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Religious Issues in the Speech in Honor of Constantine of 313 (*Panegyric XII* from the Collection of *Panegyrici Latini*)

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SUMMARY

Panegyric XII from the Collection of *Panegyrici Latini* tells about Constantine's Italian campaign and the seizure of Rome by him in 312. These events brought large political changes in the Roman Empire, but they are also related to the adoption of Christianity by Constantine. Therefore, the author of the speech must talk about religious matters in such a way to meet the expectations of both the Emperor and the other listeners. So he uses very syncretic language, creating a very capacious image of god, with which both Christians and pagans can identify.

KEYWORDS: Constantine, Latin panegyrics, battle of the Milvian Bridge, conversion of Constantine.

STRESZCZENIE

Kwestie religijne w mowie na cześć Konstantyna z 313 roku
(*Panegyryk XII* ze zbioru *Panegyrici Latini*)

Panegyryk XII ze zbioru *Panegyrici Latini* opowiada o kampanii włoskiej Konstantyna i zdobyciu przez niego Rzymu w 312 r. Wydarzenia te przyniosły duże przemiany polityczne w cesarstwie rzymskim, ale związane jest z nimi również przyjęcie przez Konstantyna chrześcijaństwa. Autor mowy musiał więc w taki sposób mówić o kwestiach religijnych, aby spełnić zarówno oczekiwania cesarza, jak i pozostałych słuchaczy. Dlatego używał bardzo synkretycznego języka, tworząc pojemny obraz boga, z którym może utożsamić się zarówno chrześcijanin, jak i poganin.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Konstantyn, panegyryki łacińskie, bitwa przy Moście Mulwijskim, nawrócenie Konstantyna.

Introduction

In the collection of Latin speeches with the conventional title of *Panegyrici Latini*¹, written in honour of several Roman emperors, as many as five are devoted to Constantine. One of them is *Panegyric XII (IX)*², delivered at the earliest in 313, probably in Trier³. This work is one of the essential sources for the Italian campaign and the conquest of Rome in 312, which are crucial for the later history of the empire. However, it is also a significant source for research on the change in Constantine's religious beliefs because one of the central moments of the Italian campaign was the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Then Constantine was to experience the vision of the Christian God through whom he accepted Christianity. Although *Panegyric XII* does not describe Constantine's vision, it does show the context and consequences of this event, which will be discussed in more detail below.

We do not know who the author of the speech was – perhaps he was associated with Autun⁴. 313 was the earliest year in which the speech could have been delivered because the takeover of Italy and Africa took place at the end of 313⁵. In 313, Constantine organized the games in Trier in honour of his victory over the Franks⁶, which probably took place in 313, according to the discussed panegyric⁷.

¹ *XII Panegyrici Latini*, ed. Ae. Baehrens, Lipsiae 1874; *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors. The Panegyrici Latini*, intr., transl, comm. R.A.B. Mynors, C.E.V. Nixon, B.S. Rodgers, Berkeley–Los Angeles–Oxford 1994.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 192–212.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 288–289; T. Barnes, *Constantine. Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*, Malden, MA–Oxford–Chichester, West Sussex, 2014, p. 98; J.W. Drijvers, *Panegyricus Latinus 12(9): Constantine's Religious Ideology*, "Journal of Late Antiquity" 14 (2021), no. 1, pp. 52–53.

⁴ *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 288.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 290. Cf. *Panegyric IV (X)* 32.6–8, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 624, which tells that the population of Africa rejoiced at their liberation from Maxentius.

⁶ *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, pp. 289–290; *Panegyric XII* 23.3. Ch.M. Odahl, *A Pagan's Reaction to Constantine's Conversion-Religious References in the Trier Panegyric of A.D. 313*, "The Ancient World" 21 (1990), no. 1, p. 45.

⁷ *Panegyric XII* 22.3–22.6.

Constantine's vision

An event that certainly had the most substantial influence on the issue of presenting deity and religion in *Panegyric XII* was the adoption of Christianity by Constantine after experiencing the miraculous vision of the Christian God. Two sources speak of this: *De mortibus persecutorum* by Lactantius and *Vita Constantini* by Eusebius of Caesarea⁸. The description by Lactantius⁹ is earlier, it was created around 315¹⁰. According to him, Constantine received advice in his sleep the night before the battle of the Milvian Bridge to put the sign of Christ on the shields of his soldiers, which ensured him a victory in the battle the next day. The detailed description of this sign is not entirely clear, and there is a discussion among researchers on the subject¹¹. Passus on the sign reads in Latin: “transversa X littera, summo capite circumflexo”¹². However, this phrase is difficult to understand unequivocally. “Transversa X littera” can mean inverted *chi*, but *transverto* can also mean to traverse¹³. The second part of the above passus can be translated as “with the upper part curved around”. Then we will get a sign called the staurogram – a cross with the Greek letter rho created by its upper part and curvature, thus a sign that Christians used¹⁴. Another possible interpretation is that Constantine placed a chi-rho monogram on the shields of his soldiers. This sign is also confirmed by one of the Constantine coins from Ticinum in northern Italy¹⁵. However, such an interpretation is only reasonable if we assume

