eroica della città (ll. 18–20) si inquadra in maniera coerente nella mappa religiosa e culturale della Grecia ridisegnata dai Romani, all’interno della quale le poleis assumevano ruoli e significati non necessariamente coincidenti con il reale peso politico, come nel caso di Naryca, rimasta ai margini della storia politica del koinon locrese, ma presente nella memoria collettiva per il prestigio procuratole dall’essere stata sede della regalità dell’eroe omerico Aiace. Da iscrizioni tanto pubbliche che private si ricavano alcuni spunti per approfondire quanto si conosce da documenti inclusi nel Corpus delle iscrizioni della Locride occidentale e dalla tradizione letteraria in merito alla etnicità locrese, in particolare confermando quella che ne costituisce in un certo senso la specificità, la coscienza del doppiio livello di appartenenza regionale e sovrapoleico: da un lato, l’orizzonte precipuamente locrese cui la popolazione fa riferimento, dall’altro un complesso di comportamenti e attitudini riconducibili a una più ampia circolazione di modelli appartenenti alla tradizione della cultura greco-romana dall’età ellenistica all’epoca imperiale. Il profilo delle società poleiche, soprattutto delle loro classi più alte, emerge dalle iscrizioni funerarie e onorarie. I carmina elegiaca incisi sulla tomba del defunto di Larymna (verosimilmente un poeta) e di quello di Halae, l’epigramma (attribuito a Posidippo) in onore di Nicasichoros a Opus, le dediche dei phylogymnastai -verosimilmente un’associazione atletica – nella medesima città (e qui soltanto attestati), che onorano un personaggio dal nome illustre di Epharmostos, fanno pensare a élites cittadine che in qualche misura si richiamano a un patrimonio di usi e valori condivisi e che si pongono in una linea di continuità con la tradizione della nobiltà delle Cento Case la quale aveva svolto un ruolo di primo piano nella storia locrese e contribuito a preservare quelle comuni radici identitarie che fin dalle età più antiche avevano fatto da cerniera tra i Locresi dell’Est e dell’Ovest.


Books about Constantine are proliferating in anticipation of another centennial anniversary of his victory over the emperor Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge outside Rome in 312. That minor military success has assumed special significance because of its association with the emperor’s famous vision of a cross in the sky. The vision supposedly marked Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, and
his subsequent support for Christianity led to the intersection of Church and State that has characterized the development of medieval and modern Western Civilization.

Klaus M. Girardet now offers a new viewpoint on the early years of Constantine’s reign. His focus is on the period from 310, when Constantine visited a temple of Apollo in Gaul, to 314, when he was consulting with bishops and issuing legislation on behalf of Christianity. This period included both «Constantine’s journey to Christianity» and the early manifestations of «the various consequences of the new aspects of his religious policy» (p. 4). The novelty of Girardet’s interpretation is to locate the important transition not in 312, but rather in 310 and 311. In Girardet’s perspective the battle at the Milvian Bridge was not a catalyst for the emperor’s decision about Christianity, but rather only subsequent confirmation. Constantine was already a Christian when he invaded Italy and marched on Rome.

The core of Girardet’s argument is his reconstruction of the events of 310 and 311. In spring of 310 Constantine defeated the rival emperor Maximian in southern Gaul. During his return to the Rhine frontier he stopped at a shrine, which Girardet identifies as a temple of Apollo Grannus at Grand (p. 38). Later that year a panegyrist described the emperor’s vision: «Constantine, you saw your Apollo… You recognized yourself in the appearance of him to whom the poets’ divine verses have prophesied that rule over the entire world is owed» (Panegyrici latini 6(7).21.3–7). In his Life of Constantine bishop Eusebius of Caesarea recorded another vision sometime before Constantine’s battle against Maxentius. According to this account, Constantine himself claimed that, «at the noontime hour of the sun», he had once seen, «with his own eyes», «a trophy of the cross in the sky, situated over the sun and formed from light» (Eusebius, Vita Constantini 1.28.2).

Already in the mid-twentieth century A. H. M. Jones had offhandedly tried to explain this vision of a cross as a solar halo, a natural phenomenon formed by the refraction of sunlight through ice crystals high in the atmosphere. In 1993 Peter Weiß revived this explanation of Constantine’s vision as a solar halo.¹ Weiß’ innovation, however, was to claim that Constantine had witnessed this solar halo already in 310 at the shrine of Apollo, and that he subsequently construed that original apparition as a vision of a cross. Girardet accepts this hypothesis of a single «Himmelsphänomen» (p. 44) that was later reinterpreted: «Nothing contradicts an identification of the emperor’s account about the cross of light, as recorded by Eusebius, with the natural event located at Grand in 310» (p. 47).

