



CHRISTIANITY AND CONSTANTINE'S IMPERIAL WOMEN

It is known that various members of Constantine's family, of his own generation and the generation before, were Christian. It is often taken for granted that Constantine encouraged or required their Christian faith. However, in fact there is only evidence for Constantine's influence on the faith of his mother Helena. This paper examines the evidence for Christianity in the imperial family before Constantine became publicly Christian, and suggests that some of these women may even have been Christian independently of Constantine's influence.

Keywords: Constantine, conversion, Christianity, aristocracy, women, fourth century

Introduction

It is an unquestioned assumption of modern scholarship that Constantine's conversion kick-started the transformation of the Roman aristocracy and thus, eventually, of the Roman West into a predominantly Christian society. This assumption has dominated much of the broad-brush analysis of the period. Among others, A. H. M. Jones suggests that Christianity was less common among the aristocracy, partly because it was incompatible with classical culture;¹ MacMullen points out that a Christian emperor meant that Christianity benefited from respectability, prestige, and material rewards;² Lane Fox points to how crucial Constantine was in the 'victory' over paganism.³

This narrative that Constantine prompted the conversion of the aristocracy is implicitly applied to his own family. It is certainly true

¹ A. H. M. Jones, 'The Social Background of the Struggle between Paganism and Christianity', in A. Momigliano (ed.) *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), 19–20.

² R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984).

³ R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth, 1986).

that he prompted the conversion of his mother Helena, as explicitly mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea.

Constantine made his mother such a God-fearer – she had not been one before – that it was as if she had been taught from birth by the common Saviour of all.

(Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini* 3.47)

There are many other known Christians in Constantine's family: these include his half-sisters Constantia and Anastasia, his mother-in-law Eutropia, and his sons by his wife Fausta. However, Christianity in the family is always implicitly explained as arising either from Constantine himself, or (for some scholars) from his father. This may stem from the false assumption that late antique households had to be religiously uniform (based partly on Plutarch's statement that husbands should make their wives conform to their gods and their friends)⁴ and may also stem from the assumption that Constantine's active vitriol against paganism later in his life must have been reflected in his domestic life as much as in his public policy.

The aim of this paper, then, is to examine the assumption that Constantine was somehow responsible for the faith of any of these individuals. Although the evidence can indeed be read this way, there is an alternative interpretation of the existing historical comments. It will here be suggested that, contrary to the usual narrative, there is no firm evidence whatsoever that Constantine influenced the faith of any of the imperial women except his own mother. In fact, some of those to be discussed were almost certainly Christian independently of Constantine's influence.

There is a wide range of modern understandings of how Constantine came to Christianity. Scholars differ on whether this occurred spontaneously at Milvian Bridge (whether or not influenced by a vision),⁵ or whether he came to Christianity gradually through his lifetime.⁶ They also disagree as to whether his faith was genuine Christianity (however that is taken),⁷ a variant of monotheism or pragmatic polytheism, or entirely cynical and pragmatic.⁸ Further, the

⁴ Plut. *Moralia* 140D.

⁵ J. F. Matthews and D. M. Nicol, 'Constantine I', *Encyclopedia Britannica* <<https://academic.oup.com/levels/collegiate/article/Constantine-I/109633>>, accessed 13 September 2019.

⁶ For example D. Potter, *Constantine the Emperor* (Oxford, 2015).

⁷ For example, T. Elliott, *The Christianity of Constantine the Great* (New York, 1996).

⁸ Originally found in J. Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great* (New York, 1940). For a more recent example, see A. Kee, *Constantine Versus Christ* (London, 1982).

evidence of Eusebius of Caesarea, one of the main sources, is often viewed as tendentious.⁹ This paper does not seek to address the issue of Constantine's own faith, but hopes to be consistent with many of these theories; here it is only necessary to assume that Constantine presented as Christian by the time of his death (on the evidence of his baptism) and chose to associate himself with Christianity publicly from the mid 320s, for example at Nicaea, with the emergence of chi rho coins, and with Christian building programmes.

The methodology of this paper is to examine the evidence for Christianity in the imperial family, for his own generation and that of his parents, but excluding his children's generation. Any of those who may have been Christian independently of Constantine's influence will be indicated on the family tree at the end of the paper. (Helena is thus not marked, since it is explicitly stated that her son brought her to Christianity).

Words such as 'independently', 'influence', and 'conversion' are here used extremely cautiously. For example, 'conversion' can imply completely embracing Christianity, but may mean a lesser step of adopting Christian values and practices while simultaneously admitting others (for example, Sol Invictus worship or prayers to a non-specific supreme deity). It is of course difficult to assess the exact 'influence' on any individual's faith, so it is here acknowledged that influences may be sundry and diverse, including everything from direct pressure to family identity and prestige, from political expediency to personal inclination. Lastly, one aim here is to examine what influences there may have been on Constantine himself. 'Independently' is loosely taken to refer to individuals for whom there is a chance they may have ended up Christian even if Constantine himself had not, or who had significant Christian influences other than Constantine himself.

Admittedly this is all fairly open-ended, but in fact the loose designations still allow important conclusions to be drawn.

Anastasia

The first hint chronologically of Christianity in this family comes from the daughter born to Constantius and Theodora named Anastasia, an explicitly Judaeo-Christian name.

⁹ For a discussion, see A. Cameron and S. Hall, 'Introduction', in their translation of Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* (Oxford, 1999).

