

BOOK REVIEW

Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics. By NOEL LENSKI. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, pp. 404. Hardcover, \$ 79.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4777-0.

The introduction of Noel Lenski's fine new book, *Constantine and the Cities. Imperial Authority and Civic Politics*, should be required reading for any course on the later Roman Empire. Lenski lays out the many faces of Constantine; here is Constantine the wily politician (à la J. Burckhardt); the compromiser (à la H. Drake); the fiercely Christianizing champion of the bishops (à la T.D. Barnes); the revolutionary (à la R. Van Dam); the consummate administrator (à la D. Potter); and so, the list goes on. Lenski's book shows how these various Constantines lived together under one imperial image, a "composite Constantine" (6). Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, who adapted reception theory to explain the dynamics of mass communication, Lenski argues that Constantine and "his message makers" (281) were adept at displaying multiform and complex images of the ruler to govern, using words, and symbols to communicate to a mass audience. But "no emperor was ever a static and essential agent"; Constantine, like all emperors, required the "counter-input from his many relatives, administrators, soldiers, subjects, opponents and enemies." (12). Seeing the emperor and his audience in a constant but purposive dialogue, Lenski defends Constantine from charges of schizophrenia or hypocrisy, and explains why there was so much diverging images of this ruler.

Most importantly, Lenski explains why Constantine was so successful in advancing Christianity. Indeed, there is no doubt, according to Lenski, that Constantine was a committed Christian post 312 CE who utilized the traditional weapons of government to advance his religion. But because imperial power was not absolute but rather, dependent on the process of give- and take between emperor and subject, both sides had to accept certain limitations in order to maintain the relationship. Lenski's approach thus represents a major advance in Constantinian studies, for it allows us to see this emperor in his own time and place, responding directly to citizens and cities on a range of local matters and at the same time, working to in spread Christianity across the empire. This approach also explains why resistance to his religious agenda was so relatively tempered. Both sides benefitted

from respecting limits. Hence the emperor did not coerce religious belief through violence, or rather only sparingly used armed force.

The book falls into four parts. Part I, "Constantine's Self-Presentation," sets out the parameters of the imperial image. Lenski draws out four themes that were constant through Constantine's political life: the power of light; triumphalism and victory; divine favor; and dynasticism (chapter 2). He follows Peter Weiss in thinking that Constantine saw a cross-shaped solar halo in southern Gaul in 310, which was the basis for his later vision, in the battle of the Milvian bridge; success in that battle confirmed his conversion and by 313, his open support for Christianity can be demonstrated by his words and actions.

Part II, "The Power of Petitions," begins with a detailed analysis of the petitions of certain cities. There is also a surprising amount of untapped epigraphic and numismatic evidence to discern the strategies that cities adopted in negotiating with the emperor who, through his responses, found the means to support Christianity. One primary example is the case of the Orcistans in Asia Minor who, claiming to be followers of the "*sanctissima religio*," requested the rights of civic status. By drawing attention to the specifically Christian connotations of this phrase (100), Lenski demonstrates that religion was a key factor in their success. Moreover, Constantine's detailed response to the Orcistans adopts a new legal form, the *adnotatio*, (101), which evidences his personal involvement. One could argue that there were perhaps other motivations in Constantine's granting this request, but the pattern is repeated, and the fact that religion was one basis in a request that was advertised to other cities is important.

One can only admire Constantine's political acuteness in recognizing the limits of his authority. Embassies of pagan cities could also successfully advance their petitions by basing their appeals on other of the traditional virtues embraced by Constantine. Lenski thus explains Constantine's willingness, even late in his reign (333–335 CE), to grant Hispellum's request to hold its own imperial cult rites. Constantine's affirmative response stipulates that these rites not contain "*contagiosa superstitio*." This restriction could be read as a restriction on animal sacrifice, but given the wide range of interpretations of *superstitio* still in use in the first half of the fourth century, here too, the wily emperor has used language that a pagan audience could interpret to fit local viewpoints.¹ The issue here, as in so many places, was the implementation of the law and the willingness of imperial administrators to enforce it, factors that Lenski could stress more.

In part III, Lenski takes a more systematic look at the financial and administrative changes wrought by Constantine for "Reconstructing the Ancient City."

Constantine seized wealth, revenues and estates from temples and even some public lands, and made them available to bishops. New churches sprung up across the empire. The speed of these changes is still striking. Now bishops judged the complaints of Christians in civil cases, and handed down decisions. In the cities, bishops were the new elites, traveling on the government post on official business, a very public statement of their new status which would take a century to fully realize.

Resistance to the emperor is the subject of Part IV, "Alternative Responses to Constantine." Lenski addresses the groups in the empire who stood against imperial Christianizing efforts. "Resisting cities," chapter 12, gives pagans their momentary due, and chapter 13, Donatists and Caecilianists, looks at resisting Christians. These chapters are brief explorations of these topics. Nor does Lenski take into account more subtle forms of resistance on the part of communities or individuals. So, for example, Kevin Wilkinson's analysis of the newly re-dated poems of Palladas (169) articulates the resistance to Constantine's seizure of temple property among urban elites. Rather, these chapters and that on Antioch and Alexandria (chapter 14) serve to demonstrate the main argument of the book; the power of the emperor to advance religious change had its limits, though force could be necessary at times.

The conclusion, inescapable from Lenski's book, is that this openly Christianizing emperor and his "message makers" were wildly successful in using the administrative and legal tools at his disposal to advance Christianity. Resistance, as far as it existed, would take time to activate. One could argue against Lenski's approach, that not enough weight has been given to the military force that the emperor wielded. And this study has made me wonder more about the ways in which Constantine controlled the military. So, too, I would like to know more about other changes wrought by Constantine on the administration of cities. But those are topics for other books. Moreover, I agree with Lenski's theoretical premise that words shaped Roman authority. From that basis, Lenski's subtle and acute book offers a compelling argument for the sincerity and simultaneously political astuteness of this first Christian emperor who, though not acting alone, was a principal actor in bringing about the religious transformation of the Roman Empire.

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ⁱ M. R. Salzman, "'*Superstitio*' in the Codex Theodosianus and the Persecution of Pagans," *VC* 41 (1987), pp. 172-188.