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**Hans A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*. New York/London: Routledge, 1996. Pp. xiv + 105. \$11.95. ISBN 0-415-13178-2 (pb).**

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Hans P[ohlsander]'s slim volume on Constantine appears in the same series, the Lancaster Pamphlets, as David Shotter's *Nero*, recently reviewed by Christopher T.H.R. Ehrhardt (*BMCR* 97.9.18). As stated in the series' common Foreword (p. ix), the Lancaster Pamphlets are primarily designed for A Level students (i.e. those in the last stage of secondary education in England and Wales), 'though they should also be of value to those pursuing introductory courses in universities', and their aim is to bring into sharper focus than a textbook can some of the central themes and problems, especially by providing 'some of the results of recent research'. Bearing these stated aims in mind, while the advanced student or scholar will find the lack of footnoting or index irksome, to say the least, this criticism is to be directed at the designer of the series' format rather than P. himself. One has to judge P.'s achievement within this frame.

P.'s short introduction is a justification for his subject, who was, after all, undoubtedly as significant for posterity as the other emperors already covered in this series (Augustus, Tiberius and Nero) but is certainly a less familiar figure to A level students, having escaped popularisation by Robert Graves or Hollywood. As P. says, Constantine was a controversial figure, whose conversion to and support for Christianity resulted in widely divergent judgements amongst subsequent Roman historians and a strongly negative press amongst post-Enlightenment commentators. P. sets out to present the 'more balanced conclusions' of modern scholars. In essence this means following much the same line of interpretation as that exemplified by the works of Timothy Barnes cited in P.'s bibliography.

P. begins by setting Constantine clearly against the background of the 'third-century crisis', providing a Timechart from A.D. 235-337 (p. xiii) and devoting the first substantial chapter to 'The soldier emperors and Diocletian' (pp. 3-11), before narrating the events of Constantine's own reign in chapters 3 to 11. Of this, thirty-two pages (pp. 12-44) are devoted to A.D. 306-324 and another thirty-two (pp. 45-77) to Constantine's last twelve years (A.D. 325-337), which represents a commendably balanced coverage of what are arguably the two major phases of Constantine's imperial career: the first as part of a college of Augusti, the second as sole Augustus. Space is found for a consideration of iconography (pp. 78-82) before P. concludes his main text with 'An assessment', in which P. passes judgement on the historical legacy of

Constantine's actions as well as on his moral character (found wanting, at least for one claimed as a saint of the Orthodox church). The whole is rounded off with four appendices and a bibliography.

There is little contentious in P.'s brief round-up of events from the demise of Severus Alexander up until Diocletian and the Tetrarchy. However, I would take issue with his portrayal of affairs immediately before Constantine in one or two instances. P.'s version of the tenor of Diocletian's tetrarchic regime (pp. 10-11) does seem somewhat coloured by old-fashioned notions of the onset of 'oriental despotism'. Use of the title *dominus/KU/RIOS* for persons imperial, and the adjective *sacer/I(ERO/S* in relation to their possessions, is hardly something which originated with Diocletian. Diocletian may have 'profoundly changed the nature of the Roman emperorship' (p. 11) but as the inventor of the tetrarchy, which embodied the Roman republican principle of collegiate office held for a limited period and included the revolutionary concept of the retired emperor, a case can be made that Diocletian took it in a direction opposite to that implied by P. The statement that Rome lost much of its power under Diocletian (p. 8, cf. 33) is similarly misleading. Certainly the emperors' absence meant that the side-lining of Rome in imperial political affairs and the process of displacing senators from military command and provincial governorships proceeded apace, but their social prestige remained unchallenged.<sup>1</sup> In this light Constantine's government appears as less of a natural progression on Diocletian's than P.'s account (chapter 10) suggests.