This name unquestionably indicates a Jew or Christian. In the West,¹⁰ there are no other instances of the name in *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* this early in the fourth century; the sole occurrence in *Prosopographie Chrétienne du Bas-Empire* demonstrates an African bishop named Anastasius at the Council of Arles in 313.¹¹ The *Liber Pontificalis* tells us that Pope Felix (r. 355–365 AD) had a father named Anastasius.¹² Lastly, the church in Rome now known as Santa Anastasia is dated to the mid fourth century, but is referred to in the acts of the Roman Synod of 499 as *titulus Anastasiae* and thus probably belonged to an individual called Anastasia in the third century or during the Diocletianic Persecution¹³ (although another possibility is that it may have been named after the sister of Constantine here under discussion).¹⁴ A handful of inscriptions in catacombs may evidence the name in Christian contexts.¹⁵ As for the Jewish sphere, Ilan's catalogue of Jewish names in the West identifies eight individuals in Jewish contexts in the third to fourth centuries with the names Anastasius, Anastasis or Anastasia; all but one of these is in Rome.¹⁶ In sum, then, Anastasia is a demonstrably Jewish or Christian name: there is no instance of it ever being found among pagans.

Some modern scholars speculate whether the girl Anastasia was named by her father, Constantius.¹⁷ Barnes here is typical: 'The Jewish and Christian overtones of the name point unmistakably to the religious sympathies of Constantius.'¹⁸ This hypothesis is taken in

¹⁰ The name had been common enough in the East for several hundred years. For references, see G. F. Grassi, 'Semitic Onomastics in Roman Aquileia', in F. M. Fales and G. F. Grassi (eds.), *Proceedings of the 13th Italian Meeting of Afro-Asiatic Linguistics, held in Udine May 21st – 24th 2007* (Padova, 2010), 12.

¹¹ <<https://archive.org/details/prosopography-later-roman-empire/PLRE-I/>>, accessed 29 May 2023; *Concilia Galliae*, Subscriptions to the Canones ad Silvestrum. On textual variants of the name, see A. Mandouze, *Prosopographie de l'Afrique Chrétienne 303–533* (Volume 1 of *Prosopographie Chrétienne du Bas-Empire*) (Paris, 1982), q.v.

¹² *Liber Pontificalis* 1.38 (Felix).

¹³ *Acta Synhodi ad 499: Subscriptions*. See further R. Krautheimer, *Corpus basilicarum Christianarum Romae*, volume 1 (Vatican, 1937), 50–51.

¹⁴ J. Vogt, 'Pagans and Christians in the Family of Constantine the Great', in Momigliano (n. 1), 47.

¹⁵ Using the database of inscriptions at <<http://www.manfredclaus.de/>>, accessed 13 July 2019 (searching for *anastas** before 330).

¹⁶ T. Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish names in Late Antiquity. Volume 3: The Western Diaspora, 330 BCE–650 CE* (Tübingen, 2008), 212 (men's names), 403 (women's names).

¹⁷ As well as T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (London, 1981), see, for example, J. Holland Smith, *Constantine the Great* (London, 1971), 47; M. Grant, *The Emperor Constantine* (London, 1998), 16; and survey in T. Grünewald, *Constantinus Maximus Augustus* (Wiesbaden, 1990), 80–1.

¹⁸ Barnes (n. 17), 4.

light of Eusebius of Caesarea's narrative that Constantine's father was a monotheistic god-fearer who therefore arguably taught Christianity, or at least monotheism, to Constantine himself. Barnes thus argues from this evidence that Constantine may have come across Christianity as a child.

However, *pace* Barnes, it seems unlikely that Constantius would have had any Christian sympathies. Firstly, the narrative of Eusebius only makes Constantius god-fearing, devoted to the one god, and so on, but even Eusebius never goes so far as to state explicitly that Constantius is Christian. 'Anastasia' is a strange name for a man to choose for his daughter when he is not explicitly Christian himself.

Secondly, Constantius did not publicly favour Christianity. Although he was famously lenient during the persecutions that struck elsewhere in the empire, and is held not to have harmed Christians themselves,¹⁹ he still destroyed churches and obviously prevented worship to an extent that Constantine was said to reinstate it as soon as his father died.

When Constantine Augustus took up his rule, the first thing he did was to restore to Christians their worship and their God. This was his first act: to reinstate the holy religion. (Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 24)

Even if Constantius was only confiscating property, he was still publicly opposing worship, and it seems surprising that he would at the same time have given his daughter a Christian name and done something deeply provocative to his Eastern imperial colleagues during a time of persecution.

So Barnes is unlikely to be correct about Constantius' religious sympathies. Alternatively, Grünewald recalls that Constantine was brought up at Diocletian's court, and thus presumably less influenced by his father's religion; further, Eusebius depicts Constantine as an adult trying to discover what god aided his father.²⁰ However, those who disagree with Barnes feel compelled to deny that Anastasia could have acquired the name at birth. In order to deny the argument that Constantius was a Christian, Grünewald is forced to deny that Anastasia can have been so named as a child. He suggests, therefore, that the name 'Anastasia' was merely a label later used to refer to

¹⁹ Optatus *Adversus Donatistas* 1.22; Lactantius *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 15, 24.

