

How to Read a Halo: Three (or More) Versions of Constantine's Vision

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Constantine and his army did see a solar halo (Weiss, *JRS* 2003). Knowing the event was real and public permits a truer judgment of how it was represented to contemporary audiences, both by official organs of Constantine's public image such as his coinage (Bruun, *Arctos* 1958) and by citizens who co-opted Constantine's miracle to objectives of their own. The three major surviving literary treatments of the vision reveal independence and audacity (cf. Bleckmann in Bonamente and Fusco, eds., *Costantino il Grande* [1992]; MacMullen, *GRBS* 1968).

The earliest, the panegyrist of 310, voiced his own credence but deferred to Constantine to guarantee he had seen Apollo and Victory bringing him laurel garlands (*Pan. Lat.* 6[7].21.4-5). Presumably soldiers attending the court could confirm, crucially, the physical marvel they too witnessed. Attributing it to Apollo conferred a Classical and Augustan form on the vision, and advantageously tied it to a sacred spring and grove at the speaker's native Autun (*Pan. Lat.* 6[7].22; Rodgers, *Byzantion* 1980). Most importantly, this palpable evidence of cosmic sanction for Constantine helped allay the crisis Gaul especially must have felt at the recent revolt and death of its great defender Maximian (cf. *Pan. Lat.* 6[7].14.1).

Constantine maintained reference to this public vision on his coins with the more literal, less tradition-bound figure of Sol and in his distinctive military emblem, the labarum (cf. Walraff, *Studia Patristica* 2001; Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* [2000]). When he defeated Maxentius and took possession of Rome in 312, the Senate in Classical and general terms echoed his claim he was divinely prompted (*CIL* 6.1139 = *ILS* 694; Hall, *J ECS* 1998). But opulent Christian churches Constantine immediately founded at Rome declared he recognized more specific and novel patronage (Ceccelli in Steinby, ed., *LTUR* 4 [1999]; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* [1981]). Lactantius in his account of the end to persecution claimed Constantine aggressively as Christianity's champion: he read into the famous vision a dream bidding Constantine to mark his soldiers' shields with a sign of Christ (*Lact. DMP* 44.3-5). Even without deciphering a Christogram solar imagery appealed to Christians too (cf. Nicholson, *VC* 2000). Thus the vision blazons Constantine a culture-hero, who escapes a personal microcosm of persecution by Galerius's malice in order to begin vindicating the Christian God's faith.

Eusebius's biography of Constantine traced the trajectory of a ruler's life rather than the fortunes of a religious community. He telescoped the time from Constantine's first being declared emperor to conquering Rome. The solar halo, seen in a waking vision, and the dream-delivered emblem solve Constantine's personal quest for faith (*Euseb. VC* 1.28-32). Victory confirms him as a Christian sovereign. Eusebius's narrative culminates not just in Constantine's military prowess, but as Constantine's government realized Christian hopes. That his myth arose from literary treatments is not surprising (cf. Lieu and Montserrat, eds., *Constantine* [1998]; Kazdahn, *Byzantion* 1987), but the disparate authorial objectives composing the myth must be sifted.