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## CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT – THE TRUTH OR A MYTH?

In historiography, the phrase *Constantinian shift* in the sense of transformation connected with the reign of Constantine is quite common. This expression occurs in different languages e.g.: przełom konstantyński<sup>1</sup>, die konstantinische Wende<sup>2</sup>, le tournant constantinien<sup>3</sup>, svolta Costantiniana<sup>4</sup>. Sometimes, the whole epoch initiated by Constantine is referred to as groundbreaking<sup>5</sup> or it is replaced with a semantically closed phrase – the revolution of Constantine<sup>6</sup>. According to the dictionary definition a “shift” is a change in something; this is a change in position, direction, or character. So, a fundamental change, a real turnabout is meant here. In a sense, the word “shift” implies discontinuity and is a contradiction of continuation. Similarly, the term revolution, which

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Straub, *W sprawie przełomu konstantyńskiego*, transl. M. Kaczmarkowski, RTK 27 (1980) z. 4, 157-166; M. Banaszak, *Następstwo tzw. przełomu konstantyńskiego*, in: *Historia Kościoła Katolickiego*, t. 1: *Starożytność*, Warszawa 1989, 121-122; S. Bralewski, *Przełom konstantyński a religijność Rzymian w wiekach IV i V – wybrane zagadnienia*, in: *Bitwa przy moście mulwjskim. Konsekwencje*, red. Z. Kalinowski – D. Próchniak, Poznań 2013 (in print).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Die Kirche Angesichts der Konstantinischen Wende*, hrsg. G. Ruhbach, Darmstadt 1976; J. Bleicken, *Constantin der Große und die Christen. Überlegungen zur konstantinischen Wende*, München 1992; *Die konstantinische Wende*, hrsg. E. Mühlenberg, Gütersloh 1998; M. Girardet, *Die Konstantinische Wende. Voraussetzungen und geistige Grundlagen der Religionspolitik Konstantins des Grossen*. Darmstadt 2006, 39-155.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. Rist, *Constantin et l'Église. Remarques sur le soi-disant tournant constantinien*, “Connaissance des Pères de l'Église” 109 (2008) 43-55; F. Barbey Weabey, *L'Église et la politique en Afrique: Éléments de réflexion pour dédramatiser le débat*, Paris 2009, 89-106 (*Le tournant constantinien*).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. R. Farina, *Eusebio di Cesarea e la “Svolta Costantiniana”*, “Augustinianum” 26 (1986) 313-322; G. Bonamente, *La “svolta costantiniana”* in: *Cristianesimo e istituzioni politiche. Da Augusto a Giustiniano*, a cura di E. Dal Covolo – R. Uglione, Roma 2001, 147-170; F. Carlà – M.G. Castello, *Questioni tardoantiche. Storia e mito della svolta costantiniana*, Roma 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Konstantin der Grosse. Kaiser einer Epochenwende*, hrsg. F. Schuller – H. Wolff, München 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. Van Damme, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, Cambridge 2008; J. Vogt, *Constantin der Grosse und sein Jahrhundert*, München 1960 (spec. p. 135-256: *Die Revolution Constantins des Grossen*).

is associated with it, refers to radical and rapid qualitative changes in some field. The consequence of the Constantinian shift or revolution, according to many researchers, was the Constantinian era or epoch, in which the Church was exposed to a twofold danger: either to dominate over rulers and the state, or to submit to them and to become an instrument in their hands<sup>7</sup>. In the Catholic Church, it was only the Second Vatican Council that was to put an end to it<sup>8</sup>.

Voluminous literature has been written on the subject of emperor Constantine, and new works are still being created<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, it is impossible to analyse all the issues connected with the Constantinian shift in such a short research paper even cursorily, so I will focus only on certain aspects of the problem. First of all, I will discuss the definition of the phenomenon – how the term

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Vogt, *Upadek Rzymu*, transl. A. Łukaszewicz, Warszawa 1993, 99; idem, *Constantin der Grosse und sein Jahrhundert*, p. 257-272: *Die constantinische Epoche*. In A.H.M. Jones's view (*Constantine and Conversion of Europe*, London 1948, 253): "thus was born Caesaropapism, the doctrine that the secular sovereign is by the grace of God supreme governor of the Church within his dominations and is as such divinely authorised to dictate the religious beliefs of his subjects". See also on this subject: Ch. Pietri, *La politique de Constance II: un premier "césaropapisme" ou l'imitatio Constantini?*, in: *L'Église et L'Empire au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, éd. A. Dihle, Genève 1989, 113-173; J.M. Sansterre, *Eusèbe de Césarée et la naissance de la théorie "césaropapiste"*, "Byzantion" 42 (1972) 131-195; R. Farina, *L'Impero e l'imperatore cristiano in Eusebio di Cesarea. La prima teologia politica del cristianesimo*, Bibliotheca Theologica Salesiana, Ser. I: Fontes, vol. 2, Zürich 1966; P. Maraval, *Eusèbe de Césarée. La théologie politique de l'empire chrétien. Louanges de Constantin (Triakontaétérikos)*, Paris 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M.D. Chenu, *La fin de l'ère constantinienne*, in: *Un concile pour notre temps*, éd. J.P. Dubois-Dumée, Paris 1961, 59-87. According to Stefan Swieżawski (T. Królak, *Kontemplacja i zdradzony świat. Rozmowy z prof. Stefanem Swieżawskim*, Poznań 1999, 159) "Constantinian era" consisted (since the Edict of Milan) on the alliance "throne and altar" and thus on the concept of State servility to the Catholic Church. It was not until the Second Vatican Council had explicitly break with that theory and practice. Conforming with Swieżawski the participants Council said that you need to end up with the Constantinian period, and in his conviction so happened.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Only in the recent years the following monographies were published: A. Marcone, *Costantino il Grande*, Rome – Bari 2000; H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the bishops: the Politics of intolerance*, Baltimore 2000; R.R. Holloway, *Constantine and Rome*, New Haven 2004; Ch.M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, London – New York 2004; H. Brandt, *Konstantin der Grosse. Der erste christliche Kaiser*, München 2006; *Constantine the Great: York's Roman Emperor*, ed. E. Hartley – J. Hawkes – M. Henig – F. Mee, York 2006; *Konstantin der Grosse: Geschichte, Archäologie, Rezeption*, hrsg. A. Demandt – J. Engemann, Trier 2006; *The Cambridge companion to the age of Constantine*, ed. N. Lenski, Cambridge 2006; E. Herrmann-Otto, *Konstantin der Grosse*, Darmstadt 2007; O. Schmidt, *Constantin der Grosse (275-337)*, Stuttgart 2007; R. Turcan, *Constantin. Le baptême ou la pourpre*, Dijon 2007; M. Clauss, *Konstantin der Grosse und seine Zeit*, München 2009; P. Stephenson, *Constantine. Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor*, London 2009; K.M. Girardet, *Der Kaiser und sein Gott. Das Christentum im Denken und in der Religionspolitik Konstantins der Grosse*, Berlin – New York 2010; J. Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*, Cambridge 2011; T. Barnes, *Constantine. Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later roman Empire*, Oxford 2011; P. Maraval, *Constantin, empereur romain et chrétien*, Paris 2011; V. Puech, *Constantin*, Paris 2011; B. Lançon – T. Moreau, *Constantin. Un Auguste chrétien*, Paris 2012; D. Potter, *Constantine the Emperor*, Oxford 2013.

