Libanius on Constantine

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LIBANIUS ON CONSTANTINE[1]

I. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the emperor Julian plays a central role in the life and writings of the Antiochene sophist Libanius. As a commentator on the life and reign of the emperor Constantine, he is seldom taken into account, and if he is, he usually gets short shrift as being verbose and unreliable. This neglect is, I believe, hardly justified. Even if it were true that Libanius could not teach us anything about the historical Constantine, his testimony still deserves attention as an example of the attitude of eastern pagans to Constantine. Moreover, although much of what Libanius has to say about Constantine was written down half a century after the events, Libanius himself, born in 314, was a contemporary of the latter part of Constantine's reign. Unlike Julian, born in 331/2,[2] and Eunapius, born in 347/8,[3] he was able to form a judgement on Constantine based on first-hand knowledge.

In trying to assess the value of Libanius' testimony on Constantine it seems worthwhile to look briefly at the geographical and social range of his experiences. Belonging to a leading curial family (both of his maternal uncles became Syriarchs under Constantine, Panolbius in 328, Phasganius in 336), Libanius grew up in the metropolis of the Roman east, Antioch-on-the-Orontes. He left his home town in 336 to complete his studies of rhetoric at the 'university' of Athens, a city which although staunchly pagan in character revered Constantine as a generous benefactor (Jul. *Or.*1.6, 8B). From the spiritual centre of Hellenism Libanius went on to Constantine's new capital on the Bosporus, where he taught as a private teacher from 340 to 342. Having been expelled from Constantinople after the riots of 342, he briefly held a professorship in Nicaea until he was appointed sophist of the city in nearby Nicomedia (344/5). After five years in the residence of Diocletian (*Or.* 61.5) and Licinius he reluctantly obeyed an imperial summons to return to Constantinople as sophist of the city (349/50). In 353/4 he finally and permanently settled in his home town Antioch where he died around 393.

The social range of his contacts is less easily defined. Most of his relatives, friends and pupils had a curial background. Although pagan sophists and philosophers had a decisive influence on his intellectual outlook, his relations with Christians were closer than he is prepared to admit in his writings. During the period with which I am here concerned Libanius' contacts with the imperial administration were mostly but not entirely confined to the level of provincial governors. He possessed a clear insight into the social and cultural background of the senate of Constantinople,[4] even though

[1] This article is a slightly revised version of a paper given at the Later Roman Empire Seminar held in Queen's College, Oxford on 11 March 1993. I would like to thank Professor John Matthews and Dr Roger Tomlin for the invitation to deliver the paper and Professor Malcolm Errington and Mr Benet Salway for having read and corrected the manuscript.

[2] For a convenient summary of the (inconclusive) debate as to whether Julian was born in 331 or 332 see A. Demandt, *Die Spätantike* (*Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft*, Abt. 3 Teil 6) (München, 1989), p. 94, n. 2.

[3] So R. J. Penella, *Greek Philosophers and Sophists in the Fourth Century A.D. Studies in Eunapius of Sardis* (Leeds, 1990), pp. 2–3. R. Goulet, 'Sur la chronologie de la vie et des oeuvres d'Eunape de Sardes', *JHS* 100 (1980), 60–72, prefers 349.

[4] See P. Petit, 'Les Sénateurs de Constantinople dans l'oeuvre de Libanius', *L'Antiquité Classique* 26 (1957), 347–82. Libanius' famous invective against the courtiers of Constantine and Constantius is in *Or.* 42.23–4; cf. *Or.* 1.76.

he probably did not gain access to court circles before his second stay there (349/50–353/4). Although the evidence does not lend itself to a prosopographical study of Libanius' early years, a few persons who certainly had a lot to say about Constantine can be demonstrated to have been in personal contact with Libanius, most prominently the *comites* Fl. Dionysius[5] and Strategius Musonianus.[6] The pagan sophist Bemarchius who wrote a history of Constantine (Suda s. v. Bemarchius) was Libanius' main opponent during his first stay in Constantinople.[7] Being in close contact with both Seleucus[8] the son of Constantine's praetorian prefect Fl. Ablabius,[9] and Sopater the son of the homonymous neoplatonist philosopher executed on Ablabius' orders,[10] Libanius must have had inside information about two principal figures in the latter part of Constantine's reign.

II. THE PANEGYRIC ON CONSTANTIUS AND CONSTANS

(i) *General analysis of the speech*

In Libanius we find two distinct groups of texts presenting very different pictures of Constantine. The first group is represented by the panegyric on Constantius and Constans delivered in 344/5, the second consists of several scattered passages in the so-called Reform speeches of the Theodosian period. Contrary to what one might expect, the speeches of the Julianic period refer to Constantine only in passing,[11] usually in the context of Julian's ancestry, without ever passing a critical judgement on him. For whatever reason Libanius did not follow the example of Julian in attacking Constantine as having brought the wrath of the gods on the empire.[12]

The traditional date for the earliest of Libanius' speeches to have survived (348/9) rests on the assumption that the latest datable event mentioned in it (*Or.* 59.98–120), the battle of Singara, took place in 348. Since most scholars nowadays rightly prefer to put the battle in 344,[13] the date of the panegyric on Constantius and Constans should be adjusted accordingly, to 344/5.[14] Thus the speech is to be placed within the first decade after Constantine's death. In order to form a judgement on the opinions expressed in the speech it is necessary to take into account the occasion and circumstances of its delivery. In the absence of independent evidence this can only be done by deductions from the speech itself. One negative conclusion seems to be fairly

[5] Fl. Dionysius (*PLRE* I, pp. 259–60, n. 11) had become acquainted with Libanius' family while he was *consularis Syriae* (*Or.* 1.36; cf. Eus. *V.C.* 4.42.3) sometime between 329 and 335.

[6] *PLRE* I, pp. 611–12 s. v. *Musonianus*. The acquaintaince, attested since the early fifties (Lib. *Ep.* 580 = *Fr.* 3), might well go back to the time when Strategius came to Antioch as *comes* of Constantine in 325 (Eus. *V.C.* 3.39.3; 62.1). See further O. Seeck, *Die Briefe des Libanius zeitlich geordnet* (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur N. F. 15; Leipzig, 1906), pp. 282–4, n. IV.

