

## Return to Rome: The Numismatic Fight between Maxentius and Constantine

The story of Constantine's consolidation of power in the early fourth century CE is often tied with the contemporaneous spread of Christianity. This narrative hinges on the historical accounts of Constantine's defeat of Maxentius in 312, when he saw the sign of the cross (or chi-rho) prior to battle (Eus. *Vit. Const.* 1.28-32; cf. Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 44.5). As traditionally understood, Constantine adopted Christianity after the battle, allowing individual Romans to do so willingly too. While the correlation of Constantine's life and Christianity's spread is hard to dispute, the clear-cut adoption of Christianity into his imperial program is more problematic considering contemporary numismatic evidence. Both Constantine's and Maxentius' coins, issued from 306-315, suggest that traditional Roman gods maintained a place of prominence and that Rome was an important anchor for their respective agendas, even after Maxentius was defeated.

Classicists have not totally overlooked Constantine's use of coins in recent decades, but the works of Eusebius and Lactantius still receive precedence. Some see Constantine's inclusion of non-Christian gods as less about Constantine's religious habits than the power of iconographic tradition (Barnes 1981); others see a more political approach to Constantine's iconography (Drake 2000; Donciu 2012). I propose that by looking at Maxentius' issues, and even the Tetrarchy's, we can see how both Maxentius and Constantine distanced themselves from their predecessors through coinage while also returning to other long-established Roman traditions.

My paper begins with a brief look at the Tetrarchy, established by Diocletian and Maximian in 293 CE, and the imagery they used to express their unity (*concordia*). There were several ways that they achieved this; they shared iconography like the Genius of the Roman People and individual emperors were hard to distinguish from one another (Rees 2004). When

Diocletian and Maximian retired in 305 CE, Maximian's son, Maxentius, was passed over for a position as emperor and made his own claim. His coins from 306 strayed from the Tetrarchy's; he used deities like Mars and Roma instead of the Genius of the Roman People. He also relied on old titles like *princeps* and *conservator urbis suae*, which were familiar for Roman emperors but new to coinage. This positioning, especially his emphasis as a savior of the city, was likely an intentional response to the Tetrarchy's decision to move their imperial seats from Rome and Galerius' decision to impose new taxes on Rome (Cullhed 1994). Maxentius' iconography, then, might be interpreted as that of a usurper for its break from the Tetrarchy, but it is also maintained traditional ties to the city.

Constantine, who was proclaimed *augustus* by his troops when his father Constantius died in 306, used many of the same shifts in iconography. He, too, issued coins distinct from the Tetrarchy but with traditional titles and deities like Sol Invictus (van Dam 2011). After Constantine defeated Maxentius, we do not see a sudden return to typical Tetrarchic imagery, nor does Constantine rely solely on Christian iconography as Eusebius and Lactantius might suggest. Instead, he carries on many of the themes of Maxentius, even calling himself the liberator of the city, or *liberator urbis suae*, echoing Maxentius' title (Marlowe 2010).

These coins and images clearly show us a different history than the one presented in Eusebius or Lactantius. Rather than wholly adopt or reject these historical narratives, we can, instead, juxtapose the two sets of evidence and weigh them against one another. Constantine responded to a traditionalist Maxentius even after Maxentius was defeated. He saved the city but did so with the help of Sol Invictus and other gods (Lenski 2016). This tactic tells us that Maxentius' traditionalist approach was more successful than is often argued by modern writers, or at least it was perceived as successful by Constantine. It also suggests that Constantine's

Christianity was, at minimum, imbued with traditional gods and concepts. While we might lack evidence from a less-elite perspective, Constantine's coins also suggest a more fluid Christianity at Rome than Eusebius or Lactantius presented to their readers.

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