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NE DAY SAW Constantine a pagan, the next a Christian, all thanks to the vision of a refulgent cross burning above him. So runs the familiar story. But told in this manner, apparently lacking precedent or preparation or context, it challenges belief. Readers of Lactantius or Eusebius, more alert than those historians themselves to the course of the events they trace, now point to many gradual steps by which the emperor actually changed his public adherence from old gods to new, bringing his empire with him. They point, moreover, to bridges of thought touching both paganism and Christianity by which men like Constantine could pass from one to the other without need violently to repudiate their earlier worship and without need of any miraculous or magical act from on high. In fact, acts of the latter sort themselves constituted a part of the bridge, and it is on them that the following pages will focus, with citation of as many authors of Constantine’s whole lifetime as are pertinent. It is the spread and prevalence of ideas as much as their content that will concern us.

Constantine’s cross, a model for several similar appearances later, evidently served the credulity of his times. Such a sign was to meet the Caesar Gallus at Antioch as he entered that city, “a cruciform pillar in the sky” visible to other spectators as well, and Constantius, about to engage Magnentius in battle, was not only favored with the same miracle but the citizens of Jerusalem attested its simultaneous appearance in the East stretching from the Mount of Calvary as far as the Mount of Olives. To the pious emperor it brought victory, to Magnentius’ troops terror, “because they worshipped demons.”

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1 Socr. 2.28 (Gallus), with parallels afforded by Philostorgius, HE ed. Bidez (GCS 1913). 3.28, involving Constantius, and by Soz. 2.3, where Constantine’s physician, his conversion not yet complete, is won over to Christianity by a vision of the cross and a voice explaining its significance as the guarantor of salvation; cf. ibid. 4.5, a cross 15 stadia high seen by multitudes in Jerusalem, who rush to the churches to be shriven or converted.

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DARTMOUTH COLLEGE
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Constantius' reign witnessed divine intervention on another front. Persians beleaguered Nisibis where, among the Roman defenders, the holy bishop James of Antioch sent up his entreaties for aid. In response a kingly figure ablaze with crown and purple robe stood out upon the battlements, in whom the Persians recognized the Christian God; and James, himself mounting next, cursed the enemy with hordes of gnats that attacked their horses and elephants, putting them all to flight.² Plagues of stinging insects first fell at Mose's command on Egypt; more recent ones were known, attributed to divine anger;³ and the efficacy of prayer in battle was to recur also, as that which Theodosius uttered against Eugenius in 393, raising a mighty wind to blow the rebels' missiles back in their faces.⁴ In so many ways did the incidents at Nisibis build on themes which were the common property of Christians in that period, just as the story of Theodosius and Eugenius likewise could be counted on to remind its audience of a storm they all had heard about, the famous storm that saved the "Thundering Legion" under Marcus Aurelius when Germans and Sarmatians beset his army. For this miracle, in an altogether typical contention over events certain historical (confirmed by Marcus Aurelius' sculptured Column as well as by his coin-issues), Christians credited their fellows, pagans turned for explanation to a wonder worker of the time, one Julianus, or to an Egyptian magician, Anouphus, who "had summoned by enchantment certain demons, above all, Hermes the aerial, and through them had brought on the rainstorm."⁵

But the figure of God Himself threatening Persians from the walls of Nisibis was more spectacular than these deluges and winds. Parallels are thus correspondingly rare. An early glimpse into the popular mind is offered by the Acta Andraea of the last quarter of the second century. It relates how the saint and his companions, "proceeding through Thrace, met a troop of armed men who made as if to fall on them. Andrew made the sign of the cross against them and prayed

³ Exod. 8.16ff; Ps. 105.31ff; cf. Thdrt. Gracc.affect.cwr. 10.58 (ed. P. Canivet, Sources chrét. 57.2 [1998] 378 n.2), on pests of mice, bats, snakes and scorpions; the last, with various stinging insects, appear often on magical amulets (S. Eretum, Symbolo 7 [1928] 70-73; cf. Grec. Ep. 69.5). In Arnobius' day (ad Nat. 1.3) plagues of locusts and mice were still blamed on Christians.
⁴ Socr. 5.25, 'so powerful was the emperor's prayer.'
⁵ Dio 72.8.4; cf. Euseb. HE 5.5.1-3, adding the detail of lightning-bolts, and E. R. Dodds, JRS 37 (1947) 56; full treatment in J. Guey, RevPhil 22 (1948) 17f.

that they might be made powerless. A bright angel touched their swords and they all fell down."⁶ Eusebius later (Vita Const. 2.6) tells of detachments of Constantine's forces—where none really were, hence miraculous troops—marching through eastern cities on the eve of the battle with Licinius, sent "by a divine and superior power." Two other examples are found in Socrates' Ecclesiastical History (6.6, 7.18): "multitudes of angels ... like armored soldiers of great stature" who vanquished Gainas; "the angels from God [who] appeared to people in Bithynia ... [and] said they were sent as arbiters over the war." Better yet is the "demonic apparition" drawn by Eusebius from Josephus (He 3.8.5; Joseph. BJ 290ff): 'before sunset in the air throughout the country chariots and regiments [were seen] flying through the clouds and encircling the cities.' Among pagan writers, on the other hand, such miraculous beings play a smaller part. A woman of gigantic form turns up in Dio Cassius' pages almost as a genre-figure. Dio asserts his personal belief in her, whether in the scene of Drusus crossing the Elbe or upon the crisis of Macrinus' reign in 217.⁷ Herodian (8.3.8) goes further. The occasion as he describes it is the closing in of Maximinus' legions on Aquileia in 238. To the townspeople 'certain oracles were given that the deity of the region would grant them victory. They call him Belis, worship him mightily, and identify him with Apollo. His image, some of Maximinus' troops reported, often appeared in the skies fighting in defense of the city'—which returns us to Constantine.