While one understands the constraints imposed in producing a general account, there are, nevertheless, occasional instances which suggest insufficient criticism of the basic sources. For example, P. relates (p. 6), as if it were undisputed, the extremely dubious story (clearly deriving from a hostile source) that Diocletian was born a slave or was the son of a freed slave, whereas, in fact, even Eutropius consigns it to a secondary place.<sup>2</sup> Again, at pp. 19-20, P. relates the highly suspect story that Maxentius' coming out of Rome to attack Constantine on 28 October 312 was motivated by his consultation of the Sibylline Books, which had told him that on that day 'an enemy of the Romans will perish.' While it is quite possible that Maxentius did believe this date (the anniversary of his *dies imperii*) to be auspicious, P. ought to have alerted readers to the fact that the story of the oracle, which is found in both Lactantius and Zosimus, would seem to be modelled on Herodotus' famous story of Croesus' consultation of Greek oracles that assured him that, if he were to attack the Persians, 'he would destroy a mighty empire'.<sup>3</sup>

There are, moreover, a couple of instances where P. gives an unproblematic account of matters on which modern scholars are far from being agreed. Firstly, and less seriously, P. declares that '[I]n all likelihood' Constantine's father, Constantius, served as praetorian prefect, to Diocletian's co-emperor, Maximian, from 288-93 (p. 13). Such vague assurance is the unfortunate side-effect of not requiring supporting evidence in footnotes or endnotes. In fact, here P. is following T.D. Barnes' identification, in preference to A.H.M. Jones', of Constantius with an anonymous individual whose relationship to Maximian is alluded to in Mamertinus' panegyric to that emperor of April 289.<sup>4</sup> Far more seriously for the overall portrait of Constantine though, P. asserts without

argument (33) that the emperor's refusal to offer sacrifice to Jupiter on the Capitol took place in relation to his *decennalia* of A.D. 315, rather than to the occasion of his vicennialian visit in 326. Clearly a refusal at the former occasion implies a rapid Christianization of public imperial ritual, which would tend to confirm the genuine and thoroughgoing nature of his conversion to Christianity in 312. Given Constantine's willingness to engage in the Donatist controversy in 313 and his significant failure to celebrate the Secular Games due in 314, P.'s account is probably right. Nevertheless, some indication of the existence of scholarly controversy would have been appropriate,<sup>5</sup> as P. does concerning the date of the first war with Licinius (p. 39) and the foundation of the Church of the Holy Apostles (p. 67). Also significant for our view of Constantine's Christianity is the controversial matter of his ban on pagan sacrifice. Clearly following Eusebius (*Vita Constantini* 2.45.1), P. mentions this in passing (p. 44), leaving the impression that it was a universal ban. However, since Eusebius is obviously trying to present Constantine as the model Christian ruler, his claims cannot be accepted uncritically. The fact is that we do not possess the text of this crucial piece of legislation (it is absent from book 16 of the Theodosian Code, a section which survives complete), but only an apparent reference to a ban by Constans in 341 (*CTh* 16.10.2). We cannot be sure that the ban referred to there was universal, though this is certainly maintained by a significant section of modern scholarly opinion.<sup>6</sup>

As a coda to his treatment of the historical circumstances of Constantine's conversion to Christianity, P. appends an account of the legend of Constantine's baptism by Pope Silvester (pp. 25-7), which is very good on its afterlife but fails adequately to explain the rationale of its genesis, though this is alluded to later (pp. 75-6). Given that the legend cannot possibly have arisen until after Constantine's baptism and death in 337, this digression from the strictly historical account of the emperor's reign would have been better placed in P.'s final chapter or in an independent appendix.

Those chapters (5-8) covering the imperial and religious politics of Constantine's reign after his conversion, with P.'s account of the Council of Nicaea at their centre, are the strongest of the whole book. P. offers a clear and concise account of the factional and christological issues which vexed Constantine in his attempts to encourage Christian unity, and P. does his readers a particular service in providing, as Appendix IV, English texts of the Creed in three stages of its development into what we nowadays call the Nicene. P. canvasses the various theories concerning the mysterious crisis of A.D. 326 which claimed the lives of Constantine's eldest son Crispus and wife Fausta (pp. 52-4), leaving a judiciously open verdict. One possibility P. does not consider for their downfall is objection to Constantine's religious policies, which had taken an undoubtedly more pronounced turn in favour of the Christian church in the aftermath of the defeat of his last imperial rival, Licinius, in 324.