[7] *Or.* 1.31; 39–44; *Ep.* 209.

[8] *PLRE* I, pp. 818–19, n. 1. The identification of Seleucus the son of Ablabius and father of the deaconess Olympias (*PLRE* I, pp. 642–3, n. 2) with Seleucus the courtier of Julian, contested by B. Schouler, 'Hommages de Libanios aux femmes de son temps', *Pallas* 32 (1985), 123–48, at 146 n. 68, gets further confirmation from a letter of John Chrysostom to Olympias saying that she came to Christianity 'ex asebous oikou' (*Ep.* 8, 5c).

[9] *PLRE* I, pp. 2–3, n. 4.

[10] *PLRE* I, pp. 846–7, n. 2.

[11] *Or.* 12.31; 18.9–11, 206.

[12] AM 21.10.8 = Jul. *E.L.F.* 21; Jul. *Or.* 7.22, 227c–228d; Caes. 315d, 328d–329d, 336a–c. For discussion see J. Vogt, 'Kaiser Julian über seinen Oheim Constantin den Großen', *Historia* 4 (1955), 339–52, reprinted in: idem, *Orbis* (Freiburg, 1960), pp 289–304. But Vogt's treatment of Libanius and Zosimus (at 351–2 or 302–4 respectively) is inadequate.

[13] The crucial point is that Julian in the first panegyric on Constantius (*Or.* 1.21, 26b) dates the death of Constans (January 350) to the sixth year after the battle.

[14] See W. Portmann, 'Die 59. Rede des Libanios und das Datum der Schlacht bei Singara', *ByzZ* 87 (1989), 1–18.

secure: the speech can hardly have been delivered in the presence of the imperial court.[15] Had this been the case, Libanius would certainly have explicitly referred to the emperor and the occasion of his presence. Instead we find references to an unnamed individual,[16] presumably a governor of Bithynia[17] or *vicarius Ponticae*,[18] who invited Libanius to deliver a speech on the then reigning dynasty (*Or.* 59.4, 5). We should, therefore, conclude that the speech was delivered to a local (in this case, Nicomedian: *Or.* 59.72, cf. 171) audience, and was not primarily intended to win favour with the imperial court. Indeed Libanius himself makes it quite clear that he had no access to the emperor's court at the time he was writing *Oration* 59. Elaborating on the topic of how difficult it was adequately to praise Constantius and Constans without failing to do justice to them, he points out that the task was even more difficult for him than it was for those who 'are deigned worthy of the imperial court, travel with the *comitatus* and have experience of the daily business in periods of peace' (*Or.* 59.8).

Praising the deeds of the reigning emperors, *Oration* 59 closely follows the established patterns of panegyrical oratory. As Libanius openly declares, only praiseworthy actions were a proper subject for panegyric oratory. To give a full account was a task for historians (*Or.* 59.56–8). The emperor Constantine II, defeated and killed in a war against his brother Constans in 340, is never mentioned. The brothers and nephews of Constantine I are likewise treated as if they had never existed (but see *Or.* 59.17). The choice of subject matter in the main section of the speech dealing with the deeds of Constantius and Constans echoes the propaganda on the new copper coinage introduced by these emperors.[19]

The dependence on official views is even more obvious in the long introductory section praising Constantine as the model in whose footsteps his sons are following (*Or.* 59.17–47). Constantine is repeatedly referred to as 'the great emperor' (*Or.* 59.29, 72)[20] and 'the most divine' (*Or.* 59.27, 59). He is praised as energetic (*Or.* 59.18), just and brave (*Or.* 59.21), victorious in war, generous and lenient (*Or.* 59.29). Indeed most of what Libanius says can be paralleled so closely in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* that I am inclined to think that Libanius actually used Eusebius as one of his sources.[21] I will here confine myself to citing the most striking instances.

[15] *Pace* J.-P. Callu, 'Un Miroir des princes: le "Basilikos" libanien de 348', *Gerion* 5 (1987), 133–52, at 135–6; Portmann (loc. cit.), 1, 12–13.

[16] T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius. Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), pp. 315–16, n. 49 suggests the praetorian prefect Fl. Philippus (*PLRE* I, pp. 696–7, n. 7) pointing to the fact that Libanius praises the emperors for replacing their praetorian prefects regularly (*Or.* 59.164). I find it hard to believe that Libanius would deliberately have offended the man who commissioned the speech.

[17] A governor of Bithynia named Pompeianus (*PLRE* I, p. 712, n. 3) staged a rhetorical contest between Himerius and Libanius: Lib. *Ep.* 742; *Decl.* 46; Him. *Or.* 53.

[18] While *vicarius Ponticae*, Fl. Philagrius (*PLRE* I, p. 694, n. 5) invited Libanius to deliver a speech: *Or.* 1.70–72.

[19] See K. Kraft, 'Die Taten der Kaiser Constans und Constantius', *JNG* 9 (1958), 141–86, esp. 182–3; accepted by Callu, loc. cit., 137–8. The *maiorina* coinage depicts (1) the battle of Singara during which the Persian heir to the throne was killed (cf. *Or.* 59.98–120), (2) Constans' crossing of the channel (cf. *Or.* 59.137–41), (3) the transfer of a Frankish tribe to Roman soil (cf. *Or.* 59.127–34), and (4) the transfer of a city in Adiabene to Thrace (cf. *Or.* 59.83–7).

[20] Eusebius uses the expression for Constantine (*V.C.* 1.1.1; 1.56.1; 3.55.4; 4.68.2), for God (*V.C.* 3.43.4; 4.29.4) and for Diocletian (*V.C.* 1.14.4)!

[21] The observations of P. Petit, 'Libanius et la *Vita Constantini*', *Historia* 1 (1950), 562–80 have not in my view been invalidated by the critique of J. Moreau, 'Zum Problem der *Vita Constantini*', *Historia* 4 (1955), 234–45, reprinted in: idem, *Scripta minora* (Heidelberg, 1964), pp. 124–34 who argued that Libanius followed the lost history of Praxagoras.