For that susceptible emperor had two visions, not only of a cross but (somewhat less well known if hardly less debated by scholars) an earlier one of Apollo. It came to him on his way south from the Rhine to defeat Maximian in Marseilles. He turned aside en route to a temple of Apollo, 'whom you saw, I believe, O Constantine—your Apollo accompanied by Victory holding out laurelled crowns to you each of which brought the presage of thirty years [of rule] ... And yet why do I say, 'I believe'? You saw and you recognized him in the form to which ... the reigns of all the world were destined' (Paneg. ver. 7[6].21.3-5). 'You saw,' presumably as others by the score had seen some deity invoked by magic or freely offering himself to them, and as, in later embroidered versions, Constantine's second vision was

⁷ Dio 55.1.3f, 79[78].25.5; cf. 73.13.3, and Plin. Ep. 7.27 and Soz. 7.23.
explained to him personally by Christ. Superhuman beings, then, who revealed themselves to their worshippers before armed conflict or whose agents or powers were exerted for the battles of the pious were a feature of pagan as of Christian mythology in the third and fourth centuries; and no better illustration of this common ground can be found than the spiritual career of Constantine between 310 and 312.

His panegyrist noted elements throughout his rise and reign beyond mere mortal reach. Sometimes such notice was blurred and vague, for example, in the emphasis of Nazarius on Constantine’s “celestial favor,” the victims “divinely granted to your arms,” “the divinity accustomed to forward your undertakings,” and so forth—expressions shading off into ambiguities common among both pagan and Christian writers. So victory comes to Valentinian magni numinis adinumto, Julian’s armies feel confident caelestis dei favore...reti, spurred on by salutaris quidam genus praesens. More often the notices of Constantine’s protector are explicit, as in the paragraphs devoted by Eusebius (HE 10.8.6–9) to proving his hero God’s representative on earth.

With Constantine, indeed, the sense that men, especially leaders of state, acted as servants of some supernal purpose and thus played their rôle under its direction, took firm hold on the minds of contemporaries, as was bound to come about from the ascendance of so historically oriented a religion as Christianity. The view, destined long to prevail, was new to the Roman world. It left faint traces in the Augustan History, where a favorite of pagan polemic, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, was imagined Stoaically receiving news of a pretender’s revolt in the certainty that di me fuentur, dis pietas me...caldi est. “We have not so worshipped the gods nor so lived that he

should overcome us.” On the other hand, the acts of Christian emperors were frequently hailed as approved, inspired, intended or made possible by God. God (says a writer addressing Constantine’s sons) has bestowed the imperium, the vexillum fidei; vobis hoc divinitas reservavit. Favore eminentis dei victores estis omnium hostium vestrorum... Strati sunt adversarum cunetum, et rebellantia ante conspectum vestrum semper arma cedere...Haec vobis deus summis... pro fide vestra reddidit praemia. And if this be a view no doubt deeply colored by the established supremacy of Christian rulers in whom the devout would wish to see the workings of Providence, we may yet match it with the statement of an Alexandrian bishop a century earlier, for whom God “entrusted the monarchy to the most pious Valerian and Gallienus,” whose reign he prays Him to uphold. So late as the fourth century, moreover, vestiges survived of a belief in guardian angels set over each person, giving to them their worship, languages and separate characters and, beyond that, controlling their destiny through their own high or low position in God’s favor. Angels might sometimes exert their power on the battlefield.

Upon his conversion, Constantine entered into this whole heritage of beliefs—the belief that a pious people would receive divine protection, that their ruler was chosen according to divine plan, and that God directly or through his angels could be expected to intercede in their behalf at crucial moments. Thus, to Maxentius’ fateful collision with Constantine at the Milvian Bridge, “God Himself as with chains dragged the tyrant far away from the [safety of Rome’s] gates.”

The question how pagans looked on the position of the Roman emperors vis à vis the gods has been surprisingly little studied, despite a mass of material. It is fortunately tangential to our purpose. Two

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8 A catalogue of pagan epiphanies—of Asclepius alone—would be endless. For a selection of those to Christians, see Constantine’s being led on the founding circuit of Constantinople by some divine being, in Philostorg. HE 2.9; Theodosius’ vision of “the blessed Melitius,” in Thirl. HE 5.6; and of St John and St Philip on the eve of battle, promising him success, ibid. 5.24 (confirmed by a second witness); Constantius’ beholding of his guardian angel or genius, in Amm. 21.14.2; Arnobius’ conversion by visions, in Hieron. Chron. a.d. 326?; and the angel sent to Licinius in a dream, in Lact. Mtr. pers. 46. For Christ appearing to Constantine, see Soz. 1.3.


