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Title	Constantine I and a new Christian golden age: a secretly Christian reverse type identified?
Authors	Woods, David
Publication date	2018-09-01
Original Citation	Woods, David (2018) 'Constantine I and a New Christian Golden Age: A Secretly Christian Reverse Type Identified?' Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies, 58, pp. 366-388.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://grbs.library.duke.edu/article/view/16063
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Download date	2026-11-02 04:22:54
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7749

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Constantine I and a New Christian Golden Age: A Secretly Christian Reverse Type Identified?

David Woods

THE PURPOSE of this paper is to explore the significance of a reverse type used on solidi struck in the name of Constantine I (306–337) alone at the mints of Nicomedia, Sirmium, Ticinum, and Trier during his vicennial year starting on 26 July 325.[1] This type depicts what is usually described as two interlaced wreaths surrounded by the legend CONSTANTINVS AVG (*fig.* 1).[2] With the exception of the issue from Trier, Constantine used this type as part of the coinage struck for donatives as he stopped in the various mint-towns during the course of his journey from Nicomedia to Rome.[3] The only minor variation between the mints is that the coins from Sirmium, Ticinum, and Trier always depict a single star cen-

[1] The standard catalogue of the coinage of Constantine I remains Patrick M. Bruun, *RIC* VII (London 1966). I refer to the coins of Constantine and his Caesars by their numbers under the relevant mints in this volume. For a detailed treatment of the coins struck by Constantine as he travelled from Nicomedia to Rome during this vicennial year, including many types not known to Bruun, see Lars Ramskold, "Constantine's Vicennalia and the Death of Crispus," in Miša Rakocija (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium Symposium* XI (2013) 409–456 (cited hereafter by author's name). In matters of dating and the structure of various issues, I follow Ramskold. However, while Ramskold's paper is invaluable in most respects, it avoids discussion of iconography.

[2] *RIC* VII Nicomedia 108–109, Sirmium 62, Ticinum 192, Trier 497.

[3] Ramskold 440 n.99 questions the authenticity of a solidus with this type apparently attributable to Heraclea and known from one example only. It was resold recently: Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XIX (5 Jan. 2016), lot 619.

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 58 (2018) 366–388
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Figure 1: solidus (d. 20 mm, w. 4.50 g) of Constantine I, Ticinum (*RIC* VII 192).
Ex Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 100 (29 May 2017), lot 638.
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trally above the two apparent wreaths, while the coins from Nicomedia seldom do.

This reverse type is of interest because no emperor had struck anything like it previously, and no emperor would strike anything like it again either. It was part of a set of five standard types of solidi struck in the names of the male members of the dynasty at these mints during the vicennial celebrations, and probably in Thessalonica also, although the particular type under discussion does not seem to have survived in the case of Thessalonica.[4] Two of the types were in the name of Constantine I himself, and one each in the names of his three eldest sons and Caesars, Crispus, Constantine II, and Constantius II. The other type struck in the name of Constantine I depicts the same legend CONSTANTINVS AVG about a seated Victory with a cornucopia in her left arm and a smaller Victory offering her a wreath in her right

[4] Two standard types of solidi were also struck in the name of the female members of the dynasty, Constantine's mother, Helena Augusta, and his wife, Fausta Augusta, simultaneously in the same mints. See Ramskold 440–441. Stylistically, however, they are very different from the types struck in the names of the male members of the dynasty. For example, the obverses of the latter are all anepigraphic, but those struck in the names of the two women bear legends. Furthermore, the obverses of the types of the males all depict the exact same bust with an upwards gaze, whereas those of the womem depict very distinct busts and neither has an upwards gaze. It seems clear, therefore, that the coins struck in the names of the male and female members of the dynasty form two distinct sets conceptually speaking, even if issued simultaneously.



Figure 2: solidus (d. 20 mm, w. 4.41 g) of Constantine I, Sirmium (*RIC* VII 56).
Ex CNG, Triton XXI (9 Jan. 2018), lot 856.
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Figure 3: solidus (d. 20 mm, w. 4.47 g) of Constantine II, Theassalonica (*RIC* VII 147).
Ex CNG, Triton XVI (9 Jan. 2013), lot 1160.
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hand (*fig.* 2).[5] The types in the name of his three sons share the same reverse design depicting Victory advancing left with a palm in her left arm and a wreath in her outstretched right hand surrounded by their name and title in each case (*fig.* 3).[6] Hence the type under discussion is alone among the larger set of five types in not depicting the goddess Victory. A key factor identifying the five types as part of a larger set or issue is that they all bear the same obverse type depicting a single beardless bust with a plain band diadem and an upwards gaze. No legend accompanies this bust and the only minor difference between the types lies in size, which tends to be smaller in the case of the Caesars,

[5] *RIC* VII Nicomedia 70, Thessalonica 131, Sirmium 56, Ticinum 193.

