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## *Patronizing Persians*

### CONSTANTINE'S LETTER TO SHAPUR II

FROM THE OUTSET OF THE fourth and final book of his panegyric *Life of Constantine* (*VC*), the Roman bishop and church historian Eusebius of Caesarea is keen to present the first Christian emperor as a patron and philanthropist of boundless generosity. Constantine, he tells us, insisted on “persistently providing repeated and continuous good works of every kind for all the inhabitants of every province alike.”<sup>1</sup> So generous was the emperor that none who sought his favor was ever “disappointed in his expectations.” While Constantine bestowed rank, honor, and other benefits of land and riches upon those closest to him, he also “showed general fatherly concern for all.” According to Eusebius, the emperor granted formal titles to so many citizens that his bureaucrats had to invent new honorifics just so Constantine could “promote more persons.”<sup>2</sup>

The emperor slashed taxes on landowners. He readjusted the financial contributions required from those who complained “that their estates were overburdened.”<sup>3</sup> He even granted the losing party in the disputes he adjudicated money or land from his personal holdings. This was so that no one who had been in his presence should ever have reason to “depart disappointed and bitter.”<sup>4</sup>

1. Euseb. *VC* IV.1. All citations of the *VC* are from the translation of A. Cameron and S. G. Hall, *Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999).

2. *VC* IV.1. Such generosity was not unique to Constantine. Simon Corcoran points out that his role “as giver of justice and distributor of benefits, whether largesse, offices or immunities,” was “hardly new” and not different in kind from that of his predecessors. See Corcoran, “Emperor and Citizen in the Era of Constantine,” in *Constantine the Great: York’s Roman Emperor*, ed. E. Hartley, J. Hawkes, and M. Henig (York: Lund Humphries, 2006), 49.

3. *VC* IV.2–3.

4. *VC* IV.4.

Toward those who did not serve Rome, Constantine was less beneficent. His predecessors kept the incursions of the Goths and other barbarians at bay through tributes and annual payments, but such an extortionate system was unacceptable to Constantine.<sup>5</sup> Through brute force, or its threat, he compelled barbarian tribes to submit to Rome. As a result of the emperor's efforts to convert the barbarians "from a lawless animal existence to one of reason and law," Eusebius says that God granted Constantine "victories over all the nations."<sup>6</sup>

Constantine's victories over enemies abroad and challengers at home did not go unnoticed. His name soon became renowned throughout the world. According to Eusebius, his court had "constant diplomatic visitors who brought valuable gifts from their homelands."<sup>7</sup> Foreign emissaries streamed to pay homage to Constantine in such droves that outside the palace gates there formed a long line of distinctive-looking barbarians wearing exotic clothes, strange haircuts, and long beards. Those who waited in the line came from every corner of the world: some had red faces, some complexions "whiter than snow," while still others were "blacker than ebony or pitch."<sup>8</sup>

In the context of these diplomatic visits to the seat of Roman power, Eusebius explains that the Persian king "also saw fit to seek recognition by Constantine through an embassy" and therefore sent a representative bearing

5. VC IV.5. One sixth-century Syriac martyrdom narrative, the *History of the Holy Mar Ma'in*, discusses the tribute that the Persians paid to Constantine. On Roman payment and receipt of tribute, see the discussion about the *History of Mar Ma'in* in chapter 6.

6. VC IV.5–6. On Eusebius's use of the term *ethnē* (nations), see A. P. Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius's "Praeparatio Evangelica"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For its broader use in early Christianity, see D. K. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

7. VC IV.7.

8. VC IV.7. Eusebius was not the first to play upon this trope of the ingathering of all "nations" in homage to the one divinely appointed king. Bruce Lincoln gives a fascinating account of ancient Persian theologies of empire in his study of Achaemenid relief sculptures that depict long lines of variously clad supplicants coming to pay homage to the king. See Lincoln, "The Role of Religion in Achaemenian Imperialism," in *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond*, ed. N. Brisch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 221–41. For a more extended treatment of this theme, see Lincoln's *Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia, with a Postscript on Abu Ghraib* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Discussing Darius, Lincoln describes the model empire as one wherein the king dominated all kinds of people, "who retained their ethnic identity but were politically and economically subordinated to him" (23).

“tokens of friendly compact.”<sup>9</sup> What Eusebius says the Persian king received from Constantine in return for his friendly tokens is the focus of this chapter.

As with other emissaries, Constantine treated the Persian ambassador well and sent him home with a successfully negotiated peace treaty and gifts whose splendor far outshone those that the ambassador had brought with him.<sup>10</sup> Yet the gifts the emperor sent to the Persian king were just material displays of Rome’s power and Constantine’s greatness. Much more important was what accompanied them: a letter from Constantine.

Constantine’s letter to Shapur, which is translated in appendix A, is an especially important, and exceptionally rare, source for Roman-Persian relations in the fourth century. Although letters between Roman emperors and their generals on the eastern frontier were surely written, none survive. And, as Fergus Millar points out, the only extant letters between a Roman emperor and a foreign king are those that have been reproduced in fourth-century literary sources. These include an exchange of two letters between Shapur and Constantine’s son Constantius in 358, which Ammianus Marcellinus preserves in his *Res Gestae*, and Constantine’s letter to Shapur, for which we possess no response. Although several late antique sources recycle Constantine’s letter, it is found first and most fully in Eusebius’s *Life of Constantine*.<sup>11</sup> In Millar’s understandably cautious estimation, all three of these fourth-century letters “are of uncertain authenticity.”<sup>12</sup>

When Constantine’s letter to Shapur is accepted as authentic, it is typically viewed as *the* document underlying centuries of strife for the Christians of Persia. A cursory examination of its contents reveals why. In the section of the letter that Eusebius has preserved, the emperor spends most of his time

9. *VC* IV.8. Eusebius does not name the Persian king as “Shapur II” but refers to him simply as “the Persian emperor.” While the date of Constantine’s letter is uncertain, Shapur II would have been the only “Persian emperor” known to Eusebius during Constantine’s sole rule. According to legend, Shapur, who was born in 309, was crowned in utero and reigned until his death in 379.

10. *VC* IV.8.

11. See Amm. Marc. XVII.5 and *VC* IV.9–13. All translations of the *Res Gestae* follow the Loeb edition of J. C. Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, 3 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1935–40).

12. F. Millar, “Emperors, Frontiers and Foreign Relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378,” *Britannia* 13 (1982): 2. Millar claims that Constantine’s letter to Shapur is the first tangible symbol of how Christianity was believed to have changed Roman foreign relations.

telling Shapur about the power of the Christian god. Constantine speaks about persecutors of Christians in his letter too—oddly, however, not persecutors in fourth-century Persia but earlier persecutors in the Roman Empire. Constantine never refers to any of his predecessors or rivals by name, but it is unquestionably the Roman emperor Valerian who is the focus of his ire. Valerian reigned from 253 to 260, was well known as a persecutor of Christians, and, most notably insofar as his role in Constantine's letter is concerned, was taken captive by Shapur I (the Great) while campaigning against the Sasanians. Valerian died as Shapur's captive, and he holds the ignominious distinction of being the only Roman emperor ever taken as a prisoner of war.

In this chapter, I consider the content of Constantine's letter, its probable date and context, and the debates over its authenticity. I am especially concerned with two additional questions: first, whether the letter can (or should) be understood as a cause of persecution in Sasanian Persia, and second, how Constantine deploys Valerian's capture and death to write a new, Christian history of the Roman Empire. This chapter will not entirely resolve the first question. Constantine's letter to Shapur has a complex transmission history and, in any case, is a recurring theme in several chapters. For example, in chapter 2 I discuss how ecclesiastical historians writing long after the emperor's death reread and entirely recontextualized Constantine's letter, and in chapter 6 I look at how a Syriac martyrdom narrative from the sixth century constructed a new account of it.