Libanius tells the same anecdote about Constantine's father Constantius enriching the provincials rather than himself (*Or.* 59.15; cf. Eus. *V.C* 1.14).[22]

Constantine comes to power both by the will of his father and heavenly consent (*Or.* 59.16–18; cf. Eus. *V.C.* 1.18ff.).

The war against Maxentius is described as liberation of Rome from the rule of an oppressive tyrant (*Or.* 59.19–20, cf. Eus. *V.C.* 1.26ff.).

In describing the battle of the Mulvian bridge, Libanius refers both to the failed trick of Maxentius and to the proverb (*Psalm* 7.16–17) that he who has made a pit and dug it deep shall fall himself into it (*Or.* 59.20; cf. Eus. *V.C.* 1.38). The same story does, however, also appear in Photius' extract (*Bibl.* 62 = *FGrHist* 219) from Praxagoras' lost history of Constantine.

Libanius knows only one war against Licinius which broke out when the latter broke the treaties with Constantine (*Or.* 59.21; cf. Eus. *V.C.* 1.50).[23]

Constantine's victories against Goths (*Or.* 59.39; cf. Eus. *V.C.* 4.5) and Sarmatians (*Or.* 59.29; cf. Eus. *V.C.* 4.6) are singled out as his major military exploits.

Another sign of deliberate adaptation to official views in this speech is the religious attitude adopted which is remarkably close to the neutral monotheistic theology to be found in courtly rhetoric. In this context it is worth noticing that the panegyric on Constantius and Constantine is the only speech of Libanius expressing a clearly monotheistic conception of the divine.[24] Moreover, God is described as creator of the world (*Or.* 59.169) in terms resembling 'Genesis 1'. Constantine was sent down from heaven to earth by God, ruled in accordance with God's will and returned to God, when his time had come (*Or.* 59.48).

There is, however, a limit to Libanius' willingness to adapt himself to official views. Any reference to Constantine's propagation of Christianity is deliberately avoided. Indeed there is no mention that Constantine ever adopted Christianity at all. The praise for Constantine's domestic policies (*Or.* 59.29) is lukewarm in comparison to that of his father Constantius (*Or.* 59.15; cf. *Or.* 18.8). Licinius, unlike Maxentius, is not described as an oppressive tyrant. Moreover, the foundation of Constantinople is conspicuously absent from the praise of Constantine.

Given the conventions of the literary genre which prevented the orator from uttering straightforward criticism, these omissions indicate that even in *Oration* 59 Libanius did not commit himself entirely to the eulogy of Constantine. He thus had good reason repeatedly to remind his audience that he was talking about a topic which had not been chosen by himself (*Or.* 59.4, 6). In what it overtly states, however, *Oration* 59 is little more than a reproduction of official views on Constantine propagated by his sons.

(ii) *Constantine and the Persians*

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Oration* 59 is the account of the origins of the Persian war. In Libanius we hear nothing about disputes over Armenia,[25] the

[22] See H. Kloft, 'Zur *Vita Constantini* I 14', *Historia* 19 (1970), 509–14.

[23] For a conclusive demonstration that the first war of Constantine against Licinius is ignored in the *Vita Constantini* (1.49–2.18) see J. Vogt, 'Die *Vita Constantini* des Eusebius über den Konflikt zwischen Konstantin und Licinius', *Historia* 2 (1954), 463–71.

[24] *theos*: *Or.* 59.50, 125. *ho kreitton*: *Or.* 59.48 *bis*, 58, 72, 142.

[25] See N. H. Baynes, 'Rome and Armenia in the Fourth Century', *EHR* 25 (1910), 625–43, reprinted with revisions in: idem, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1960), pp. 186–208: W. Ensslin, 'Zu dem vermuteten Perserfeldzug des rex Hannibalianus', *Klio* N. F. 11 (1936), 102–10.

persecution of Christians living under Persian rule,[26] or, for that matter, the lies of Metrodorus.[27] Instead Libanius presents a strikingly Thucydidean (cf. *Or.* 59.126: Thucydides as model) version of the events, focusing on material resources and military equipment. According to Libanius the Persians had for forty years (*Or.* 59.65) prepared themselves for a counter-offensive to win back the territory ceded to the Romans in 298. Embassies and gifts which in the meantime were sent to the emperors of Rome (cf. Eus. *V.C.* 4.8) had only been a means of disguising their true intentions. Since the Persians had realized that the defeat had been due to their inferior weaponry, they started a comprehensive armament programme, recruiting the whole male population of Persia for the army (*Or.* 59.65). Being handicapped, however, by the lack of sufficient quantities of iron ore (*Or.* 59.66), they sent an embassy to Constantine to gain permission to import it from within the Roman empire, using conflicts with their barbarian neighbours as a pretext (*Or.* 59.67). Still according to Libanius, Constantine granted their plea, though fully aware of the Persians' intentions because he wanted his sons to have enemies worthy to fight against. With these supplies of iron the Persians then introduced the mailed cavalry with both horse and horseman heavily armoured (*Or.* 59.69–70). Having completed their armament programme, the Persians finally felt strong enough to send an embassy demanding the cession of Roman territory if war was to be avoided (*Or.* 59.71). Constantine refused to give way, embarked on a campaign against Persia, but died in Nicomedia before he had reached the frontier (*Or.* 59.72).

The historical significance of all this is far from clear. The story looks like an *a posteriori* fabrication designed to explain the sudden change in Persian politics towards Rome in 336. But who fabricated the story? I would suggest that Libanius merely reproduces a story disseminated by Constantius, for three reasons: firstly, because the whole speech seems to be based on official views, and secondly, because the fictional framework of the story contains several bits of reliable information. To start with, a Persian embassy at Constantine's court in 336 is attested in Eusebius (*V.C.* 4.56–7). Highland Iran is indeed short of iron ore,[28] and the export of metals was legally forbidden.[29] There is, therefore, nothing unlikely about a Persian embassy coming to Constantine to ask for imperial permission to import iron. Thirdly, the story clearly served a purpose in defending the foreign and military policies of the emperor Constantius by showing that Constantius was responsible neither for the outbreak of the war against Persia, since hostilities had already broken out, when Constantine was still alive, nor for the unsuccessful warfare conducted against the Persians, since their military superiority, which necessitated a cavalry reform carried out by Constantius,[30] was only made possible by the misguided policies of his father. If this interpretation is correct, we paradoxically catch a glimpse of a criticism of Constantine propagated by his sons.

