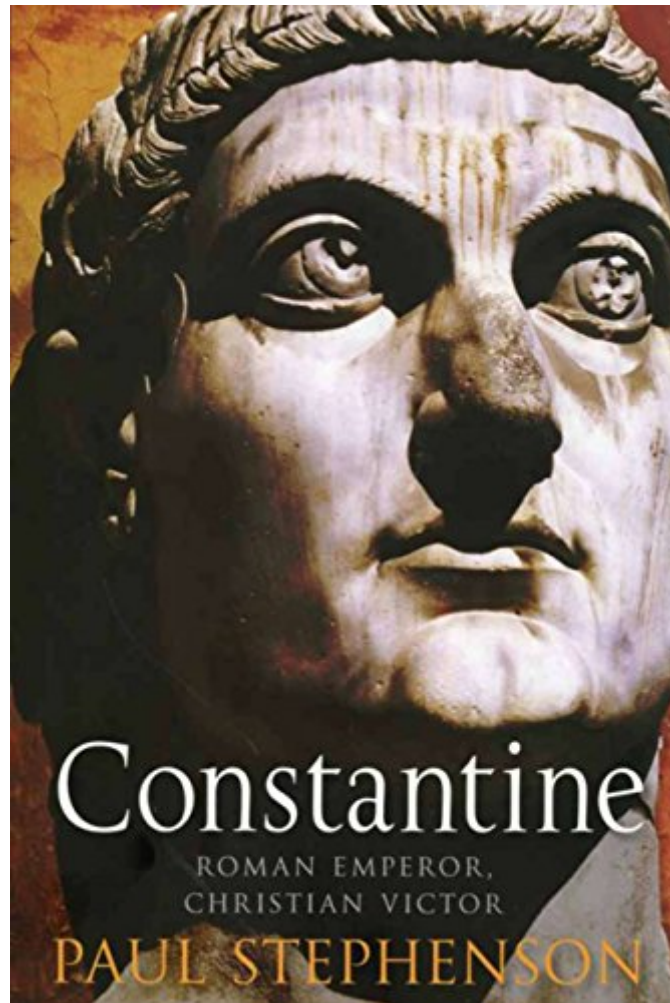


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Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor



Synopsis

A fascinating survey of the life and enduring legacy of perhaps the greatest and most unjustly ignored of the Roman emperors-written by a richly gifted historian. In 312 A.D., Constantine-one of four Roman emperors ruling a divided empire-marched on Rome to establish his control. On the eve of the battle, a cross appeared to him in the sky with an exhortation, "By this sign conquer." Inscribing the cross on the shields of his soldiers, Constantine drove his rivals into the Tiber and claimed the imperial capital for himself. Under Constantine, Christianity emerged from the shadows, its adherents no longer persecuted. Constantine united the western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire. He founded a new capital city, Constantinople. Thereafter the Christian Roman Empire endured in the East, while Rome itself fell to the barbarian hordes. Paul Stephenson offers a nuanced and deeply satisfying account of a man whose cultural and spiritual renewal of the Roman Empire gave birth to the idea of a unified Christian Europe underpinned by a commitment to religious tolerance.

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Customer Reviews

The Roman Emperor Constantine I, or Constantine the Great, is one of the most significant figures in history. Among the reasons for his historical stature are (a) after two generations of divided rule of

the Roman Empire by as many as four emperors ("the Tetrarchy"), Constantine reunited the Empire under one ruler; (b) he established Constantinople as a second Rome, or new Rome, transforming it into one of the most important cities in the world, at times "the" most important city; and, most significantly, (c) he converted to Christianity, becoming the first Christian Roman emperor.

CONSTANTINE: ROMAN EMPEROR, CHRISTIAN VICTOR is a blend of biography and history. It covers the life of Constantine, though not in minute detail (which, for all I know, might not be possible). In general, it employs a broader historical perspective than the more typical biography, which, I think, is a plus in this instance. In his Preface, author Stephenson writes that his book is a "narrative" of Constantine's life, and as such is "as much story as history." This suggests that he is aiming more for a popular lay audience than denizens of academia. If so, he is only partly successful. The text is not punctuated by footnotes (although at the end of the book there are 35 pages of rather detailed "bibliographical essays", corresponding to each chapter of the book), but nonetheless the narrative is somewhat denser and more detailed than most popular histories. Reading it is not easy going, though it is not quite at the extreme of strenuous.

The name of my post is a far more accurate description of this book than its given title. Those looking for a general historical biography will be disappointed, as will those looking for a military history or narrative account of Constantine's life. However, that said, this book doesn't try to be any of the former. Rather, it is a fascinating scholarly examination of Constantine's imperial ideology. The author meticulously examines artifacts, murals, sculptures in great (at times too much) detail to describe how Constantine projected his power and wanted to appear to the masses. There is a great discussion of various religions competing with Christianity, the ideology of the imperial cult, and how Constantine co-opted the existing pagan symbolism and iconography into his new "christian" religion in an attempt to unify the empire. It was interesting to see the author describe how many of the dates Christians take for granted as holidays were actually pagan holidays that Constantine re-used and re-cycled. The author also uses coins and other artifacts to try and resolve conflicting historical accounts of Constantine's life. While there is great detail as to the language and symbolism on the coins struck by Constantine, the book lacks any attention to detail on Constantine's campaigns. Very little attention is devoted to the makeup of Constantine's field army, his use of barbarian conscripts, changes in training, equipment, tactics, etc. There is some mention of Constantine's military reforms and changes to billeting, but not much analysis of the broader historical consequences of these decisions. In summary, for what it is, this is a good book; it just was not what I was expecting based on the title.

Judging by the title of the book you might think that this was a military or secular history of Constantine's career. It isn't. The title refers to the name that Constantine adopted when he became Christian: Victor. It's also connected to the famous vision he had before the battle of the Milvian Bridge. I learned it as "in hoc signo vincis" (in this sign, conquer), but Stephenson assures us that that was based on a translation of Eusebius. Eusebius translated Constantine's Latin vision into Greek which a later writer translated back into Latin. The actual saying, as recorded by Latin sources, was "hoc signo victor eris" (by this sign you shall be victor). Constantine seems to have taken this literally and became Victor. Kinda odd but ok. That was by far the most interesting thing I learned from this book. This book was written by a Byzantinist and it shows. Not because he gets facts wrong or predates major Byzantine developments (he doesn't), but because of his focus. The summary of Constantine's life and career is just that: a summary. He never really goes in depth or gets involved enough to interest the reader. What he does spend a lot of time on is an interpretation of the archaeological evidence and some of the written sources. The information in the previous paragraph is a perfect example of the kinds of topic he dwells on. Now this isn't really a bad thing. He focuses on things a lot of other writers leave alone. But it hardly makes for compelling reading and in the end it feels like it's a series of discussions thinly connected into an overarching narrative. This book isn't footnoted either so it is of little value as a scholarly work. I'm also not sure I buy his explanation of the expansion of Christianity.

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