I propose that the emperor's letter was written to communicate to the Persian king how Constantine was different from, and much stronger than, previous rulers of Rome. Its date is central to its interpretation. Contrary to what some sources suggest, there is no evidence (either internal or external) that the letter was written immediately before Constantine's death and the ensuing war between Rome and Persia, which began in 337. Rather, it seems to date to a period of peace between the two empires, with the most plausible time of composition being 324/25, after Constantine had become the sole ruler of the Roman Empire and when the many supplicants and ambassadors to him were arriving before the imperial gates. Altogether, the date, context, and content of the letter suggest that it should be read primarily as a reconfiguration of divine support for Roman kingship in the person of Constantine. The emperor's letter is undeniably unique, but it did not touch off a persecution or lead to a religious war.

CONSTANTINE AS THE PROTECTOR OF ALL  
CHRISTIANS IN ALL PLACES

Eusebius testifies that Constantine wrote the letter to Shapur himself, in Latin. Presumably, the copy entrusted to the Persian ambassador was not the autograph but a Greek translation. Greek was known among the literati of the Sasanian Empire, as several trilingual (Parthian, Middle Persian, Greek) inscriptions from the Sasanian period attest. And it was in Greek, not Latin, Eusebius says, that the letter was “in circulation among us” and has been transcribed in the *VC*, so as to be “more readily understood by the reader.”<sup>13</sup>

Essentially, Constantine’s letter is an announcement that the emperor of Rome had the support of the Christian god. By itself, such a proclamation of personal religiosity would have been odd, but the letter is more than just an imperial statement of Constantine’s Christianity. The emperor goes much further. He regales the Persian king with lurid reminders of the consequences that had befallen those who persecuted Christians, and he suggests that if Shapur is wise, he will care for all the Christians living in the lands of the East. Intriguingly, such admonishments are made in rather symbolic fashion, using the emperor Valerian as the model to avoid.

According to Eusebius, Constantine learned from the Persian ambassador “that the churches of God were multiplying among the Persians and that many thousands of people were being gathered into the flocks of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> As Eusebius tells it, Constantine knew nothing about the rapid growth and wide diffusion of Christianity in Persia, given that he says in his letter, as if in response to recent news, “how pleasing it is for me to hear that the most important parts of Persia too are richly adorned [with Christians]!”<sup>15</sup> In his

13. *VC* IV.8. This is not the only place in the *VC* where Eusebius claims that Constantine wrote something in Latin that was later translated into Greek. Shortly after his citation of the letter to Shapur, Eusebius comments, “Latin was the language in which the Emperor used to produce the texts of his speeches. They were translated into Greek by professional interpreters” (*VC* IV.32). In this same section, Eusebius explains that he has appended to the *VC* another of Constantine’s translated works (the *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints*), “so that none may think our assertions about his speeches to be mere rhetoric.” Much of the language in Constantine’s letter to Shapur is similar to that of the *Oration*, a text that was, in fact, appended to the earliest manuscripts of the *VC*.

14. *VC* IV.8.

15. *VC* IV.13. There are several martyrdom narratives set earlier in Shapur’s reign that predate the “Great Persecution” by as many as two decades, but all are late compositions,

introduction to the letter, Eusebius underscores just how happy Constantine was to learn that there were Christians in Persia and that the faith was flourishing there, explaining that the emperor “as one who had general responsibility for [Christians] everywhere . . . took prudent measures on behalf of them all.”<sup>16</sup> Constantine’s concern for Christians knew no bounds. He took personal responsibility for all Christians in all places. Even those who were subjects of a foreign king.

### *The Contents of Constantine’s Letter*

Eusebius quotes Constantine’s letter at length, but he cannot have preserved all of it. The letter reads as if he has begun quoting from it midstream. He fails to include any formal opening or greeting to the addressee, literary elements that must have been present under the most basic conventions of late ancient epistolary writing. The absence of a heading or a greeting, “such as we have with every other letter of Constantine in Eusebius’s account,” leads Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall to conclude, “This may suggest that Eusebius has this document from a secondary history or source.”<sup>17</sup>

The first line of the letter that Eusebius quotes begins a long confessional section in which Constantine explains that he guards “the divine faith,” participates “in the light of truth,” and acknowledges “the most holy religion [*thrēskeia*].”<sup>18</sup> More forebodingly (at least in terms of how the letter has tra-

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and there is no evidence that Constantine was aware of any specific Christian martyrs in Persia. The *History of Sultan Mahdukt* (*AMS* II, 1–39), for example, claims to tell the story of a Persian Christian nobleman who was persecuted in the ninth year of Shapur’s reign (317/18), but the final redaction of the text dates to the late seventh century. The *History of Sultan Mahdukt* is more concerned to weave a narrative constructing an ancient, biblical past for the nobles it celebrates than to relate any historically credible details about Persia during Shapur’s early reign. There is simply no credible evidence for ante-Nicene persecutions or martyrs in Persia, despite J. D. Strong’s recent argument to the contrary, “Candida: An Ante-Nicene Martyr in Persia,” *J ECS* 23 (2015): 389–412.

16. *VC* IV.8.

17. Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine*, 314. See also B. H. Warmington, “The Sources of Some Constantinian Documents in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* and *Life of Constantine*,” *SP* 18 (1986): 93–98. Warmington suggests from whom Eusebius may have acquired his copy of the letter: an imperial official called Marianus who is mentioned with high praise at *VC* IV.44.

18. *VC* IV.9. On the term *thrēskeia* and the problem of translating it as “religion,” see B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 34–38.

ditionally been read), Constantine tactfully but clearly proclaims that he has “the power of this God as ally.” He declares that his army carries the sign of God on its shoulders and that, by means of his allegiance to the divine, he has “raised up the whole world step by step with sure hopes of salvation.”<sup>19</sup>

Constantine portrays the victories that God has granted him as therapeutic and restorative, implying that his rise to sole rule over Roman lands has healed the world of its wounds, reviving it “like a patient after treatment” and freeing it from “the slavery of such great tyrants.”<sup>20</sup> The “great tyrants” to whom he refers are not foreign kings, Goths or Persians, but his own predecessors and rivals—persecutors of Christians. Contrary to these haughtily tyrannical emperors, the God of the Christians “takes pleasure in works of kindness and gentleness.” Yet this God is quick to shatter “all ostentatious power” and destroy the proud and the arrogant. Rome’s pagan rulers were defeated, Constantine explains, because God “values highly righteous empire” and thus “strengthens it with his own resources, and guards the imperial mind with the calm of peace.”<sup>21</sup> Addressing Shapur as “my brother,” Constantine insists that he is justified and unmistakable “in confessing this one God the Author and Father of all.” The Roman emperor makes a point of establishing a new era by directly contrasting himself with “many of those who have reigned here” (the Roman Empire), who, “seduced by insane errors,” denied God and persecuted his followers.<sup>22</sup>

Up to this point, the letter seems to be mainly the self-aggrandizing bluster of a king who is thanking his divine patron while touting his own prowess on the battlefield. There is nothing particularly strange or novel about this, except perhaps for the considerable amount of time that Constantine spends on the topic. The emperor’s rhetoric about the divine goes beyond the more perfunctory, but equally self-serving, recognition of the gods by Shapur himself, decades later, in his letter to Constantius of 358. According to Ammianus, Shapur identifies himself by citing his fraternal relationship to the heavens, beginning, “Shapur, King of Kings, partner with the Stars, brother of the Sun and Moon,” but then formally greets Constantius and promptly turns to the business at hand.<sup>23</sup>

Constantine, by contrast, scrupulously details his relationship to the divine and explains how his alliance with his god distinguishes him from the

19. *VC* IV.9.

20. *VC* IV.9.

21. *VC* IV.10.

22. *VC* IV.11.