[26] See T. D. Barnes, 'Constantine and the Christians of Persia', *JRS* 75 (1985), 126–36.

[27] See B. H. Warmington, 'Ammianus Marcellinus and the Lies of Metrodorus', *CQ* n. s. 31 (1981), 464–8; J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London, 1989), pp. 135–6, 448.

[28] See C. S. Lightfoot, *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire with Special Reference to the Reign of Constantius II* (D. Phil., Oxford, 1981), p. 37, n. 116.

[29] Dig. 39.4.11 (Paulus); 48.4.4 (Scaevola); Expositio 22.

[30] See D. Hoffmann, *Das spätromische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum* (Epigraphische Studien 7; Düsseldorf 1969/70), Vol. 1, pp. 265–77 with notes 599–727 in Vol. 2, pp. 110–17.

III. CONSTANTINE IN THE SPEECHES OF THE THEODOSIAN PERIOD

(i) *Constantine and the Romans*

So far we have seen Libanius as a representative of the 'official' version of Constantine as it was current under his sons. It is not until the reign of Theodosius I that we find Libanius expressing a more sincere and more critical view of the first Christian emperor. The references to Constantine contained in Libanius' speeches of the Theodosian period bear upon three different aspects of Constantine's reign: firstly, Constantine's relations with the city of Rome, secondly, Constantine's municipal policies, and thirdly, Constantine's religious policies.

The two speeches of Libanius about the so-called Riot of the statues which purport to have been delivered in the presence of the emperor Theodosius himself have for long attracted the attention of historians studying social relations in the cities of the late empire. Hardly ever, however, has it been noticed that they contain remarkable information about a visit of Constantine to the city of Rome. This information in my view deserves to be taken seriously since it forms an integral part of the argument of these speeches which were intended to be read by high officials of the central administration and, I take it, by the emperor himself.

In the first of these two speeches, *To the emperor Theodosius about the riots* (*Or.* 19), the example of Constantine is introduced to demonstrate that the clemency for which Libanius was pleading had in similar circumstances already been shown by previous emperors.[31]

> Indeed we can see both that Julian sought to achieve fame from this source, and that the founder of the new city which he built to rival the city of Rome at least sometimes displayed this quality. For instance, once when the Roman populace assailed him with catcalls, he asked his brothers what he ought to do. One of them answered that he should let loose an armed force upon them and cut them down, and offered to take charge of the operation himself. The other replied that it became his majesty to take not the slightest notice of such behaviour. Constantine told them that this advice was the correct one and that of the harsh brother was of little use to an emperor: it was proper for rulers to put up with such skittishness. So he made the one great in renown and dismissed the other crest-fallen, and he put himself on good terms with Rome by issuing a law that emperors ought to laugh about behaviour of this kind. (*Or.* 19.19 in Norman's translation, with modifications).

The same episode is repeated, albeit with a considerable change of emphasis, in the speech which gives thanks to the emperor for having pardoned the city of Antioch (*Or.* 20.24). Both these passages tell us little about Libanius' personal attitude to Constantine, although it is, I believe, significant that the praise of Constantine's clemency is, unlike that of Julian's clemency, qualified by the remark that he displayed it only at times. Indeed Libanius goes on in the following chapter to deplore Constantine's ruthless suppression of harmless[32] magical practices (*Or.* 19.20).

The two passages do, however, seem to have considerable value as evidence for Constantine's relations with the city of Rome. As I have demonstrated in a forthcoming article in *Historia*, the episode narrated by Libanius can be located in a

[31] For a good survey of emperors' responses to criticism in circus or theatre (not, however, using the evidence from Lib. *Or.* 19 and 20) see Alan Cameron, *Circus Factions. Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 157–92.

[32] Förster's conjecture (*ekeinon* for *ekeinou*) is rightly rejected by Norman. There is no need and hence no justification to change the transmitted text.

precise historical context. For the sake of brevity I will here confine myself to summarizing the main points:

(1) Given that the speech was addressed to a well-informed audience it seems reasonable to accept that Libanius' comparatively detailed narrative is based on historical facts. I therefore take it that, on one of his visits to Rome, Constantine was in fact accompanied by two of his brothers, that the Romans expressed discontent by means of insulting acclamations, and that Constantine reacted by issuing a legal pronouncement without, however, punishing the offenders.

(2) Since Constantine visited the city of Rome only three times, there is a very limited choice as to which visit Libanius is describing. The triumphant entry into Rome after the battle of the Mulvian bridge (28 October 312) can, I believe, be ruled out since immediately after the liberation from the 'tyrant' Maxentius a conflict between the Romans and Constantine seems inconceivable. Nor is the celebration of Constantine's *decennalia* in 315 a fitting context for Libanius' narrative. The crucial point is the presence of two brothers at Constantine's court, who, since Hannibalianus the elder[33] seems to have died young, are probably to be identified with Dalmatius the elder[34] and Iulius Constantius the father of Julian.[35] Now we have reliable evidence that both of them had for several years been in a sort of exile before they were finally allowed to join Constantine's court.[36] Furthermore, since Iulius Constantius spent the last part of his exile in Corinth,[37] his return must post-date the end of the first war of Constantine against Licinius, when the diocese of Macedonia came under Constantine's control (Zos. 2.20.1). There is, then, hardly enough time for Iulius Constantius to be at Constantine's court in 315, even if one puts the battle of Cibalae in 314, not 316.[38] This negative argument can be supplemented by a piece of positive evidence. Since we know that Gallus was born in Tuscany in 325/6 (AM 14.11.27) we have every reason to suppose that his father Iulius Constantius was in fact in central Italy at the time the imperial court visited Rome.