“Constantinian shift” should be understood, what was the connection between the notion and the policy of emperor Constantine. Which of Constantine’s actions, connected with the conversion to Christianity and responding to the military victories received from God were novelties, and which of them were the continuation of Roman traditions? I will also try to emphasize the opinions about the shift that did not correspond to the historical reality and which created a certain kind of a myth. The question that arises immediately is whether in the times contemporary with Constantine, or close to his reign, any breakthrough was seen in his policy. It must be noted that, according to Christian authors, a fundamental breakthrough occurred when Christ – *Salvator mundi* – was born. As they noted, Christ was born as a human being and a Roman citizen in the time of Augustus, who ordered the Janus’ temple to be closed and established peace on Earth – *pax Augusta*<sup>10</sup>. In this way, the emperor contributed to the creation of the community of all people. The peace was supposed to be the basis of a new order in the world and was connected to the birth of Christ-God, who was its real source. Through his earthly epiphany, he was perceived as the real founder of the new order and the provider of peace. So, *pax Romana*, *pax Augusta* became, in their view, *pax Christiana*. Lactantius in *Divinae Institutiones*<sup>11</sup>, that was before the year 313, wrote about a golden age, when a worship of one God was dominant, which brought peace and common harmony. In his work, the ancient author “constantly assumes, and assumes his readers will agree, that Christianity, the Religion of the Most High God, is the original and natural religion of all mankind”<sup>12</sup>. This period of common happiness was, in his view, supposed to return, together with people’s conversion to Christianity, which, in a way, was a herald of the Constantinian shift<sup>13</sup>.

Constantine put an end to prosecutions of Christians and re-established common peace<sup>14</sup>, so an extremely important role in God’s plan towards the world was attributed to him. Three centuries before, Augustus, through

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea (*Praeparatio evangelica* I 4; *Demonstratio evangelica* III 7, 30; VII 2, 22; VIII 3; VIII 4, 12; IX 17, 13) treats *pax Augusta* as a work of Divine Providence predicted in the Old Testament.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* V 5-8; L.J. Swift, *Lactantius and the Golden Age*, “American Journal of Philology” 89 (1968) 144-156; V. Buchheit, *Goldene Zeit und Paradies auf Erden (Laktanz, Inst. 5,5-8)*, “Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft” NF 4 (1978) 161-185 and 5 (1979) 219-235.

<sup>12</sup> O. Nicholson, *Caelum potius intuemini: Lactantius and a Statue of Constantine*, *StPatr* 34 (2001) 185. As Timothy Barnes pointed out, Eusebius probably perceived Christianity as Timothy Barnes, (*Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge 1981, 126ff, 184ff) the original religion of mankind and identified it with the religion of the patriarchs of the Old Testament.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. O. Nicholson, *Golden Age and the End of the World: Myths of Mediterranean Life from Lactantius to Joshua the Stylite*, in: *The Mediaeval Mediterranean*, ed. M. Chiat – K. Reyerson – S. Cloud, Minnesota, 1989, 11-18.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Eusebius, *Chronicon* sub anno 313 (*Romanorum* 34, *regnavit Constantinus* 10), ed. R. Helm: *Die Chronik des Hieronymus*, GCS 47 (*Eusebius Werke* 7), Berlin 1956, 230c: “Pax nostris a Constantino reddita”. According to Eusebius, peace was restored by Constantine, not given by

reorganizing the internal situation of the Roman Empire<sup>15</sup>, unwittingly prepared the country for the advent of Christ, facilitated the spreading of Christianity and thus unintentionally played a vital role in the mentioned plan. On the other hand, Constantine, through his protection over believers of Christ, started a new epoch of eschatological Kingdom of God on Earth. In this way, the emperor opened a new chapter of history, leading people to unity, which had its beginning in the only God. Orosius expressed it in brief terms: one God, one Emperor, one Empire<sup>16</sup>, one Church, one peace, one homeland, one law, one faith<sup>17</sup>.

Obviously, this was the way in which Christian circles perceived Constantine. The Emperor was a controversial figure as early as in the time of his contemporaries – he was differently judged by Christians on the one hand, and pagans, on the other<sup>18</sup>. The former were eulogists of his achievements and virtues of character, the latter were his ruthless critics. This divergence regarded the outlook on life. A different view among pagan authors was expressed by Praxagoras of Athens, who, despite being a pagan, which was emphasized by Photius in the *Library*<sup>19</sup>, noted numerous virtues, noble character and great achievements of Constantine, while criticising his enemies at the same time. However, the mentioned exception could not have changed the existing division of opinions of those who judged Constantine<sup>20</sup>.

