

**Raymond Van Dam.** *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv + 296. ISBN 978-1-107-09643-1. Hardback \$90.00.

Raymond Van Dam, Professor of Roman Imperial, Early Christian, and Early Medieval History at the University of Michigan, has offered a strange and challenging, interesting but frustrating, and backward looking and anti-narrative approach to the climactic battle between Constantine and Maxentius north of Rome seventeen hundred years ago in his latest work on *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge*. Unfortunately, his methodology and organization reveal more about his personal attitudes to the ancient sources of Late Antiquity than to the real history of that important era. He clearly indicates his dislike of the emphasis modern historians have placed upon the role of Christianity in the late Roman Empire, his distrust of Eusebius of Caesarea as a reliable historian of that time, and his disbelief in the ability of historians to reconstruct and write an accurate narrative of ancient events.

In the first chapter on “Visions of Constantine” (1–18), Professor Van Dam begins with a brief outline of Constantine’s Italian campaign to conquer Italy from his imperial rival Maxentius, and the supposed celestial vision and dream which the emperor experienced on the road to Rome and later told his biographer Eusebius had inspired him to create a Christian war standard (in the shape of a cross and topped with a Christogram) to tap into the power of Christ and lead his forces to victory at the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge (correct ancient spelling) on 28 October 312. The author then posits that modern scholars have been wrong to interpret these events as a moment of conversion for the emperor and a “momentous change in religion, society, and politics” for the empire (4). He then briefly mentions some of the other sources relevant to the military campaign and Constantine’s career, and lays out his agenda in this book: to demonstrate that studies in memory theory, oral transmission, and narratology should warn modern historians not to try to “conflate the ancient accounts into a single master narrative,” that they should try to understand “the ancient authors’ differing agendas,” that Constantine himself “shaped his memories of the vision of the cross and the dream to correspond to his later circumstances,” that Eusebius “subsequently reinterpreted them” to fit his own personal theological needs, and that the best way to reinterpret the events of 312 is to work backward from modern times to the ancient period.

In the next seven chapters, Dr. Van Dam employs his new approach to work his way back from the Middle Ages to Late Antiquity deconstructing and reinterpreting the memories of Constantine at the Milvian Bridge and as a Christian emperor along the way. Chapter Two (19–32) surveys the papal construction in the medieval west of a legendary Constantine who was cured of leprosy by Pope Sylvester and handed over control of Rome and the western provinces to the papacy in return through the bogus *Constitutum Constantini*, and the Byzantine construction in the medieval east of new visions for the emperor relevant to Constantinople. So far, so good. Yet, he fails to point out that the false *Constitution of Constantine* was based in part on the real donation of eight

churches and empire-wide estates to support them which the emperor built around Rome, and that the best visual representation of the Sylvester-Constantine legend is found in the beautiful series of frescoes in the 13th c. Chapel of St. Sylvester north of San Clemente in Rome—painted at the height of the Papal Monarchy in the High Middle Ages. Chapter Three (33–55) first surveys the pagan and ecclesiastical historians of the 6th and 5th centuries (Zosimus, Eunapius and Julian vs. Evagrius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret and Rufinus), and reveals their elaborations (and falsehoods) on the earlier accounts of the conversion and victory of Constantine. He finishes it by looking at late 4th c. imperial events recalling Constantine—the appeal to their father’s vision by Constantius II and Constantina against the usurper Magnentius, and the claim of a Constantinian dynastic connection by the Valentinian and Theodosian Dynasties. Unfortunately, he misinterprets the famous “vision coin” motif of 351 which portrayed Constantine being crowned by an angel, holding a *vexillum* with the Christogram, and encircled by the inscription of the words he had told his children that he had heard from heaven during his revelatory experiences (*HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS*)—Van Dam makes it Constantius and relates it to a vision seen by Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem; and even gets the mints wrong (Sirmium and Thessalonica instead of Siscia and Sirmium for distribution to the eastern European troops to keep them loyal to the divinely instituted Constantinian Dynasty). The author’s errors in the numismatic and architectural sources here and elsewhere are serious weaknesses in this work.