(3) If this argument holds good, Libanius provides hitherto neglected evidence on three topics. Firstly, he proves that Constantine's brothers joined the imperial court earlier than it had been possible to demonstrate until now. I should like to suggest that the overthrow of Licinius provided the occasion for their restoration to favour. Secondly, Libanius sheds new light on a turning point in Constantine's relations with the city of Rome. The uneasy atmosphere surrounding the celebration of Constantine's *vicennalia* in Rome helps to explain why he refused to come back to Rome for the celebration of his *tricennalia* and instead made Constantinople his permanent residence. Thirdly, Libanius enables us to elucidate a much-discussed passage in Zosimus (2.29.5–30.1) where Constantine is said to have incurred the enmity of the senate and people of Rome when he left a traditional ceremony leading to the Capitol. Although Zosimus or rather his source Eunapius undoubtedly dated this incident to 326, some scholars have adduced his testimony as evidence that

[33] *PLRE* I, p. 407, n. 1.

[34] W. Ensslin, 'Dalmatius *censor*, der Halbbruder Konstantins I', *RhM* 78 (1929), 199–212; *PLRE* I, pp. 240–1, n. 6. But *CTh* 12.17.1 is unlikely to have been addressed to Constantine's half-brother since members of the imperial family are not otherwise attested as recipients of laws.

[35] *PLRE* I, p. 226, n. 7.

[36] Auson. *Prof.* 17.9–12; 18.9–13.

[37] Lib. *Or.* 14.29–30 = Jul. *E.L.F.* 20.

[38] For 314 see C. Habicht, 'Zur Geschichte des Kaisers Konstantin', *Hermes* 56 (1958), 360–78; for 316: D. Kienast, 'Das *bellum Cibalense* und die Morde des Licinius', in: M. Wissemann (ed.), *Roma renascens. Beiträge zur Spätantike und Rezeptionsgeschichte. Ilona Opelt von Freunden und Schülern zum 9.7.1988 in Verehrung gewidmet* (Frankfurt/Main etc., 1988), pp. 149–71.

Constantine ceased to offer sacrifice as early as 312[39] or, alternatively, 315.[40] Libanius can now be seen to provide independent confirmation that it was indeed during the celebration of the *vicennalia* that Constantine had to face riotous manifestations of discontent from the side of the Romans. The passage in Zosimus should, therefore, be understood as an integral part of a partisan tradition about Constantine connecting his adoption of Christianity with the murder of Crispus and Fausta.

(ii) *Constantine and the city councils*

Apart from the Theodosian code, Libanius provides our main contemporary evidence for the decline of the city councils in the fourth century. His two speeches dealing with the problem of the so-called flight of the councillors (*Or.* 48; 49) draw a gloomy picture of the situation of city councils in general and the city council of Antioch in particular. According to the former of the two speeches (*Or.* 48),[41] the numerical strength of the Antiochene city council had under Theodosius dropped from 600 plus 600 originally to only 60 (*Or.* 48.3; cf. *Or.* 2.33: from 600 to 60); the latter gives even more dramatic figures stating a decline from 1200 to 12 (*Or.* 49.8). The two speeches both blame an inner circle within the city councils as being chiefly responsible for the deterioration in the status and membership of the curial order. But while *Oration* 48 addresses the councillors of Antioch invoking their civic spirit, *Oration* 49 appeals to the emperor demanding that the existing laws against the flight of councillors be enforced. Given that Libanius' argument focuses on the role of the *principales*, it is remarkable that he allots a fair share of the responsibility to imperial policy. In Libanius' view the decline of the city council began only after Constantine had become sole emperor of the East. By contrast, he saw the reign of the emperor Licinius as a period of urban prosperity. As always with Libanius, the texts are not as explicit as a modern historian would like them to be, but nevertheless they do seem to fit into a coherent and intelligible picture.

(1) In *Oration* 48 Libanius asserts that the great period of the Antiochene city council, when 600 men served it 'with their property' and another 600 'with their bodies', lasted until the reign of a certain emperor: 'Thereafter it was no longer so, for many destructive forces of various origins adversely affected the council' (*Or.* 48.3). This passage, a splendid example of Libanius' sometimes exasperating elusiveness, only goes to show that Libanius did in fact link the decline of the city councils with the reign of a particular emperor, whose name, however, he does not deign to mention. Fortunately, there is a parallel passage in *Oration* 49 which describes the same process in more detail and with more precision.

> In times past the councils used to flourish in every city. The land and better class houses used to belong to the councillors, and every one of them had money: they would intermarry and to be a member of the council was to be well-to-do. That was their situation when a certain emperor took them over, but by various acts of policy, not least by the foundation of his new capital, he brought them low. And after his death, when he had already sown the seeds of the Persian war, the troubles connected with this war wrought havoc with the councils, and every year caused a deterioration in them, since councillors sent to the Tigris were forced, by the losses they incurred,

[39] J. Straub, 'Konstantins Verzicht auf den Gang zum Kapitol', *Historia* 4 (1955), 297–313, reprinted in: idem. *Regeneratio imperii. Aufsätze über Roms Kaisertum und Reich im Spiegel der heidnischen und christlichen Publizistik* (Darmstadt, 1972), pp. 100–18.

[40] F. Paschoud, 'Zosime 2, 29 et la version païenne de la conversion de Constantin', *Historia* 20 (1971), 334–53, reprinted in: idem, *Cinq études zur Zosime* (Paris, 1975), pp. 24–62.

[41] I accept the arguments of J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Antioch. City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 270–6 as modified in *CR* n. s. 29 (1979), 30 that *Or.* 48 was composed earlier than *Or.* 49, probably in 384/5.

to sell their family property. And purchasers flocked in from heaven knows where, since they were comfortably reaping the harvest of office in the imperial administration. (*Or.* 49.2 in Norman's translation).

The emperor who by various policies caused the decline of the city councils is here unmistakably identified as Constantine, and his reign is implicitly contrasted with that of a predecessor from whom he took over the cities in a state of prosperity. But who was this predecessor of Constantine? Petit maintained that Libanius had Diocletian in mind.[42] In view of the context, however, Licinius is a more likely candidate. This inference gains corroboration from a curious passage in the speech *In Defence of the Temples*, where Licinius is described as an emperor 'who allowed the cities to prosper' (*Or.* 30.6). A passage in the *Funeral speech on Julian* also seems to point to the conclusion that Libanius indeed thinks of the reign of Licinius when talking about the golden age of the city councils: Libanius here recounts that the administration of Licinius' praetorian prefect, and Julian's maternal grandfather, Iulius Iulianus[43] was so highly appreciated by Constantine himself that he praised it as a model for his own officials to emulate (*Or.* 18.9).