From the Emperor's letter to the citizens of Palestine, which was cited in *Vita Constantini* by Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea<sup>21</sup>, it appears that Constantine himself had an impression that he was chosen by God as a measure against "so grave a wickedness oppresses humanity"<sup>22</sup>, bringing a threat of

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him. After the prosecutions of Christians, the world returned to its normal state, see A. Kotłowska, *Obraz dziejów w Chronici Canones Euzebiusza z Cezarei*, Poznań 2009, 205-209.

<sup>15</sup> Augustus, by introducing monarchy, and as a consequence *pax Augusta*, provided *Imperium Romanum* with stabilization on an unprecedented scale. The success achieved by this ruler influence the political views of Eusebius of Caesarea, who treated the "divine monarchy" as the best of all political, cf. Eusebius Caesariensis, *Demonstratio evangelica* III 2, 27; see also Kotłowska, *Obraz dziejów*, p. 204-206.

<sup>16</sup> Religious sphere (politeizm/monotheism) was transferred to politics (poliarchy/monarchy). Cf. F. Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy*, Washington 1966, 614-615; Kotłowska, *Obraz dziejów*, p. 204.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Paulus Orosius, *Historiarum Adversum Paganos* III 8, 5; V 2, 1; VII 33, 17-19. See also: K. Iłski, *Idea jedności politycznej społecznej i religijnej w świetle pism Ambrożego z Mediolanu*, Poznań 2001, 224.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 272-275.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. S. Bralewski, *Historiografia pro i antykonstantyńska w Bibliotece Focjusza*, "Piotrkowskie Zeszyty Historyczne" 3 (2001) 31-40.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Eusebius Caesariensis, *Vita Constantini* II 24-42, ed. F. Winkelmann, GCS 7/1 (*Eusebius Werke* 1/1), Berlin 1975, 58-66.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem II 28, 1, GCS 7/1, 60, transl. A. Cameron – S.G. Hall: Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Oxford 1999, 105.

complete disaster of the Roman Empire. Through becoming a tool in God's hands and by dint of his help, the Emperor, as he reckoned, eradicated every kind of evil, which controlled the world. Ever since, the humankind, which was enlightened and taught by Constantine, was supposed to obey sacred laws of God and the faith was to expand without any obstacles<sup>23</sup>. The reign of Constantine, from a propaganda perspective, was supposed to be a turning point in the battle against evil. The Constantinian shift, according to Eusebius, would mean, a restoration of peace and an introduction of the Kingdom of God, on the one hand, yet on the other, a fundamental change in the battle against evil.

An interesting opinion was expressed by Hermias Sozomen, the author of the *History of the Church*, who lived and worked in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote about a miraculous and unexpected transformation (παραδόξου μεταβολῆς) that happened to the world (οἰκουμένη)<sup>24</sup>. It was Sozomen's conviction that God himself caused it to happen. According to the historian, "in divine and great affairs, God delights to bring to pass changes in a marvelous manner (παραδόξου μεταβάσεις)"<sup>25</sup>. The author defined the mentioned change as an abandonment of old pagan religion (προτέρας θρησκείας), as well as native customs (πατρίων νόμων)<sup>26</sup>.

Sozomen associated this transformation with the will of God and testimony given by many Christians, and indirectly also with emperor Constantine, since he was a proponent of faith and a protector (πρεσβεύειν – defend, favour, give priority) of Christian dogmas (Χριστιανῶν δόγμα). There were several events which were believed to have persuaded the emperor to that, especially, as the historian stated, a sign that he got from God (i.e. the famous vision that the ruler experienced during a campaign against Maxentius). A breakthrough in this case regarded an abandonment of paganism and native customs connected with it. It must be emphasized that Sozomen wrote from a perspective of over one hundred years, he was thus more aware of the changes that occurred.

Ancient writers noticed an ambivalent nature of the Constantinian shift for the Church itself, which is proven by a testimony of Jerome of Stridon, who stated that since the Church got under the control of Christian emperors, it gained power and wealth, but, on the other hand, weakened its moral strength<sup>27</sup>. Apparently, contemporary elites of the Christian world were aware of the fact that a mass conversion to this religion together with the involvement of the state was not always caused by an internal transformation of the baptised, but sometimes resulted from servility and careerism.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibidem* II 28, 2, GCS 7/1, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Sozomenus, HE I 1, 11, ed. J. Bidez – G.Ch. Hansen, GCS 50, Berlin 1960, 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem* I 1, 9, GCS 50, 8, transl. Ch.D. Hartranft: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (= NPNF), ed. P. Schaff, Series II, vol. 2, New York 1890, 513.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem* I 1, 11, GCS 50, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hieronymus Stridonensis, *Epistulae*, ed. I. Hilberg, CSEL 54-56, Vindobonae 1910-1918, *passim*. See Straub, *W sprawie przelomu konstantyńskiego*, p. 157.

The notion of the Constantinian shift was popularized in various languages in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, it was not defined in a uniform way. When, in 1913, that is exactly one hundred years ago, pope Pius X encouraged Christians to celebrate a one thousand six hundredth anniversary of the Edict of Milan, he emphasized the positive side of the Constantinian shift. Many authors discussing this issue perceived the shift only as the beginning of supremacy of Christians over pagans and treated the emperor as the first Christian monarch. In other words, Christianisation of *Imperium Romanum* was associated with Constantine and this trend has been maintained in numerous publications until today<sup>28</sup>.

Since the Second Vatican Council, negative effects of the Constantinian shift on the Church<sup>29</sup>, as a consequence of which this institution has changed fundamentally<sup>30</sup>, have been stressed. According to these opinions, the transformation concerned mainly the Church itself. It was proven that there was a substantial difference between the Church from before the reign of Constantine and the Church after that time. The Church was supposed to have become politicized and, through its involvement in the issues of the state, was believed to have lost its original identity<sup>31</sup>.