²⁰ Grünewald (n. 17), 82; Eusebius of Caesarea *Vita Constantini* 1.27–28.

this individual as a marker of her faith, and we do not know her true name.²¹

Although Grünewald is right to question whether Constantius was Christian, the problem is that he is forced into a convoluted position regarding Anastasia's name. There is no other evidence at this period for individuals taking a secondary name, for example at baptism, as a marker of their faith. If anything, onomastic evidence indicates quite the contrary: Depauw and Clarysse's onomastic analysis of Egyptian papyri suggests that Christians could have explicitly pagan names at this period, whereas the reverse is unlikely.²²

The key point here is that both Barnes and Grünewald take it for granted that, if the child were named Anastasia, that would indeed indicate the faith of her father; yet there is no need to make this assumption. Instead of looking for the influence of Constantius, there is another possibility that is rarely considered in the modern literature:²³ that Anastasia was named not by her father, but by her mother, Theodora. There are a couple of reasons why this could be possible.

Firstly, it was in fact a Roman practice that children were named by the mother's family, at least in the classical period.²⁴ (We may note, however, that Constantine's children were not named by his wife's family.) Indeed, some of Theodora's other children may have been named on her behalf. She has a daughter named Eutropia, presumably after Theodora's own mother, and a son called Hannibalianus, after a family member who may have been either her blood father by her mother's first marriage (see family tree diagram) or a name from her mother's family.²⁵

Secondly, the *Origo Constantini* speaks of the senator Bassianus *qui habebat alteram Constantini sororem Anastasiam* ('who had Constantine's other sister Anastasia').²⁶ The use of '*habebat*' is curious; the text is usually taken as implying that Anastasia and Bassianus were married, but this is not normal usage for *habeo*, which has more vulgar

²¹ Ibid., 81–2: 'Anastasia wäre dann ein "signum" der Betreffenden, deren "nomina" uns unbekannt sind' (So 'Anastasia' was an identifier for the party concerned, whose name is unknown to us).

²² M. Depauw and W. Clarysse, 'How Christian was Fourth Century Egypt? Onomastic Perspectives on Conversion', *VChr* 67.4 (2013), 425–7.

²³ For one example, see Grant (n. 17), 17.

²⁴ B. Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford, 2003), 111.

²⁵ On both possibilities, see for example B. Leadbetter, 'The Illegitimacy of Constantine and the Birth of the Tetrarchy', in S. Lieu and D. Monsterrat (eds.), *Constantine. History, Historiography and Legend* (London, 2002), 75–7.

²⁶ *Origo Constantini* 14.

connotations when standing alone.²⁷ So it may be that it here refers to a contractual relationship or betrothal. This in turn suggests that Anastasia in 316 may have been under the age of twelve. She was thus born in 304 or thereafter, but Constantius died in 305, so it is quite possible that she was born while her father was sick, or even after he died. Her mother could then have had a greater say in naming the child.

So it is possible that it was her mother who named her. Anastasia's name would then indicate the Christian faith not of her father, but of her mother Theodora. If this assumption is true, Theodora is the earliest member of the imperial family to be Christian, from the first few years of the fourth century. Her faith therefore cannot have been influenced by Constantine's, firstly because his conversion is dated to 312 at the earliest, and secondly because Theodora spent most of her life living apart from Constantine – firstly at the Western court while Constantine was in the East, and thereafter in exile in Toulouse.

So, then, instead of assuming that Anastasia had to be named by her father, it is worth considering the fact that her name may have reflected her *mother's* faith. If this assumption is true, it must certainly follow that Theodora and Anastasia are both Christian independently of Constantine, since Anastasia was born at some point before Constantine's supposed conversion around the time of his war with Maxentius.

So far this is merely speculative, but the case is strengthened by consideration of another of Theodora's daughters, Constantia.

Constantia

Constantia is mentioned in a variety of sources as Christian, and particularly as playing a part in the Arian controversy.²⁸ As with the other women mentioned here, it seems to be implicitly assumed that her Christianity arose under Constantine's influence. However, a careful examination of the dates shows that this may not be the case.

Her Christian faith is well attested. The first chronological reference to her faith comes from Philostorgius, who mentions that Constantia persuaded her local bishops to sign up to the Nicene Creed.

²⁷ C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1945), q.v.

²⁸ Philostorgius *Epitome* 1.9; Rufinus *Hist. Eccl.* 10.12; Socrates Scholasticus *Hist. Eccl.* 1.25; Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 2.27.

Philostorgius also admits that everyone agreed to the Definition of the Faith at Nicaea, except for [two Egyptian bishops]. But the rest of the band of Arian leaders – I mean Eusebius of Nicomedia whom Philostorgius calls ‘the Great’, Theognis of Nicaea and Maris of Chalcedon and the rest of the posse – accepted the council’s ruling, albeit fraudulently and treacherously... They signalled their agreement to the synodical decrees, since Constantia, the emperor’s sister, proposed this course to them.

(Philostorgius, *Epitome* 1.9)²⁹

The Greek is ambiguous as to what course exactly Constantia recommended, but the point here is that the text implies a working relationship between Constantia and the three local bishops (Chalcedon and Nicaea were both in north-western Asia Minor, close to Nicomedia).