[6] For Crispus, see *RIC* VII Nicomedia 110–111, Sirmium 63, Ticinum 194, Trier 497; for Constantine II, Nicomedia 112, Sirmium 64, Thessalonica 147, Ticinum 195; for Constantius II, Nicomedia 113, Sirmium 65, Thessalonica 148, Ticinum 196, Trier 499.

most noticeably so in the case of the youngest Caesar Constantius II.

The numismatic context

The fact that the reverse type under discussion shows two apparent wreaths identical in every way naturally suggests that it commemorates two of something. Furthermore, since laurel wreaths were traditional symbols of victory, the obvious suggestion is that this type commemorates two victories of some sort. For example, the Roman moneyer Faustus Cornelius Sulla in 56 B.C. issued a denarius with reverse type depicting four wreaths around a globe, one larger in reference to the golden wreath awarded to his father-in-law Pompey the Great by the senate in 63 and three smaller ones in reference to the three triumphs also awarded to Pompey for his various foreign victories (*fig.* 4).[7]



Figure 4: denarius (d. 19 mm, w. 3.89 g) of Faustus Cornelius Sulla. Ex Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 100 (29 May 2017), lot 325. Reproduced with permission © Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG.

Obviously, a long time had since passed, but this example well illustrates the attraction of such one-to-one correspondence between the commemoration of military victory and the number of those victories. Furthermore, in the case of the reverse under discussion, one does not have to search very hard to discover two victories. Given the date of issue shortly after Constantine had defeated Licinius I in his second civil-war against him in late 324, one obvious suggestion is that this type commemorates his victories in those two civil-wars, the first in 316/7and the second

[7] Crawford, *RRC* I no. 426/4a.

in 324. Another possibility, perhaps less likely, is that the two wreaths allude to the fact that Constantine had defeated two imperial commanders in his most recent civil-war, Licinius I as Augustus and the Martinianus whom he had promoted as Caesar during the course of this war. Finally, one should not forget Constantine's so-called 'pagan vision' in Gaul in 310 as reported by an anonymous panegyricist, according to which Constantine saw Apollo, accompanied by Victory, offering him an unstated number of wreaths, each of which symbolised thirty years.[8] So perhaps these wreaths represent thirty years each once more, and promise Constantine that he would reach 60 years of age at a time when he was still only 54. However, any attempt to interpret the significance of the reverse type under discussion must also acknowledge that it has a counterpart among the silver coins struck at the same time, and needs to take its symbolism into account also before reaching any conclusions.

The same mints that struck the five types of solidi described above seem to have struck four different types of siliqua at the same time. In this case, only one type was issued in the name of Constantine I, and one type again in the names of each of three sons who were Caesars. The reverse of the type in the name of Constantine I depicts Victory advancing left with a trophy in her right hand and a palm branch in her left (*fig.* 5).[9] The types in the names of his three Caesars all share the same reverse design once more, three standing palm branches with a star above the central branch (*fig.* 6), the only difference in each case being their name about this design.[10] All four issues display the same obverse type depicting a single beardless bust with a plain band

[8] *Pan.Lat.* 6(7).21.4. Peter Weiss, "The Vision of Constantine," *JRA* 16 (2003) 237–259, at 250, argues that Constantine saw a spectacular double solar-halo in the sky, and that the reference to thirty years reflects the fact that there were three concentrations of light on each halo-ring.

[9] Not in *RIC* VII. Extremely rare examples survive from Antioch, Nicomedia, and Ticinum: see Ramskold 446, n. 114.

[10] *RIC* VII: for Crispus, see Antioch 70a (in Addenda); for Constantine II, see Thessalonica 195, Ticinum 184, Rome 380; for Constantius II, see Rome

diadem and an upwards gaze in each case, exactly as found on the accompanying solidi.



Figure 5: siliqua (2.98 g) of Constantine I, Antioch (not in *RIC* 7).
Ex Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 100 (29 May 2017), lot 642.
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Figure 6: siliqua (d. 21mm, w. 3.10 g) of Constantius II, Nicomedia (not in *RIC* 7).
Ex Gitbud & Naumann, Auction 10 (1 Dec. 2013), lot 736.
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There is a clear similarity in design between the reverse of the solidus struck in the name of Constantine I depicting two apparent wreaths and the reverse of the siliquae struck in the names of his Caesars depicting three standing palm branches. Each depicts a single star situated centrally above symbols of victory. Neither depicts Victory. Furthermore, one can detect a similar sort of organizing principle operating in each denomination: the design of the Victory-less reverse of the three Caesars in the case of the siliqua builds upon the palm held by Victory on the other reverse type of Constantine I in the same denomination, while the design of the Victory-less reverse struck in the

379. For other examples not in *RIC* VII see Ramskold 445–446.

name of Constantine I in the case of the solidus builds upon the wreath held by Victory on the reverse type of the Caesars in that denomination. More importantly, with the coexistence of these Victory-less reverse types in each denomination, the court officials distributing these coins as donatives could have paid a donative in both gold and silver without using coins depicting Victory, if they had so wished, and could have done so in the names of all the male members of the imperial college, the Augustus and the three Caesars.