It must be remembered, though, that the fact of politicizing religion was a phenomenon typical for the contemporary time, as Cicero claimed: “every state has its own religion and we have ours (Sua cuique civitati religio [...] est, nostra nobis)”<sup>32</sup>. Constantine was involved in the internal affairs of the Church by clergy, trying only to restore the unity of the Church, through a compromise wherever it was possible.

Among various opinions of researchers, there is also a view according to which no fundamental breakthrough took place in connection with the Constantine’s reign, since the Christianisation of the Empire had been occurring before his time and, however slow, it was systematic and advanced to such an extent that it was impossible to reverse. Therefore, in this case a breakthrough would have been ostensible if it was to regard the Christianisation

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Rist, *Constantin et l'Église*, p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> On the subject of the significance of the Constantinian shift for the Church, Friedhelm Winkelmann wrote in *Die “Konstantinische Wende” und ihre Bedeutung für die Kirche*, in: *Die konstantinische Wende*, p. 123-143.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Chenu, *La fin de l' “ère constantinienne”*, p. 59-87; Królak, *Kontemplacja*, p. 159; R. Hergger, *Macht ohne Auftrag. Die Entstehung der Staats und Volkskirche*, Olten – Fribourg en Brisgau 1963, 159; Rist, *Constantin et l'Église*, p. 43-44.

<sup>31</sup> A.H.M. Jones wrote (*Constantine and Conversion of Europe*, p. 256.) already about it, noting that when: “Christianity became the official, and gradually also the normal, religion of the Roman empire. The effect on the Church was mainly bad. As converts came in no longer by conviction, but for interested motives or merely by inertia, the spiritual and moral fervour of the Church inevitably waned”.

<sup>32</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28, 69, ed. C.F.W. Müller: *M. Tullii Ciceronis Orationes: Pro Sulla; Pro A. Licinio Archia poeta; Pro L. Fracco*, Lipsiae 1906, 362, own translation.

of *Imperium Romanum*<sup>33</sup>. The findings of Arnold Hugh Martin Jones, though, seem to be correct:

“It may be argued indeed that the Roman empire must eventually have become Christian, and that an emperor must at last have been converted. But there are no solid grounds for this belief. In the contemporary empire of Persia, Christian churches were numerous, and despite, or because of, periodical persecutions, increased and flourished; but no Persian king was converted, and the Christians remained a small minority in the Persian dominions”<sup>34</sup>.

Thus, it appears, that the researchers who support the thesis stating that without the Constantinian shift, the history of the world would take a different course, are right<sup>35</sup>.

Timothy Barnes questioned the legitimacy of using the term “Constantinian revolution”, since, in the political sense, this word denotes “a complete overthrow of the established government”, and such a situation did not occur with reference to Constantine. According to the researcher:

“Constantine’s victories over Maxentius and Licinius, which made him master of the whole Roman Empire, brought no change in the form of government in the areas that he won in civil war, merely the substitution of his rule for that of another”<sup>36</sup>.

Barnes stated that Constantine made radical changes, especially in the sphere of religion: he destabilized pagan cults in the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, made Christianity an official religion of the Empire and emperor and created a new, privileged class, who had their own vital interest in maintaining that state of affairs. Not only did he grant privileges to clergy, but also supported the Church financially with substantial amounts of money. Thus, according to Barnes, the ruler’s actions should rather be perceived as a kind of reformation, comparable in its scope and effects to the English reformation initiated by Henry VIII, who transferred wealth from monasteries to secular owners, which, in the course of a few decades, transformed English society. So, as Barnes tries to prove, we should rather be talking about “Constantinian reformation”, not “Constantinian revolution”<sup>37</sup>. However, he also points out that, although it was not a revolution in a classic, Marxist meaning, after several decades, the policy of Constantine brought about a transformation of

<sup>33</sup> Cf. K.M. Girardet, *Die Konstantinische Wende und ihre Bedeutung für das Reich. Althistorische Überlegungen zu den geistigen Grundlagen der Religionspolitik Konstantins d. Gr.*, in: idem, *Die konstantinische Wende*, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, *Constantine and Conversion of Europe*, p. 254.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. J.A. Straub, *Konstantins christliches Sendungsbewusstsein*, “Das neue Bild der Antike” 2 (1942) 374-94; Girardet, *Die Konstantinische Wende*, p. 155-156.

<sup>36</sup> T. Barnes, *Was there a Constantinian Revolution*, “Journal of Late Antiquity” 2 (2009) 381-382.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. T.D. Barnes, *The Constantinian Reformation*, in *Ernest Crake Memorial Lectures 1984*, Sackville – New Brunswick 1986, 39-57.

the Roman world, which was not less thorough than the transfiguration of the Mediterranean over three hundred years before, when the Republic of Rome was substituted with autocracy<sup>38</sup>.

It is not easy to define the notion of the Constantinian shift, especially as a lot of myths have grown up around it. The most important of them regards the triumph of Christianity and the Cross – *signum Salvatoris*. In fact, however, the mentioned triumph was a long-lasting process, which expanded far beyond the scope of life of Constantine. Nevertheless, on the strength of the decisions taken in Milan in 313 AD, the emperor guaranteed his subjects personal freedom of faith<sup>39</sup>, while he used the symbol of a cross very rarely.

Eusebius of Caesarea mentioned in his *Life of Constantine*<sup>40</sup> that in a city named after this emperor, by dint of his zealotry, it was possible to see a symbol of the Passion of our Saviour, made from precious stones and framed in gold<sup>41</sup>, on the ceiling of the main chamber of the emperor's palace. In another passage, he wrote about the symbol of salvation placed within a painting situated in front of the main entrance to the palace<sup>42</sup>. In both cases it might have been the symbol of the cross. Perhaps, though, it was a so-called "hidden cross" (*crux dissimulata*) in a monogram of Christ.