Any account of the foundation of Constantinople is problematic because of the poor state of our knowledge of the city before the 350s. Nevertheless in his version (pp. 59-67), P. seems rather keener to see Constantinople, as inaugurated in 330, as a 'New Rome' and a Christian capital than the evidence

strictly warrants. The city's claim to rival the status of the old capital might better be seen as a phenomenon of the 350s, as a reaction by Constantius II to Magnentius' usurpation in the West. Furthermore P.'s implication (p. 66) that the dedications of the churches to the concepts of Irene (Peace) and Sophia (Wisdom) were chosen as alternatives inoffensive to pagans is anachronistic, since it was as yet too early for the more familiar practice naming basilicas for saints, other than their immediate *martyria*. It is, moreover, more than likely that the latter church is attributable to Constantius II rather than his father.<sup>7</sup>

As P. emphasises (pp. 68-9), Constantine's conversion to Christianity did not result in a new era of leniency in legal penalties. In fact he seems to have been quite inventive in devising new unpleasantnesses, such as the ingestion of molten lead. Although P. does not make it clear, one change in this field attributable to Christianity was little more than symbolic: replacing the *crux* (cross) for executions because of its obvious connotations with the *furca* (fork) would have been of little comfort to those nailed to its wood. This only serves to underline P.'s conclusions to this chapter on Constantine's government (p. 72): Constantine introduced fewer innovations than his religious conversion might lead one to expect and what innovation there was tended to serve a conservative purpose.

However, I cannot entirely share one of P.'s overall conclusions that Constantine's reign saw 'no radical reordering of society' (p. 84). Certainly P. is right to say that Constantine's conversion and foundation of Constantinople did not produce this result. Nevertheless, his reign did see a radical reordering of the symbolic social hierarchy of the empire, whereby the central place of the institutions of the city of Rome in determining social status was usurped not by those of any new capital city but by a status-hierarchy emanating directly from the imperial court, wherever that might be. P.'s final judgement on Constantine is harsh (85-6), finding him not only incompetent in arrangements for the succession but also, as the first Christian emperor, distinctly lacking in mercy and humility. The latter is entirely congruent with a megalomania on Constantine's part evidenced by his portrayal in the colossal seated statue of the Basilica Nova in Rome (described in 79-80), the precedents for which would seem to lie more with divine than previous imperial statuary.

P. provides a helpful outline of the primary sources in Appendix I, though its helpfulness is limited, as already noted, by the lack of indication of how the main text relates to them. One feels that P. might have done more in his main narrative to indicate the source or sources on which his account relies at any particular point, however disruptive to the narrative flow the occasional 'according to' might have been. Aside from a couple of minor misapprehensions,<sup>8</sup> the subsequent glossary (Appendix II) seems correctly pitched for the readership. The same cannot be said for the biographical notes (Appendix III), which ought to offer further background on significant *dramatis personae* of the main text to help to explain their actions in that context. Why the entries for M. Aurelius, L. Verus and Antoninus Pius (hardly figures of central significance to Constantine's reign), when the extremely significant Ablabius (mentioned at p. 77) is absent? And, significant though he might be, Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem (p. 97), does not even appear in the

main text, as far as I can discern.

Two items are worth noting in addition to P.'s list of primary source material in English (pp. 102-3): S.N.C. Lieu & D. Montserrat (edd.), *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine Views. A Source History* (Routledge: New York & London, 1996) and S.J.J. Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs: Imperial Pronouncements and Government, AD 284-324* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1996), both of which no doubt appeared too late for inclusion in P.'s manuscript; though Routledge might have tipped P. off to the appearance of the former. One might also note in this context Maureen A. Tilley (trans. with notes and introduction), *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 24; Liverpool University Press: Liverpool, 1996).

The overall editorial standard is very high.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the text is generously illustrated -- one of the book's strengths -- with ten figures of diverse provenance: one map, three town plans, three drawings (two architectural, one of a coin-type), two photographs (a manuscript illumination and a marble head) and a family tree. The publishers are to be commended for the quality of reproduction of these, but I cannot let maps 3 and 6 (of the Christian basilicas of Rome and Jerusalem respectively), borrowed from Charles M. Odahl's *Early Christian Latin Literature* (Ares: Chicago 1993), pass without comment. Both are distinctly unprofessional in execution, having the air of schoolboy sketches. This is most acute as regards the indication of the city walls in the map of Jerusalem (p. 56), where the dotted line marking their first-century phase is so easily confused with the shading (indicating relief?) that the point that the Anastasis Basilica lies outside them but within the late antique circuit is obscured. As well as exhibiting the same low standard of draughtsmanship, the map of Rome (p. 35) suffers from the additional inconsistency of being labelled in a mixture of English, Latin and Italian (e.g. Tiber r., Pons Milvius, Via Ostiense), not to mention the slip 'Via Laminia' for Flaminia. Drafting from scratch could hardly have failed to produce superior results.