The fact that two symbols of victory, that is, two apparent wreaths, occur on the Victory-less reverse type of the solidus, while three symbols of victory, that is, three palm branches, occur on the Victory-less reverse type of the siliqua argues against both types referring to the same things or events. Furthermore, it is important to note that the mint at Siscia struck siliquae with reverse type depicting the same design of a central star above three palm branches in the names of Constantius II and Constans as Augusti during the period 337–340.[11] Consequently, the palm branches seem unlikely to refer to any specific military or political achievements by Constantine I in the period leading up to 326. Instead, it seems probable that the three palm branches on the siliquae of 337–340 refer to the fact that there were three Augusti then—Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans—while the three palm branches on the siliquae of 325/6 probably refer to the fact that there were three Caesars then—Crispus, Constantine II, and Constantius II.[12]

If the three palm branches of the siliquae of 325/6 refer to the three Caesars, then one would naturally expect the two apparent wreaths of the parallel solidus to refer to two members of the imperial household also. However, since the coins struck in the name of the three Caesars depict three symbols in reference to them as a group, then one might also expect the coins struck in the name of the sole Augustus to depict a sole symbol in refer-

[11] J. P. C. Kent, *RIC* VIII (London 1981), Siscia 60–69.

[12] As Kent, *RIC* VIII 340, says of the siliquae of 337–340: "each palm must surely symbolise an Augustus." Similarly, Ramskold 445 says of the siliquae of 325/6: "the three branches may symbolise the three caesars."

ence to him alone. Alternatively, if it is Augustan status rather than status as Augustus in particular that is central here, then one might have expected the solidus to depict three wreaths, one for Constantine as Augustus, another for his wife Fausta as Augusta, and a third for his mother Helena as Augusta. However, given the scrupulously equal treatment afforded both Fausta and Helena on the coinage otherwise, it is unthinkable that the two wreaths should have been intended in reference to Constantine and either his wife or his mother. On the other hand, it is equally unthinkable that they should have been intended in reference to both Helena and Fausta to the exclusion of Constantine himself. In this way, while it is easy to understand why the solidus might have depicted one wreath, or even three wreaths, it is much less easy to understand why it depicts two wreaths.



Figure 7: nummus (2.91 g) of Crispus, Aquileia (*RIC* VII 98).
Ex Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 100 (29 May 2017), lot 642.
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The puzzle posed by the depiction of two wreaths is deepened by the fact that large wreaths were a common feature of the reverse design of the coinage of Constantine and his sons subsequently, but it was always a single large wreath, never two or more. In particular, the coins struck celebrating the five-yearly imperial vows normally depicted a legend referring to the vows within a single laurel wreath. So, for example, the main type of nummus struck at most mints under Constantine during the period ca. 320–325 depicted a large wreath surrounding a variety of slightly different legends referring to his vows or to those of his sons (*fig.* 7).

This is not to claim that two wreaths never occurred on the coinage, but rather that multiple wreaths were only ever at-

tributes of other figures rather than the main subjects of the design in themselves. Even then, they were relatively rare. For example, the reverse of a solidus struck at Trier ca. 314 depicted the emperor receiving one wreath each from the figures Pax and Respublica.[13] Of perhaps greater relevance, a nummus struck at Constantinople alone in 327 depicted Victory standing on a galley with a wreath in each hand surrounded by the legend LIBERTAS PVBLICA (*fig.* 8). It is tempting, therefore, to connect the two wreaths of the reverse under discussion with the two wreaths of Victory on this nummus, but that returns us to the first suggestion once more that the two wreaths symbolise two separate victories, perhaps Constantine's defeats of Licinius I in two successive civil-wars.



Figure 8: nummus (d. 20mm, 3.41 g) of Constantine I, Constantinople (*RIC* VII 25).
Ex Roma Numismatics, Auction 13 (23 Mar. 2017), lot 926.
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It is important next to draw attention to another feature of the reverse type under discussion, and the reason why I have consistently referred to two apparent wreaths rather than two wreaths simply, and that is the fact that this type does not really depict two separate wreaths. If one examines the image carefully, one can see that they are actually formed from the same continuous strand of vegetation which crosses over itself at the point of contact of the apparent two wreaths.[14] It is almost as if a single large circle or wreath had been twisted in the centre to

[13] *RIC* VII Trier 16.