Anyway, Eusebius was familiar with only two instances of Constantine's displaying a sign which can suggest a cross, in the city of the emperor's name. The first one was the interior of the palace, which was inaccessible to the public, the second, though, was a painting placed outside, in front of the palace, where the symbol of a cross was just a small element of the composition. It appears that if Eusebius had been familiar with any instance of displaying cross in any other public place, especially in a monumental form, he would not have hesitated to write about it. Probably, the ruler himself was not willing to shock his subjects with the sign of a cross. He had to respect the public opinion, and for the majority of citizens, a cross was a symbol of disgraceful death, which had just been prohibited.

The sign of a cross, since the 1<sup>st</sup> century, has been identified by Christians with the glorious victory of Christ and protective functions were ascribed to it. Constantine did not associate Christianity with an ideology of victory, as it can sometimes be read, since the idea of victory and triumph was deeply rooted in Christianity itself, which was based on the triumph of Christ over death and devil, as his resurrection has been interpreted. The emperor took advantage of this potential for political purposes and in the military field, the symbolism of which can be observed in the act of granting the symbol of a cross to the

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Barnes, *Was there a Constantinian Revolution*, p. 383.

<sup>39</sup> Themistios (*Oratio* 5, 70), when he appealed to emperor Jovian for respecting tolerance, cited the example of Constantine.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Eusebius Caesariensis, *Vita Constantini* III 49.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *ibidem*.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *ibidem* III 3.



military banner, as that was the way *labarum* was perceived by Christians, although it must be stressed that it was only a hidden cross.

Sozomen emphasized the reverence for military banners in *Imperium Romanum* as early as in pagan time, paying attention to the fact that the banner preceding the emperor was more worshipped than the others<sup>43</sup>. In this manner he referred to so-called *religio castrensis*, characterised by a cult of military banners, on which recruits took an oath of allegiance (*sacramentum*)<sup>44</sup>, in order to become rightful soldiers. The worship of Christianized military symbols, their sacralisation and the power ascribed to them had become inherent parts of a long-lasting tradition cultivated in pagan Rome. Thus, no innovations can be discussed in this field.

The Constantinian shift is connected with the Constantine's victory in a battle by the Milvian Bridge, which, together with the preceding vision, was supposed to become the source of the emperor's conversion. As a consequence, in the public sphere in the time of Constantine, the theology of victory was dominant and, as it seems, the official state propaganda was based on it, evoking a wide social response. It was not a new phenomenon either, as it had been adapted from pagan Rome. Its essence was focused on attributing military victories to the supernatural. Connecting military successes with gods had a very old tradition in Rome and it reflected the Roman mentality. Polytheism, which existed in Rome, made the Romans accustomed to the fact that commanders and later emperors ascribed military successes to various gods, who were also perceived as companions (*comites*), protectors (*connservatores*) or assistants (*auxilatores*) of rulers. According to contemporary beliefs, a victorious result of a campaign proved the rightness of choices in the aspect of religion. So, the act of assigning the victory in the battle of the Milvian Bridge to Christ and, later, connecting all the other successes with this God, were not extraordinary phenomena, but rather a typically Roman custom, i.e. cultivating Roman traditions.

In the Roman tradition, victories attributed to gods must have been in accordance with their will. The right to test gods' will was reserved for leaders through the act out *auspicia*. In this way, they received divine sanction to military activities. It was, at the same time, a harbinger of a victory. Constantine the Great, by the time he became a follower of Christ, was said to have experienced a famous vision<sup>45</sup> before the battle with Maxentius, in which an-

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Sozomenus, HE I 4.

<sup>44</sup> Tutelary spirits (*nimina*) were connected with military symbols, thus divine power was ascribed to them. An eagle (*aquila*), the main sign of legions, was associated with Jupiter from the time of Marius. Soldiers attached great significance to them, which was proven by Tertullian, according to whom the signs were supposed to be more important to them than the gods, including Jupiter, themselves.

<sup>45</sup> Voluminous literature has been created on this subject. See among others: W. Seston, *La vision païenne de 310 et les origines du chrisme constantinien*, "Annuaire de l'Institut de philologie et d'histoire orientales et slaves" 4 (1936) 373-395; A. Ziółkowski, *Wizja Konstantyna. Reinterpre-*

gels or Christ himself announced his victory. Similarly, during the war against Licinius, “Constantine perceived clearly, by means of signs and dreams, that the special protection of Divine Providence had been extended to him”<sup>46</sup>.

Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>47</sup>, and then also Socrates of Constantinople and Sozomen<sup>48</sup> wrote about the uncertainty that bothered emperor Constantine before the battle of the Milvian Bridge<sup>49</sup>, when “he debated as to what divinity’s aid he should invoke in the conduct of the war”<sup>50</sup>. All three authors suggested a difficult situation, in which Constantine found himself in the confrontation with Maxentius, which was not only caused by the fact that the latter one had a military advantage over the former. From a Roman point of view, the ruler could have counted on the protection of god Mars and also the founder of Rome, Romulus, who he treated with special deference<sup>51</sup>.

A few years earlier, in 307, tetrarchs, first Sever, whose protector was Hercules, and then Galerius, who appealed to Jupiter, had a chance to learn that, when they got defeated in a battle against Maxentius. According to Socrates, these supporters of Diocletian “had not profited at all by the pagan deities, whom they had sought to propitiate”<sup>52</sup>. They suffered defeats, which revealed the weakness of their divine protectors.

The outcome of military struggles had a deep sacred or even eschatological dimension. It proved the rightness of choices made on religious grounds.

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*taċja*, VoxP 3 (1983) t. 4, 200-215; A. Łukaszewicz, *A propos u symbolisme impérial romain au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle: Quelques remarques sur le christogramme*, “Historia” 39 (1990) fasc. 4, 504-506; O. Nicholson, *Constantine’s Vision of the Cross*, VigCh 54 (2000) 309-323; J.W. Drijvers, *The Power of the Cross – Celestial Cross Appearances in the Fourth Century*, w: *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity*, ed. A. Cain – N. Lenski, Farnham – Burlington 2009, 39-41; J. Long, *How to Read a Halo Three (or More) Versions of Constantine’s Vision*, in: *The Power of Religion*, p. 227-235; Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor*, p. 159-183.