23. Amm. Marc. XVII.5.3.

earlier (impious) rulers of Rome. It takes quite some time for him to explain to Shapur why he is waxing on about his love for “the most holy religion” and the god who so majestically carried his armies to victory. In fact, all the preliminary sections that survive of Constantine’s letter are a series of reminders of what happened to those who persecuted “the people devoted to God.”<sup>24</sup> Only near the end of the letter does he utter the name “Christian” and thus reveal to Shapur the identity of the nameless god and the unspecified faith that he has been extolling at such length. After all this pomp and brass, Constantine finally concedes—at what Eusebius makes out to be the close of the letter—that his “whole concern” is “for them,” adding, by way of explanation, “I mean of course the Christians.”<sup>25</sup>

Assuming that Shapur received Constantine’s letter, one cannot help but wonder what the Persian king would have made of it. The Persian ambassador, having spent some time in the Roman Empire, may have been key to helping his ruler understand the universalizing claims that the Roman emperor was making.<sup>26</sup> Constantine singles out a specific group of people in Persia for special consideration after proclaiming to Shapur that his own military successes are thanks to the god whom these people worship. At the same time that Constantine praises Shapur because Persia is “richly adorned” with Christians, he reminds him of what happens to those who persecute Christians. At the same time that he glorifies the goodness of the Christian god, he rails against the errors of non-Christians and the sickness of the cultic sacrifices of his predecessors, claiming that such perversions have “overthrown many of the nations and whole peoples.”<sup>27</sup>

More than anything else, Constantine’s letter is driven by the persistent sense that benefits accrue to those who support Christians (or at least refrain from persecuting them), while dreadful consequences await those who treat Christians poorly. Yet even given this, it is imperative to note that Constantine’s letter is neither an indictment of Shapur nor a critique of the king’s gods. Constantine never suggests that he suspects Shapur of persecut-

24. *VC* IV.12.

25. *VC* IV.13.

26. On this point see, for example, M. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

27. *VC* IV.10. For a summary and analysis of the other Constantinian references in Eusebius that speak disdainfully of pagan sacrifices, see T. D. Barnes, “Constantine’s Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice,” *AJP* 105 (1984): 69–72; and S. Bradbury, “Constantine and the Problem of Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century,” *CP* 89 (1994): 120–39.

ing the Christians in his realm. To the contrary, he specifically grants Shapur authority over the Christians of Persia. He is clear to indicate his pleasure in hearing that the choicest parts of Persia are overflowing with Christians, and he attempts to secure their continued safety through rhetorical persuasion and fraternal cajoling. The close of Constantine's letter even rings with a tone of congratulatory and communal well-wishing: "May the very best come to you therefore, and at the same time the best for them, since they also are yours." The emperor continues in this vein, saying, "These [Christians] therefore, since you are so great, I entrust to you, putting their very persons in your hands, because you too are renowned for piety. Love them in accordance with your own humanity. For you will give enormous satisfaction both to yourself and to us by keeping faith."<sup>28</sup>

Constantine's language at the end of his letter may sound condescending, but a patronal attitude toward Christians everywhere is precisely the one that he intends to adopt—or, at least, that Eusebius intends to fashion for him in the *VC*. From Constantine's point of view, Shapur should understand the Christians of Persia as a divine gift to his empire—a gift more splendid than any of those being delivered to him by his returning ambassador.

### *Eusebius and the Beginning of Imperial Christianity*

While Eusebius may have had good reason to celebrate the emperor's overweening concern for Christians beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire, most scholars have, quite justifiably, read Constantine's letter with more trepidation. For in claiming to be so concerned about the Christians of Persia, Constantine effectively marks them as clients of Rome. Roger Blockley, for example, suggests that the obstreperous religiosity of Constantine's letter was "threatening" to the Persian king and must have "fuelled Persian suspicions by emphasising the universal mission of the Christian Church and [Constantine's] 'episcopal' responsibility for those without it."<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Timothy Barnes reads Constantine's letter to Shapur as sure evidence of an astonishing change in the Roman Empire's outlook on the rest of the known world. He argues that it demonstrates that Constantine's conversion and concomitant Christianization of the Roman Empire began "to affect foreign

28. *VC* IV.13.

29. R. C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992), 11.

policy” as soon as Constantine became the sole ruler of the empire. Echoing what we hear in Constantine’s letter, Barnes says that the emperor “regarded himself as a divinely ordained protector of Christians everywhere, with a duty to convert pagans to the truth, and this fundamental assumption about his mission in life inevitably shaped his policy toward Persia, where a large number of Christians lived under a Zoroastrian monarch.”<sup>30</sup>

Among Syriac scholars who accept the authenticity of Constantine’s letter, Sebastian Brock agrees that the emperor’s vocal role as a patron of the Christians of Persia had negative repercussions for them. But he considers the problem to have been the historiographical legacy of Eusebius’s portrayal of Constantine “as advocate for the Christian minority living under the Zoroastrian Sasanids,” rather than Constantine’s letter itself.<sup>31</sup> This is a subtle but crucial distinction. Throughout all of his works, the *VC* and the *Church History* included, Eusebius’s overarching focus is, truly, on Christianity in the Roman Empire. This lopsided if predictable territorial emphasis, Brock argues, leaves “the reader with the impression that Christianity was essentially a phenomenon restricted to the Greco-Latin cultural world.”<sup>32</sup> What Eusebius creates in his literary and historical works is thus, according to Brock, a “picture of the history of the Christian church as being inextricably interwoven with the history of the Roman empire,” a combination of piety and power that has had enduring consequences for the Christians of Persia and “a pernicious influence on the writing of almost all subsequent ecclesiastical history down to our present day.”<sup>33</sup>

30. T.D. Barnes, “Constantine and the Christians of Persia,” *JRS* 75 (1985): 131. With respect to the treaties promulgated between Rome and the Goths and Sarmatians whom Eusebius mentions in *VC* IV.5–6, Barnes says that Constantine “insisted on including religious stipulations, which enabled him (and his panegyrist Eusebius) to claim that he had converted the northern barbarians.”

31. S.P. Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties,” in *Religion and National Identity*, ed. S. Mews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 2.

32. S.P. Brock, “Eusebius and Syriac Christianity,” in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. H.W. Attridge and G. Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 212.

33. Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire,” 2. Adam Becker extends Brock’s assessment of Eusebius’s “negative” effect on the history of Christianity in the East into a commentary on the general scholarly ignorance of Christianity (and Judaism) outside the Roman Empire. See Becker, “Beyond the Spatial and Temporal *Limes*: Questioning the ‘Parting of the Ways’ outside the Roman Empire,” in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Becker and A. Y. Reed (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 373.

As Brock's frank assessment indicates, it is Eusebius, and a Eusebian-inspired approach to writing church history, that has had longer and deeper consequences for the Christians of Persia than any letter that Shapur may have received from Constantine. To be sure, many of Eusebius's works were translated into Syriac at a relatively early date. For example, his treatise *On Theophany* and his *Martyrs of Palestine* are both preserved in British Library Add. MS 12,150 (the oldest dated Christian literary manuscript in any language), which was copied in Edessa in 411. The *Church History* entered Syriac quite quickly too, possibly—some have argued—even before Eusebius's death.<sup>34</sup> As a result of his stature in the Roman Empire and his wide readership among Syriac-speaking Christians there and in the Persian Empire, Eusebius has had an undeniably outsized influence on Syriac historiography.<sup>35</sup>

Subsequent chapters consider this influence of Eusebian ecclesiastical history, especially Constantine's letter to Shapur as the *VC* presents it, but Brock's comments here help to make an important point: even a negative assessment of the authenticity of Constantine's letter does little to diminish its importance for the writing of fourth-century history. Every ecclesiastical history or martyrdom narrative that quotes from or otherwise uses Constantine's letter both postdates and draws from the *VC*. There is no other, independent source for the letter. What matters is not whether Shapur received this letter from Constantine but that Christians in the Roman and the Persian Empire alike believed that he did and thereby penned their histories of this period with Constantine and his letter in mind.

#### THE AUTHENTICITY OF CONSTANTINE'S LETTER

Questions about the long shadow of Eusebius notwithstanding, it is certainly true that the letter to Shapur is the obvious outlier among the dozen-plus Constantinian documents that the *VC* cites. Miriam Vivian, whose 1987

34. See W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Acquired since the Year 1838*, vol. 2 (London, 1871), 631–33; and the preface to Wright and N. McLean, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius in Syriac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898).