[14] This is very clear in most cases. However, in the case of British Museum R1874,0715.138 (from Sirmium), it is rather less obvious.

form two smaller loops. The result is that the two wreaths resemble the Roman symbol for one thousand as commonly depicted, for example, on moneybags in Roman art, such as in the so-called Magerius mosaic from late third-century Africa or the ivory diptych celebrating the consulship of Manlius Boethius in 487 (*fig.* 9).[15]



Figure 9: details from the consular diptych of Manlius Boethius (Museo di Santa Giulia, Brescia) depicting moneybags which each display two of the symbol for one thousand. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

It is difficult to believe that many of those viewing this reverse type did not immediately notice this resemblance between the wreaths and the symbol for one thousand. The question, therefore, is how they interpreted this apparent reference to a thousand of something, and whether this reverse had been deliberately intended to evoke such an interpretation. It was not normal in this period to mark the value of coins on them, but when this was done in the case of precious metal coins, the preference seems to have been to identify the weight of the coin as a fraction of a pound of the relevant metal.[16] For example, the reverse of the new silver coin introduced by Diocletian in his

[15] On the Magerius mosaic, now in the Sousse Archaeological Museuem, see Azedine Beschaouch, "La mosaïque de chasse à l'amphithéâtre découverte à Smirat en Tunisie," *CRAI* (1966) 134–157. The moneybags on the diptych seem to contain 2000 solidi each. For further discussion see Cecilia Olovsdotter, *The Consular Image: An Iconological Study of the Consular Diptychs* (Oxford 2005) 131.

[16] In general see Roger Bland, "Marks of Value (Certain and Possible) on Late Roman Coins with Intrinsic Values (from Aurelian)," in William E. Metcalf (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage* (Oxford 2012) 655–662.

reform of the coinage in ca. 294 sometimes depicted the numeral XCVI in order to denote the fact that it was struck at the rate of 96 to a pound of silver.[17] Of greater relevance, the solidus sometimes bore the number LXXII in order to indicate that it was struck at the rate of 72 to a pound of gold.[18] This means that it is highly unlikely that the reverse under discussion referred to the value of this coin in some way. Even if it did, however, it is hard to understand what the unit of reference might have been, for a solidus to be valued at either a thousand of the unit or one thousandth of it. For example, it has been calculated that a solidus of the period 325–330 was probably valued at about 50,000 notional denarii *communes* or 2000 standard nummi rather than a thousand of either.[19]

The power of ambiguity

It is necessary next to consider the broader political and cultural context in which the reverse under discussion was struck and, since Constantine was the first Christian emperor who did so much to promote the Christianization of the Roman state, one cannot avoid the religious question. More specifically, one needs to consider whether this unique reverse type had any potential Christian significance.

It has long been recognized that Constantine was slow to change traditional imperial iconography and very cautious in his approach to the numismatic representation of his reign, to the extent that it would be difficult to realize from his coinage alone that he was a Christian, even by the end of his reign.[20] His reign

[17] C. H. V. Sutherland, *RIC* VI (London 1967), Ticinum 20–22, Aquileia 16–17.

[18] *RIC* VII, Antioch 98–104; *RIC* VIII, Antioch 3–8.

[19] See Kenneth W. Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy 300 B.C. to A.D. 700* (Baltimore 1996) 168.

[20] For discussions of Christian influence upon the coinage of Constantine see e.g. Frederic W. Madden, *Christian Emblems on the Coins of Constantine I the Great, his Family and his Successors* (London 1878); Andreas Alföldi, "The Helmet of Constantine with the Christian Monogram," *JRS* 22 (1932) 9–23;

witnessed the de-paganisation of the coinage rather than its Christianization. The gods disappeared from the coinage, including most personifications of the virtues that emperors had traditionally imagined themselves or their relatives to possess, although Constantine was noticeably slow to remove Sol, who had featured as the main device on the nummus since 310, from the coinage, only doing so by ca. 320.[21] Lighted altars and sacrificial tools also disappeared from the coinage. Some personifications managed to survive on the coinage into the early reigns of Constantine's sons as Augusti, assisted by the ambiguity in most cases as to whether the goddesses themselves were being depicted or female members of the dynasty.[22] Yet only three goddesses managed to survive this process into the mid-fourth century and later—Victory, Roma, and Constantinopolis—presumably because they represented special cases, figures of such symbolic stature that it was easier simply to deny their

Guido Bruck, "Verwendung christlicher Symbole auf Münzen von Constantin I. bis Magnentius," *NZ* 76 (1955) 26–32; Patrick Bruun, "The Christian Signs on the Coins of Constantine," *Arctos* 3 (1962) 5–35; Charles M. Odahl, "Christian Symbolism on Constantinian Coinage," *AncW* 40 (2009) 117–147; Dominique Hollard and Fernando López Sánchez, *Le Chrisme et le Phénix: Images monétaires et mutations idéologiques au IV^e siècle* (Bordeaux 2014) 13–67.

[21] See Patrick Bruun, "The Disappearance of Sol from the Coins of Constantine," *Arctos* 2 (1958) 15–37. Some exceptional gold coins did depict Sol later (*RIC* VII, Antioch 49 in 325) or Constantine in solar crown (Antioch 70 in 326), but the main point is that these were exceptional and are best explained as a result of the use of old dies still in a time of transition.

