholars, students, and all those interested in Roman imperial, early Christian, and Byzantine imperial history”. This aim is reasserted by the author himself who writes: “I have attempted to make the book as ‘reader friendly’ as possible (...) written in a lucid and understandable style, and not littered with the arcane debates of scholars” (p. ix). However, the author does not consistently achieve this goal throughout the book as he at times gets entangled with long and overly detailed descriptions of events. Nevertheless, readers should note that although on one hand Odahl does not adduce to the subject new inspiring insights, on the other hand, he undoubtedly demonstrates a secure approach which blends information contained in texts with the material sources of the Constantinian era. “I came to the conclusion that the only authentic way to truly understand Constantine and his times was to travel with him. (...) [Important tools for a new biographical study on Constantine are] the use of Christian symbols on imperial coinage, detailed accounts of Constantinian church-building programs, the appearance of apocalyptic imagery in imperial letters and art” (pp. viii and 283).

The book, after the preface, a list of illustrations and a brief chronological table of the life of Constantine, begins with a first introductory chapter (“The Subject and the Ancient Sources”, pp. 1-14) on ancient literary sources and material remains useful for reconstructing the biography of Constantine. This chapter is designed for the general reader who is unfamiliar with the subject. Here the author illustrates the main ancient texts on which his study is based by adding a brief description of their content: these texts include the ‘*Vita Constantini*’, written by the emperor’s biographer, Eusebius of Caesarea; the ‘*Origo Constantini Imperatoris*’ of unknown authorship; ecclesiastical chronicles and imperial panegyrics, and not least texts written by Constantine himself such as letters on Christian councils and sermons.

The second chapter (“The Imperial Crisis and the Illyrian Emperors”, pp. 15-41) is a narration of political, economical, religious and military events that took place in the Roman Empire from the Julio-Claudian successors of Augustus up to the elevation of Diocletian to the imperial throne. This wide-ranging chapter (although, in its central section, rather prolix) reveals the firm knowledge of the author on various aspects of the ancient world; however, the assimilation of its rich content may present a challenge to readers equipped with only a smattering of Roman history.

The third chapter (“The First Tetrarchy and the Caesar’s Son”, pp. 42-74) deals with the tetrarchic system designed by Diocletian whose division of the Empire into four administrative and military parts ensured a more efficient control over the barbarian invasions although it inevitably increased the costs of bureaucracy. The economic reform of Diocletian successfully augmented the agrarian production and laid the foundation for a ‘fortress empire’ the “regimented ‘command economy’” of which was based on “state-run arms factories, fortified granaries, imperial transport systems and hereditary service for essential professions” (p. 54). A lasting stain on Diocletian and his co-emperors was, however, the bloody persecution that they carried out against Christians.

Chapter four (“The Gallic Emperor and the Dying Persecutors”, pp. 75-97) is a detailed account of the accession to power of Constantine and his confrontations with the emperor Galerius caused, above all, by the policy of religious toleration adopted by Constantine in favour of Christians. As Odahl rightly points out “[i]t is doubtful whether Constantine knew or cared much about Christianity at this point in his life and career. He simply wished to distinguish himself from Galerius” (p. 86).

Chapter five (“The Italian Campaign and Constantine’s Conversion”, pp. 98-120) centres on the conflict between Constantine and Maxentius and the victory of the former at the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 AD. After the miraculous event of the vision of the Cross and the belief that the defeat of Maxentius had been brought about by the intervention of the Christian God, Constantine “raised Christianity to a status of legal equality with paganism, and began to establish it as a favoured religion in the western regions of the empire” (p. 116). These favourable predispositions towards Christians lead Constantine and Licinius, his colleague and emperor of the eastern part of the empire, to draw up an accord, known as the ‘Edict of Milan’. The edict recognized Christianity as a legal religion, exempted the Christian clergy from the *munera civilia* imposed by Diocletian and put an end to the Great Persecution of Christians.