⁸ On the vision of Constantine, H.A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles. Christians, Pagans, Jews, and the Supernatural*, 312–410, New York 2017, pp. 49–74; O. Nicholson, *Constantine's Vision of the Cross*, “*Vigiliae Christianae*” 54 (2000), no. 3, pp. 309–323; J. Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 218–219; T. Barnes, *Constantine*, pp. 74–76; P. Weiss, *The Vision of Constantine*, “*Journal of Roman Archaeology*” 16 (2003), trans. A.R. Birley, pp. 237–259; R. Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 3–17.

⁹ Laktanz, *De mortibus persecutorum* 44.5, ed. A. Städele, Turnhout 2003 (Fontes Christiani, vol. 43).

¹⁰ H.A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles*, p. 51.

¹¹ Cf. R. Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge*, p. 3; H.A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles*, pp. 51–56; Ch.M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, New York 2013, pp. 105–106; E. DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire. Lactantius and Rome*, Ithaca, New York–London 2000, p. 122.

¹² Laktanz, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44.5, p. 202.

¹³ *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, Oxford 1968, p. 1968.

¹⁴ H.A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles*, p. 53.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

that the text is damaged in this place and make its emendation. Therefore, in 1930 Henri Grégoire proposed the following addition of the Greek iota to the text: “transversa X littera <I>, summo capite circumflexo”¹⁶. With this amendment, “transversa” should be translated as *traversing*. So we get the phrase, “the letter X traversed by I”.

The account of Eusebius about the miraculous vision of Constantine described in *Vita Constantini*¹⁷ was created between 337 and 339¹⁸, so it was many years after the events of 312. The introduction to this scene is to be a campaign to liberate Rome from the power of Maxentius¹⁹. Constantine, however, is to realize that since Maxentius uses magic practices to gain the advantage, Constantine also needs divine help in the war. In addition, he is to consider the very strength of the army as secondary to the power of a deity²⁰. So when Constantine considers which god he should follow, he realizes that it did not end well for those who worshipped pagan deities. Only Constantine’s father decided to worship “the God who transcends the universe”²¹. After all, Constantine finds it most prudent to worship the same God as his father²².

Finally, Constantine confirmed his decision to accept one God by receiving a heavenly sign from him. Eusebius himself, however, proceeding to describe Constantine’s vision, informs that the emperor told him about it much later but ensures readers that his message is entirely credible²³. So according to Eusebius the vision took place around noon²⁴. The Emperor and the gathered soldiers see

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 55–56; cf. the edition of Sources Chrétiennes, which accepts this addition, Lactance, *De la Mort des Persécuteurs*, ed. J. Moreau, vol. 1, Paris 1954 (Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 39), p. 127.

¹⁷ *Vita Constantini* 1.28.2.

¹⁸ H.A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles*, p. 51; A. Cameron, S.G. Hall, *Introduction*, in: Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, introd., trans. and comm. A. Cameron, S.G. Hall, Oxford–New York 1999, p. 3. In J.W. Drijvers’ opinion the account of Eusebius is unreliable partly because it is so late, J.W. Drijvers, *Panegyricus Latinus*, p. 60.

¹⁹ *Vita Constantini* 1.25.2–26.

²⁰ *Vita Constantini* 1.27.1, Eusebius, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, ed. F. Winkelmann, Berlin–New York 1991 (Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte), pp. 28–29: “τὰ μὲν ἐξ ὀπλιτῶν καὶ στρατιωτικοῦ πλήθους δεύτερα τιθέμενος (τῆς γὰρ παρὰ θεοῦ βοήθειας ἀπούσης τὸ μὴ ἐν ταῦτα δύνασθαι ἡγεῖτο).”

²¹ *Vita Constantini* 1.27.2, Eusebius, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, p. 29: “θεόν, διὰ πάσης τιμήσαντα ζωῆς”. English translation, Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, p. 80.

²² *Vita Constantini* 1.27.3.

²³ *Ibidem* 1.28.1.

²⁴ *Ibidem* 1.28.2, Eusebius, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, p. 30: “ἀμφὶ μεσημβρινὰς ἡλίου ὥρας”.

a luminous cross in the sky and the text “By this conquer” attached to it²⁵. Then in the night, Constantine sees Christ in his dream, who commands the use of this sign for protection during the fight, which Constantine decides to do²⁶. In this way, a labarum with a chi-rho monogram is created, which Constantine also places on his helmet²⁷.