(2) The picture thus emerging seems sufficiently clear to serve as a starting point for further questions. For, whatever one might think about the factual basis of this view, there can, I believe, be little doubt that Libanius himself sincerely believed that the decline of the city councils culminating under Theodosius only set in after Constantine had overthrown Licinius. Addressing the emperor Theodosius and his subordinates with the aim of bringing about measures against fugitive councillors, there was no point in explicitly denigrating Constantine and implicitly whitewashing Licinius, unless Libanius believed these judgements to be true. It seems legitimate, then, to ask, by which policies Libanius believed that Constantine had caused the decline of the city councils, whether Libanius' views on the municipal policies of Licinius and Constantine can be paralleled in other sources, and, finally, what their historical significance might be.

Only one of the reasons why Constantine was held responsible by Libanius for the decline of the city councils is explicitly stated in the text I have quoted: the foundation of Constantinople. For Libanius the city of Constantine was not only a hot-bed of bigotry and debauchery but above all a consuming centre parasitic on the other cities of the empire.[44] Eunapius expresses the same view in more detail (*V.S.* 462/3, cf. Zos. 2.32.1), and it is probable that it reflects a widely held resentment against the establishment of a second Rome within the realm of Greek culture. As regards the factual basis of this resentment, it is obvious that the establishment of a second capital built and provisioned out of imperial funds indeed put considerable strain on the resources of the empire,[45] and that this was financed at the expense of the provincial cities, both through taxes raised in the provinces and through reduced spending outside Constantinople.

Reasons other than the foundation of a parasitic consuming centre are hinted at by Libanius but not explicitly stated, if we leave aside Constantine's indirect responsibility for the financial losses eastern decurions incurred in supplying Roman

[42] P. Petit, *Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche au IVe siècle après J.-C.* (Institut Français d'Archéologie de Beyrouth. Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 62; Paris, 1955), p. 54.

[43] *PLRE* I, pp. 478–9, n. 35.

[44] *Or.* 1.74–80, esp. 75–6, 215, 279; 30.37; *Ep.* 441.4; 633.2.

[45] For the food supply of Constantinople see G. Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Bibliothèque Byzantine. Études 7: Paris, 1974), pp. 530–41.

troops fighting against the Persians.[46] There is reason, however, to assume that the fiscal policies of Licinius and Constantine were among them. Since taxation was the field where imperial policy and city councils were most closely connected, it seems significant that a clear distinction between the fiscal policies of Licinius and Constantine can be paralleled in other sources. Aurelius Victor contrasts the *parsimonia* (41.3) of Licinius with the *munificentia* (40.15) of Constantine. In the first panegyric on his cousin Constantius Julian praises Constantine for having lavishly spent all the wealth that Licinius had amassed during his reign (*Or.* 1.6, 8b), and this hyperbolical praise was clearly intended to be a hidden critique, as becomes clear in Julian's *Caesares*, where Constantine's extravagance is ridiculed (335b, cf. *Or.* 7.22, 228a).

Constantine's fiscal policy seems indeed to have been widely criticized, not only by pagans. Even Constantine's hagiographer Eusebius felt bound to admit that, because of his excessive sense of benevolence towards his friends, Constantine was unable to curb the insatiability of his subordinates (Eus. *V.C.* 4.29–31). Pagans normally took a less charitable view. In Ammianus' famous phrase Constantine was 'the first to open the greedy jaws of his supporters while Constantius rammed the wealth of the provinces down their throats' (16.8.12). The *Epitome de Caesaribus* reports that Constantine during the last ten years of his reign was nicknamed 'pupillus ob profusiones immodicas' (41.16). While the sources I have just quoted focus on the waste of public means, Eunapius, as represented in Zosimus, singles out a specific fiscal innovation of Constantine as having been detrimental to the cities, the introduction of the *collatio lustralis* (2.38.1). Libanius is, I believe, likely to have shared this view, since the *collatio lustralis* is the only tax he ever criticizes as being in principle unbearable and unjust (*Or.* 46.22). If Eusebius is to be trusted when he credits Constantine with a reduction of the land tax by one quarter (*V.C.* 4.3), we can here detect an urban bias in our sources. The introduction of a tax on the urban population counted for more than a lessening of the burdens of the peasants.

While the negative tradition about Constantine's fiscal policy can safely be accepted as rooted in reality, the existence of a favourable tradition (cf. *Epit.* 41.8–10) about the fiscal policy of an emperor whose memory had officially been condemned is more difficult to explain.[47] The most attractive solution of this problem remains, I believe, to attribute to Licinius the abolition of the urban poll tax, attested in a law falsely registered under the name of Constantine.[48]

(iii) *Constantine and the Pagans*

I finally turn to the representation of Constantine's religious policies in Libanius. The question presents itself under two aspects: Constantine's adoption of Christianity and his policies towards the pagans. Most of the relevant passages now come from

[46] Lib. *Ep.* 143, *Or.* 17.19; cf. *Or.* 18.206; AM 25.4.23–4, 24.3.4 (speech of Julian); cf. 24.4.9.

[47] Licinius' economical use of funds is implicitly acknowledged by Lactantius (*M.P.* 46.12: 'tenax in largiendo'). Eusebius merely reproduces the usual stereotypes about the behaviour of tyrants (*H.E.* 10.8.13; *V.C.* 1.55.1–2: size of fiscal lots exaggerated, men long dead included in the tax registers); cf. Anon. Val. 22: many rich men executed in order to confiscate their properties.

