

Solar Power in Late Antiquity, Or One Halo Phenomenon Does Not a Christian Make

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Peter Weiss's identification of a "halo phenomenon" as the source of Constantine's conversion to Christianity (1993; Eng. tr. 2003) has met with decidedly different reactions in the scholarly world. Anglo-Saxon scholars have generally embraced it, while Weiss's own colleagues in Germany have been more standoffish. By itself, the "halo phenomenon" does not explain either the reason for these differing reactions or the originality of Weiss's argument. A.H.M. Jones made the suggestion more than half a century ago, relying on an even older scientific study (Jones [1962, orig.1948] 85; cf. Dodds [1965] 47). But Weiss is the first to make a systematic attempt to correlate the scientific evidence with data from the Constantinian period, and then to demonstrate how the phenomenon lies behind certain heretofore inexplicable symbols on Constantine's coins. He does a brilliant job of connecting the dots. For scholars trained in the positivist tradition, his study provides a comfortable explanation for the traditional story line.

The problem lies in what Weiss did *not* address. Why, for instance, should Constantine have been moved more by the "cross" than by the sun? And even granting priority to the cross, is it conceivable that, had this chance sighting not occurred, there would have been no triumphant march from Britain to the Hellespont, no sense of divine mission, no fateful union between Christian church and Roman state? Put this way, the reason for the different reactions becomes clear: A positivist approach puts more explanatory weight on the halo phenomenon than it can possibly bear; in its own way, it is as reductionist, and as unsatisfying intellectually, as the traditional miracle story that it seeks to explain away.

Jackie Long's paper supplies much of what is missing from Weiss's own study. Taking the halo phenomenon for granted, she has shown how the symbols of cross and sun could be adapted to the very different goals of contemporary commentators. My aim is a more fundamental one: to put the sun symbol into the context of contemporary imperial ideology in general, and Constantine's religious program in particular. The aim is to show that a halo phenomenon suited Constantine's own aims as much as it did those of his commentators. Indeed, the importance of this symbol to the first Christian emperor borders on the scandalous, embracing not only his Sunday law but also the notorious statue he put up in Constantinople, to which, Philostorgius (2.17) tells us, the people of Constantinople paid divine honors. As Theodor Preger established more than a century ago (*Hermes* 1901), this was a statue of the god Helios, onto which the emperor grafted his own features. The role this symbol played in shaping the religious politics of this period provides a deeper understanding. Two hitherto unrelated texts—Firmicus Maternus' *Mathesis* and the emperor Julian's *Hymn to King Helios*—show the strong appeal solar cult could exercise even on individuals who had never witnessed a halo phenomenon.