One possibility is that Constantine may have encouraged her conversion when he was with her at the time of her marriage to Licinius in Milan (313), or from afar in the years thereafter. Pohlsander considers that she was ‘well familiar with or perhaps in some way committed to’ Christianity even from the time of her marriage.³⁰ However Constantia was already promised to Licinius around 310 while Maxentius was alive,³¹ so before Constantine’s dream at Milvian Bridge (if indeed this date is assigned to his conversion). The battle occurred in October 312, and she was married to Licinius around February 313.³² It is unlikely that Constantine was particularly close to Constantia at this point: her brothers had been exiled from court to Toulouse,³³ and Constantia as a young woman may well have been with her mother or at some residence away from court.³⁴ Still, it is possible Constantine exerted some pressure on her at this stage. But we do not know that he even conceived of Christianity as an important political tool in 313, since we do not even know that he intended to conquer Licinius at that point, and Sol Invictus coins show his public persona did not yet fully embrace

²⁹ Ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς συνομολογεῖ πάντας ὁμοφρονῆσαι τῷ ἐν Νικαίᾳ τῆς πίστεως ὄρω, πλὴν Σεκοῦνδου τοῦ Πτολεμαῖδος, ὃ καὶ Θεωγράδης ὁ τῆς Μαρμαρικής ἠκολούθησεν. τὸ δὲ ἄλλο στίφος τῶν Ἀρειανῶν ἐφόρων, Εὐσέβιος τε, φημί, ὁ Νικομηδείας ὃν οὗτος ἀποθειάζει μέγαν καὶ Θεόγονις ὁ Νικαίας, καὶ Μάρις ὁ Καλχηδόνας, καὶ ἡ ἄλλη φάλαγξ πρὸς τὴν σύνοδον μετετάξατο· ἐν δόλῳ μὲν, καὶ οὗτος φησι, καὶ τὸ ὁμοίουσιν ἐν τῇ τοῦ ὁμοουσίου φωνῇ ὑποκλέψαντες· πλὴν γε συμφρονεῖν τοῖς συνοδικαῖς ψηφίσμασιν ἀναδεξάμενοι, Κωνσταντίνος [sic] τῆς τοῦ Κωνσταντίνου βασιλείας ἀδελφῆς εἰσηγησαμένης αὐτοῖς τὴν εἰς τοῦτο παραίνεσιν.

³⁰ H. Pohlsander, ‘Constantia’, *AncSoc* 24 (1991), 156.

³¹ Lactantius *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 43.

³² Barnes (n. 17), 71.

³³ Ausonius *Commemoratio Professores Burdigalensium* 16.

³⁴ Pohlsander (n. 30), 154.

Christianity publicly. Lastly, Constantia could realistically have been expected to support her husband's religious practices rather than her half-brother's.

Another possibility is that Constantia became a Christian when Constantine defeated her husband and arrived in the East. However, the dates are quite tight: he wins Nicomedia in autumn 324, and the first council discussing the Arian controversy was held at Antioch only a few months later in the winter of 324/5 (the council of Nicaea following in May to July of 325).

This is not impossible (especially in the wake of one's husband's defeat), but it is more likely that she was Christian before his arrival. One tenuous indication of this comes from the letter written to her by the bishop of Caesarea, also called Eusebius; she asked for an image of Christ and he replied that Christ cannot be represented in a picture.³⁵ The authenticity of the letter is sometimes questioned (for example, Gero feels it is more likely to be genuine based on considerations of theology and language; Barnes, on the other hand, suggests that, while genuine, it may have been altered in a later century).³⁶ If it is genuine, it may be datable to before 324 because of the fact that Eusebius addresses her as *basilissa*, a title that was only technically correct while Licinius was emperor. (On the other hand, as Gero points out, Eusebius could still have used the title as flattery after that date.³⁷)

But there is stronger evidence that Constantia was Christian before 324, because the literature points to the court connections of the bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, 'the Great'. The Arian controversy had already been rumbling for a few years under Emperor Licinius, and Eusebius was appealed to as an arbiter and senior disputant because of his great influence.

Eusebius of Nicomedia particularly took up the debate. . . Now at this juncture Eusebius possessed great influence, because the emperor resided at Nicomedia. . . So many of the bishops deferred to Eusebius. (Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.6)

³⁵ Ibid., 156.

³⁶ S. Gero, 'The True Image of Christ: Eusebius' Letter to Constantia Reconsidered', *JThS* 32.1 (1981), 460–70; T. D. Barnes, 'Notes on the Letter of Eusebius to Constantia', *Studia Patristica* 46 (2010), 313–18.

³⁷ Gero (n. 36), 464 n. 2.

Socrates suggests that Eusebius' episcopal influence stems from the fact that he is known at court; the Nicomedian bishop may even have had preferential treatment in convening synods during the Arian controversy.³⁸

It should be emphasized that this occurred under Licinius, before Constantine's arrival. The preferential treatment received by Eusebius may have arisen because he was familiar with Licinius. Constantine later accused Eusebius of continuing loyalty to the earlier emperor,³⁹ although of course Constantine eventually forgave Eusebius and was even baptized by him.⁴⁰ This may even have been a family connection; Ammianus Marcellinus tells us Eusebius was a distant relative of the emperor Julian,⁴¹ which may indicate he was related to an official in Licinius' court.⁴²

But Licinius was probably not a Christian, and may have even suppressed Christianity, so the bishop must have been acquainted not so much with Licinius but rather his wife Constantia. Certainly they seem to be connected in the sources. For example, while most sources suggest Constantia interceded with her brother on behalf of her husband Licinius,⁴³ one source mentions that Eusebius went with her.⁴⁴ Moreover, their collusion in religious affairs later on hints that this relationship arose partly because Constantine's sister was a member of his flock: later narratives confirm she shared his Arianizing theology.⁴⁵ Indeed, since Licinius' residence was at Nicomedia,⁴⁶ she may have known Eusebius from the time of his translation there around 317 AD.⁴⁷ So all in all, it is likely that Constantia was a Christian already

³⁸ Holland Smith (n. 17), 165, 189, suggests that Eusebius was able to get round bans on synods, and meet with his own bishops. It may be that Licinius' ban on synods had the intention of hindering Eusebius' opponents. See also Barnes (n. 17), 376 n.154, and S. Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs* (Oxford, 2000), 195, 285, citing Eusebius of Caesarea *Vita Constantini* 1.51, 2.66.