Chapters Four and Five (56–100) are the heart of the book and deal in depth with “Constantine’s Memories” and “Eusebius’ Commentary.” Professor Van Dam correctly starts with an overview of the relationship of Constantine and Eusebius and the times and occasions they met and corresponded late in his reign (*ca.* 325–37). He then goes wildly astray in interpreting Constantine’s memories of his conversion event, and Eusebius’ reinterpretations of it. He has a fundamental misunderstanding of memory theory—used so brilliantly and effectively by Richard Bauckham in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2006) to reveal how dramatic events and charismatic people can imprint accurate memories on eyewitnesses for decades. Van Dam correctly points out that Constantine did not personally recount the events of 312 to Eusebius and other eastern bishops until at least 325 when conversing with them after the Council of Nicaea; but he then mistakenly asserts that “the catalyst for the emperor’s stories [was] an opportunity to explain the circumstances behind the construction of his famous military standard and its effectiveness in battles,” and, in a breathtakingly wrong footnote, states that “the *labarum*, a *vexillum* with Christian symbols, apparently did not appear on coins until after Constantine’s reign” (62–63). The construction of the original Christian war standard in the campaign of 312 was an important part of the story of Constantine’s victory, but the personal revelations he believed he had received from Christ were even more important in defining his role as a “servant of God” (*famulus Dei* in Constantine’s own words) on earth and in giving him episcopal authority (*episkopos ton ektos* in his own words) with the bishops above the Church. Suggesting that the emperor’s memories about the battle for Rome were just a

series of anecdotes about the use of a talismanic standard while he was convening and conversing with bishops about the highest matters of theology and hierarchy is much too minimalist. And the *labarum* which Eusebius saw and described in the *Vita Constantini* appeared on one of the first coin types Constantine ordered to be minted from Constantinople in 327–28 to celebrate his victories over the devil in the world (Licinius the pagan emperor in the “Holy War” of 324) and over the devil in the Church (Arius the heretic in the theological conflict leading up to the Nicene councils of 325 and 327) as reported by the emperor in a contemporary letter of the time. In an apocalyptic motif drawn from the Book of Revelation, Constantine had the *labarum* with its Christogram atop a crossbar portrayed piercing the “great dragon and wriggling serpent” whose head plunges to the abyss below. This coin motif reflected a much larger tableau of this imagery placed above the entry portico at the palace in Constantinople which Eusebius described in full. The use of crosses, Christograms, and *vexilla* carrying Christograms appeared on many Constantinian coin types reflecting his conversion event, and more careful research by the author could have prevented this and other factual errors. Besides undermining the reliability of the emperor’s memories, the most troubling part of these chapters is the revival of the Burckhardtian-Grégoireian attack on the honesty of Eusebius and the manner in which he presented Constantine in his works. Van Dam is correct in showing that Eusebius modified the story of the events of 312 in the three editions of his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (313, 315, and 324) and in his *Vita Constantini* (339) as he learned more details of those events, but he goes too far in portraying Eusebius as an unreliable and dishonest historian who shaped his final narrative to fit the needs of his theological agenda—changing Constantine from the “New Moses” of his early writings to the “exemplar of Jesus Christ” in his final presentation so that “the emperor would become the embodiment of Eusebius’ distinctive theology” of Christ the Son being subordinate to God the Father (74–81). This was a theory pioneered by Rudolf Leeb in *Konstantin und Christus* (Berlin, 1992), but Van Dam does not cite him, or other authors whose works and words he often uses. In reality, Eusebius employed many biblical types to describe and interpret the first Christian emperor—Moses leading the chosen people out of bondage as Constantine led the Christian people out of persecution, the prophet of a new era in which the Saints reign upon the earth, and the equal of the Apostles who completed the work they had begun in converting the Roman world to the true faith. The latter was probably Constantine’s favorite as he called the Apostles “the best men of their age” in sermons, built shrines over their tombs, and planned to have himself placed in a sarcophagus surrounded by twelve cenotaphs representing the twelve Apostles in the largest church he built on the highest hill in his new Christian capital of Constantinople—see H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore, MD, 2000) and Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (London, 2004, 1st ed. & 2010, 2nd ed.) for this more likely interpretation.