35. Muriel Debié's studies of Syriac historiography demonstrate the extent to which Western traditions have influenced it. See Debié, "L'Héritage de la chronique d'Eusèbe dans l'historiographie syriaque," *JCSSS* 6 (2006): 18–26; and Debié, "L'Héritage de l'historiographie grecque," in *L'Historiographie syriaque, Études syriaques* 6, ed. Debié (Paris: Geuthner, 2009), 11–31.

dissertation examines the role of Constantine's letter on Roman-Persian relations, comments that it "has been viewed as so unique that many scholars have not known how to explain it." In fact, she continues, "it seemed so unthinkable that a document with such Christian witness should come out of the chancery of a Roman emperor that in the 1930's Henri Grégoire made it a crucial point in his arguments against the authenticity of the entire *VC*."<sup>36</sup> The overt religiosity of Constantine's letter led the Sasanian historian Karin Mosig-Walburg to doubt its authenticity too, although she concluded that Eusebius should probably be considered guilty of simple negligence in authenticating his sources rather than outright forgery of the letter.<sup>37</sup> For Mosig-Walburg, as for Grégoire and others, it is simply beyond the bounds of reason that a fourth-century emperor—even Constantine—could so let religion dictate his foreign policy.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Recipient and Date of the Letter*

Perhaps partly on the basis of Grégoire's influential article, even the assumption that Shapur II was the letter's addressee has been questioned. It has been argued that although the letter may be authentic, Eusebius must have inadvertently misconstrued the identity of its recipient. Constantine was writing not to a pagan, Persian king but to a Christian vassal of the Roman Empire: the Armenian king Tiridates.<sup>39</sup> This argument has not been greeted with

36. See M. R. Vivian, "A Letter to Shapur: The Effect of Constantine's Conversion on Roman-Persian Relations," PhD diss. (University of California at Santa Barbara, 1987), 8, with reference to Grégoire's well-known article "Eusèbe n'est pas l'auteur de la *Vita Constantini* dans sa forme actuelle et Constantin ne s'est pas 'converti' en 312," *Byz* 13 (1938): 561–83. See also Vivian, "Eusebius and Constantine's Letter to Shapur: Its Place in the *Vita Constantini*," *SP* 29 (1997): 164–69.

37. K. Mosig-Walburg, *Römer und Perser: Vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr.* (Gutenberg: Computus Druck Satz, 2009), 275. See also her "Christenverfolgung und Römerkrieg: Zu Ursachen, Ausmaß und Zielrichtung der Christenverfolgung unter Šāpūr II.," *Iranistik* 7 (2005): 5–84; and "Die Christenverfolgung Šāpūrs II. vor dem Hintergrund des persisch-römischen Krieges," in *Inkulturation des Christentums im Sasanidenreich*, ed. A. Mustafa and J. Tubach (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2007), 171–86.

38. Mosig-Walburg, *Römer und Perser*, 282.

39. D. De Decker, "Sur le destinataire de la lettre au Roi des Perses (Eusèbe de Césarée, *Vit. Const.*, IV, 9–13) et la conversion de l'Arménie à la religion chrétienne," *Persica* 8 (1979): 99–116. Barnes, in discussing De Decker's work, notes that the tone of the letter—"polite, tactful, allusive, and indirect"—is such that it might lead one to conclude that Shapur was not the recipient. See Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia," 131. This implies that Barnes considers courteousness something that would have been out of place in a letter

much enthusiasm, but it is possible that Tiridates's conversion to Christianity may have played an exacerbating role in Roman-Persian relations.<sup>40</sup> In his *Church History*, Sozomen (writing in Constantinople around 440) precedes his assessment of Shapur's persecution by noting that certain regions of Persia were led to embrace Christianity in part through the influence of "Tiridates, the king of [the Armenian] people."<sup>41</sup> Georg Blum connects the dots to conclude that Constantine's conversion and subsequent heralding of the Christian god in his letter, coupled with the conversion of Tiridates and Armenia, must have led Shapur to feel as if "Christian states" were beginning to surround Persia.<sup>42</sup>

Even though the letter's intended recipient was not Tiridates but almost certainly Shapur, there is no question that it is the only document in the *VC* that was addressed beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire. Still, its date and the circumstances of its composition remain less than certain.<sup>43</sup> Because Eusebius suggests that it was written in response to an official emissary's visit to Constantine's court, it has been argued that the letter was probably composed in or around 324, when there is evidence for the presence of Persian officials in the Roman Empire—including Prince Hormizd, a defector from the Sasanian court. In fact, most of the Constantinian documents in the *VC*

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to a Persian king. However, while direct, the letter that Constantius wrote to *fratri meo Sapori* at the height of the war between them is neither impolite nor tactless. See Amm. Marc. XVII.5.10–14.

40. Mosig-Walburg discusses the role of Armenia throughout her work on the confrontation between Rome and Persia in the fourth century, but see especially her account of Armenia during the time of Constantine in *Römer und Perser*, 240–66.

41. Soz. *HE* II.8.

42. G. G. Blum, "Zur religionspolitischen Situation der persischen Kirche im 3. und 4. Jahrhundert," *ZKG* 91 (1980): 26. References to religious states and church-state relations and even the secularized terms "religion" and "politics" are anachronistic for the fourth century. For the beginnings of such a critique among those who have addressed this period, see P. Gignoux, "Church-State Relations in the Sasanian Period," in *Monarchies and Socio-religious Traditions in the Ancient Near East (Papers Read at the 31st International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa)*, ed. T. Mikasa (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), 72–80; and, more recently and much more theoretically, A. H. Becker, "Political Theology and Religious Diversity in the Sasanian Empire," in *Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians: Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context*, ed. G. Herman (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2014), 7–25.

43. In 1988, Harold Drake pointedly remarked, "The Letter to Shapur still needs definitive treatment." See Drake, "What Eusebius Knew: The Genesis of the *Vita Constantini*," *CP* 83 (1988): 27n23. Perhaps such definitive treatment arrived with the publication of Vivian's dissertation.

were likely written during the first years of Constantine's sole rule over the Roman Empire, between 324 and 326. Timothy Barnes demonstrates that Eusebius had amassed copies of most of the documents he used in his work no later than 326.<sup>44</sup> Later dates for Constantine's letter, even as late as 337, the last year of the emperor's life, cannot be definitively ruled out, but they are much less likely than the mid-320s for several reasons. First, the letter reads very much like an announcement of Constantine's Christianity—a celebration of the Christian god for leading Constantine on to what seem to have been relatively recent victories—which would better suit a mid-320s than a late 330s context. And then there is the overly laudatory and fraternal tone of the letter, which is difficult to reconcile with a date closer to the end of Constantine's life, when the emperor seems to have been in the midst of planning a campaign against Shapur, as I discuss in the next chapter.<sup>45</sup>

A mid-320s date would seem to militate against the letter's having played a direct role in aggravating Shapur to turn against Christians. Fifteen years would have elapsed between his receipt of the letter and any subsequent oppression of the Christians of Persia, which began, as the martyr acts of Simeon bar Šabba'e suggest, no earlier than 339. Such an extended chronology of events makes it hard to read Constantine's letter as a document that galvanized any immediate concern over the Christians of Persia among the Sasanian nobility.