10 Amm. Marc. 29.5.40, 16.12.13; cf. frequent references to the emperor’s numen or divinitas in the Paneg. et. 3 and 4 (e.g. 4.13.6, 4.17.1); Constantine’s conversion by apparition of tou boion, in Soz. 1.18. Even such loosely conceived powers might still be thought of as actually operating on history. We see events taking place upo tou boion touy. in Ihnl. 1.9.4; ef evziolas ton ymias tou. in Dio 79[78].8.2, cf. 76[75].4.5; or ef ympa epa nepturos deon ton, in Euseb. HE 4.2.2.

11 Interesting passages: SHA Avid. Cassius 2.2; 8.2f, 11.8, quoting Hor. Od. 1.17.13. I cannot recall any earlier pagan texts hinting at the existence of a divine plan for history, though it is easy to find the belief that the accession and demise of an emperor were divinely intended. See J. Bérenger, Recherches sur l’aspect idéologique du princeprat (Basel 1935) 155f, 164f. In the fourth century, no doubt in a spirit of anti-Christian polemic, Eunapius (Vit. soph. 476) describes Julian’s “conquering all the barbarians because he worshipped the gods”—a more explicit statement of cause and effect than fits in the earlier Empire. Cf. Inf. n.17.

12 Firm. Mat. Epp. prof. r. 16.4, 20.7, 29.3; bishop Dionysius in Euseb. HE 7.11.8; cf. Tert. Apel. 33; Orig. c. Cels. 8.68 and 70; and, of course, Eusebius throughout the Vita Const., e.g. L.18.

13 The basic text was Deut. 25.18 (and Dan. 10.13), with later adherence clearest in Orig. c. Cels. 1.24, 3.2, 4.8, 5.25, 5.30; see H. B. Kuhn, JBL 67 (1948) 218–31; E. Peterson, ThkZ 7 (1971) 81–90; and C. M. Morrison, The Powers That Be (London 1960) 18–23 and passim.

14 Euseb. V. Const. 1.38.

points only need be made. In the first place, the idea of national
guardian angels, though familiar to writers like Celsius, Porphyry,
Lamblichus and Julian, did not lead to a concept of supernatural
intervention in terrestrial happenings; nor (in the second place) did
the concept of the ruler favored or even chosen by the gods develop
further into the expectation that they would miraculously succor him
in the hour of national crisis. Not until challenged by Christianity did
pagans give any sharpness to their claims that their own piety could
secure the safety of the state or the victorious outcome of a cam-
paign. In Constantine’s lifetime, a change can be seen. In the trans-
ition to an era of far more intense and vaunting religious propaganda,
the battle of the Milvian Bridge was critical. Thereafter, through the
conflicts involving Licinius and Maximin and so to the historic con-
version of Clovis in the following century, battle was determined, so
men said, by divine judgement.

But to return to Constantine: newly converted, he advanced into
Italy in 312. His decision to make war, his march, his feelings and
to his description of his opponent, who, we are told, huddles in
Rome gripped by terror, vice and superstition, dupe to countless
religious charlatans, petitioner to countless vain spirits, convert to
such revolting measures as the tearing of unborn babes from the
womb for use in prognostic sacrifices. Though the picture of his
superstitionis maleficis is a compendium of commonplaces, it sets
the stage for the dramatic collision of the two religious worlds. This is the

16 Julian, adv.Gstl. 1160; Orig. c.Cels. 8.35; Ael.Arist. Or. 43.18, cited from H. Chadwick,
Origen: Central Celsus (Cambridge 1965) xii; lamb. Myst. 5.25; Morrison, op.cit. (supra
n.13) 84f; on the related idea of a supreme god with angel-agents, like the Persian king
surrounded by his satraps, which was fitted into both Origen’s and Neoplatonic thought,
see F. Cumont, RevHistPhil 72 (1915) 163–74.

17 Note the references, of a new explicitness, by the Egyptian prefect Aemilianus, to
the gods that preserve their [i.e. of Valerian and Gallienus] monarchy,” or by Maximi-
to the city that is “by many proofs revealed to flourish through the presence of the heav-
only gods, etc.,” or his assertion that “by the gods the government of the state and all
individuals in it have their being” (Euseb. HE 7.11, 9.7, 9.7f, 9.9, 9a, 6). Pagan supporters
attributed Julian’s spectacular success against Constantius to Julian’s divine protec-
tion (Eunap. Vit.soip 476; Greg.Naz. Or. 4, adv.Juln. 1.47). For even approximate parallels to
such views, one would have to go back three centuries and more to Vergil’s age (R. Syme,
The Roman Revolution (Oxford 1939) 486).

18 On Maxenius’ desperate measures, see Paneg. vet. 9[12] 16.3; Euseb. V.Const. 1.36, HE
8.14.5, 9.9.2; Lact. Mert.psps. 44; Zoë 2.15.4; for these clichés of the tyrant’s last days,
compare SHA Julianus 7.9f; Soz. 1.7; Dio 74.16.5, 80[79] 11; Euseb. V.Const. 2.4, HE 8.14.8;
and Zon. 13.1.2; for the prognostic sacrifices, also Amm.Marc. 29.2.17.

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significance felt by historians of the battle of the Milvian Bridge. The
old world failed, whatever devices were desperately attempted; the
new conquered, in the first campaign of a century’s religious strife.