Chapters Six and Seven (101–218) go back to the earliest Latin sources and monuments in the west shortly after the events of 312, and offer detailed accounts of their contents and some reasonable and some far-fetched interpretations thereupon. In

dealing with *Panegyricus IX (XII)* delivered before the emperor and a mixed audience of pagans and Christians upon Constantine's return to Trier in late 313, Professor Van Dam admits that this was the earliest extant written source for the previous year's campaign into Italy, but seems confused from whom the orator might have gotten his information, and thinks that he was highlighting his own Gallic retrospective. After a century of detailed studies and analyses of imperial panegyrics—from René Pichon's *Les derniers écrivains profanes* (Paris, 1906) to C.E.V. Nixon's and B.S. Rodgers' *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: the Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley, 1994), and this reviewer's article "A Pagan's Reaction to Constantine's Conversion – Religious References in the Trier Panegyric of A.D. 313," *AncW*, vol. 21 (1990)—it is clear that panegyrists got their information from the imperial court on which deeds of the emperor they were to praise and which subjects they might emphasize. This orator did a wonderful job of reviewing Constantine's Italian campaign, the *providentia* and *virtutes* he exhibited in battles, and very carefully employed neutral religious language (*mens divina*, *divinum numen*, etc.) to express the source of divine inspiration behind the emperor's success in acknowledging his new religious orientation without antagonizing either the pagans or Christians in the audience. The specific phrase that Constantine "had been admonished by divine inspiration" (*divino monitus instinctu*) seems to hint at his revelation and guidance from the Christian Deity. Van Dam does not get this, but then it does not fit his agenda (103–06). In treating the Christian rhetorician Lactantius, the author follows this reviewer in placing him at Constantine's court in Trier in the years after 313, and teaching the emperor's son Crispus and probably the emperor as well in the tenets of Christianity through lectures and readings in his massive *Divinae Institutiones*. He also has Lactantius writing the first Christian account of the emperor's conversion here in the *Liber de Mortibus Persecutorum* (314–15), but has vague "informants at the court" telling him about the dream before the battle and the use of the Christogram on the shields of the soldiers. Rather, the Christian teacher and his convert emperor were so close that Constantine probably supplied information himself to Lactantius, and he started using Lactantian ideas and phrasing in letters to bishops and his subjects as early as 314. Van Dam admits that "a monogram resembling a christogram" appeared on special silver medallions at this time at the top of the emperor's helmet, but tries to obfuscate its form and significance as if Constantine did not know the symbols he was ordering to be used on his official portrait on the coinage of the realm. And as usual, the author gets things backwards—having Lactantius teach Constantine about what happened at the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge! (106–124). Dr. Van Dam effectively describes the decorations on the Arch of Constantine dedicated in Rome during the emperor's *Decennalia* celebrations in 315 and demonstrates that it reflects the wishes of the largely pagan Senate that Constantine model himself after good republican style emperors of the second century; but he misses the earlier coin motif of 312–13 whereupon the Senate gave him the title of Trajan as "the best Princeps" (*OPTIMUS PRINCEPS*). Throughout these chapters the author downplays any elements or evidences of the emperor's propagation of Christianity in the years immediately after his conversion experience—neutralizing the *INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS* phrase on the arch inscription, preferring Rufinus' more

vague, albeit much later, rendering of the inscription giving credit for his victory to the Christian symbol on his *labarum* beneath his colossal statue in the Basilica Nova of 312–13 to the earlier ones from Eusebius in his *Historia* and *Vita*, and downplaying his explicit Christian terminology in his correspondence during the Donatist Dispute of 313–16 (wherein he writes of the Christian Deity as the *Deus Omnipotens*, of Christ as his *Dominus* and *Salvator*, and addresses the Christian bishops as his *fratres carissimi*)—and posits that his involvement in the dispute was largely to keep the grain flowing from Africa to Rome. Thus, in these seven chapters, Van Dam has set the stage for his conclusions in the final three chapters of the book.