[22] For example, it is not clear whether the bronze coins struck ca. 337–340 with reverse depicting a woman carrying an infant at her breast surrounded by the legend PIETAS ROMANA depict the goddess Piety or the empress Theodora, second wife of Constantius I, in whose name they were always struck: *RIC* VIII, Trier 43, 48, 56, 65, 79, 91; Rome 28, 54; Constantinople 36, 50–51. Similarly, it is not clear whether the associated coins with reverse depicting a woman holding a branch and a transverse sceptre surrounded by the legend PAX PVBLICA depict the goddess Pax or the empress Helena, mother of Constantine I, in whose name they were always struck: *RIC* VIII, Trier 42, 47, 55, 63, 78, 90; Rome 27, 53; Constantinople 33–35, 48–49.

divinity than to remove them altogether.[23] The key point here, however, is that actual Christianization of the coinage made little or no progress under Constantine. Indeed, this process would take several centuries before it reached its completion.[24] Under Constantine, some mint officials did occasionally include crosses among their issue marks, or the chi-rho symbol among the secondary detail on the imperial helmet or shield, but it is clear that these were purely local initiatives rather than a result of directives from the imperial centre.

The reverse types preferred by Constantine during the latter part of his reign were studiously neutral or ambiguous as far as the religious question was concerned. The emphasis was on military achievement and imperial anniversaries rather than religious policy or divine support for the regime. Yet scholars have searched hard for potential Christian influence, and a reverse type struck at Constantinople alone in 327 has drawn particular attention (*fig.* 10).[25] This depicts a labarum, the new imperial standard identifiable as such by the presence of the chi-rho symbol, spearing into the back of a wriggling serpent. It is difficult for a Christian to view such a coin and not identify the

[23] These figures persisted for a long time subsequently. The battle trophy often associated with Victory was transformed into a Christian cross under Theodosius II (408–450), while she herself was transformed into an angel on the solidus under Justin I (518–527). See R. H. Storch, "The Trophy and the Cross: Pagan and Christian Symbolism in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," *Byzantion* 40 (1970) 105–118. However, Victory made sporadic appearances on other denominations even as late as the reign of Heraclius (610–641). Constantinopolis disappeared when Tiberius II (574–582) replaced the seated Constantinopolis of the solidi of Justin II (565–574) with a large cross, allegedly in response to a dream (John of Ephesus *HE* 3.3.15).

[24] The climax of this process arguably came when Justinian II decided in 690 to strike a new type of solidus with a bust of Christ on the reverse. See Michael Humphreys, "The 'War of Images' Revisited. Justinian II's Coinage Reform and the Caliphate," *NC* 173 (2013) 229–244.

[25] See C. M. Odahl, "The Use of Apocalyptic Imagery in Constantine's Christian Propaganda," *Centrepoint* 4.3 (1981) 9–19, summarizing earlier discussions. Unfortunately, the fame of this type has encouraged forgers in recent years; see Lars Ramskold, "Highly Deceptive Forgeries of Constantine's SPES PVBLIC Coinage," *The Celator* 23.12 (1 December 2009) 18–32.



Figure 10: nummus (d. 19 mm, w. 3.11 g) of Constantine I, Constantinople (*RIC* VII 19).
Ex CNG, Triton XIV (4 Jan. 2011), lot 835.
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serpent with Satan as described in the Christian scriptures. That this was so is proven by Eusebius of Caesarea as he describes a painting that Constantine erected at the entrance to his palace in Constantinople. He begins by describing Constantine's pride in "the Saviour's sign," by which he presumably means the chi-rho sign adopted by Constantine as his new symbol, and then describes his inclusion of this sign in this painting in order to prove his point (*VC* 3.3.1–2):[26]

> This he displayed on a very high panel set before the entrance to the palace for the eyes of all to see, showing in the picture the Saviour's sign placed above his own head, and the hostile and inimical beast, which had laid siege to the Church of God through the tyranny of the godless, he made in the form of a serpent (ἐν δράκοντος μορφῇ) borne down to the deep. For the oracles proclaimed him a "serpent" and a "crooked snake" in the books of the prophet of God (δράκοντα γὰρ αὐτὸν καὶ σκολιὸν ὄφιν ἐν προφητῶν θεοῦ βίβλοις ἀνηγόρευε τὰ λόγια); therefore the emperor also showed to all, through the medium of the encaustic painting, the serpent (τὸν δράκοντα) under his own feet and those of his sons, pierced through the middle of the body with a javelin, and thrust down in the depths of the sea. In this way he indicated the invisible enemy of the human race, whom he showed also to

[26] Transl. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford 1999) 122, but amending the potentially misleading translation of δράκων as "dragon" to "serpent" instead.

> have departed to the depths of destruction by the power of the Saviour's trophy which was set up over his head.

By his reference to the oracles in the "books of the prophet of God," Eusebius alludes to Isaiah 27:1:[27]

> τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ ἐπάξει ὁ θεὸς τὴν μάχαιραν τὴν ἁγίαν καὶ τὴν μεγάλην καὶ τὴν ἰσχυρὰν ἐπὶ τὸν δράκοντα ὄφιν φεύγοντα, ἐπὶ τὸν δράκοντα ὄφιν σκολιὸν καὶ ἀνελεῖ τὸν δράκοντα.
>
> On that day God will bring his holy and great and strong dagger against the serpent, a fleeing snake—against the serpent, a crooked snake—and he will kill the serpent.