This strife was carried on not merely by men but by supernatural
forces, too. If the Sibylline books, demons, priests and the rest deceived
Maxentius, it is at any rate they who fought as well as he; and their
enemy was not the western emperor but the Savior’s sign. The sign
may then have been the chrism and only in later battles the cross;
more likely, at the Milvian Bridge as throughout the rest of
Constantine’s career, the cross. Its cherished use in war, its invariable
efficacy whether on armor or on the labarum and whether to protect
emperor or humble standard-bearer, set it above all other forces;
yet the relation between the labarum and the traditional Roman
vexillum is obvious, while the painting of a declaratory or magical
device on the shields of one’s troops had earlier close parallels. Even
the tales of the defensive properties of the cross in combat are matched
by the inscriptions found on pieces of military equipment from the
centuries just before Constantine, reading “Luck to the bearer” or
“Best and Greatest, save the corps of all our soldiers”; Mars or Victory
might be depicted on armor. Such evidence shows us the well-worn
paths that Constantine trod when, according to the ancient arts of
apotropaic magic though with a different device, he put the insignia
of Christianity in the hands of his followers.

On the history of these insignia there is no need for much discus-
sion. Their potency to tear demons from their lairs in statues, to
uproot them from unhappy manias, to drive them forever from

19 A. Alfeld, Conversion of Constantine (Oxford 1948) 17f argues for the chrism, but points
out (126 n.7) the magical properties which it as well as the cross might be supposed to
possess.

20 On the power given to Constantine by use of the cross, see Socr. 1.2; Soz. 1.4, the cross
venerated by soldiers and the labarum work miracles; ibid. 1.8, cross marked on weapons;
Thdr. HE 1.17, and Socr. 1.17, Helena sends her son nails and wood from the true cross,
which he uses on his equipment and bears into battle “in order to avert the missiles of his
enemies.”

21 Firm.Mat. Err.prosp. 20.7, the labarum called the vexillum fidelis; and, on its warlike
properties, Alfeld, op.cit. (supra n.19) 84 and n.3, coins of Constantine showing “the imper-
ial standard with the emblem of Christ piercing with its point the snake of paganism.”

E. Petersen et al., Die Marcus-Säule (München 1896) plates 5.1, 10.1f, 11.1, 15.1, etc.; RE
2a (1921) 919 s.v. SCUTUM on Trajan’s Column; for identification of units by their shields,
see Tac. Hist. 3.23; Dio 64.14.2; Amm.Naz. 16.12.6; for Vespasian’s name on his vexillum,
Suet. Vesp. 6; for apotropaic animal symbols on shields, MacMullen, Artif 46 (1964) 442.

23 A. Rohlmann, CRAI 1935, 67f; P. Wullemier, Gallia 8 (1950) 1467; J. M. C. Toynbee,
CONSTANTINE AND THE MIRACULOUS SHRINES AND TEMPLES TO THE ACCOMPANYMENT OF THEIR ANGUISHED HOWLS AND SUPPLICATIONS—ALL THIS IS ATTESTED IN DOZENS OF ACCOUNTS OF CHRIST’S CROSS OR NAME IN THE SERVICE OF THE FAITHFUL. SO MIGHTY WAS THE WEAPON THAT CONSTANTINE AIMED AT MAXENTIUS’ WEAKER GODS. BUT CONSTANTINE EXTENDED ITS USE. HIS MOTHER HELENA SENT HIM A PIECE OF THE TRUE CROSS. “WHEN HE RECEIVED IT, CONFIDENT THAT THE CITY IN WHICH IT WAS KEPT WOULD BE PRESERVED FOREVER, HE HID IT IN A STATUE OF HIMSELF STANDING IN THE SO-CALLED FORUM OF CONSTANTINE IN CONSTANTINOPLE, ON A LARGE PORPHYRY COLUMN”—THEREBY PRODUCING THE CHRISTIAN EQUIVALENT OF THOSE IMAGES OF THE PAGAN GODS THAT, BOTH EARLIER AND LATER, DEFLECTED ENEMIES’ ATTACKS. THEY GUARDED NERO AGAINST CONSPIRACIES, EPHESUS AGAINST PLAUGUES, ATHENS AGAINST EARTHQUAKES, ROME AGAINST SEDITION.25

CONSTANTINE’S ACTIONS FITTED THE TIMES. APOTROPAIC MAGIC TO WARD OFF DISEASE WAS ON THE INCREASE. LUCKY STONES WITH MYSTIC SIGNS AND SPELLS ON THEM GREW MORE POPULAR IN THE THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES THAN EVER BEFORE, EVIDENTLY AMONG BOTH CHRISTIANS AND PAGANS, SINCE THE SYNODS OF ANCYRA (UNDER CONSTANTINE) AND OF LAODICEA (BETWEEN 341 AND 381) SPOKE OUT AGAINST “THOSE WHO FORETOLD THE FUTURE AND FOLLOW THE CUSTOMS OF THE HEATHEN, OR INTRODUCE PERSONS INTO THEIR HOUSES TO FIND OUT MAGICAL REMEDIES OR TO PERFORM PURIFICATIONS,” OR AGAINST PRIESTS WHO “SHALL NOT BE MAGICIANS OR ENCHANTERS OR ASTROLOGERS OR MAKE SO-CALLED PHYLACTERYs [AMULETS]... AND THOSE WHO WEAR THEM, WE ORDER TO BE EXPELLED FROM THE CHURCH.”26