In Girardet’s reading, it is the subsequent recasting of the solar halo as a Christian cross that requires explanation. Already during 311, according to Girardet, there were many reasons for Constantine to abandon pagan cults and lean toward Christianity. In April the emperor Galerius, who had previously been a...

primary instigator behind the persecution of Christians, issued a statement of toleration that seemed to concede the ineffectiveness of the pagan gods. By autumn Constantine was objecting to the revival of persecution by the emperor Maximinus in the East. According to Girardet, Constantine’s letter to Maximinus «could have been the first political outcome of his turning» to Christianity (p. 50). Many of Girardet’s additional claims are even more hypothetical. Perhaps, he suggests, Constantine had heard a Christian interpretation of the «phénoménon in the sky» from the bishop of Trier (pp. 44–45), or even from the rhetorician Lactantius (pp. 59–60). Perhaps he had already modified his military standard to include the symbol of the cross and a christogram (the ligature of Greek letters serving as an abbreviation for ‘Jesus Christ’ or just ‘Christ’). Even though firm evidence for such a Christianized military standard does not appear until years later, «there is not the slightest reason not to accept the statement» (p. 60).

This sort of speculation is strongly questionable, for several reasons. First, not only is there no indication in the panegyric of 310 that the vision of Apollo had been the manifestation of a solar halo, but collapsing these two visions into one is an unconvincing assumption. In an oration delivered in Constantine’s presence at the end of his reign Eusebius conceded that the emperor had repeatedly relied upon visions to help make decisions about political and military affairs. Rather than only one or two visions, the emperor had had «thousands of visions of your Savior» (Eusebius, De laudibus Constantini 18.1). We modern historians should be trying to multiply the number of Constantine’s visions, rather than reducing them to a single vision.

Second, interpreting visions and dreams is admittedly difficult. With his fundamentally empiricist approach Girardet has deployed a restricted set of explanatory categories: fact or fiction, politics or religion, Christian or not. These categories are inadequate for constructing a proper interpretive framework. Instead, Constantine’s visions formed an epistemology, a symbolic means for finding meaning in unfamiliar or trying circumstances. Contemporaries likewise used this symbolic medium to understand the emperor’s decisions and actions. These stories about Constantine’s visions should hence be interpreted not as exact forensic descriptions, but as later representations of past circumstances. The narrators, authors, and storytellers were constructing a past to serve their present concerns.

Compounding the problem is Girardet’s preference for conflating the literary sources into a single master narrative that matches his speculations. Close readings of ancient texts will always be a foundation of historical interpretation. It is hence surprising that missing from his analysis is consideration of the sources for these ‘sources’. The years leading up to Constantine’s invasion of Italy in 312 and the battle at the Milvian Bridge are comparatively well-documented in panegyrics, Lactantius’ account of the Tetrarchic emperors, the frieze on the Arch of Constantine at Rome, Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History, and his Life of Constantine. Where did the panegyrist of 310, the panegyrist of 313, Lactantius, and Eusebius acquire their information, and how did their personal concerns affect their narratives? Eusebius, for instance, finally recorded Constantine’s story
about the vision of the cross in his *Life*, which was completed only after the emperor’s death in 337. The earliest he could have heard that story was at the council of Nicaea in 325, when he met Constantine for the first time. But by then the emperor had already listened to the earlier panegyrics, he was already familiar with some of Lactantius’ ideas, and he had already seen the frieze of the battle at the Milvian Bridge depicted on the commemorative arch at Rome. Those earlier accounts, both panegyric and monumental, would have influenced Constantine’s memories. By the time the emperor finally told his own story to Eusebius and other bishops, he had been thinking for years about both the original event and these subsequent accounts.

