

## BOOK REVIEW

*Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge.* By Raymond VAN DAM. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xiii + 296. \$90.00 / £55.00. ISBN 978-1-107-09643-1.

At the Milvian bridge outside the walls of Rome on 28 October 312 Constantine and Maxentius, brothers-in-law and both sons of former emperors, fought to the death with the victorious Constantine becoming master of Rome and sole emperor in the west. Few battles have been so profound in their impact. Few battles have also been so contested in their interpretation. Controversy has always turned on Constantine's claim, recorded by bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Life of Constantine* (dated to 337), to have been inspired by the vision of a cross in the sunny sky before the battle and a dream in which he was instructed to place a Christian emblem on his military standards. What might he have seen and dreamed in October 312, if anything? How did it come to be so charged with exclusively Christian meaning? How do we know? Varying answers to these simple questions remain at the heart of most modern understandings of Constantine's purpose as well as the character of the man and his reign, epitomized in the battle's association with the "conversion of Constantine." Van Dam was obliged to confront all this in a previous study of Constantine (*The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, 2007) but now he has produced a concentrated treatment of the potential meaning of that single decisive battle. What he provides is a systematic historiographical critique of one particular episode recounted both by and for Constantine at different points over his lifetime (at least from 313 to 336) and occasionally memorialized in stone and marble. The author's technique necessarily requires philological and iconographical analysis to which he self-consciously adds more modern interpretative approaches involving "community memories," oral traditions and narratology (11). What results is a complex and subtle argument which at different points is both modern and postmodern, disciplined and undisciplined, decisive and speculative, compelling and tenuous. This is no book for Constantinian tyros.

The first three chapters introduce the story and its methodology (Chapter 1), trace the portrayal of the battle in medieval and Byzantine texts and visual arts

(Chapter 2) and show how the fifth and sixth century church historians and their counterpoints, Eunapius and Zosimus, evaluated Constantine and the battle (Chapter 3). Chapter 7, the longest, highlights Constantine's preoccupations in the years after the battle (not religious affairs and inclinations but classical culture, the traditions of Rome and the role of his army), followed by chapters on how to retell the story of the battle detached from its later religious significance (Chapter 8), especially by focusing on the contrasting imperial approach of Maxentius (Chapter 9) and concluding with the significance of bridges in Roman tradition (Chapter 10). The core of this book, however, is Chapters 4 to 6 (56–154) in which Van Dam outlines what Constantine says he saw and dreamed, how the battle subsequently impacted on him, then how it has been misrepresented ever since. Van Dam's conclusion is that what Eusebius wrote in his "late, faraway, sectarian [and] partisan" (56) *Life* was what he heard from Constantine in 325 when they first met at Nicaea and again at Constantinople in 336. By 325 the "raconteur" (62) Constantine had slowly shaped his memory of events before and after the battle but was more influenced by the derivative accounts of others such as Lactantius than his own first-hand recollections. While Eusebius had noted the battle in his *Church History* well before meeting Constantine, he too kept refashioning it to suit his own theological purposes so that the version in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* is merely a theological confection of both participant and author. According to Van Dam, Constantine's "conversion" needs to be divorced completely from his victory at the Milvian bridge.

Van Dam's thesis is a novel approach to an old question and deserves serious consideration, but too many doubts remain to proclaim it convincing, especially his quest to defer and downplay the Christianity of Constantine immediately after 312. The extant records are far more ambiguous and open to interpretation than Van Dam allows: within weeks of the battle (313) Constantine was having the church of St John Lateran built at Rome on imperial real estate; within a year or so (313/4) at the imperial court at Trier, where so many of the battle's participants and observers resided, Constantine's success was being attributed explicitly to the Christian deity by Lactantius (an intimate of the emperor's household) and at Caesarea by Eusebius (*Church History* 9.9, probably relying on the circulation of an official victory bulletin from Rome); at Arles shortly after, and for the first time ever, an emperor convoked a council of bishops (August 314) to resolve a theological dispute which had been referred to him from Africa, not merely to secure Rome's African food supply as Van Dam asserts

(180–1); while at Rome around the same time a colossal statue relocated to the apse of the newly completed Basilica of Maxentius was modified to represent Constantine holding a long shafted object with its “saving sign.”

Van Dam has produced an interesting and provocative book but it is not helped by its cluttered and confusing timeline (xii–xiii), by its total lack of illustrations and by the fact that the quality of the maps does not match the quality of the text. For Constantine the battle of the Milvian bridge clearly provoked a sense of divinely sanctioned destiny which eventually resolved itself in a self-conscious commitment to the Christian deity. More attention should be paid to this transitional conversion process which is now so well argued and illustrated, especially through the numismatic record, in Jonathan Bardill, *Constantine: Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2011).

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