EUSEBIUS TELLS THE TALE OF CAESAREA IN PALESTINE WHERE ONCE LIVED THE WOMAN WHO CHRIST CURED OF AN ISSUE OF BLOOD. AT THE GATES OF HER HOUSE STOOD TWO STATUES WHICH HE HIMSELF HAD SEEN, ONE OF A WOMAN PRAYING, THE OTHER OF A MAN RESEMBLING JESUS. AT THE BASE OF THE LATTER GREW A CURIOUS HERB ABLE TO “CURE DISEASES OF ALL KINDS.” TO THIS WONDER WE MUST ADD THE POWER OF THE TRUE CROSS THAT HELENA DISCOVERED TO HEAL THE SICK: THUS, TWO ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE WORKINGS OF CHRISTUS MEDICUS, IN OPPOSITION ESPECIALLY TO THE AUTHORITY ENJOYED BY ASCLEPIUS.37 BUT IT WAS, AFTER ALL, ESSENTIAL FOR THE CHURCH TO PRESENT ITS FOUNDER AS A GOD OF DEEDS EQUAL TO THE PERFORMANCES OF PAGAN DEITIES, SINCE, PARTICULARLY FOR A MASS AUDIENCE, PROOF THROUGH MIRACLES OFFERED AN INFINITELY MORE PERSUASIVE APPEAL THAN THE TYPE OF ARGUMENT CARRIED ON IN WRITTEN FORM. SIMPLE PEOPLE WANTED SIMPLE PROOF OF THE SUPERIOR ABILITY OF CHRISTIANITY TO DO FOR THEM WHAT OLDER WORSHIPS HAD ALWAYS PROMISED: THAT IS, TO DEFEND THEM FROM THE ILLS OF THIS EARTH. THE DREAMS GRANTED AT ASCLEPIEIAUGHT SUPPLIANTS HOW TO BE HEALED. COULD CHRIST OR HIS HOLY MEN DO AS MUCH? AND IF THE ANSWER WAS YES, IN SCORES OF WONDERS WROUGHT ESPECIALLY BY MONKS, THERE REMAINED THE MORE GENERAL AFFLICTON OF EPIDEMIC DISEASE. THROUGHOUT ANTIQUITY MEN ATTRADED PLAUGUES TO DIVINE ANGER. A PERSISTENT CONVICTION BLAMED THEIR ONSET ON THE PROGRESS OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE RESULTING NEGLECT OF PAGAN CULTS.38 IT WAS A HEAVY CHARGE VARIOUSLY ANSWERED; BUT ONE RESPONSE AS IT WAS ULTIMATELY FRAMED IN PIUS MYTH SAID THAT EVEN IN AVERTING DISEASE CHRISTIANS HAD ACCESS TO A MORE GENERously BENEFICENT POWER THAN PAGAN WORONER. WITH A FEW EXCEPTIONS—EUSEBIUS WROTE AT ONCE—CHRISTIANS, LIKE PAGANS, ACKNOWLEDGED THE SUPERNATURAL ORIGIN OF PLAUGUES, AS THEY DID OF OTHER BODILY ILLS WHICH THEY COULD NOT UNDERSTAND. AIMENTS AFFlicting (IN GROTEQUELY DISGUSTING DESCRIPTIONS) ESPECIALLY THE INTESTINES AND GENITALS MARKED THE VICTIM AS THE TARGET OF A GOD’s, OR OF GOD’s, WRATH; THE GENRE IS WELL KNOWN AND MEETS US MOST OFTEN IN THE HEATED RELIGIOUS ATMOSPHERE OF THE FOURTH CENTURY.39 MANIC FITS LIKEWIS