### *A Text or a Source?*

While it is true that the letter to Shapur is unique among Constantinian documents in the *VC* and that it is unattested outside Eusebius and his continuators, these facts alone are insufficient to dismiss it as either inauthentic

44. T. D. Barnes, "Panegyric, History and Hagiography in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 111.

45. For an overview of the possible dates of the letter's composition, see Drake, "What Eusebius Knew," 27; Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia," 131–32, with further explanation in Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 258; D. Frendo, "Constantine's Letter to Shapur II: Its Authenticity, Occasion, and Attendant Circumstances," *BAL* 15 (2001): 60; and Vivian, "Letter to Shapur," 87–129, which considers the dates and circumstances of the letter's composition in direct conjunction with the supposed dates of Shapur's persecution.

or a Eusebian invention.<sup>46</sup> Thinking about how best to read the *VC* may be helpful in this regard. As Averil Cameron aptly puts it, the *VC* “has to be read as a *text* before it can be read as a *source*.”<sup>47</sup> If understood as a source for episodes in the emperor’s life, then it tends to be read as confirming or contradicting what the reader believes he or she already knows about Constantine. Approached in this way, the *VC* will be either accepted as trustworthy or dismissed as misinformed and spurious.<sup>48</sup> But if instead it is read as a text about Constantine rather than a source for his life, then questions about the authenticity of each Constantinian document that Eusebius cites are less urgent. The important point is that Constantine’s letter to Shapur circulated in late antiquity as if it were authentic. And there are good reasons to believe that it actually was.

In 1950, T. C. Skeat’s discovery of an early fourth-century papyrus (P. Lond. 878) helped confirm that the Constantinian documents that Eusebius cites—while they too must be read as texts—are likely authentic sources, from which Eusebius faithfully quotes. The London papyrus is important in this respect because it independently preserves part of Constantine’s decree to the Eastern provincials in Palestine. Eusebius reproduces this decree in full in the *VC*, and his quotation is perfectly consistent with that in the papyrus.<sup>49</sup> The discovery of this papyrus “greatly reduced the likelihood that the documents [in the *VC*] as a group should be regarded as suspect.”<sup>50</sup> Eusebius was

46. David Frendo comments, “The general trend [in Eusebian studies] has been toward acceptance of the Eusebian authorship of the *Vita Constantini* and of the authenticity of the greater part of the documents contained therein.” See Frendo, “Constantine’s Letter to Shapur,” 58–60, which discusses arguments for and against the authenticity of Constantine’s letter to Shapur at length. As Horst Schneider argues, however, the letter to Shapur is very much an anomaly among the documents in the *VC*, possessing a style and language that differ significantly from those of other imperial decrees. See B. Bleckmann and Schneider, *Eusebius von Caesarea, De Vita Constantini, Über das Leben Konstantins* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 420n287.

47. My emphasis. See Cameron, “Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* and the Construction of Constantine,” in *Portraits: Biographical Representations in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, ed. M. J. Edwards and S. Swain (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 145.

48. A. Cameron, “Eusebius of Caesarea and the Rethinking of History,” in *Tria Corda: Scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano*, ed. E. Gabba (Como: New Press, 1983), 72.

49. For Eusebius’s citation of the decree, see *VC* II.2.4–42. The portion preserved in P. Lond. 878 mirrors *VC* II.2.6.2–29.1. See A. H. M. Jones and T. C. Skeat, “Notes on the Genuineness of the Constantinian Documents in Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*,” *JEH* 5 (1954): 196–200. See also S. Mitchell, “Maximinus and the Christians in A.D. 312: A New Latin Inscription,” *JRS* 78 (1988): 105–24.

50. Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine*, 239.

writing a hagiography, that much is undeniable, but he does not seem to have invented the Constantinian sources at his disposal. Rather, as the papyrus evidence suggests, he quotes faithfully from the sources that he had before him and which he apparently believed were authentically Constantinian.

Put simply, we cannot be certain that Constantine wrote the letter to Shapur, but there is no more reason to doubt its authenticity than there is to doubt any of the other Constantinian documents that Eusebius cites. Indeed, Constantine's letter to the Eastern provincials in the mid-320s rehearses topics and themes that are very similar to those in the letter to Shapur.<sup>51</sup> Such similarities can only strengthen the arguments in favor of the authenticity of the letter to Shapur. Taking all of this into account, it is thus fair to assume that the letter was genuinely from Constantine's hand, that it was sent to Shapur sometime between 324 and 337 (with an earlier date being most likely), and that the Greek translation quoted by Eusebius is presumably not an injustice to the emperor's Latin. Shapur probably did receive a letter from Constantine, in which the Roman emperor declared his allegiance to the Christian god, critiqued past persecutors of Christians, and expressed his concern for Christians in Persia.

#### REASSESSING CONSTANTINE'S LETTER

Even given robust assumptions about the authenticity of Constantine's letter, it was hardly needed to alert Persians to the presence of Christians in their midst. The Persian ambassador himself is the one who supposedly informed Constantine that Christians were thriving in Persia. And besides ambassadors and other officials, plenty of merchants routinely passed from one realm to the other. The merchant-missionary, not a novel phenomenon in the mid-fourth century, was one of the many vehicles of Christianization in the Sasanian Empire.<sup>52</sup> No political or cultural border either would have hin-

51. *VC* II.48–60.

52. See the discussion of the Christianization of Persia in chapter 5. The comprehensive survey of Christian missionary activity in Persia by Christelle and Florence Jullien captures the variegated nature of Christianity in Iran in the third and early fourth centuries and references the many sources attesting to its diversity, spread, and means of growth. See Jullien and Jullien, *Apôtres des confins: Processus missionnaires chrétiens dans l'empire iranien*, *Res Orientales XV* (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 2002), especially 43–117, on the literary accounts of Christian missionaries in Iran, and 153–87, on the consequences of earlier deportations of Roman citizens to the Iranian heartland.

dered the Persian awareness that changes were afoot under Constantine. The Sasanians were acutely attuned to power struggles in the Roman Empire, and information moved across an inevitably porous zone of contact.<sup>53</sup> As A. D. Lee points out, even though the absence of documentary evidence makes ascertaining both the existence and the means of transmission of strategic military intelligence difficult, “the very despatch of certain embassies implies that there was movement of information between the two empires.” Lee further remarks that the Persian ambassador who arrived at Constantinople seeking to dissuade Constantine from marching to war in 337 is one obvious indication “that the Persians had somehow learned of Roman preparations.”<sup>54</sup>

If Constantine’s conversion to Christianity resulted in the immediate changes that are so often claimed for his reign by ancient and contemporary historians alike—such as the abolition of pagan sacrifices, an exceptional redistribution of wealth favoring Christians and Christian sites, and the promotion of Christianity above and beyond all other cults—then is it really plausible that the Persians would not have noticed such raucous and radical transformations? Indeed, the Persian ambassador to whom Constantine supposedly entrusted his letter to Shapur may have witnessed the burgeoning religious transformations of the Roman Empire firsthand. But if the religious changes within the Roman Empire were not nearly so overwhelming, in either their scope or their intensity, as some have claimed, then Constantine’s announcement to Shapur about his own Christianity and his concern for all Christians may yet have been newsworthy.

In either case, the more important question here is whether Constantine’s personal claim to an allegiance with the Christian god was sufficient to inexorably establish a link between that god and the Roman Empire such that the name “Christian” became immediately interchangeable with “Roman.” Such

53. See J. F. Matthews, “Hostages, Philosophers, Pilgrims, and the Diffusion of Ideas in the Late Roman Mediterranean and Near East,” in *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, ed. F. M. Clover and R. S. Humphreys (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 29–49.

54. A. D. Lee, “Embassies as Evidence for the Movement of Military Intelligence between the Roman and Sasanian Empires,” in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, ed. P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (Oxford: BAR International Editions, 1986), 456. For more on the Roman-Persian negotiations (or, rather, Constantine’s refusal thereof) in the months leading up to the war, see K. Mosig-Walburg, “Zur Westpolitik Shāpūrs II.,” in *Iran, questions et connaissances: Actes du IV<sup>e</sup> congrès européen des études iraniennes, organisé par la Societas Iranologica Europaea, Paris, 6–10 septembre 1999*, vol. 1, *La période ancienne*, ed. P. Huyse (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 329–47.

a link could not be instituted overnight, on the basis of a single letter. The connection between *Romanitas* and *Christianitas* took some time to establish, even in the Roman Empire. Although Constantine's letter was certainly a preliminary step in that direction, before the emperor could—with a few strokes of his pen—inaugurate the Byzantine-Christian future, he had to rewrite the Roman-pagan past.