<sup>46</sup> Sozomenus, HE I 8, 9, GCS 50, 18: “σημείων καὶ ὄνειράτων ὅσης θειόθεν ἤξιωτο προνοίας”, transl. Hartranft, NPNF II/2, 524.

<sup>47</sup> Eusebius (*Vita Constantini* I 27, GCS 7/1, 29, transl. Cameron – Hall, p. 80) perceived Constantine’s decision about choosing a divine protector in a way which corresponded to the Roman mentality, since, according to his account, Constantine during his preparations to the battle against Maxentius, wondered: “what kind of god he should adopt to help him”.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Sozomenus, HE I 3.

<sup>49</sup> About the battle, see: R. van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge*, Cambridge 2011; C.H. Lange, *Constantine’s Civil War Triumph of AD 312 and the Adaptability of Triumphal Tradition*, “Analecta Romana Instituti Danici” 37 (2012) 29-53.

<sup>50</sup> Socrates, HE I 2, 3, ed. G.Ch. Hansen, GCS NF 1, Berlin 1995, 3, transl. A.C. Zenos, NPNF II/2, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. D. de Decker, *La politique religieuse de Maxence*, “Byzantion” 38 (1968) 472-562; O. Hekster, *The city of Rome in late imperial ideology: The Tetrachs, Maxentius and Constantine*, “Mediterraneo Antico” 2 (1999) 726-728 and 732-734. Olivier Hekster proved that until 308, that was the time when he argued with his father Maximian, Maxentius worshipped Hercules, the divine patron of his father, in a special way (ibidem, p. 732).

<sup>52</sup> Socraes, HE I 2, 3, GCS NF 1, 3, transl. Zenos, NPNF II/2, 40.

In case of confrontation of the monotheistic religion – Christianity with paganism, battlefield victories achieved in the name of Christ, lent credence to the message of his teachings, and, in this way, revealed the false foundations of pagan cults. Opponents of Constantine, who looked for protection among pagan gods, became enemies of Christ, thus Church historians, such as Theodoret of Cyrus, treated them as godless, vile tyrants (ἀνοσιουργῶν [...] καὶ δυσσεβῶν [...] τυράννων)<sup>53</sup>. The barbarians defeated by Constantine, convinced by the unexpected failure, “for the first time embraced the Christian religion, by means of which Constantine had been protected”<sup>54</sup>.

Constantine’s great trust in the power of his divine Protector was shown in his readiness to declare war against the Persians in defence of Christians<sup>55</sup>, and only the death of the emperor made it impossible<sup>56</sup>, although, according to Socrates: “the war was not at that time carried on, being prevented through dread of the emperor”<sup>57</sup>. Constantine’s letter to Shapur II, which was cited by Eusebius of Caesarea and Theodoret of Cyrus, and then discussed by Sozomen, clearly proved that the ruler was interested in the fate of Christians in Persia.

Military victories were of fundamental importance in the legalisation of authority, which is visible in a title of “victor” (*victor*, νικητής)<sup>58</sup>, frequently used by rulers. This expression was adapted instead of the previously used term *Invictus*, which referred to the solar god (*Sol Invictus*). It was emperor Constantine I, who introduced this change under the influence of Christianity, by placing the new nickname at the beginning of the imperial titles. It was since then associated with victories of rulers over enemies of Christ<sup>59</sup>. The

<sup>53</sup> For example Theodoret of Cyrus (HE I 2, 1) referred to Maxentius, Maximinus Daia and Licinius in this way.

<sup>54</sup> Socrates, HE I 18, 4, GCS NF 1, 58: “πιστεῦσαι τότε πρῶτον τῇ τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ θρησκείᾳ, δι’ ἧς καὶ Κωνσταντίνος ἐσφῆξετο”, transl. Zenos, NPNF II/2, 80.

<sup>55</sup> However, it was not the cause of the planned war; see: P.J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine. The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom*, Downers Grove 2010, 245-247. According to T.D. Barnes (*Constantine and the Christians of Persia*, JRS 75 (1985) 136) Constantine “brought Christianity into play as a political factor in relations between Rome and Persia”.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Socrates, HE I 18, 12. About the persecutions of Christians in Persia, see also Sozomenus, HE II 9-14. Constantine’s preparations for a war were also proven by homilies by Aphrates, see: *The Homilies of Aphraates I*, trans. W. Wright, London 1869; *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes*, ed. R. Parisot, PSyr I, Paris 1894 and I/2, Paris 1907, 1-489. See also Barnes, *Constantine and the Christians of Persia*, p. 126-136.

<sup>57</sup> Socrates, HE I 18, 12, GCS NF 1, 60: “Ἄλλ’ οὐ προὔβη τότε ὁ πόλεμος: ἔφθη γὰρ δέει τοῦ βασιλέως σβεσθεῆς”, transl. Zenos, NPNF II/2, 81.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *ibidem* I 7, 2; I 9, 30; I 9, 46; I 9, 50; I 9, 55; I 25, 7; I 34, 1; II 23, 5; II 23, 8; II 23, 10; II 23, 45; II 23, 49; II 23, 57; II 37, 78; III 25, 10; Sozomenus, HE IV 14, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. F. Kolb, *Ideal późnoantycznego władcy. Ideologia i autoprezentacja*, transl. A. Gierlińska, Poznań 2008, 70. According to Andreas Alföldi (*The conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, Oxford 1948, 58-59) the mentioned change of titles proves the abandonment of the cult of Sol Invictus by emperor. Jonathan Bardill (*Constantine, Divine Emperor*, p. 332) does not agree with this opinion, proving that the Emperor still worshipped the solar god “unnamed and undepicted” and in

name “victor”, together with other titles, with which bishops referred to rulers in ecclesiastical histories, such as “the most pious, the most beloved by God” (τῷ εὐσεβεσάτῳ καὶ θεοφιλεσάτῳ)<sup>60</sup>, constituted the fundamental idea of power. An emperor, by dint of his piety, enjoyed God’s generosity, as a result of which he was successful in military operations. These were tangible proofs of the divine support, thus, in this way, God sanctioned emperor’s authority.