Chapters six and seven, the longest ones of the book (“Religious Concerns and Apostolic Rome”, 121-61, and “The Eastern Crusade and the Nicene Council”, 162-201) are concerned with Constantine’s church-building program in Rome and his rivalry with Licinius, which escalated into a political and religious war over supremacy in the Roman empire (Odahl defines the two faces of this conflict in terms of “cold war” for the years 316-17 and “holy war” for the years 323-24). After the defeat of his enemies “the growing sense of missionary zeal” (p. 141) of Constantine for the Christian faith was displayed in his arch of Triumph and on his coins where the monogram and the globular cross of Christ indicated that Constantine

“served as the divinely sanctioned imperial agent of the Almighty God on earth” (p. 146). Those years were not only characterised by the expectation of civil wars but also by Constantine’s attempt to neutralise the religious schism threatened by dissident Christians in North Africa (the Donatists, a rigorist sect that opposed reconciliation with Christians who handed over the Scriptures during the Great Persecution) and in the East (the Arians who preached that Jesus, the Son, was different in essence from God, the Father). Finally, in terms of urban planning, Constantine endowed Rome with the spectacular construction of Christian basilicas while his imperial architects set a new architectural norm for the construction of Christian edifices for the centuries to come.

Chapter eight (“The Dynastic Tragedy and Helena’s Pilgrimage”, 202-20) deals with the “enigmatic deaths” (p. 202) of Fausta, Constantine’s second wife, and Crispus (the son he had from his first wedding) who were both sentenced to death by Constantine in 326 AD. That year was also tarnished by the enactment of several new laws on sex, marriage and adultery (e.g. men who raped girls had to be burnt alive and nurses who aided them in their violent plans had to swallow molten lead) which Odahl posits as a way “to discourage sexual impropriety and to upgrade marital sanctity in accord with Christian teachings” (p. 204), whereas they were in fact an anachronistic exercise of brutal order. The second part of the chapter tells of the church-building program of Helena, Constantine’s mother, in Palestine such as, for instance, the construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Chapter nine (“Imperial Concerns and Christian Constantinople”, 221-44) is a detailed account of Constantinian imperial bureaucracy, which retained and expanded many of the administrative reforms issued during the tetrarchic period, and the transformation of pagan Byzantium into the Christian Constantinople. Odahl’s reconstruction of historical events is meticulous and knowledgeable although at times he indulges in very detailed and ‘centrifugal’ discussions that may lead the reader astray.

In chapters ten (“The Final Campaigns and the Emperor’s Heirs”, 245-67) and eleven (“The Thirteenth Apostle and the Christian Empire”, 268-79) Odahl examines the last years of Constantine’s life during which he continued in his church-building program (notably with the completion of a church in honour of the Holy Apostles, the Hagioi Apostoloi) and re-conquered the territories of Dacia above the lower Danube river thereby restoring the boundaries of the Roman Empire back to those of the time of Trajan. He also laid for his successors the foundation of a new tetrarchic system based on a dynastic arrangement. Christians began to see him differently and Eusebius, historian and biographer of Constantine, fostered the belief that the Christian emperor was the “interpreter of the Almighty God” and that the Christianised Empire was the “terrestrial mimema of the celestial common wealth” (p. 267). Constantine died on 22 May 337 and his mortal remains were buried in the church of the Hagioi Apostoloi, he having been honoured as isapostolos, “equal to the Apostles”.

In a brief final chapter (“The Legacy and Modern Interpretations”, 280-84) Odahl highlights the legacy of Constantine that has influenced the theories of imperial theocracy in the Byzantine Empire and in Europe



during the Middle Ages. This chapter could usefully be read first as it explains the methodological approach of the author.

This book has been carefully edited and contains 92 beautiful photographs and 8 maps. Very few typographical errors have been found (e.g. read “the” and “and” instead of “the the” and “and and” at pp. 220 and 284; read “dissatisfaction” instead of “dissatification” at p. 86); more serious is the confusion between accents and breathings in Greek quotations throughout the book. Although this work presents little new material, the author does offer a number of interesting parallels between material and literary sources.