24 For example, Cypr. //Demetrianus 15; Acta Andreae 9; Thphl.Ant. ad Antol. 2.8
(Migne PG 6.1061f); Marc. Diac. V.Porph. 61; Consolations Zacchaei et Apolleni, ed. G. Morin (Bonn 1935) 1.5; Greg. Nyss. V.Greg.Tauum. (Migne PG 46.916a and 9490-9520); Soz. 4.16 and 5.2; Thdr. HB 3.1, 5.21; Athan. Or. Incarn. v.48 (Migne PG 55.181); idem, V. Antem. 13.23, 35, 40, 53, 63f, and 80; Lact. Mort. pers. 10.21; Euseb. H.Ev. 4; Jul. Imp. Ep. 79 (ed. Bidez); and Acta Sancatissip. et Polyceni (ed. James) 17f.
25 To the references in MacMullen, Enemies of the Roman Order (Cambridge [Mass.] 1960) 319, on apotropaic measures, add Suet. Nero 56, Philostr. V.Apolon 4.10, and Dio 37.9.2; effective apotropaic rites against the enemies of the state, SHA Asarian 16.5, 20.5-7, 21.4, described with considerable emphasis to match, in pagan history, the miracles wrought by christians. On constantine’s statue, see Soz. 1.17.
27 Euseb. HE 7.18.1-3; Soz. 1.17; R. Arbesmann, Traditio 10 (1954) 3f. Note that, as christ was lowered to a healer of bodies, pagan propaganda sought to raise asclepius to a healer of souls, Jul. Imp. adv.Gal. 2008. At the same time the ability of the gods, notably asclepius, really to heal their worshippers was perpetually depreciated, e.g., in Cypr. idel, v.natit. 65; Tat. //Ad Graec. 16; Tert. //Apol. 22; Ps.-Clem. //Hist. Rom. 9.13f; and Athan. V.Antol. 33. F. Dölger, Archd 6 (1909) 242-54, discusses some of these and other passages.
28 Cypr. ad Demet. 2f; Arnob. adv.Nat. 1.1 and 3; Porphyry in Thdr. Graec. afflietur. 12.96f. For a pagan and a christian in competition to avert plague from Rome, only the christian successful, see Dodds, op.cit. (supra n.5) 57.
29 Medical details meet us in Plut. Sulla 36, but earlier examples that he draws from greek literature could be easily multiplied. see the full history of eudocia in w. nestle, griechische studien (Stuttgart 1948) 568f. Other roots of the genre reach into judaism, continued by christian writers against pagans, persecutors and heretics, and usurped for use
called more for the exorcist than the doctor, and Christians claimed to possess the requisite skills more than their opponents. Palladius and Sozomen supply an abundance of case-histories. It was the same with other mysterious catastrophes: sterility of the fields, insect-pests, hail, drought, earthquakes, storms. Great winds, said Maximin Daia, were controlled by the gods, and could be turned on or off by their favor or displeasure. Jealous courtiers of Constantine accused the influential wise man Sopater of having "chained the winds" that were to bring the grain fleet to the capital; whereupon the emperor, evidently convinced that the man was actually capable of the necessary enchantments, executed him. Believing that natural phenomena, from earthquakes to the wasting of the flesh, were in fact all supernatural, people of the later Empire saw in their afflictions a working out of divine conflicts on a terrestrial plane or stage. Pagans accused Christians of causing these conflicts and their resultant sufferings. In the Apologists the echoes of such accusations—popularia verba, said Arnobius—are plainly heard: individual instances of persecution breaking out in the train, and because of the typical interpretation, of droughts and earthquakes are fairly often recorded. It was thought that droughts and the like might be deliberately inflicted in response to invocation or upon people hateful to the gods, though it was still more usually argued that the protectors of cities and nations had been neglected, and had for this reason departed. The sum total of the later Empire's ill-fortunes could thus, to Zoémis, appear to follow from the abandonment of ancestral cults and rites. He singles out for his criticism the decision of Constantine not to hold the ludi saeculares, in order that he may strike a blow at that hero of the Church.33

against Christians by pagans. See II Chron. 21:13 and 18; I Macr. 6.8; II Macr. 9.6; Acts 1.18, 12.23; Herod smitten in Joseph. AJ 17.108–170, BJ 1.656–603, both texts familiar to Eusebius (HE 1.8.5); Arius smitten in answer to bishop Alexander's prayer, in Socr. 1.38 and Thdt. HE 1.13; Galerius smitten, in Act. Myst. pers. 33 and Euseb. HE 8.6.3–5; Julian, uncle to the future emperor, smitten in Soc. 5.8, Thdt. HE 3.9, and in Philostorg. HE (Bidez) 7.10, adding the names of other victims of ἰδρύσεις; and used against Christians by Juin. Imp. Ep. 55 and 90 (ed. Bidez). Euseb. HE 9.7,10; cf. Marc.Diac. V.Porph. 56; Iambh. Myst. 5.6, and V.Pythag. 135; supra n 5. Though this evidence deals only with storms, much more could be gathered on other types of natural disaster.

K. Svoboda, La démonologie de Michel Psellos (Brno 1927) 11–14, 31, 34f; F. Curtius, Lucretius (Paris 1949) 81–95; idem, Rev Hist Rel 72 (1915) 159–74; T. Hopfner, Griechisch-Agyptischer Offenbarungsglaube (Leipzig 1921) 6, 8, 21ff, 43f; and the sources, from the less important forerunners like Plutarch (e.g. Mor. 361f), albinus (e.g. Epit. 15.1), and Artemidorus (e.g. Oen. 2.34), to the chief Neoplatonists, Plotinus (Enn. 3.5.6), Porphyry (Ep. an Anelo, passim; August. De civ. D. 10.9.26; Prod. In Tim. 1.420), Iamblichus (Myst. 3.3–9, 12, 20; 2.3; 3.16; etc.), and Proclus (In Crat. 122).

Demons caused pests, etc., in Porph. Abst. 2.40 and Iambh. Myst. 2.6 and 56; they cure the sick, ibid. 3.3; bring oracles, ibid. 3.2 and 16; Plut. Mor. 362; respond to δέκασονες, in Iambh. Myst. 2.7, and Curtius, Rev Hist Rel 72 (1919) 175; they attack men at the command of magic, Marc.Diac. V.Porph. 10; Iambh. Or. 1.43, 361–3 (cf. Zon. 13.8.17f; and Amm.Marc.

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Here, then, is another part of the background to the battle of the Milvian Bridge: terrestrial events of a striking, public character were thought to result from supernatural intercession whether spontaneous or invoked. It was neither improper nor uncommon for Christians to give credence to happenings of this order, and it was frowned on only if it degenerated to the private practice of magic. Pagans of course enjoyed a wider latitude in superstition, without, however, any fundamentally different views.