Constantine was believed to achieve military successes by dint of his piety. According to Sozomen, “those who hold imperial power need only piety to be fortunate, without it, “armies, a powerful empire, and every other resource, are of no avail”<sup>61</sup>. Piety (εὐσέβεια, εὐλάβεια, *pietas*)<sup>62</sup> was a key to a proper relation with God and it guaranteed good fortune through his blessing, which was also in accordance with Roman mentality. In fact, *pietas* in pagan Rome was not only one of the fundamental virtues<sup>63</sup>, and then became a cardinal virtue of emperors, but also belonged to the most important ideas of the state<sup>64</sup>. It was, indeed, vital to ensure auspiciousness to the country and the ruler himself. Its personifications were worshipped<sup>65</sup> as early as in the time of the republic. Since the reign of Augustus it was associated with the person of a ruler or the imperial court<sup>66</sup>.

Piety and religiousness of the Romans were praised by Marcus Tullius Cicero, who proved that, in this respect, they exceeded all the other peoples and nations (*omnes gentes, nationesque*)<sup>67</sup>. Titus Livius, on the other hand, in accordance with the ideas promoted by Augustus, emphasized that the scrupulous observance of the religious cult ensured propitiousness and a growth of the

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this way “not only respected the Christian belief that God should be invisible but also rendered his god of light ambiguous and therefore acceptable to both pagans and Christians”.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Socrates, HE I 8, 37; I 8, 52; I 9, 2; I 9, 3; I 26, 2; III 25, 10; VII 42, 4; Sozomenus, HE VI 4, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Sozomenus, HE IX 1, 2, GCS 50, 390: “ἢ μοι δοκεῖ μάλιστα τὸν θεὸν ἐπιδειξαι μόνην εὐσέβειαν ἀρκεῖν πρὸς σωτηρίαν τοῖς βασιλεύουσιν, ἄνευ δὲ ταύτης μηδὲν εἶναι στρατεύματα καὶ βασιλέως ἰσχύον καὶ τὴν ἄλλην παρασκευὴν”, transl. Hartranft, NPNP II/2, 900.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. J. Korpany, *Studia nad łacińską terminologią polityczno-socjalną okresu republiki rzymskiej*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk 1976, 123ff.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. H. Waagenvoort, *Pietas. Selected Studies in Roman Religion*, Leiden 1980 (spec. p. 1-20: *Pietas*); J. Champeaux, “*Pietas*”: *piété personnelle et piété collective à Rome*, “Bulletin l’Association Guillaume Budé” 3 (1989) 263-279.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. M.P. Charlesworth, *The Virtues of a Roman Emperor: Propaganda and the Creation of Belief*, Proceedings of the British Academy 23, London 1937, 105-133. J.R. Fears, *The cult of Virtues and Roman Imperial Ideology*, ANRW II 17, 2, Berlin – New York 1981, 864ff; A. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Emperor and His Virtues*, “Historia” 30 (1981) 298-323.

<sup>65</sup> About iconography of *pietas* see T. Mikocki, *Zgodna, pobożna, płodna, skromna, piękna... Propaganda cnót żeńskich w sztuce rzymskiej*, Wrocław 1997, 105-169.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Mikocki, *Zgodna*, p.106.

<sup>67</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De haruspicum responsis* 19, ed. N.H. Watts, Loeb Classical Library 158, London 1923, 339-340.

territory of the country. Nonfeasance or negligence, according to the author, led to misfortunes and defeats<sup>68</sup>.

When Constantine, as Sozomen pointed out, “had vanquished all those who rose up in battle against him”, he tried to repay God through his eagerness in the matters concerning faith, thus he encouraged his subject to convert to Christianity<sup>69</sup>, supported the Church financially, exempted members of clergy from taxes<sup>70</sup>, established law favourable to them, built churches, surrounded himself with clergymen, participated in prayers, in sacred mysteries of the altar<sup>71</sup>. He also, quite evidently, solicited for a unity of the Church, regarding a lack of it as ungratefulness to God. Therefore, as Sozomen expressed it, Constantine considered “dissension in the Church of God as more dangerous than any other evil”<sup>72</sup>, and that was why he appealed, at the Council of Nicaea, for reconciliation, unity and peace among the clergymen gathered there. He expected that, together with the clergymen, he would be “triumph (τὸ τρόπαιον ἀναστήσαι) with you over the envious demon, who excited this internal revolt because he was provoked to see our external enemies and tyrants under our feet, and envied our good estate”<sup>73</sup>. The mission of a Christian emperor was caring about the unity of the Church, which the evil spirit wanted to destroy. The ruler considered its restoration to be a victory over satan. This special kind of theology of victory regarded not only external and internal political opponents, but also those, who caused conflicts within the Church.

According to the accounts of church historians, Constantine struggled not only for the integrity of the Church, but also the religious unity of his subjects, trying to cause them „to recognize the one true faith and way of salvation (σωτήριον)”<sup>74</sup>. Sozomen mentioned placing the sign of the cross on battle equipment in order to make soldiers accustomed to reverence for God<sup>75</sup>.

In pagan Rome commanders also expressed gratitude to gods. Asking for their protection, they offered *votum* in a temple – a ceremonial oath to gods, or, in fact, various obligations towards them. They were often connected with the

<sup>68</sup> Cf. W. Liebeschuetz, *The religious position of Livy's History*, JRS 57 (1967) 45-55; M. Jarczynowska, *Religie świata rzymskiego*, Warszawa 1987, 11; J. Linderski, *Roman religion in Livy*, in: *Livius : Aspekte seines Werkes*, hrsg. W. Schuller, Constance 1993, 53-70.