This makes it clear that he interprets the serpent as a depiction of Satan, and believes that Constantine is being depicted overthrowing Satan. In reality, however, the primary reference in the case of both painting and coin was probably to Licinius. In proof of this, one need look no further than the words of Constantine himself in a letter addressed to Eusebius where his reference to "that serpent (τοῦ δράκοντος ἐκείνου) driven out of the public administration through the providence of the supreme God and by our service" (*VC* 2.46.2) can only refer to Licinius. Furthermore, Eusebius himself indulges in such imagery also when describing the alleged behaviour of Licinius prior to the second civil-war with Constantine (*VC* 2.1.2):[28]

> Like some wild beast, or a crooked snake coiling up on itself (ἢ σκολιὸς ὄφις περὶ ἑαυτὸν ἰλυσπώμενος), breathing wrath and menace of war with God, he dared not yet, for fear of Constantine, openly assail the churches of God subject to him.

However, this was not a case of one or the other, either Satan or Licinius, because as Eusebius' words above reveal, he believed that Satan acted through the "tyranny of the godless," that is, through men such as Licinius. In other words, as far as Eusebius was concerned, the painting depicted Satan, but Satan probably as a symbol of Licinius.

[27] Text A. Rahlfs and R. Hanhart, *Septuaginta*[2] (Stuttgart 2006) 599; transl. *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford 2009) 843, but for δράκων amending "dragon" to "serpent."

[28] Cameron and Hall 94, slightly amended for consistency.



Figure 11: denarius (d. 18 mm, w. 3.99 g) of Julius Caesar (*RRC* 443/1).
Ex CNG, Triton XXI (9 Jan. 2018), lot 660.
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The key point here is that one does not need to be Christian (or Jewish) in order to use a serpent to symbolise one's enemy. While the Romans often kept serpents as pets, and sometimes cast them in positive light as divine defenders of the household or the innocent, they could also portray them as monstrous creatures, suitable symbols of evil men.[29] For example, in 49 B.C. Julius Caesar depicted himself as an elephant about to crush an enemy represented by a serpent on the reverse of one of his denarii (*fig.* 11).[30] Writing in the late first century A.D., Silius Italicus frequently compared Rome's great enemy Hannibal to a serpent.[31] Much later, the pagan Ammianus Marcellinus often compared those whom he was criticizing to serpents, one, for example, to "an underground serpent, lurking below the hidden entrance to its hole" and another to "a viper swelling with its store of poison" (15.2.4, 18.4.4). In the case of the nummus under discussion, therefore, it is clear that both Christians and pagans would have understood the image similarly, that the serpent represented the evil tyrant Licinius, even if they reached this understanding by different mental routes. However, the overall design was also so new and arresting that Christians

[29] On the Roman attitude to serpents see Laura J. Hawtree, *Wild Animals in Roman Epic* (diss. Exeter 2011) 166–196.

[30] The precise identity of the serpent is much disputed. See e.g. David Woods, "Caesar the Elephant against Juba the Snake," *NC* 169 (2009) 189–92; Debra L. Nousek, "Turning Points in Roman History: The Case of Caesar's Elephant Denarius," *Phoenix* 62 (2008) 290–307.

[31] *Punica* 3.204–213; 12.5–14, 55–59; 17.447–450.

could easily read this as confirmation of something more, that Constantine was deliberately using Christian imagery in order to allude to Christian scriptures.

The tendency of Christians to interpret new and arresting imagery as a direct consequence of the emperor's more assertive Christianity, particularly in a context where one could plausibly read some religious interpretation into it when it was at least non-pagan if not positively Christian, should not be underestimated. Another good example is provided by Eusebius' praise of the new obverse bust type adopted by Constantine in 325, the very bust paired with the reverse under discussion:[32]

> The great strength of the divinely inspired faith fixed in his soul might be deduced by considering also the fact that he had his own portrait so depicted on the gold coinage that he appeared to look upwards in the manner of one reaching out to God in prayer.

Constantine had probably chosen this new bust in full knowledge that some Christians at least would interpret it exactly as Eusebius does here, as a sign of his veneration of the one Christian God. However, pagans could also interpret it as a sign of his veneration of the divine more generally, since this style of bust actually had a long history dating back ultimately to Alexander the Great, even if it had not enjoyed Roman imperial use recently.[33]

A hidden sign of a Christian new age

Given both that Constantine did try to use some imagery after his defeat of Licinius in 324 that would have had a special meaning for Christians and that Christians such as Eusebius were clearly attentive to the possibility that some of his new imagery would contain such a meaning, it is worth considering whether the two apparent wreaths on the reverse under discussion conceal such. The fact that these wreaths resemble the symbol for one thousand provides the starting point. What might this number have meant to Christians? More importantly, would this

[32] *VC* 4.15.1; Cameron and Hall 158.