*Persecution and Divine Justice in the Letter to Shapur:  
The Example of Valerian*

Christians, Constantine says, are the reason for his letter.<sup>55</sup> The emperor's concern for Christians far and wide is a theme that appears regularly in the *VC*. It might be most keenly encapsulated in this story that Eusebius tells: Constantine was present at an assembly of bishops who were gathered for dinner. He “let slip the remark that he was perhaps himself a bishop too, using some such words as these in our hearing: ‘You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside.’”<sup>56</sup>

In their commentary on this passage, Cameron and Hall call it “one of the most famous and puzzling statements in the *VC*.”<sup>57</sup> To whom was Constantine referring when he called himself a bishop “over those outside”? Did he mean Christians outside Rome, those beyond the reach of the church of the empire? Or did he mean to anoint himself with a missionary role, as the shepherd who would lead non-Christians within the Roman Empire to the church?

While this passage—which Eusebius seems to regard as an intriguing but only anecdotal aside—may reinforce the view that the letter to Shapur is an expression of Constantine's sense of religious mission, the emperor's letter is not an oblique or surreptitious way of claiming the Christians of Persia as Roman subjects, or of girding Shapur for a war on their behalf. Constantine writes to Shapur seeking to ensure that the Persian king will *continue* to not

55. *VC* IV.13.

56. *VC* IV.24. See also W. Seston, “Constantine as a ‘Bishop,’” *JRS* 37 (1947): 127–31.

57. Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine*, 320. It has also helped fuel the characterization of Constantine as a “caesaropapist.” Claudia Rapp says that this passage, coupled with others that refer to Constantine as a “bishop,” seems “to encapsulate the Byzantine vision of imperial authority in its relation to Christianity.” See Rapp, “Imperial Ideology in the Making: Eusebius of Caesarea on Constantine as ‘Bishop,’” *JTS* 49 (1998): 685.

persecute Christians. He remarks that he is commending the Christians of Persia to the protection of the Persian king, who is “renowned for piety [*eusebeia*]” and to whom he hopes “the very best” will come, “since they [the Christians] are also yours.”<sup>58</sup> The letter warns Shapur, but in a way that is judiciously phrased as being helpful, not threatening. It is important to note too that according to Eusebius, Constantine accompanied it with peace guarantees and magnificent presents.<sup>59</sup>

Constantine does focus largely on war and military victories in the opening sections of his letter, but the reasons behind such militarism have to be properly understood. The references to his victorious army should be read less as imperial saber rattling and more as a straightforward presentation of evidence that would have been readily intelligible to a leader, and reader, such as Shapur. Constantine offers tangible proof (his triumphs over adversaries) of the benefits that God accords to rulers who are benevolent toward Christians. He insists that Christians will be a boon to Shapur and to the Persian Empire, if only Shapur is wise enough to understand this: “For so you will keep the sovereign Lord of the Universe kind, merciful and benevolent.”<sup>60</sup> In Constantine’s estimation, those who failed to keep the Lord benevolent were not Persian kings but Roman emperors who persecuted Christians. Valerian in particular is singled out for special condemnation.

Even though the letter never names him (nor Shapur, for that matter), Valerian is the person on whom the whole message of Constantine’s letter hinges.<sup>61</sup> In transitioning from the sections that tout the power of the Christian god and attest to his patronage in ushering Constantine to victory, Constantine turns to critique “many of those who have reigned here”—non-Christian Roman emperors—who were “seduced by insane errors” and denied God. He strives to present the death and punishment of these persecuting emperors in providential terms, anticipating that Shapur will likewise account for their deaths as the result of divine vengeance. Constantine explains, “All mankind since has regarded their fate as superseding all other examples to warn those who strive for the same ends.”<sup>62</sup>

58. *VC* IV.13.

59. *VC* IV.8.

60. *VC* IV.13.

61. On the common rhetorical practice of keeping enemies unnamed in order to refer to them in a more allusive fashion, see R. MacMullen, “Roman Bureaucratess,” *Traditio* 18 (1962): 364–78; Vivian (“Letter to Shapur,” 66) brings up this point as well.

62. *VC* IV.11.

Referring to Valerian, Constantine tells Shapur that a Roman persecutor of Christians “was driven from these parts [the Roman Empire] by divine wrath as by a thunderbolt and was left in yours, where he caused the victory on your side to become very famous because of the shame he suffered.”<sup>63</sup> Constantine could have chosen to single out other famous persecutors of Christians—Decius or Diocletian, perhaps—but Valerian’s utility in a letter to a Persian king is obvious. Shapur II’s great-grandfather Shapur I defeated Valerian’s army in 260 and, as numerous sources attest, either killed the Roman emperor or led him off into a captivity from which he never returned.

Shapur the Great’s victory over Valerian was, quite literally, a monumental defeat for the Romans. Several massive relief sculptures cut directly into the cliffs at Naqsh-e-Rostam, near the ancient Achaemenid capital of Persepolis, soon commemorated it.<sup>64</sup> These rock reliefs, as well as others near the city of Bishapur, depict a suppliant Valerian before a triumphant Shapur.<sup>65</sup> In a trilingual inscription (Parthian, Middle Persian, Greek) on the famous Ka’ba-ye Zartosht (Cube of Zoroaster), Shapur claims to have defeated Valerian and his army and deported the Roman emperor and scores of his officers to the Persian heartland.<sup>66</sup>

In turning to consider the fate of Valerian and his captivity in Persia, Constantine moves from extolling the power infused into Rome’s armies by the Christian god to acknowledging that that same god once supported the Persians (apparently unbeknown to them) in their war against a Roman army that was led by an emperor who persecuted Christians. Constantine’s intent

63. *VC* IV.11. Later commentators had no trouble understanding the identity of the person driven out by a thunderbolt. Sozomen, who summarizes Constantine’s letter in a discussion of Shapur and the Christian martyrs of Persia, specifically names Valerian as the referent of Constantine’s wrath. See *Soz. HE* II.15.4.

64. See G. Herrmann, D. N. Mackenzie, and R. Howell, *The Sasanian Reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam: Naqsh-e Rostam 6, The Triumph of Shapur I*, *Iranische Denkmäler* 13 (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1989); and Herrmann, “The Rock Reliefs of Sasanian Iran,” in *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Parthian and Sasanian Periods: Rejection and Revival c. 238 BC–AD 642*, ed. J. E. Curtis (London: British Museum Press, 2000), 35–45.

65. On the visual depiction of Valerian’s capture, see Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, 68. For a more comprehensive study of the use of such relief sculpture throughout Persia, see Canepa’s “Topographies of Power: Theorizing the Visual, Spatial and Ritual Contexts of Rock Reliefs in Ancient Iran,” in *Of Rocks and Water: Towards an Archaeology of Place*, ed. Ö. Harmanşah (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 55–92.

66. See M. Back, *Die sasanidischen Staatsinschriften*, *Acta Iranica* 18 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), ŠKZ, Mid. Pers. I.15, Parth. I.11, Gk. I.25; and E. Kettenhofen, *Die römisch-persischen Kriege des 3. Jahrhunderts. n. Chr. nach der Inschrift Šābpuhrs I. an der Ka’be-ye Zartošt (ŠKZ)* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1982), 97–99.

is didactic. Rome was once an empire enslaved by tyrants, but with the elevation of a Christian emperor it has “enjoyed the general restoration of right” and “revived like a patient after treatment.”<sup>67</sup> Constantine thereby contrasts his rise to power with the downfall of his non-Christian predecessors. Those who persecute “the people devoted to God” come to a bitter end, as Valerian’s well-known fate attests.<sup>68</sup> And while the letter surely calls Valerian’s paganism to task—Constantine calls his cult sacrifices “abominable blood and foul hateful odours”—this was not the main reason for his downfall.<sup>69</sup> Rather, it was Valerian’s persecution of Christians.