³⁹ Theodoret *Hist. Eccl.* 1.19.

⁴⁰ Jerome *Chronicon* a. 337.

⁴¹ Ammianus Marcellinus 22.9.

⁴² J. Bidez, 'Notes sur quelques passages des écrits de l'empereur Julien', in P. Thomas (ed.), *Mélanges P. Thomas* (Bruges, 1930), 54–65.

⁴³ Zosimus *Hist. Eccl.* 2.28.2; Aurelius Victor *Epitome de Caesaribus* 41.7, *Origo Constantini* 28.

⁴⁴ *Vita Constantini* from Codex Angelicus A (Philostorgius *Hist. Eccl.*, Anhang V, GCS, 180).

⁴⁵ Jerome *Ep.* 133.4; Socrates Scholasticus *Hist. Eccl.* 1.25; Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 2.27; Theodoret *Hist. Eccl.* 2.2.

⁴⁶ Licinius' known movements are given in T. D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge MA/London, 1982), 81.

⁴⁷ Pohlsander (n. 30), 156.

before the arrival of Constantine in 324, a position held also by Vogt and Pohlsander.⁴⁸

So, then, Constantia's Christianity is likely to have been influenced from a variety of directions, but not necessarily primarily by Constantine. If we agree that Anastasia and Theodora were Christian, then we can consider another possibility, namely that Constantia may, like her sister, have been brought up Christian.

Eutropia and Fausta

From the family tree, we see that we now have three women within an immediate family unit showing evidence for Christianity 'independently' of Constantine, namely Theodora and her two daughters Constantia and Anastasia.

The case is not so clear for the other women of the family, Theodora's sister Fausta (Constantine's wife) and her mother Eutropia. It is possible that both were Christian, but the evidence does not allow us to say with certainty when or how their conversions occurred.

Eutropia was not only Christian, but fervently so: Constantine himself described her as *hosiōtatē*, 'extremely holy'.⁴⁹ Sozomen tells us she herself went to Palestine and prayed at the 'old oak of Abraham' (that is, the Oaks of Mamre); it was there she encountered the idolatrous practices that she asked her son-in-law to ban, and a church was also built on the spot.⁵⁰ However, we do not know when her Christian faith developed.

As for Fausta, Constantine's wife, even less is known due to her *damnatio memoriae*. The earliest historical statement as to her faith comes from Zonaras, who states she was a pagan and encouraged Constantine to be one;⁵¹ however, Zonaras is a late source (twelfth century) and at this point he is trying to explain why Constantine was still a pagan before his conquest of Maxentius.

⁴⁸ Vogt (n. 14), 47; Pohlsander (n. 30), 156.

⁴⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea *Vita Constantini* 3.52: Ἐν καὶ τοῦτο μέγιστον τῆς ὀσιωτάτης μου κηδεστρίας γέγονεν εἰς ἡμᾶς εὐεργέτημα... (In this, an immense benefit has been brought to me by my exceptionally holy mother-in-law...).

⁵⁰ Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 2.4; see also Socrates Scholasticus *Hist. Eccl.* 2.4.

⁵¹ Zonaras *Epitome* 13.1.2.

Archaeological evidence may offer one clue. An excavation on Rome's Caelian Hill, near the medieval complex of St John Lateran, has been identified by the excavator Santa Maria Scrinari as being a part of Fausta's palace, depicting imperial ideology.⁵² It should be noted that Scrinari's identification is not universally accepted,⁵³ so the evidence is presented here tentatively. A large mural along a corridor depicts members of the imperial household, painted almost life-size (Constantius, Constantine, Fausta, Theodora, and so on);⁵⁴ below them is an epigraphical band that identified the figures. Another panel appears to be more mythological, depicting hippocamps and dolphins to the left and a charioteer to the right. Close to the charioteer is an inscription; much of it is unclear, but it includes a small staurogram (Ϟ) accompanied by an alpha and omega and the words *in [h]oc signo est patris victoria* ('the fatherland's victory is in this sign').⁵⁵

According to Scrinari, this script (lettering 'a1') is from the first application of the plaster, around 315.⁵⁶ Dating of this earliest phase is provided by two inscriptions referring to the fourth consulate of Licinius in 315 AD. This has potentially exciting ramifications: the dating makes it one of the earliest manifestations of this symbol in a Constantinian context, if not the earliest itself.⁵⁷ If this was indeed Fausta's palace, and she had a place in commissioning the mural

⁵² V. Sta M. Scrinari, *Il laterano imperiale. Vol. 1: Dalle aedes Laterani alla Domus Faustae* (Vatican, 1991), especially Chapter 4. See also S. McFadden, *Courty Places and Sacred Spaces*, doctoral thesis, University of Pennsylvania (2007), Chapter 5, <<https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3292052/>>, accessed 31 May 2023.

⁵³ For scholarly alternatives to Scrinari, see E. W. Nash, 'Convenerunt in domus Faustae: S. Optatus Milevitani 1.23', *RQA* 71 (1976), 1–21; P. Liverani 'L'ambiente nell'antichità', in C. Pietrangeli (ed.), *La basilica di S. Giovanni in Laterano* (Firenze, 1990), 23–8. Nash suggests another house is the Domus Faustae, but that this was not Constantine's wife but another aristocratic woman; Liverani's early works critique Scrinari's hypothesis, but more recently his position is that it is impossible to know one way or another about the house Scrinari excavated. See also the literature on the Domus Faustae cited by McFadden (n. 52), 83 n. 6.