<sup>69</sup> Sozomenus, HE I 8, 9-10, GCS 50, 18: “κρατήσας δὲ πάντων τῶν ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ συμβάντων πολέμων καθάπερ ἀντιφιλοτιμούμενος τὸν Χριστὸν ἡμίβετο τῇ περὶ τὴν θρησκείαν σπουδῇ, ταύτην μόνην πρεσβεύειν καὶ σωτήριον ἡγεῖσθαι τοὺς ἀρχομένους προτρέπων”, NPNF II/2, 524.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. *ibidem* I 9.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *ibidem* I 8, 10-14.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem* I 19, 3, GCS 50, 40: “ἐπεὶ παντὸς κακοῦ χαλεπώτερον ἡγοῦμαι τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ στασιάζειν”, transl. NPNF II/2, 544.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, GCS 50, 41, transl. NPNF II/2, 545.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem* I 8, 10, GCS 50, 18, NPNF II/2, 524. See also Eusebius Caesariensis, *Vita Constantini* II 56.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, GCS 50, 18-19: “προσεθίζων δὲ τοὺς στρατιώτας ὁμοίως αὐτῷ τὸν θεὸν σέβειαν, τὰ τοῦτων ὄπλα τῷ συμβόλῳ τοῦ σταυροῦ κατεσήμαινε”.

spoils of war, therefore, they were paid during triumphs, which was of sacred nature. It was combined with thanksgiving (*supplicatio*) addressed to gods for the achieved success, and commanders personified Jupiter and made their offering to him. In this way, they sought gods' favour for themselves and for the state in the future<sup>76</sup>. Apparently, religious activities of Roman pagan and Christian rulers and commanders were similar in their essence.

In conclusion, it must be stated that Constantine, in his state policy, was mainly a continuator of the tradition inherited from the ancestors, which was a in contradiction with the idea of a breakthrough. However, he initiated a processes that, in the course of time, brought about a fundamental transformation of the Roman Empire. Therefore, it appears that the Constantinian shift should be seen as an epochal act of the Emperor, who did not only acknowledge and provide care for the Church, but also tied it to the state and led it to a great importance, acquiring in return, in his deep conviction, the blessing of God for the Roman Empire and its rulers. Undoubtedly, the conversion of the Emperor to Christianity was a groundbreaking event, in whatever way it might be perceived and dated, although it could also be seen by the Romans as a choice of a divine patron, who would ensure a victory to the Emperor. Yet another crucial issue for the future of the state was a Christian upbringing of the imperial children.

Putting himself and his state under the protection of the only God was, indeed, revolutionary. Monotheism, by nature, excluded other worships and, although many years passed before Christianity became an official religion of *Imperium Romanum*, it happened as a consequence of the choice made by Constantine. Contrary to certain doubts expressed by some researchers, it is even possible to determine the exact time when the conversion took place. It was undoubtedly the time of the military campaign against Maxentius, that is September 312, when the ruler entrusted himself to the God of Christians and ascribed his military victories to his protection. This is a historical fact.

It must be emphasized that Constantine's actions were prudent and in many of his deeds a continuation of Roman traditions is visible. Generally, the Constantinian shift did not cause any revolutionary changes in the sphere of religiousness, since references to the pagan epoch of Rome were present in this field as well<sup>77</sup>.

Translated Karolina Wodarczyk

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. K. Balbuza, *Triumfator. Triumf i ideologia zwycięstwa w starożytnym Rzymie epoki cesarstwa*, Poznań 2005, passim.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Bralewski, *Przełom konstantyński a religijność Rzymian w wiekach IV i V* (in print).

## PRZEŁOM KONSTANTYŃSKI – PRAWDA CZY MIT?

(Streszczenie)

Zdefiniowanie zjawiska nazwanego przełomem czy rewolucją konstantyńską nie jest łatwe. Wydaje się, że trzeba w nim widzieć epokowy czyn cesarza, który nie tylko uznał i otoczył opieką Kościół, ale związał go z państwem i doprowadził do wielkiego znaczenia, pozyskując w zamian, w swoim głębokim przekonaniu, błogosławieństwo samego Boga dla *Imperium Romanum* i jego władców. Konsekwencją wydarzeń określanych tym mianem – według wielu badaczy – była epoka czy era konstantyńska, w której Kościół narażony był na dwojakie niebezpieczeństwo. Mógł on bowiem zdominować rządzących i państwo bądź podporządkować się im i stać się instrumentem w ich rękach. W Kościele katolickim zakończyć epokę tę miał dopiero II Sobór Watykański. Konstantyn w swej polityce państwowej był przede wszystkim kontynuatorem tradycji odziedziczonej po przodkach, co było zaprzeczeniem idei przełomu. Zapoczątkował jednak procesy, dzięki którym z czasem dokonało się gruntowne przeobrażenie Cesarstwa Rzymskiego. Niewątpliwie charakter przełomowy miało samo nawrócenie cesarza na chrześcijaństwo, jakkolwiek by je rozumieć i datować, chociaż i ono mogło być postrzegane przez Rzymian jako wybór boskiego patrona, który zapewnia zwycięstwa cesarzowi oraz wychowanie cesarskich dzieci w duchu chrześcijańskim. Jednak oddanie siebie i swego państwa przez Konstantyna w opiekę jedynego Boga samo w sobie miało charakter rewolucyjny. Monoteizm wszak z natury wykluczał inne kultury i choć upłynęło jeszcze kilkadziesiąt lat, nim chrześcijaństwo oficjalnie stało się religią państwową w *Imperium Romanum*, to było to konsekwencją wyboru dokonanego przez Konstantyna.

**Key words:** empereur Constantine I, Constantinian Shift, Constantinian revolution, christianisation of Imperium Romanum.

**Słowa kluczowe:** cesarz Konstantyn I, przełom konstantyński, rewolucja konstantyńska, chrystianizacja Imperium Romanum.