This is an important point. For throughout his letter, Constantine demonstrates no interest in critiquing Shapur’s gods or the cults of the Persians. He even remarks that Shapur is “renowned for piety.”<sup>70</sup> The emperor is not proselytizing to non-Christian Persians but instead is intent on demonstrating to Shapur that rulers who persecute Christians enrage God, while those who protect them earn God’s munificence.

That Valerian’s death was a direct result of his oppression of Christians, not just his paganism, is a theme that other Christian sources from the Roman Empire echo. In his *Chronicle*, Jerome suggests a clear, causal connection between Valerian’s persecution of Christians and his untimely death, indicating that the latter followed immediately from the former.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, Augustine’s disciple Orosius places Valerian as the eighth in a long line of persecuting emperors beginning with Nero. He says that soon after Valerian began persecuting Christians, the Persians enslaved him.<sup>72</sup> Sozomen too claims that Valerian’s reign was untroubled so long as he did not persecute Christians. But once the emperor began his oppression, the wrath of God delivered him to the Persians.<sup>73</sup> Following his death in Persia a century after Valerian’s, the emperor Julian’s demise was interpreted in an identical way.

67. *VC* IV.9.

68. *VC* IV.12.

69. *VC* IV.10.

70. *VC* IV.13.

71. On the year 258, Jerome comments that Valerian, after instigating a persecution against Christians, was immediately captured by Shapur, the king of the Persians. See R. Helm, *Eusebius Werke*, vol. 7, *Die Chronik des Hieronymus*, GCS 47 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1956), 302.

72. Orosius, *Ad. Paganos* VII.22.3–4. For a translation, see R.J. Defarrari, *Paulus Orosius: The Seven Books of History against the Pagans* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

73. Soz. *HE* II.15.4.

### *Valerian and a New Roman History*

Valerian surfaces in Christian texts written outside the Roman Empire too. The East Syrian *Chronicle of Seert*, a tenth-century ecclesiastical history in Christian Arabic, finds a providential purpose in the persecuting emperor. Although only a few sections of the formerly extensive *Chronicle* survive, what remains of it begins with Valerian's death. According to the *Chronicle*, there was a divine, double purpose to the emperor's demise. After the death of "the evil Valerian," the Christian priests he had exiled were allowed to return to their episcopal sees. More important, Shapur's many Roman captives, especially the citizens of Antioch, "multiplied in Persia," where they (anachronistically for the mid-third century) "built monasteries and churches." Valerian's death, at least according to East Syrian Christian legend, hastened the spread of Christianity in Persia, of which Shapur I was an unwitting tool by deporting the citizens of defeated Roman cities (Christians among them) en masse to Persia.<sup>74</sup>

From the perspective of the *Chronicle of Seert*, Christianity thus flourished in third-century Persia in ways that would have been impossible at the same time in the Roman Empire under rulers such as Valerian. As much as Constantine indicates an ignorance in his letter that Christians were prospering in Persia under Shapur II, he at least seems to have known that Christians had, in fact, fled the Roman Empire for other lands during times of persecution. In his letter to the provincials in Palestine, Constantine laments the persecutions of Diocletian and refers to "the boast of the barbarians who at that time welcomed refugees from among us, and kept them in humane custody, for they provided them not only with safety but with the opportunity to practise their religion in security. And now the Roman race bears this indelible stain, left on its name by the Christians who were driven at that time from the Roman world and took refuge with barbarians."<sup>75</sup>

One way to remove the "indelible stain" on the Roman race was by celebrating the gory but divine vengeance taken upon emperors such as Valerian. Thus Vincenzo Poggi refers to Constantine's letter as an exercise in "purificazione della memoria," a way of making amends for past oppression and

74. A. Scher, *Histoire nestorienne inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, première partie 1, PO 4 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1908), 220–21. See also the further discussion of deportations and Christian captives in chapter 5.

75. *VC* II.53. See also Frendo, "Constantine's Letter to Shapur," 62.

perhaps of surreptitiously welcoming back those who had fled the Roman Empire or had been taken captive by the Persians.<sup>76</sup>

Like that between persecution and divine punishment, there seems to be a direct relationship between the stridency of an author's Christianity and the gruesomeness he attributes to Valerian's demise. The pagan historian Zosimus, for example, mentions only that Valerian shamed himself and the Roman Empire through the disgrace of his capture. Zosimus provides no details about the emperor's death.<sup>77</sup> On the other end of the spectrum is the Latin rhetorician Lactantius. His polemical *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* is a graphic litany of the deaths suffered by emperors who persecuted Christians, Valerian among them. This pamphlet reads, however, less as a celebration of the oppression of the oppressor (although it is that) and more as a new sort of historical tract, a definitive rewriting of Roman history along Christian lines, designed to show how God intervenes in history and severely punishes those who persecute Christians. More important, Lactantius's celebration of Valerian's death is key to further understanding Constantine's letter to Shapur.

### *Lactantius and Constantine on the Deaths of Persecutors*

Lactantius reviles Valerian, saying that no Roman, not even Valerian's own son, bothered to avenge his dishonorable imprisonment.<sup>78</sup> But this was only the beginning of Valerian's humiliation. Lactantius claims that he was forced to serve as a human footstool, so that whenever Shapur wished to mount his horse, Valerian would have to kneel down on his hands and knees and bear the Persian king's weight upon his back. As Shapur mounted his horse, he

76. V. Poggi, "Costantino e la chiesa di Persia," in *Costantino il Grande nell'età bizantina: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio, Ravenna, 5-8 aprile 2001* (Bizantinistica V), ed. G. Bonamente and A. Carile (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 2003), 74.

77. Zos. *HNI*.36.2.

78. Lactant. *De mort. pers.* V.5. The *Chronicle of Seert*, by contrast, indicates that Valerian's son Gallienus sent Shapur magnificent presents. In return, Valerian's body was delivered to the Roman Empire. The *Chronicle* also specifies that Gallienus recalled those whom his father had exiled and repealed the edicts against the Christians. See Scher, *Histoire nestorienne inédite*, 223.

The ideas developed in this section were originally part of my formal response to "Religious Identity through the Prism of Spectacle in Early Christianity" by Elizabeth Castelli, both presented at the Center for Late Ancient Studies symposium "Constructing and Contesting Late Ancient Identities," Duke University, Durham, NC, February 20, 2009.

would smirk at the emperor-turned-footstool and remind him that *this* was the truth—Roman subjugation to Persian victors—not the imaginative false victories that the Romans painted on their walls.<sup>79</sup> Lactantius claims that after Valerian's death, his skin was peeled from his body, dyed red, and hung up "in the temple of the barbarian gods" as a warning to all future Roman ambassadors.<sup>80</sup>

Constantine, far from denying that Valerian's death was as shameful as the Persians would have it, in fact verifies, but then reclaims, his predecessor's notorious humiliation, to laud the power of the Christian god. He writes to Shapur in his letter, "It would appear that it has turned out advantageous that even in our own day the punishment of such persons has become notorious. I have myself observed the end of those next to me, who with vicious decrees had harassed the people devoted to God."<sup>81</sup> For Constantine, Valerian's shame is educative. His divine punishment was a spectacular warning, his skin a red flag flying for everyone in the future.

Just as the organizers of the bloody spectacles of the Roman arena sought to restage ancient myths, thereby renewing mythological reality by discursively and viscerally sustaining their narratives, Lactantius is attempting to stage (anew) a *truer* account of Roman history. In so doing, he presents not only a more pedagogically inclined spectacle of punishment but, at the same time, a correction of the historical record by showing how God raised up emperors such as Constantine to rescind the impious edicts of tyrants.<sup>82</sup> Lactantius seeks to display the power of God and to make clear that it is God who punishes the persecutors, judging the impious in order to "teach posterity" that he alone is God.<sup>83</sup>

Elizabeth Castelli argues that Lactantius's understanding of "divine punishment combines . . . elements of Roman penal violence—retribution,

79. Lactant. *De mort. pers.* V.3.

80. Lactant. *De mort. pers.* V.6. On this episode, see E. Reiner, "The Reddling of Valerian," *CQ* 56 (2006): 325–29. For an overview of the varying accounts of Valerian's capture and death, see B. Isaac, "The Army in the Late Roman East: The Persian Wars and the Defence of the Byzantine Provinces," in *The Near East under Roman Rule: Selected Papers* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 440–41. Isaac indicates that Lactantius was the first to add the grisly detail that Valerian was flayed. On the practice of hanging up human trophies in Persian temples, see also the Syriac *Martyrdom of Abbot Barshebya* (*AMS* II, 281–84), translated in appendix C.