⁵⁴ McFadden (n. 52), 195–7.

⁵⁵ Scrinari (n. 52), 164–5 (discussion), 172 (transcription), 185 (image). There are also chi rho proper on this mural (as opposed to a labarum or staurogram). However, these are from a later stage and written over earlier text. They are accompanied by the words *CONSTANTS IMP [RO]MANORUM*, thus confirming a date after 333 for this part of the mural: Scrinari (n. 52), 166 (discussion), 172 (transcription), 190 (image).

⁵⁶ Scrinari (n. 52), 163, 167.

⁵⁷ Other uses of the chi rho, if not strictly the labarum, at this time include the much-cited Ticinum medallion (RIC VII Ticinum 36; note also the Siscia series, dating from 316 onwards). There are also possible examples on North African milestones from before 313; P. Salama, 'Les provinces d'Afrique et les débuts du monogramme constantinien', *BSAF* 1998:1 (2002), 137–59.

(which, as mentioned, is by no means certain), she was already using Christian symbols at a period when Constantine was publicly still issuing Sol Invictus coins.

There are few other contemporary clues, but Fausta may have been present at the church council in her residence in October 313.⁵⁸ Although this does not necessarily indicate her own faith, there are no indications pointing in any other religious direction. There is also tentative evidence of Fausta's association with two churches that may have borne her name, in Milan and Carthage, and indeed a possible connection between her *domus* and the later Lateran constructions.⁵⁹

So, then, Eutropia was certainly Christian, and Fausta may have been. The question is how they came to be so, and what assumptions come to bear when we have no other information. The most obvious conclusion might seem to be that Constantine prompted or encouraged their conversion. Chronologically speaking, we know that in the 310s Constantine already had the Christian tutor Lactantius to educate his sons, indicating a policy for his household even if he was cautious about publicly presenting himself as Christian. We know that Eutropia was politically pressurized in other areas, for example in disowning the legitimacy of her son Maxentius.⁶⁰ As for Fausta, she would have been even more susceptible to Constantine's influence, on two levels: firstly as his wife she might be expected to support any new religious programme from her imperial husband, and secondly she was probably young enough to be influenced by any religious regime at court.

This is all valid, but it is important that this is maintained in the realm of hypothesis and not certainty. It is false to assume that religion was required to be uniform across a family or household in this period, especially as many cults were focused on one gender in particular (see further below on the sociological analyses of Salzman and Brown). Moreover, conversion of older generations (such as Constantine influencing his mother-in-law) should be seen sociologically as an exception rather than the rule. In all, there is no evidence whatsoever that Constantine required his family to convert (not even his mother).

⁵⁸ Optatus *Adversus Donatistas* 1.23.

⁵⁹ For discussion of the various church buildings mentioned here, see I. Image, 'Hard to Find Another Woman Like Her: Constantine's Empress Fausta', *CW* (forthcoming).

⁶⁰ *Origo Constantini* 4.12.

The argument that Constantine converted these women for political reasons is also weakened by the fact that we do not hear of the men of the family being Christian – in particular Theodora's sons, the brothers of Anastasia and Constantia, even after they were re-established at court in the 320s; indeed, there is no evidence for Christianity among the men of the family before Constantine's own sons⁶¹ (*pace* those such as Vogt who suggest Emperor Julian's father must have been Christian⁶²).

However, the sections on Anastasia and Constantia above allow us to suggest another possibility for the faith of Eutropia and (if she was Christian) Fausta. If Theodora and her two daughters were Christian, then it is quite possible that there may be some link between Theodora's faith and that of her mother and sister. Indeed this could be what is meant by Eusebius of Caesarea's comment that, before the Persecution, even some of the tetrarchs had Christian 'wives and children and servants'⁶³ who were permitted to speak openly about their faith. This could refer to Diocletian's wife Prisca and daughter Valeria, who may or may not have been Christian,⁶⁴ but we may note that both Eutropia and her daughter Theodora were also tetrarchic wives.

This does not preclude the influence of Constantine, but shows that, at very least, there were additional factors at work in the faith positions of Eutropia and Fausta. (Indeed some scholars have suggested that even Eutropia's son Maxentius may have been Christian, due to Eusebius's curious statement that he 'pretended to be a Christian';⁶⁵ that position is not necessary for the current argument.⁶⁶)

While Constantine's influence is politically plausible, the mutual interaction of the faith of the women in this family is sociologically so. As far back as 1961, Peter Brown emphasized the role of kinship when it comes to religious affiliations. More recently, Michele Salzman examined evidence for transmission of religion between generations in the fourth century and has found that children continue

⁶¹ See, for example, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, entries for Dalmatius, Julius Constantius, Hannibalianus.

⁶² Vogt (n. 14), 47.

⁶³ Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 8.1.3.

⁶⁴ Depending on interpretation of Lactantius *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 15.1.

⁶⁵ Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 8.14.1; D. de Decker, 'La politique religieuse de Maxence', *Byzantion* 38 (1968), 472–562.