Although perhaps too heavy for the tastes of some scholars, P.'s emphasis on the ecclesiastical aspects of Constantine's reign -- as one might expect from an emeritus Professor of Classics and Religious Studies and the author of *Helena: Empress and Saint* (Ares: Chicago 1996) -- is on the whole justified, I think, by the facts of Constantine's significance for the church in physical (church-building) and metaphysical matters (doctrine). On the other hand the presence of at least one statement redolent of the author's religious commitment seems unnecessary (p. 55), since it might undermine P.'s credibility as the purveyor of a balanced view of Constantine in the eyes of a multi-faith readership.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, while P.'s expertise clearly lies in the religious aspects of Constantine's reign, his account of the secular is informed by the current scholarly consensus (even where that would appear to be mistaken).<sup>11</sup> Thus P.'s account of Constantine does fulfil the objectives of the Lancaster Pamphlets in this respect.

In sum, despite the occasional quibbles this reviewer might have with line taken and reservations held regarding the format of the series, P. has fulfilled

his brief by providing a generally balanced account of Constantine's reign in a clear, if uncomplicated and unchallenging, manner. These virtues, combined with its brevity and price, will no doubt make it deservedly popular amongst its target audience.

## NOTES

1. P.'s further claim (p. 33) that 'now ... even the urban prefect was appointed by the emperor' is rather curious seeing that the urban prefects had always been appointed by the emperors ever since the appointment of the first, L. Calpurnius Piso pontifex (cos. 15 B.C.), in Augustus' last days.
2. Eutropius, *Breviarium* 9.19 'Diocletian ... a man who came from Dalmatia ... was of such insignificant origin that most (writers) believe that he was the son of a clerk, some that he was a freedman of the senator Anullinus.', trans. H.W. Bird, (Liverpool, 1993).
3. Lactantius, *de mortibus persecutorum* 44.8 & Zosimus, 2.16.1; cf. Herodotus 1.53.
4. For instance, A.H.M. Jones in *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1971), Constantius 12, preferred to refer the words of *Pan. Lat.* 10(2).11.4-7 to Afranius Hannibalianus cos. 292 (Hannibalianus 3), whose daughter was probably the Theodora who married Constantius.
5. Cf., for example, H.-U. Wiemer, "Libanios und Zosimus ueber den Rom-Besuch Konstantins I. im Jahre 326", *Historia* 43 (1994), 469-94. The existence of this debate is belatedly alluded to on p. 54.
6. The strongest advocate is T.D. Barnes (e.g. *Constantine and Eusebius* [Cambridge MA 1981], 210, 246); cf. S. Bradbury, "Constantine and the Problem of Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century", *Classical Philology* 89 (1994), 120-39 and S.J.J. Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs* (Oxford, 1996), 315-6.
7. According to C. Mango, *Byzantine Architecture* (London, 1979 [1986]), 28, the only churches ascribed to Constantine on good authority are S. Irene, SS. Apostoli and perhaps S. Acacius.
8. Viz. the games staged by Philip the Arab in A.D. 248 were not part of the cycle of *Ludi Saeculares* but rather celebrated the millennium of the city of Rome (cf. p. 4); and the statement that a diocese 'normally consisted of three provinces' implies a far higher degree of regularisation than was the case (p. 93).
9. The only solecism I noted was the curious use of 'reverence(d)' for revere(d) (pp. 22 & 46) and the only typographic error 'Const<a>ntine' (p. 70).
10. Viz., a propos of the building of the basilica of the Anastasis in Jerusalem,

'In the course of the work the tomb which was believed to be -- an in all likelihood is -- the tomb of Jesus was discovered'.

**11.** E.g. P. follows the current scholarly consensus that there was a prefecture of Africa under Constantine, even if there is little or no unequivocal evidence for it (cf. my comments on J. Migl's *Die Ordnung der Ämter: Prätorianerpräfektur und Vikariat in der Regionalverwaltung des Römischen Reiches von Konstantin bis zur Valentinianischen Dynastie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994) in *CR* n.s. 47 [1997] forthcoming).

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