[33] Jonathan Bardill, *Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge 2012) 11–27.

meaning be consistent with the themes of Constantinian propaganda after 324?

One passage immediately demands attention, the section of the book of Revelation that describes what will happen after Satan has been thrust down into the abyss (Rev 20:1–4):[34]

> Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the abyss and a heavy chain. He seized the serpent, that ancient snake (τὸν δράκοντα, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος)—that is, the Devil, or Satan—and chained him up for a thousand years. The angel threw him into the abyss, locked it, and sealed it, so that he could not deceive the nations any more until the thousand years were over. After that he must be let loose for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and those who sat on them were given the power to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been executed because they had proclaimed the truth that Jesus revealed and the Word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image, nor had they received the mark of the beast on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and ruled as kings with Christ for a thousand years.

This passage deserves attention because of its consistency with Constantinian propaganda depicting Licinius as a serpent and the emphasis in that propaganda upon the idea that Constantine had thrust him into the depths. Any scripturally literate Christian aware of Constantinian propaganda depicting Licinius as a serpent thrust down into the depths would have been encouraged by this passage to seek some sign that Constantine was also comparing his new rule to the thousand-year rule of the newly resurrected Christian martyrs with Christ. Indeed, such a comparison would have been the obvious next step in Constantine's own propaganda, a declaration that a new Christian golden age was at hand.

Various emperors in the past had declared their reigns to represent a new golden age of peace and prosperity. Most recently, the rebel emperor Carausius (286–293) had alluded to key lines from Vergil's messianic fourth eclogue on much of his

[34] Transl. *Good News Bible: Today's English Version* (1976) 321, slightly amended.

coinage in an effort to persuade his subjects that he was ushering in a new golden age. He had proudly displayed on many of his coins the letters RSR, in abbreviation of the Vergilian phrase *Redeunt Saturnia regna* "Saturnian kingdoms return," a reference to the fact that, according to traditional pagan mythology, humans had enjoyed their greatest peace and prosperity when the god Saturn had ruled the earth: that was the original golden age.[35] As Constantine was Christian, however, he would probably have wished to distance any celebration of his rule as a new golden age of peace and prosperity from such pagan associations. So how might he have done so?

The answer to this lies in the *Divine Institutes* originally composed by Lactantius shortly after the start of the Diocletianic persecution of Christians in 303.[36] He specifically identifies the thousand-year reign of Christ as described in Revelation with the return of the Saturnian golden age of traditional pagan mythology.[37] This equation of events is particularly relevant here because Lactantius spent several years at the court of Constantine, probably ca. 310–313, as the tutor of his son Crispus. Furthermore, he dedicated a revised edition of his *Divine Institutes* to Constantine.[38] Indeed, it has even been argued that Constantine's letter to the bishops at Arles in 314 incorporated ideas from the *Divine Institutes* and paraphrased Lactantius.[39] Finally, it has also been argued that Constantine's interest in the second coming of Christ, and eschatology more generally, was piqued

[35] Guy de la Bédoyère, "Carausius and the Marks RSR and I.N.P.C.D.A," *NC* 158 (1998) 79–88; Graham Barker, "The Coinage of Carausius: Developing the Golden Age Ideology through the Saecular Games," *NC* 175 (2015) 161–170.

[36] For translation and commentary see Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey, *Lactantius: Divine Institutes* (Liverpool 2003).

[37] *Div.Inst.* 7.24. More generally, see Louis J. Swift, "Lactantius and the Golden Age," *AJP* 89 (1968) 144–156.

[38] *Div.Inst.* 1.1.13–16, 7.27.11–17.

[39] Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the *Divine Institutes*," *JECS* 2 (1994) 33–52.

by the potential identification of his own alleged vision of a cross in the sky before the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 with the appearance of the Sign of the Son of Man in the sky immediately preceding the second coming as reportedly predicted by Christ himself.[40] Taking all this evidence into consideration, it seems highly probable that Constantine and other members of his court would have been familiar with Lactantius' equation of the thousand-year rule of Christ with the Saturnian golden age.

It is my argument, therefore, that the two apparent wreaths on the reverse under discussion represent a tentative first step in a new Christian iconography celebrating the return of a golden age in a new Christian way. Why then is there not more evidence either that Constantine did celebrate a new golden age or that he strove to invent a new Christian iconography in order to depict the same? The answer may lie partly in the sparse nature of the surviving literary evidence for his rule after 324.[41] However, it probably has more to do with the mysterious scandal of 326 resulting in the deaths of both his eldest son Crispus and his wife Fausta.[42] Any declarations of a new golden age would have rung hollow immediately after these deaths, whether this age was entirely traditionally conceived or had acquired a new Christian tinge. In effect, the temptation to indulge in triumphal claims of a new Christian golden age was killed at birth.

