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# The vision of Constantine

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translated by A. R. Birley

*Note to the reader:* This is a revised translation of a paper first presented in 1989 to celebrate Alfred Heuss's 80th birthday and published in 1993 as "Die Vision Constantins," in J. Bleicken (ed.), *Colloquium aus Anlaß des 80. Geburtstages von Alfred Heuß* (Frankfurter Althistorische Studien 13, Kallmünz 1993) 143-69. The editor of *JRA* noted the desirability of an English version, and it has kindly been prepared by A. R. Birley in collaboration with the author and with T. D. Barnes. The author has made several additions to the text and notes, and he has provided an Addendum.

## 1. Introduction: the problem

"Constantine's visions again!", perhaps you will say: yet more speculations on a theme that never ends. Alfred Heuss not without reason deliberately steered clear of this set of questions in his *Römische Geschichte*. But he did make one comment: 'modern interpretation, in so far as it treats his [Constantine's] conversion as a historical phenomenon, must place itself in a positive relationship to this *Tradition* [the sources on the vision-accounts]'.<sup>1</sup> If I now take up this question, it is because I believe that I have discovered something which puts "conversion" and "*Tradition*" in that positive relationship.<sup>2</sup>

There is a mountain of literature on the 'Constantinian *Wende*' ('revolution') and, inextricably related to it, the vision-accounts. The attention paid to this emperor, a figure towering above others, matches in its scale the significance of that momentous turning-point. It is impossible to discuss here all the various interpretations in detail. First, then, a bare summary of what is no longer in dispute. From 312, one year on from Galerius's empire-wide toleration edict and then his death, Constantine, following his victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, favoured Christianity with his imperial power, and became the first emperor to make common cause with the Christians. No one would really quarrel (any more) with this elementary fact.<sup>3</sup> But extreme differences of opinion remain about his motives: which ones predominated personal, political, or religious? Of course, one can describe his well-known 'religious development'<sup>4</sup>, from its beginnings in the tetrarchic state cult, via Sun-worship, to his very personal brand of Christology; and then fit this in with the decisive stages on his road to power. His policy towards the Christians can be clearly set out and understood as a consequence of the historical development, pointing ahead the path to the future.

All the same, the crucial question remains: what lay behind this, what is to be made of the claim (which Constantine never tired of repeating), that he owed his successes to the working of a supreme deity, identified with the God of the Christians? What bearing has this claim on the emperor's dynamism, which went beyond normal bounds? What lies behind his unmitigate-

1 A. Heuß, *Römische Geschichte* (2nd edn., Hamburg 1964) 450, 605 f.

2 The observations that follow were delivered in necessarily very brief fashion at the Colloquium. For the published version an extended presentation, detailed in some places, seemed appropriate. But to have attempted full documentation of Constantinian scholarship would have burst its bounds. It seemed sensible to limit the annotation and to refrain almost entirely from citing modern works on the Constantinian *Wende* ('revolution'). Fuller references are given only for questions directly related to the paper's main thesis. For more detailed information on the controversies about Constantine's conversion and visions, one may recommend H. Kraft (ed.), *Konstantin der Grosse* (Darmstadt 1974), in which some important items are reprinted; cf. also P. Keresztes, "The phenomenon of Constantine the Great's conversion," *Augustinianum* 27 (1987) 85-100.

3 H. Grégoire's thesis that Licinius, not Constantine, was the real driving force stimulated further research by provoking rebuttal; but it failed to win support until it was revived in 1992 (while the first version of this paper was still in press) by J. Bleicken; see Addendum. See Kraft (supra n.2) for Grégoire's contributions and a selection of replies.

4 On this, see the classic monograph, H. Kraft, *Kaiser Konstantin religiöse Entwicklung* (Tübingen 1955).