In the short Chapter Eight (219–23) entitled “Backward and Forward,” he indicates that “after analysis and interpretation [it is time] for a New Narrative.” Herein, he warns his readers (scholars) that all of the ancient accounts “had their own agendas,” and that “our modern narratives are likewise constructed.” He congratulates himself on avoiding “a narrative that moves forward chronologically” and instead using a “reverse narrative” that has “no teleology.” He invokes “pop culture [which] offers movies whose stories begin at the end, go backward, and end at the beginning” apparently to buttress the methodology and organization he has employed in this book. And, finally, he indicates that “a backward narrative can now segue into a forward narrative, . . . and tell the story of the battle of the Milvian Bridge in a different way [by extracting] the religious context that tends to dominate modern scholarship about the age of Constantine”.

After doubting Constantine’s memories of his revelatory experiences before the battle, undermining the credibility of Eusebius in reporting the emperor’s memories of his vision and dream from Christ, and attempting to downplay or discount the massive evidence of imperial patronage for the Christian faith and involvement in Church affairs from 312 forward, Professor Van Dam at last offers his new secular narrative for the struggle between Constantine and Maxentius in AD 312. In Chapters Nine on “Remembering Maxentius” and Ten on “Back Word: The Bridge” (224–58), the author constructs his own non-religious account which makes Maxentius the hero—a republican style civilian emperor at Rome upholding the central place of the old capital in the Roman Empire, and Constantine the villain—the tetrarchic military adventurer from the frontier attacking Rome and making it a backwash to the new regional capitals of the Roman world. He portrays Maxentius as a new Horatius Cocles at the bridge defending republican Rome against Constantine as the new tetrarch conquering the center from the periphery. An astonishing reinterpretation! In reality, Maxentius was as much an admirer of the tetrarchic system of collegial emperorship as Constantine; claiming a right to be a legitimate emperor in the Second Tetrarchy because his father Maximian had served as an Augustus while Constantine’s father Constantius had only been a Caesar in the First Tetrarchy. Yes, he did appeal to the pride of Romans in their former position as dwellers of the old capital of the empire in his revolt against the emperors who had left him out of the Second Tetrarchy, but he also sought and eventually got some recognition therein (for a short time from his brother-in-law Constantine, and later from the eastern tetrarch Maximin Daia). And no, he was hardly

ever seen as a “good emperor” by his subjects and the ancient historians (pagan as well as Christian) who largely regarded him as a “tyrant” or “usurper” who had upset the new balance and stability of a college of two western and two eastern emperors who beat back the barbarians on the frontiers and had restored peace and prosperity within the Roman world. It was, in fact, Constantine who acted like a republican style emperor after his victory, restoring the senators to key government positions and endowing Rome with new structures (a *thermae* bathing complex and a *basilica* court house). Yet, the needs of the empire, a dynastic tragedy in Rome, and the opportunity to begin again in a more Christianized area ultimately persuaded Constantine to move eastward and found a rival capital which would survive the “fall of Rome” by a millennium as the center of the Byzantine Empire.

This book includes a backward chronology at its front end, and an adequate bibliography of ancient sources and modern scholarship with an index at the rear end. The author, however, leaves out many useful works in the bibliography, and does not always cite the scholarship he is using in his analyses. Although he gives descriptions of some of the coins and monuments of the era, the book lacks any illustrations of these. Van Dam demonstrates familiarity with the literary sources of the time, but has not fully mastered the numismatic and architectural evidence as well as he should have. He has completed part of the duty of a historian—analyzing and interpreting the relevant sources (the social science part). Yet, he has not completed the ultimate duty of a historian—providing a full and integrated narrative of his subject (the humanistic part). He has, in essence, given us his research notes and comments thereupon, and only provided a faulty and incomplete narrative. Overall, it is an interesting attempt to look at the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge from a new perspective, but the attempt to minimize the religious aspects of it and the consequences from it are not successful. I can only recommend it to fellow Constantinian scholars who might enjoy rumbling through Dr. Van Dam’s notes, and examining where he got his facts right and wrong (many I did not mention), and how he arrived at his novel interpretations. For those who like to appear avant-garde, and appreciate postmodern approaches, literary deconstruction, personal perspectives, and Oliver Stone flash-back and anti-chronological stories, this book will be enjoyable. But for those who want a thoroughly researched, eloquently written, fully illustrated and completely annotated chronological narrative of Constantine and his reign with all of the pieces of the mosaic of the story in their proper places, they will have to look elsewhere.

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