The suggestion that the two apparent wreaths were deliberately designed in such a way as to form the symbol for a

[40] Mt 24:30. See Oliver Nicholson, "Constantine's Vision of the Cross," *VigChr* 54 (2000) 309–323.

[41] For hints of such propaganda see Johannes Wienand, "Die Poesie des Bürgerkriegs. Das constantinische *aureum saeculum* in den *Carmina* Optatians," in G. Bonamente et al.(eds.), *Costantino prima e dopo Costantino* (Bari 2012) 419–444. For a translation of poem 3 by Optatian, wherein he specifically declares *Aurea iam toto*, *victor*, *tua saecula pollent, / Constantine, polo*. "Your golden age, victorious Constantine, is now mighty in all the world," see Michael Squire, " 'How to Read a Roman Portrait'? Optatian Porfyry, Constantine and the *Vultus Augusti*," *PBSR* 84 (2016) 179–240, at 189–190.

[42] For a recent summary of the debate concerning their deaths see Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire* (Chichester 2011) 144–150.

thousand, and that this was intended to remind Christian viewers of the promise in Revelation that the overthrow of Satan would be followed by a thousand years of Christian rule, is reinforced by the fact that this was the only type of solidus in its distinct set not to depict the goddess Victory. This absence would immediately have drawn the attention of anyone handling these coins, and, in the case of Christians, may have caused them to seek some special explanation of this absence, to consider whether it was because it would have been inconsistent to include a goddess in a design with a hidden Christian message.



Figure 12: nummus (d. 18 mm, w. 2.81 g) of Constantine I, Siscia (*RIC* VII 214).
Ex Numismatik Naumann, Auction 41 (6 March 2016), lot 901.
Reproduced with permission © Numismatik Naumann.

A final point deserves emphasis, the significance of the star placed centrally above the two apparent wreaths. It is not a solar symbol and ought not to be confused with such. The same star appears immediately above the city-gate on the reverse of the main type of nummus struck at fifteen mints throughout the empire during the period ca. 325–329 (*fig.* 12), where the surrounding legend reads either PROVIDENTIAE AVGG or PROVIDENTIAE CAESS, and this has often been mistakenly identified as a symbol of Sol.[43] However, this type celebrates the *providentia* "provision" of the emperor for the *salus* "safety" of the empire using the imagery of the *adventus* "arrival" ceremony.[44]

[43] See e.g. Hollard and López Sánchez, *Le Chrisme et le Phénix* 60: "il est en effet impossible de voir dans cet astre veillant sur le camp … autre chose qu'une image de Sol."

[44] See David Woods, "The Late Roman 'Camp Gate' Reverse Type and

Hence the star depicted above the city gate is the *sidus salutare* "saving star" symbolising the saving presence of the emperor who has arrived through the open gates of the city.[45] Contrary to the traditional interpretation, there is no connection with the *limes* or any programme of fortification. In this case, therefore, since the star is a sign of salvation, and a generic metaphor of light equally acceptable to both pagans and Christians alike, it is entirely appropriate that it should have been used in conjunction with a symbol referring to the one-thousand year reign of the resurrected martyrs with Christ.

Conclusion

It has been argued that Constantine concealed the Latin symbol for a thousand within a depiction of two apparent wreaths on the reverse of a type of solidus struck in 325/6, and that he did so in order to allude to the one-thousand year reign of the resurrected martyrs with Christ following the overthrow of Satan as described in Revelation. In so doing, he was comparing his reign after his overthrow of Licinius to the reign of the martyrs with Christ after the overthrow of Satan. The message was that he would try to rule with Christ in the manner of those kings, that is, as a perfect Christian king.[46] Pagans probably saw only two interlaced or conjoined wreaths, which they most likely interpreted in reference to Constantine's two civil-war victories over Licinius, if they even thought about the significance of their number at all. Some of them probably did note the curious resemblance of these wreaths to the symbol for a thousand, but this was easily dismissed as an accident of design, since this num-

the *Sidus Salutare*," *NC* 177 (2017) 159–174.

[45] For the phrase *sidus salutare* see Amm. Marc. 21.10.2, 22.9.14.

[46] Bardill, *Divine Emperor* 362, identifies Constantine with Christ rather than the martyrs ruling with him to argue that he may have believed that he "had fulfilled predictions of how Christ would rule during the last millennium." This is part of a larger, unconvincing argument that Constantine assimilated himself to Christ. See the review by Charles M. Odahl, *AncW* 44 (2013) 199–202.

ber had no particular religious significance in or of itself. The result was that pagans could interpret this reverse in one way, and Christians in another. Pagans were not provoked to fear or alarm, but some Christians could be provoked to hope and joy. In this way, this design proved itself a model of the ambiguity so beloved of Constantine in his numismatic representation of his rule during his later years, but so frustrating to the modern scholar.[47]

July, 2018

Department of Classics
University College Cork
Western Road, Cork, Ireland
d.woods@ucc.ie

[47] I would like to thank Lars Ramskold and Charles Odahl for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, as well as the anonymous reader.