

## CONSTANTINE

ODAHL (C. M.) *Constantine and the Christian Empire*. Pp. xviii + 400, ills, maps. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. Cased, £60. ISBN: 0-415-17485-6.

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On the penultimate page of the main text of his new study of Constantine, Charles Odahl notes that he ‘found [himself] in agreement with [T.D. Barnes’s] opinion that Constantine “believed sincerely that God had given him a special mission to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity”’ (p. 283, quoting T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* [Cambridge, MA, 1981], p. 275). This prompts an obvious question: do we need a book that substantially agrees with another, already well-established as a major study in the field, and published over twenty years ago? O. is clearly of the opinion that we do. His aim is to exploit a broader range of sources than simply texts, of which Barnes was (and remains) a subtle exegete. He laments the ‘failure [of earlier studies] to completely utilize all the material sources from the period – particularly the coins and buildings – in conjunction with the literary sources in order to offer a full and accurate portrait of Constantine and his secular and religious policies’ (p. 283). Thus, in his conclusion (and similar remarks are made in the Preface: pp. viii–ix), O. seeks to justify his lengthy biographical account of the emperor. How successfully does the result match this ambition?

Let me first consider the book’s virtues, which are not inconsiderable. There can be no doubt either that O.’s readers (and he aims at a broad constituency comprising ‘the educated public’ and ‘fellow scholars’: p. ix) will come away with a surer sense of the material culture of Constantine’s age than they would, for example, from Barnes. The book is copiously illustrated with maps and photographs, the latter including numerous very fine, crisp reproductions of coins as well as several impressive topographical views. General readers will find themselves beguiled by a vigorous and exciting narrative. Passages of the book, such as the account of the breakdown of the tetrarchic system between 305 and 312 (pp. 75–97), are quite thrilling: this is narrative history written with verve.

Thus, general readers seeking an evocation of the age will probably be satisfied. For others, however, the experience will be less satisfactory. Some of the book’s ambitions achieve uneven success. Consider the use of the material evidence, which O. pegs up as a major justification for his study. I wonder how useful, for instance, are photographs of the modern St Peter’s basilica (pp. 154–5) to illustrate O.’s account of Constantine’s buildings there (an account which ought now to engage with the arguments against a Constantinian foundation for the church made in G.W. Bowersock, ‘Peter and Constantine’, in J.-M. Carrié and R. Lizzi Testa [edd.] *‘Humana Sapit’: Études d’Antiquité Tardive offertes à Lellia Cracco Ruggini* [Bibliothèque de l’Antiquité Tardive 3: Turnhout, 2002], pp. 209–17). Readers will need very keen eyesight indeed (or a magnifying glass) to spot the *decennalia* column base that O. mentions in his caption to the general view of the Roman forum on p. 70 (it is *just* about visible, but half of it is hidden by the arch of Septimius Severus). Also, general and, particularly, student readers unacquainted with the finer points of numismatics might have liked to have had the various abbreviations in coin legends explained to them, especially in captions to photographs.

As for the racy narrative, at times it takes on a whimsical character that borders on the speculative if not the fictional, as when we are invited to consider various characters' emotions (*passim*) or to imagine both Constantine's mother Helena and his sister Constantia as 'lovely young lad[ies]' (pp. 16, 117)! General readers might enjoy such moments; those of us trying to teach students to be critical historians will probably take a much less charitable view. A more serious concern is that, because O. has deliberately opted to relegate matters of scholarly argument to the lengthy endnotes (p. ix), the narrative itself gives little sense of where debate on Constantine is most fraught. Again, a general audience looking for a good read might not be troubled; but students (particularly weak ones who do not routinely look at footnotes, never mind endnotes) might be misled into assuming that there is greater consensus about Constantine than is actually the case. Furthermore, the idiosyncratic (i.e. non-alphabetical) arrangement of the bibliography will not assist anyone seeking to use the book as a reference work.

A more worrying cause for concern, in a volume that prefers vigorous narrative to protracted debate, is a clear tendency towards a teleological account of Constantine and his achievements. That the final page of the main text should face a photograph of Bernini's equestrian statue, from the porch of St Peter's, of Constantine's vision speaks loud and clear that O. considers the Christian dimension to his narrative to be the most important. Of course, no one would seriously deny that Constantine played a pivotal role in western religious history; yet all too often in this book, Christianity is allowed to dominate all other considerations. Thus, for example, the account of the arch of Constantine in Rome (pp. 141–3) centres on the question of what it might tell us about the emperor's religion and how others interpreted it in the aftermath of Constantine's victory over Maxentius at the Milvian bridge in 312 (cf. pp. 333–4, n. 37, where discussion of the inscriptions on the arch focusses almost exclusively on the phrase *instinctu diuinitatis*). There is little hint, however, of how the structure belonged to a systematic programme of erasing the memory of Maxentius from the monumental heart of Rome (cf. J. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* [Oxford, 2000], pp. 76–90). Linked to this emphasis on matters religious is a peculiar willingness to trust certain Christian texts of doubtful reliability: the chapter on Rome, for example, boasts an alarmingly uncritical use of that most contentious source, the *Liber Pontificalis*.

This is only a brief glimpse of the book's faults. Students will need to be warned of its numerous limitations, and probably should be directed elsewhere. I shall continue to refer mine to the works of T.D. Barnes, Averil Cameron and Hal Drake, as well as to older studies such as that by Norman Baynes; meanwhile, the recent appearance of N. Lenski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge, 2006) offers an ideal resource for those encountering the emperor for the first time. Nevertheless, I do not think it would be fair to end on an entirely sour note. Those general readers that O. had in mind when composing the book might very well be excited enough to want to learn more. That in itself is no mean achievement.

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

MARK HUMPHRIES  
mark.humphries@nuim.ie