⁶⁶ For recent assessments see B. Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome. The First Three Centuries* (London, 2010), 217–20.

in the religion of their parents around 90 per cent of the time, whether they be pagan or Christian.⁶⁷ In Salzman's sample, it transpires that Christian women transmit their faith to their daughters for every single case in the sample (although her sample is admittedly small). This tallies with the later picture as portrayed by Yarborough: for example, Jerome's well-known companion Paula passed her Christian faith on to her four daughters, but her son is brought up pagan by the family's guardian and only converts after his sister Blesilla's death.⁶⁸

In Constantine's family, the close relationships between these Christian women suggests a mutual influence; further, many of these women appear as Christian before there is any evidence for Constantine's own Christianity. Salzman's analysis would suggest that, if one woman in the family is Christian, it is not surprising to find Christianity among her daughters too. Conversely, it may have been harder for a woman to pass her faith onto her sons; and, as already mentioned, while Theodora's daughters appear to be Christian there is not any similar evidence for her sons. The sociological evidence also suggests that Constantine would have been less concerned about converting 'up' the family tree (that is, the older generation).

But at the end of the day, we do not know one way or the other whether Constantine prompted Eutropia's or Fausta's conversion. So these two women are still circled on the family tree to denote they are Christian (or may be, in Fausta's case), but they are only circled with a dotted line, to indicate that the timing and source of influence is unknown.

Influence in the other direction?

So far we have examined the possibility that the faith of these women was not primarily influenced by Constantine, but we can go further and ask whether his own faith was in fact influenced by theirs. We have highlighted the possibility that Theodora was Christian already

⁶⁷ M. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy* (London, 2002), 228 Table 5.3 and 226 Table 5.1. See also M. Salzman, 'Aristocratic Women: Conductors of Christianity in the Fourth Century', *Helios* 16.2 (1989), 207–20, at 215.

⁶⁸ A. Yarborough, 'Christianization in the Fourth Century: The example of Roman women', *ChHist* 45 (1976), 149–65.

from the opening years of the century, so there is even a chance that it was these women, and not his father, who prompted Constantine's own interest in Christianity in the first place.

One example of this is that the emperor was known to be persuaded by his sister Constantia in the matter of the Arian controversy. She was much loved by her brother;⁶⁹ he named a city after her,⁷⁰ issued a medallion for her after her death,⁷¹ and was by her bedside as she died. After the events of the Arian controversy already mentioned, she further influenced events in a number of other ways. She interceded with her brother to allow Eusebius of Nicomedia and his colleague Theognis of Nicaea home from exile, proclaiming that God had given her a dream telling her these men had suffered unjustly.⁷² Later she introduced an 'Arian presbyter' to Constantine, who persuaded Constantine to recall Arius; Socrates explicitly states that one reason Constantine may have agreed was 'out of desire to please his sister'.⁷³ This 'presbyter' may have been Eusebius himself.⁷⁴ As a result of all this, later orthodox writers saw her as being a bad (that is, Arian) influence on her brother:⁷⁵ so her influence on him is acknowledged in the literature.

A second piece of evidence is a passage in Zosimus, which is tendentious historically but informative sociologically.

Constantine's conscience was tormented [for murdering his son and his wife in 326 and] for breaking his oath, so he went to the pagan priests to be purified from his offences. But they said no kind of cleansing existed that could purify him from such enormities.

An Egyptian from Spain, who had come to Rome and who had become friendly with the imperial women, fell into conversation with Constantine and assured him that Christianity could take away all his sin. . .⁷⁶

The courtier from Spain persuades Constantine that Christianity can help him, and Zosimus goes on to say that Constantine subsequently converts to Christianity. The Spanish courtier is probably to be

⁶⁹ Socrates Scholasticus *Hist. Eccl.* 1.18, Theodoret *Hist. Eccl.* 2.2, and further examples at Pohlsander (n. 30), 160–1.

⁷⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea *Vita Constantini* 4.38; Socrates Scholasticus *Hist. Eccl.* 1.18; Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 2.5.7–8.

⁷¹ Pohlsander (n. 30), 163–4.

⁷² Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 3.19.

⁷³ Socrates Scholasticus *Hist. Eccl.* 1.25; Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 2.27.

⁷⁴ Cf. Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 2.34.

⁷⁵ Jerome *Ep.* 133.4.

⁷⁶ Zosimus *Hist. Nova* 2.29.

identified as Ossius, bishop of Cordoba, with 'Egyptian' being a disparaging term for a cheap magician or charlatan.⁷⁷

It is necessary to take this passage carefully. Zosimus, as a pagan historian, is repeating the pagan account of Constantine's conversion, found also in Julian⁷⁸ but refuted by Sozomen.⁷⁹ Moreover, Christian accounts dated Constantine's conversion to the battle of Milvian Bridge, and this is usually followed by modern scholars for pinpointing the beginning of Constantine's Christian interest. Still, Zosimus' narrative is suggestive on a number of points. Firstly, it implies that there were Christians among the imperial women (the plural indicates that this is not just Helena); indeed, if the 'Egyptian' is indeed Ossius then their close association with a bishop could indicate that they were more outward or regular in Christian praxis than Constantine himself (compare Constantia's association with Eusebius). Secondly, it suggests that Christian women could be seen as influencing the men of their household, and that Zosimus felt his audience would find this convincing.

On the wider scale this was perfectly plausible: Brown and Yarborough both emphasize the role of aristocratic women in conversion,⁸⁰ although Salzman shows that the available data do not uphold the validity of this assumption.⁸¹ Still, it may be that these women either influenced or accompanied Constantine's spiritual journey whatever scholars take that to be to be, whether an instantaneous conversion in 312, a gradual development through his lifetime, or even a cynical juxtaposition of Christianity and solar monotheism until his death.⁸²

Conclusion

Turning to the family tree, five names are circled as Christian. Of these, three are circled with a continuous line denoting that they could have

⁷⁷ Holland Smith (n. 17), 213; C. M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (London, 2010), 208–9.