81. *VC* IV.12.

82. Lactant. *De mort. pers.* I.3.

83. Lactant. *De mort. pers.* I.6.

humiliation, correction, prevention, and deterrence. But punishment is also educative . . . simultaneously a form of display and a form of teaching.” And “the object of [such] correction,” she points out, is ultimately “mistaken theological understanding.” Correcting mistaken theology is, for Lactantius, part of his methodical renarration of Roman history. Valerian’s mistaken theological understanding, manifested less in his paganism than in his persecution of the people of God, garnered many afterlives in Christian discourse. Yet, as Castelli emphasizes, there is no “anti-imperial character” to Lactantius’s history. Lactantius distinguishes between “emperors” (such as Constantine) and “tyrants” (such as Valerian) but, she says, “never calls the notion of empire into question.”<sup>84</sup>

Lactantius’s rhetorical project pairs closely with Constantine’s—both the emperor’s letter to Shapur and his *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints*. In fact, as Harold Drake notes, “the enthusiastic identification of parallels” between Constantine’s *Oration* and the works of “other writers such as Lactantius was beginning to sound like yet another search for alternative authors [of Constantine’s *Oration*] until T.D. Barnes came to the sensible conclusion that words delivered by the emperor, no matter who wrote them, could safely be considered to be the emperor’s own.”<sup>85</sup>

In his *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints*, Constantine echoes Lactantius’s portrayal of God’s “righteous judgment” of Valerian while touting his own divinely inspired victories and rule over the Roman Empire as a Christian. According to Eusebius, Constantine’s *Oration* was written in Latin and then translated into Greek—like the letter to Shapur. Eusebius also reminds us that a Greek version of Constantine’s *Oration* was transmitted as an appendix to the *VC*.<sup>86</sup> In several manuscripts, the *Oration* is in fact appended to the *VC*. Constantine confirms Lactantius’s reading of history in his *Oration*, and he reaffirms Shapur the Great’s horse-mounting jibe

84. Castelli, “Religious Identity.”

85. See H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 292, with reference to Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 74. See also Barnes, “Lactantius and Constantine,” *JRS* 63 (1973): 29–46.

86. *VC* IV,32. Drake suggests that the history of Constantine’s *Oration* “is a microcosm of classical scholarship in the modern age.” The text moved from an early “period of hypercriticism (during which scholars freely dismissed whole passages for not conforming to what their science told them the emperor should have said)” to cautious admission “as a representative piece of fourth-century propaganda, though still held unlikely to be Constantine’s own” and finally to recent times, when “scholars have been more willing to concede authenticity.” See Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 292.

at Valerian. If past defeat—even past defeat of the Roman Empire—is divine retribution, then present victory is thereby divinely sanctioned.<sup>87</sup> Constantine likens Valerian to Decius and condemns the emperor who died at the hands of the Persians, saying, “But you, Valerian, who showed the same murder-lust toward those who heeded God, you made the holy judgment manifest when you were caught and led as a prisoner in bonds with your very purple and all your royal pomp, and finally, flayed and pickled at the behest of Sapor the King of the Persians, you were set up as an eternal trophy of your own misfortune!”<sup>88</sup>

As Jeremy Schott indicates, Constantine evidently borrows from Lactantius in his *Oration* but diverges from him “by drawing connections between the persecutors and *biblical* tyrants.”<sup>89</sup> Constantine refers to the destruction of the Assyrian Empire as a result of thunderbolts from heaven thanks to the impious rule of the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar, whose “whole line was wiped out” and whose power “passed to the Persians.”<sup>90</sup> Just as one tyrant lost his kingdom to thunderbolts, “the thunderbolt and the fire from heaven” consumed the palace and bedchamber of the persecutor Diocletian—who thereafter lived his life in perpetual dread of the thunderbolt—in retribution for his persecution of Christians.<sup>91</sup> Constantine uses this idea of the thunderbolt, which comes up twice in the *Oration*, pairing a biblical tyrant with a persecutor of Christians, again in the letter to Shapur when he explains how Valerian “was driven from these parts by divine wrath as by a thunderbolt.”<sup>92</sup>

Divine retribution results in the punishment of the tyrant or persecutor but also in the apotheosis of the divine drama and the restoration of proper

87. Jeremy Schott comments, “This portion of the *Oration* [XXIV.1–3] most certainly owes something to Lactantius’ *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*. Lactantius and Constantine identify the same set of emperors (although Constantine omits the pre-Decian persecutors) and point to their ignominious destruction as evidence of God’s retributive justice.” See Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 116. Schott affirms and expands on the work of Elizabeth Digeser, and both, as suggested, are attuned to the role of Lactantius in laying the rhetorical groundwork of Christian empire. See Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

88. Cons. Or. XXIV.1–3. All translations of the *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints* are from M. Edwards, *Constantine and Christendom* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003).

89. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion*, 116. My emphasis.

90. Cons. Or. XVII.

91. Cons. Or. XXV.

92. VC IV.11.

order—the calm after the storm. In his letter to Shapur, Constantine refers to his victory over his enemies as “the general restoration of right,” a restoration of peace in which all humanity can exalt, as the world revives “like a patient after treatment.”<sup>93</sup> In his analysis of the *Oration*, Harold Drake notes that the “real subject” of the emperor’s speech is a demonstration of God’s providence, “the care that God exercises on behalf of those who worship him with true piety.” Quoting the emperor’s words, Drake points out that for both Eusebius and Constantine, God’s providence consistently includes the Christian emperor’s victories as much as the defeats of his opponents: “The world itself cries out and the pageant of stars shines brighter and more conspicuous, rejoicing (as I believe) in the *fitting judgment of unholy deeds*. The very times that succeed the wild and inhumane life are reckoned to rejoice because of their own good lot, and show *the goodwill of God* toward humankind.”<sup>94</sup> But part of the result of Constantine’s conversion and his linking of divine justice to his rise to power was the need to emphasize the providential aspect of his rule, along with his concern for Christians everywhere. Christians who had suffered under persecuting emperors needed reassurance of Constantine’s fundamental difference from his predecessors. They needed an acknowledgment that he was *their* emperor.

This restoration of right order was what Constantine wished to announce to Shapur in his letter. In their literary works, Constantine, Eusebius, and Lactantius all put forth a new idea of a *Christian* Rome. While this was apparently not intended solely for consumption within the borders of the empire, it was not (at least initially) a way of injecting “religion” into foreign policy either. The logical leap from Constantine as a Christian—and, as his letter suggests, Constantine as a concerned father to Christians everywhere—to the idea of Rome as a fundamentally Christian empire with new-found subjects spread throughout Persia represents Eusebius’s construction of Constantine. The emperor’s letter was no precursor to any crusade, nor even a declaration of any fundamental change in the Roman Empire. It announced the restoration, not the institution, of order. As David Frendo reminds us, Constantine’s letter was novel, as, “undoubtedly, new forces were at work, but one must not exaggerate their intensity or extent. What we are

93. *VC* IV.9.

94. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 296, with reference to *Cons. Or.* XXV (my emphasis).

witnessing are the first beginnings of a slow process of historical development and change.”<sup>95</sup>

Only in the fifth century, when tales about Christian martyrs in Persia began to reach the ears of Roman ecclesiastical historians, did Constantine’s letter again come into play as a supposed factor in Shapur’s persecution of Christians—and then, as I discuss in the next chapter, not as the cause but as the Roman emperor’s response to the tremendous slaughter of Christians in Persia.

95. Frendo, “Constantine’s Letter to Shapur,” 65.