To understand a further aspect of the collision between Maxentius and Constantine, some discussion of demons is needed. The term, in Greek or by adoption in Latin, had the broadest meaning. Pagan philosophers used it to designate, between the crass materialism of mankind and the ethereal realm of pure intellect, the denizens of an intermediate world who served as agents and emissaries from the higher to the lower and (conducting the souls of the dead and the prayers of the living) from the lower to the higher. These denizens had ranks according to their insubstantiality and intellectuality, the purer ones sometimes called angels but often not differentiated under a separate category. They linked men to gods. Foreign as was most of this hierarchy of intermediaries to classical Greek thought, it can be seen developing in the second century and went virtually unquestioned in the later Empire. Its roots lay partly in a substratum of popular superstition, partly in Oriental religions. To mention only points of interest to our present purpose: it was demons who occasioned earthquakes, pests and so forth; they again who brought oracles from the gods and cured the sick; sometimes, too, harmed men when called on with the proper enchantments. Outstanding minds of late antiquity, Porphyry and Libanius, were quite sure that magic could be enlisted in the cause of personal vendettas—though the pure in spirit were beyond the reach of demons. The more evil among demons
longed to gorge themselves on sacrifices, to experience sexual intercourse vicariously through the bodies of the possessed, and to deceive with false revelations. Sometimes demons dwelt in cult images; they would not appear in impure places and shunned a hostile presence. To different ones among them different temples, even different zones or, more specifically, nations and peoples, had been assigned for worship and they occasionally took visible human shape to meddle directly in the course of events. According to a particularly common conviction, the Devil—διάβολος—or his agents continually worked against the progress or unity of the Church by spreading false doctrines, libels, suspicions against Christians, and the like. Infected with these diabolical errors, heretics and persecutors became mere instruments of a wickedness from beyond.

Strange views, perhaps. But as a darkness of irrationality thickened over the declining centuries of the Roman empire, superstition blacked out the clearer lights of religion, wizards masqueraded as philosophers, and the fears of the masses took hold on those who passed for educated and enlightened. From the same world, reflecting of necessity the same ideas because surrounded by them in all social classes, rose the leaders of the Church. Thus all of the opinions about demons (by that specific term, daemon or δαιμον) just now reviewed as representing the consensus of pagan thought also reigned as orthodoxy among Christians like Origen, Lactantius, Eusebius, Basil, Gregory and many others. though with this major difference, that the intermediaries between mortal and divine were conceived of as good and bad angels, the latter being equated (under the name ‘demons’) with the pagan gods. It hardly occurred to Christians to deny the whole infinite list of the older deities; only as many as possible were traced back to men as heroes, according to the traditional teachings of Euhemerism, while those that could not be talked out of existence in this fashion were left to deceive men with false visions, false cures, false oracles and insidious intrusions of shameful lust. This last trial especially will be recalled by readers of Athanasius’ Vita S. Antoni. Anthony declared himself the target of temptation by beautiful succubi some of whom, it is permissible to imagine, were simply pious peasant girls coming to venerate the saint. The mistake, at any rate, is once attested of a bishop of Constantius’ time, spending the night at an inn. A woman entered in the dark, the bishop asked, “Who’s there?” and hearing her voice concluded she was a demon in female form. “Straightway he called on Christ the Savior to help him.” The instinctive assumption that unearthly forces were at work tells us much about the spirit of the age.

Priests forbidden by the Council of Laodicea to engage in magical practices are joined by the clients of charlatans in Basil’s congregation; together they and their like form the audience for one of the charges most frequently (surely, because most credibly) launched by

43 Demons were seen as intermediary beings (Arnob. adv.Nat. 2.35; Euseb. Prep.ev. 4.5), formerly angels until their fall (Tat. ad Græc. 12; Terr. Apoll. 22; Lact. Div.inst. 2.15; Euseb. Prep.ev. 716; Athenag. pro Christ. 24; Consult.Zacchaei [supra n.24] 1.30f; Phot. Bibl. 234f=Methodus; Svoboda, op.cit. [supra n.34] 6f). What pagans called gods were either formerly mortals (Euhemerism:: Arnob. adv.Nat. 1.37; Firm.Mat. Err.profrel. 2.3, 7.6; Cypr. Iol.vanit. 1; Athenag. pro Christ. 28) or simply demons (Tat. ad Græc. 22; Justin. Apol. 1.5; Clem.Alex. Cohort. 1.2.63 and 69; Terr. Apoll. 22; Euseb. H.Ericol. 25 and Prep.ev. 4.5 and 23; Consult.Zacchaei 1.5; Soci. 3.23; Soz. 2.5; Thdt. HE 1.16, 3.3). They lodged in cult statues (Ps. 96:5; Ps-Clem. Hom. 9.15; Cypr. Iol.vanit. 7; Rufin., Migne PG 12.789a; Basil, Migne PG 30.532f; Firm.Mat. Err.profrel. 13.4; Athenag. pro Christ. 267f, delighting in the smoke and blood of sacrifices (Orig. c.Cels. 7.5; Terr. Apoll. 22; Firm.Mat. Err.profrel. 13.4; Basil, Migne PG 30.165f and 332f) or among deceitful oracles to pagans (Cypr. Iol.vanit. 6; Consult.Zacchaei 1.27; Svoboda, op.cit. [supra n.34] 34); they sought sexual license through possession (Ps.-Clem. Hom. 9.9f; [Clem.Rom.] Recog. 4.16; Consult.Zacchaei 1.30; Svoboda, op.cit. 31). Especially by controlling men’s minds and impulses they intervened to shape historical events (Justin. Apol. 1.44.12; Cypr. Iol.vanit. 7; Euseb. V.Const. 1.45, 1.49, 3.12, 3.26; HE 3.8.5, 4.7.2, 4.11.9, 9.10.2; Greg.Naz., Migne PG 36.348a; Soc. 4.19; Thdt. HE 1.1c). They could be called or banished by spells (Arnob. adv.Abat. 1.45=45), but could not hurt the pure (Lact. Div.inst. 2.16). Nations and peoples were assigned to the oversight of angels (supra n.13; Clem.Alex. Cohort. 2; J. Daniélou, Origène [Paris 1948] 236f; idem, Recherches de science religieuse 38 [1911] 132-34).