[48] *CTh* 13.10.2. The attribution to Licinius was proposed by H. Grégoire, 'About Licinius' Fiscal and Religious Policy', *Byzantion* 13 (1938), 551–60. The attribution to Maximinus Daia, proposed by S. Mitchell, 'Maximinus and the Christians in A.D. 312: A New Latin Inscription', *JRS* 78 (1988), 105–24, at 122–3, seems less likely. In order to ascribe the law to Maximinus, not only the *inscriptio* but also the *subscriptio* has to be changed, since Maximinus did not recognize the third consulate of Licinius, making himself consul for the third time in 313.

Libanius' speech *In Defence of the Temples* (*Or.* 30), addressed to the emperor Theodosius and the higher echelons of his civil administration while Tatianus was praetorian prefect (388–91).[49] In this speech Libanius appeals to Theodosius that he should protect the temples against the assaults of fanatical monks arguing that attempts to prevent pagans from offering incense sacrifice were contrary to the laws the obeying of which the emperor was bound to ensure. In support of his case Libanius gives a short sketch of imperial policy toward paganism since Constantine. His main aim in doing so is to demonstrate that the prohibition of pagan sacrifice in all its forms by Constantius (cf. *CTh* 16.10.2–6) was an aberration from the more tolerant attitude displayed both before and after him. It is in this context that Libanius' statements about Constantine's religious policies have to be interpreted.

> While I was a boy, the ruler who had held a reign of terror in Rome was brought down by the leader of an army of Gauls, who attacked the gods to whom just before they had prayed. Having defeated the person who had allowed the cities to prosper, and thinking it to his own advantage to recognize some other as god, he, on the one hand, used the sacred treasures to build the city upon which his heart was set, but on the other made absolutely no alteration in the traditional forms of worship; though poverty reigned in the temples, one could see all the rest of the rituals being fulfilled. (*Or.* 30.6 in Norman's translation, with modifications)

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether or not Constantine really respected the traditional forms of worshipping the gods in their entirety, I look first at the account of Constantine's adoption of Christianity. At first sight, Libanius' position on this seems inconsistent, even self-contradictory. On the one hand, he depicts Constantine's army as having fought against the gods as early as 312, apparently referring to the Christian tradition that the victory over Maxentius was won under the sign of the cross. Constantine's own adoption of Christianity, on the other hand, is assigned to the period after the overthrow of Licinius rather than to the period when Constantine defeated Maxentius. Admittedly the grammatical structure of the crucial sentence is loose (even more loose than it is possible for me adequately to render into English), but the sequence in which these events are narrated can hardly be due to chance. Ascribing Constantine's adoption of Christianity to opportunistic motives, Libanius clearly wanted his readers to link this decision with the looting of pagan temples started after the final defeat of Licinius.[50]

A well-known chapter in Zosimus invites comparison (2.39.1–4). Zosimus, as usual following his source Eunapius, preserves a pagan tradition which ascribed Constantine's adoption of Christianity to feelings of guilt for the execution of Crispus and Fausta.[51] When pagan priests refused to purify him of his wrongdoing, Constantine turned to a mysterious 'Egyptian from Spain' who promised him that Jesus would forgive whatever sin he committed. Libanius agrees with Eunapius in that he too assigns Constantine's adoption of Christianity to the period of Constantine as sole emperor.[52] In Libanius, however, Constantine's apostasy from the old gods does not result from feelings of guilt, but from opportunism and greed. Since in another passage of the same speech Libanius declares that Constantine was punished twice for the looting of the temples, first by self-inflicted punishment and

[49] For Tatianus see *PLRE* I, pp. 876–8, n. 5. P. Petit, 'Sur la date du *Pro Templis*', *Byzantion* 21 (1951), 285–309 has in my view failed to prove that Libanius sent the speech while the praetorian prefect Cynegius (*PLRE* I, pp. 235–6, n. 3), harshly criticized in §46, was still in office (384–8).

[50] Eus. *L.C.* 8.1–4; *V.C.* 54, 57; Jul. *Or.* 7.22, 228b; Anon. *De reb. bell.* 2.1; Lib. *Or.* 30.6, 37; 62.8; Zos. 5.24.6; Joh. Mal. p. 324 Bonn.

[51] Disseminated in secret as long as sons of Constantine reigned, it first shows up in Julian's *Caesares* (336a/b). Sozomenus deemed it necessary to refute it at length: *H.E.* 1.5.

[52] A similar periodization of Constantine's reign is to be found in Aur. Vict. 41.12.

then by punishment suffered even after death when his sons attacked each other (*Or.* 30.37), he seems to have regarded the execution of Crispus and Fausta as a consequence rather than a cause of Constantine's apostasy from the old gods.

The second aspect of the quoted passage from *In Defence of the Temples* is the assertion that Constantine, while employing the temple treasures to build Constantinople, refrained from altering the traditional forms of worshipping the gods. Again I should like to stress the fact that the credibility of this statement is an essential part of Libanius' argument. Trying to establish a precedent for the toleration of pagan cults by a Christian emperor, Libanius is unlikely to employ a mere fabrication of his imagination. Indeed we find that Libanius had already presented the same argument to a purely local (that is, here, Antiochene)[53] audience when he defended himself under Valens against the accusation of being an incompetent teacher. Arguing that the indisputable decline of rhetorical studies was due to the withdrawal of imperial favour, he draws a clear distinction between Constantine who confined himself to stripping the temples of their wealth, and Constantius who had the temples destroyed, abolished every sacred custom and preferred short-hand clerks to rhetorically trained men (*Or.* 62.8–9).[54] This very distinction can indeed be traced even further back, to the emperor Julian. Outlining in allegorical form the history of the Constantinian dynasty, Julian blames Constantine for having brought ruin on his family by deserting the sun-god and looting the temples. The actual destruction of the temples, however, started only under his sons (*Or.* 7.22, 228b–c). The belief that Constantine had not persecuted the pagans appears also in Themistius when he hails Jovian who had issued a law proclaiming religious toleration as a 'new Constantine' (*Or.* 5, 70d–71a). I would conclude that Libanius reflects a persistent pagan tradition which insisted that Constantine, although he adopted Christianity for himself, nevertheless did not persecute the pagans.[55]

The historical significance of this tradition is of course highly disputed. Timothy Barnes, for example, discards Libanius' testimony as 'totally misleading',[56] relying on Eusebius' assertion that Constantine forbade pagan worship in all its cultic forms after the final defeat of Licinius.[57] Now it is obvious that the pagan tradition I have tried to reconstruct cannot be sustained as an unqualified generalization. Constantine did after all destroy some old sanctuaries, probably including the prestigious one of Asclepius in Cilician Aegeae.[58] This does not, however, necessarily imply that the

[53] Local circulation is indicated by the fact that the speech culminates in an invective against a local enemy of Libanius: *Or.* 62.63–73. *Terminus post quem* is the suppression of the revolt of Procopius (*Or.* 62.58–60). Since the sketch of the emperors' attitudes to Greek rhetoric (*Or.* 62.8–18) ends with Julian, the speech was almost certainly composed before Valens' death.