⁷⁸ Julian *Caesars* 336.

⁷⁹ Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 1.5.

⁸⁰ P. Brown, 'Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy', *JRS* 51 (1961), 6–8; Yarborough (n. 68).

⁸¹ Salzman 'Aristocratic Women' (n. 67).

⁸² See Barnes (n. 17), 274, for some scholarly views of Constantine's faith. For a very different (and more recent) angle, consider J. Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2012), who holds that Constantine was a universalist throughout his life.

been Christian independently of Constantine, namely Theodora and her daughters Constantia and Anastasia. Two names are given dotted circles, to denote that we do not know about their faith journey: these are Constantine's mother-in-law Eutropia and his wife Fausta.

This emphasizes visually the points already covered above. Firstly, despite the scholarly speculation about Constantius' faith, the only Christian individuals who could be independent of Constantine are not on Constantine's blood side – even Eusebius never says that his father Constantius was a Christian. Rather, all the Christian individuals are on his wife's side of the family. They are also very closely related: the elder Eutropia, her two daughters, and two of her grand-daughters. Secondly, taken chronologically the first individual in the family who is Christian is not Constantine, but arguably his sister-in-law and mother-in-law Theodora. Thirdly, all of the imperial individuals showing evidence for Christianity before the mid 320s (other than Constantine) are women.

It is not the intention here to write a new narrative of Constantine's spiritual journey; all that has been said in this article is consistent with either a conversion experience in 312 or a gradual building in Constantine's faith over the following decade. Rather, the intention is merely to contribute to our understanding of his faith experience: namely, that he seems to have had Christians already among his wife's family when he himself came to the Christian faith.

This article may serve as a corrective to some understandings of Constantine's proselytizing policy. It is sometimes thought that Constantine may have compelled or encouraged individuals to convert to Christianity. This may indeed have happened in the case of Eutropia or Fausta, but the point emphasized here is that there is *no evidence* for this assumption. We do not have any hint that Constantine 'required' anyone to convert, not even his mother; and there is no evidence that he did in fact prompt the conversion of any of his family in this period whether directly or indirectly, through preferential treatment. Yet this narrative of 'encouraged' conversion appears to underlie some scholarly assessments. For example, Barnes assumes that Constantine's letter to Palestine demanded pagans to be tolerant to Christians, but not the reverse;⁸³ similarly, Grant suggests that Fausta's continued adherence

⁸³ Barnes (n. 17), 210, on Eusebius of Caesarea *Vita Constantini* 2.60. Barnes' interpretation is disputed by J. Curran, 'Constantine and the Ancient Cults of Rome: The Legal Evidence', *G&R* 43.1 (1996), 68–80, at 73.

to paganism was one reason that may have contributed to her murder.⁸⁴ Yet there is no evidence that Constantine enforced conversions in his family (although he may have done), far less that he would murder anyone who preferred not to. Indeed, there is no evidence that Constantine would persecute pagans personally;⁸⁵ such persecution by Christians only really erupts later in the century.⁸⁶

It is, of course, correct to rely on the evidence of writers such as Eusebius of Caesarea to inform us about Constantine's faith and that of his family. However, at the same time we should not forget the biases in such evidence. Eusebius wants to show Constantine as a key player in the Christianization of the empire, and thus naturally would not mention his female in-laws as much. Moreover, by 326 at least four members of this family had suffered *damnationes memoriae*, namely Maximian, Maxentius, Fausta, and Crispus. By implication the roles – and faiths – of related individuals such as Eutropia or Theodora would not have been extolled in the glittering way Helena's was.⁸⁷

Lastly, sociological analysis of religious influence within families demonstrates that it was not felt necessary for different members of a household to share a religion; that influence works down the generations, not up them; and that influence works within gender units. If Constantine prompted his mother's conversion, this should be taken as the exception rather than the rule.

It may be that the women of the family were Christian because of Constantine's influence, but it should be emphasized that Constantine himself was only one of many factors that would have influenced the faith of these women. Indeed when the evidence is taken chronologically, it seems more likely that some of these women influenced Constantine's Christianity rather than the other way round.

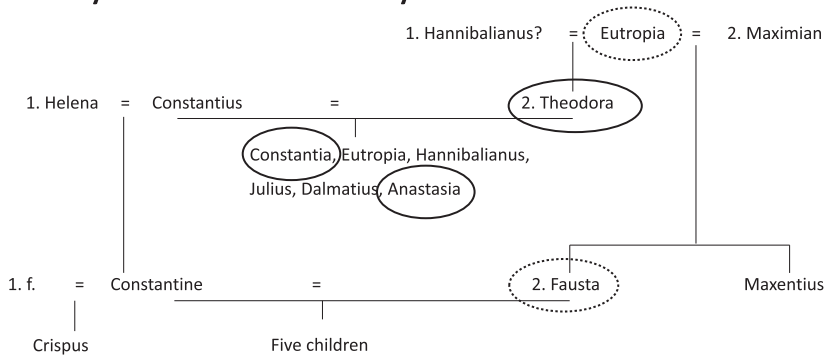
⁸⁴ Grant (n. 17), 114.

⁸⁵ Curran (n. 83), 76–7.

⁸⁶ MacMullen (n. 2), 86–101.

⁸⁷ Compare Barnes (n. 17), 270.

Christianity and Constantine's family tree



1. Those who are thought to be Christian before the mid-320s are circled (apart from Helena and Constantine himself).
2. Those who could have been Christian independently of Constantine's influence are circled in a continuous line. Dotted lines indicate that the details behind the individual's Christianity are not known.

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