44 Thdt. HE 2.7.
Christians at their fellows, heretics or schismatics or simply personal foes, namely, the charges of attempted sorcery. It is irrelevant that these were no doubt often untrue; the fact remains that they were believed. They could be launched, moreover, at more ambitious targets, and used in polemics of a yet graver importance. When enemies of the Church competitively inflated the reputation of that renowned wonder-worker of the first century, Apollonius of Tyana, Christians could dismiss him, too, as a mere 'magician'; in reply, the term was turned against Christ, lowering Him to the rank of magus. Could pagan miracles truly equal those wrought by Christ? A didactic tract pointed to his raising of the dead to life, whereas heathen wizards could only boast that *magicae arcanitates non mortuorum sed daemonum spiritus evocari.*

The atmosphere of contentious comparison, the tendency to prove the superiority of one's faith by matching its miraculous powers with another's, emerged suddenly from books to the stage of real events in Constantine's lifetime. The conditions making this possible were all present. What was required was a conviction that powers accessible to men through invocation, and willing to intervene in tangible forms and happenings—moreover, powers potentially hostile to each other—filled the universe. It was necessary, too, that such a conviction should be held by the great mass of people, as was indeed the case. Our sketch so far, relying more on anecdotes than analysis, has been intended to reveal society shot through at all levels with the colors of a grosser superstition, with cruder expectations of the supernatural than one could find in the Empire at its height.

The consequences appeared first in the origins of the Great Persecution, of which Constantine, incidentally, was a witness. As Diocletian was assisting in the ceremony of extispicium, Christians in his retinue crossed themselves, "by which act the demons were put to flight and the ritual disturbed." The chief priest explained why the

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44 ibid. 1.28; Socr. 1.27; Soz. 2.25, 4.10—all recounting accusations against Athanasius; also against Eusebius of Cæsarea (Socr. 2.9; Soz. 3.6), Cyprian (Prudent. Persit. 13.21f), Constantius (Amn. Marc. 21.1.6), and various heresarchs (Iren. adv. Haer. 1.13.3, and Euseb. HE 4.7.2 and 4.11.4, quoting Irenaeus and Justin; Text. De praec. haeret. 43; idem, adv. Marc. 1.18). One set of charges against a certain Syrian bishop in 444 is interestingly analyzed by E. Peterson in *Miscellanea Pio Fischini* I (Rome 1948) 95-99. The usual term of abuse was *yelq* and *sypylq* (cf. Joseph. AJ 20.5.1, 20.8.5, 20.8.10).

45 On *Christus magus* see Lact. Div. Inst. 5.2, refusing Herodes' comparison of Apollonius and Christ; ibid. 5.3; Athan. Or. Incaur. ver. 48 (Migne PG 25.181); and Arnob. adv. Nat. 1.53; cf. Achan. Migne PG 25.129 and 149, and Consult. Zachaei 1.13, on *magica carmina.*

46 See nn. 35, 37 and 42, and especially Porph. V. Platon. 10, with Thdrt. Græc. ascet. ev. 12.96f; Arnob. adv. Nat. 2.2; Terr. Apol. 46; Orig. cels. 1.60, 3.29; Euseb. HE 7.10.4, 9.3; Soz. 3.18; Soz. 5.2, 5.19; and Hopfner, op. cit. (supra n.34) 14 (a Neoplatonist view).

47 Euseb. V. Const. 1.50, HE 7.10.4, cf. 7.17 and 9.3; Soz. 3.18, 4.24

48 Eurip. V. inf. 481; cf. the attack repulsed by Plotinus, in MacMullen, op. cit. (supra n.25) 100.
with "certain unspeakable invocations to demons and deterrents of
war,"40 vain, as it turns out, and powerless against the mightier
arsenal of Christianity.

How much in the scene can be credited? Were our whole basis of
understanding the pages of Eusebius alone, we might, like Burck-
hardt a hundred years ago, replace the supernatural elements with
others more easily acceptable to a modern mind. Anachronistic
rationalism, however, only misleads; the interpretation suggested by
more recent scholars, notably Alföldi, is surely right. In the light of
the beliefs surveyed in the foregoing pages, we must suppose that
Constantine's contemporaries (why not himself, then?) did in truth
fear antagonistic wizardry, did put their faith in supernatural aid to
be exerted visibly on the very field of battle, accepted without
skepticism the powers claimed both for Maxentius' sacrifices and for
the symbol of the cross, and looked on the whole struggle of old
against new religion as being greater than, but no different in kind
from, the operation of magicians' spells and counter-spells.

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40 Euseb. HE 8.14.5; supran. 18.