[54] In view of these explicit statements it is puzzling to find that in his *Autobiography* Libanius praises a citizen of Heraclea Pontica whom he had met in 340 for having 'consorted more with gods than with men on earth' although a sacrilegious legislator inflicted the death penalty on anyone who dared to do so (*Or.* 1.27). Two (not mutually exclusive) explanations might be suggested. Firstly, Libanius refers to divination (cf. *Or.* 19.20) rather than to sacrifices which did not become liable to the death penalty before 356/7 (*CTh* 16.10.6). Secondly, since the statement covers the whole life-time of the man, it cannot be precisely located in time. The emperor in question could, therefore, well be Constantius.

For a different view see T. D. Barnes, 'Christians and Pagans in the Reign of Constantius', *Entretiens Hardt* 34 (1987), 301–37, at 330, n. 135.

[55] It was not, however, shared by Eunapius who accused Constantine of having pulled down the most celebrated temples: *V.S.* 461.

[56] T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), p. 377, n. 11.

[57] Eus. *V.C.* 2.45; 2.23, cf. *CTh* 16.10.2.

[58] According to Eusebius (*V.C.* 3.56) the famous sanctuary (for the site and its history see L. Robert, 'De Cilicie à Messine et à Plymouth avec deux inscriptions grecques errantes', *Journal*

general picture of Constantine as an emperor who allowed the traditional forms of worshipping the gods to continue is false. There is reason to believe that even in the city which bears Constantine's name the ancestral temples of Helios, Artemis and Aphrodite remained in function.[59] Indeed a key document from the hands of Constantine himself, the *Letter to the Eastern Provincials* (Eus. *V.C.* 2.48–60), issued probably after Licinius' death in 325 (referred to in 2.54), conveys the very same impression. Though expressing the wish that all his subjects should convert to Christianity, Constantine here makes it quite clear that he did not want pagan worship to be suppressed by means of force.[60] The evidence thus admits an alternative interpretation. The sequence of events in Eusebius' narrative implies that the *Letter* followed the legislation against the pagans. If so, the law against pagan worship can only have been valid for a very short period, and the *Letter* marks a reversal of religious policy, the return to toleration after a short period of attempted persecution.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up. I have argued that we find in Libanius two very different pictures of Constantine, which reflect different traditions of different origins.

In the panegyric on Constantius and Constans Libanius merely reproduces current views on Constantine propagated by the courts of his sons. Constantine, the 'great' and 'most divine' emperor, was sent from heaven and ruled according to the will of God. His life and rule was a model for his sons to follow. He liberated Rome from the tyranny of Maxentius and went to war against Licinius only when the latter broke the treaties with him. He was a great warrior defeating both the Goths and the Sarmatians, but miscalculated when he allowed the Persians to improve their weaponry with the help of Roman iron.

The so-called Reform-speeches of the Theodosian period belong to an opposing tradition entertained by pagans in the cities of the east. Constantine ruined the city councils by founding a consuming centre parasitic on the eastern provinces and by oppressive fiscal demands. He started a disastrous war against the Persians. He converted to Christianity for purely opportunistic reasons and was duly punished for having looted the temples by disasters in his family. In comparison with Constantius, however, his reign was the lesser evil, since, although he adopted Christianity for himself, he did not suppress pagan cults by means of force.

des Savants [1973], 162–211, reprinted in: idem, *Opera Minora Selecta*, vol. 7 [Amsterdam, 1990], pp. 225–75) was razed to the ground by soldiers acting on Constantine's orders. But when Julian in 362 passed through Tarsus he was approached by 'the priest of Asclepius' and granted his plea that the local bishop should restore the columns which he had taken away from the temple (Zon. 13.12). In 355 an altar dedicated to 'Asclepius of Aegeae' was set up in Epidaurus (*IG* IV^2 438). Libanius attributes the demolition to Constantius: *Or.* 30.38–9; cf. *Ep.* 695, 1342.

[59] Joh. Mal. p. 324 Bonn with the discussion in Dagron, op. cit., pp. 373–7 (but Joh. Lyd. *De Mens.* 4.2 is poor evidence for the performance of pagan rites during the consecration).

C. Mango, *Le Développement urbain de Constantinople (IVe–VIIe siècle)* (Travaux et mémoires. Monographes 2: Paris, 1990^2), pp. 34–6 points out that the few churches which can plausibly be attributed to Constantine can hardly have given Constantinople a thoroughly Christian outlook as Eusebius would have us believe (*V.C.* 3.48).

[60] The traditional interpretation of Constantine's *Letter to the Eastern Provincials* has recently been challenged by T. D. Barnes, 'Constantine's Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice', *AJPh* 105 (1984), 69–72) who argues that document means the exact opposite of what it has always been taken to mean: in his view the *Letter* is not an edict of toleration, but an edict of persecution. For a convincing refutation of this view see R. M. Errington, 'Constantine and the Pagans', *GRBSt* 29 (1988), 309–18, at 311–12.

For all that, it is possible to detect behind the all too obvious self-contradictions a basic continuity in Libanius' attitude to Constantine. The panegyric of 344/5 already foreshadows the critical views on Constantine expressed under Theodosius, not in what it says, but in what it omits to say. Libanius never praised Constantine's adoption and propagation of Christianity, his fiscal policies, or the foundation of Constantinople. He was never prepared to call Licinius a tyrant and he always blamed Constantine as being responsible for the war against Persia which was so disastrous to the cities of the east.

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