Girardet rightly stresses the «religious ambiguity» inherent in the decoration of the arch (p. 88). Ambiguity was in fact a characteristic of all these accounts, both near-contemporary and much later. Stories about Constantine’s visions hence concerned memories, and not simply religious beliefs. They cannot be conflated into a simple linear narrative (or, as Girardet claims, «the historical reality in the past», p. 34). In particular, the story about the cross in the sky should not be applied as an accurate depiction of the beginning of Constantine’s religious evolution. Instead, that story marked the conclusion of a long process of recollection. It was a retrospective attempt to make sense of past events by associating them with a divine sanction. The story about the vision of a cross was already an interpretation, a reading of the past.  

Girardet’s overviews of Constantine’s actions after his victory in 312 are stronger chapters. In his letters to imperial magistrates and churchmen the emperor identified himself as a Christian (Chapter 6). He financed the construction of churches at Rome, and he bestowed property and privileges on churchmen (Chapter 7). In various ways the emperor considered himself responsible for the development of liturgy and theology (Chapter 8).

Because of the emperor’s nonstop involvement in ecclesiastical affairs, Girardet describes Constantine as a «Christian pontifex maximus» (p. 147). This characterization is suggestive, largely because it sets up the possibility of interesting continuities both with the role of earlier emperors in the celebration of state religion, and with the future role of popes in taking over ecclesiastical affairs at Rome. It is also somewhat misleading. On the one hand it allows Girardet to explain away the survival of pagan motifs as simple political expediency (p. 98). At the same time it allows him to insist that Constantine was not interested at all in any sort of religious toleration or consensus (pp. 138–39, 156). Instead, in 324 Constantine fought an actual «religious war» (p. 134) against Licinius, a rival emperor. In the end, Girardet credits the emperor’s lasting historical significance to his «policy of systematic Christianization» (p. 163).

The study of Constantine and his age flourishes. But one consistent weakness of much Constantinian scholarship is its relentless focus on Constantine, at the expense of other emperors. Another weakness is the single-minded emphasis on religiosity, as if that were the most important aspect of Constantine’s reign. The

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1 For the application of memory studies to Constantine’s vision, see R. Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (Cambridge, 2011).
obvious consequence of these trends is a persistent obsession with the purity and conviction of his religious beliefs. A comparison with other contemporary emperors quickly exposes the limitation of this approach. According to Lactantius, Diocletian had consulted an oracle of Apollo before initiating persecution of Christians, Maxentius had consulted the Sibylline books before his battle against Constantine, and Licinius had had a dream of an «angel of God» before his victory over Maximinus. Yet modern scholarship does not obsess about the sincerity of these emperors’ religiosity. Only Constantine’s motives seem to raise questions regarding his religion or his politics.¹

Girardet’s ideas are consistently learned and provocative. In the first half of the book, however, that provocation is largely a consequence of numerous conjectures. In proposing Constantine’s shift to Christianity already in 311, Girardet relies too often on assumptions that quickly become statements of fact. «Dagegen spricht nichts» (p. 72): therefore, in this case, Girardet concludes (quite implausibly) that Constantine had informed Lactantius about the appearance of the cross in the sky perhaps in 311. In the second half of the book the stimulation is a consequence of an unforgiving perspective on the rigidity of the emperor’s Christianity. According to Girardet, all along Constantine’s «political intention» had been to «erase the religious pluralism of the empire» (p. 162). For the early years of Constantine’s reign Girardet relies on dubious speculation, and for the later years he highlights a brittle intolerance toward traditional cults. The end result is a severely constricted perspective on Constantine and his gods.

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¹ For non-religious aspects of Constantine’s reign, see R. Van Dam, The Roman Revolution of Constantine (Cambridge, 2007).


‘The Roman Government of Britain’ [RGB] is «a completely new version» of Birley’s classic and indispensable ‘The Fasti of Roman Britain’ (1981) [FRB], which maintains the same very high standard and is still indispensable for Roman historians in general as well as archaeologists and students of Roman Britain. Like FRB, it lists «all known Roman high officials who served in Britain», quoting exhaustively the primary evidence, literary and epigraphic, and analysing fully their origins, family connections and careers. (Not one of them, incidentally, originated from Britain itself, not until the usurper Gratianus in 407.) The Introduction incorporates the invaluable «senatorial career in the principate» from FRB, but without the tabulation of illustrative careers, and concludes with summary treatment of topics such as the governors of Britain and their staff, the provincial ‘capital’, and local government. Other summary treatments, which comprised the third and final section of FRB, have been revised and moved into the four-part chronological sequence which follows the Introduction. Part I (43 – c.213) amounts to more than two-thirds of RGB, and ends with the division of