Therefore, if we assume that the description of the sign of Christ in Lactantius requires emendation and that it is, in fact, a chi-rho monogram, the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius from Caesarea will be consistent with each other²⁸. It will also be the same sign found on Constantine’s helmet on the coin minted in Ticinum in 315²⁹.

Presentation of God in Panegyric XII

The panegyric of 313, created in honour of Constantine, does not mention anything about Constantine’s miraculous vision or say anything directly about Christianity, but religious elements appear in it many times. These will be presented and analysed in this section.

At the beginning of the piece, the speaker talks about the circumstances of Constantine’s expedition to Rome and the preparation for it. So we learn that it was the God himself who was to encourage Constantine to embark on the expedition³⁰, and he decided to take it up despite the warnings of the pagan diviners³¹. Therefore, the speaker wonders what divine force inspired Constantine to undertake a risky expedition³².

²⁵ *Vita Constantini* 1.28.2, Eusebius, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, p. 30: “τοῦτο πρὸς τὸν αἰῶνα”. English translation, Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, p. 81.

²⁶ *Vita Constantini* 1.29–30.

²⁷ *Vita Constantini* 1.31.

²⁸ On the contradictions in these two stories, R. Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge*, pp. 3–14; H.A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles*, pp. 57–58; T. Barnes, *Constantine*, pp. 74–76; A. Cameron, [review] *Constantinus Christianus. Constantine and Eusebius by T.D. Barnes; The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, “The Journal of Roman Studies” 73 (1983), p. 186.

²⁹ H.A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles*, p. 58; although Drijvers claims that this evidence is from a later period, J. Drijvers, *Panegyricus Latinus*, p. 65.

³⁰ *Panegyric XII* 2.4.

³¹ *Panegyric XII* 2.5.

³² *Panegyric XII* 2.4, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 595: “Quisnam te deus, quae tam praesens hortata [est] maiestas ut, omnibus fere tuis comitibus et ducibus non solum tacite

The narrator of the panegyric then proceeds to present the figure of Maxentius and earlier attempts to overthrow him – first by Severus and then by his father, Maximian, who was supposed to consider Maxentius a bastard himself³³. However, the earlier failures of these people in the fight against Maxentius only emphasize the uniqueness of Constantine's actions, who succeeds in defeating the usurper. Constantine, however, had to be supported by divine power if he decided to go on an expedition³⁴. Then the panegyrist wonders whether it was not the reason itself that led Constantine and states that "each man's own prudence is his god"³⁵. When in the further part, the figures of Constantine and Maxentius are opposed to each other, the author emphasizes that Constantine is guided by divine leadership and Maxentius by superstition³⁶.

Then, the speaker describes Constantine's acquisition of other Italian cities before he reaches Rome. During this part of the expedition, the emperor is again to show extraordinary reason and, at the same time, kindness and benignancy towards others. The expression of this is to be what Constantine decided for the captured soldiers of Maxentius. He ordered them to make ties with swords³⁷, even though his soldiers were afraid to guard their enemies during the march through Italy, to which the emperor was to be led by "divine inspiration" ("divino monitus instinctu"). According to the speaker, thanks to this action, Constantine is to resemble a god who is characterized as follows: "As that god, creator, and master of the world sends messages now sad, now glad, with his same thunderbolt"³⁸.

mussantibus sed etiam aperte timentibus, contra consilia hominum, contra haruspicum monita ipse per temet liberandae Urbis tempus uenisse sentires?". English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, pp. 295–296: "What god, what majesty so immediate encouraged you, when almost all of your comrades and commanders were not only silently muttering but even openly fearful, to perceive on your own, against the counsels of men, against the warnings of soothsayers, that the time had come to liberate the City?"

³³ *Panegyric XII* 3.4–5.

³⁴ *Panegyric XII* 4.1, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 596: "dic, quaeso, quid in consilio nisi diuinum numen habuisti?". English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 299: "tell us, I beg you, what you had as counsel if not a divine power?"

³⁵ *Panegyric XII* 4.2, English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 299. Latin text, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 596: "sua enim cuique prudentia deus est".

³⁶ *Panegyric XII* 4.4.

³⁷ *Panegyric XII* 11.4.

³⁸ *Panegyric XII* 13.2; *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 601: "Vt deus ille mundi creator et dominus eodem fulmine suo nunc tristes nunc laetos nuntios mittit". English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 313.

God, who is the ruler of the world and the ruler of thunder³⁹, is Jupiter in the Roman world, but being the creator of the world cannot be an attribute of deity in the Roman religion. It is typical for Judaism and Christianity⁴⁰. The narrator does not refer to any particular religion at this point but creates a specific synthesis of pagan and Christian elements.

In the further part of the speech, the author mentions the deity no longer in the context of Constantine but Maxentius. We learn that Maxentius decided to meet the enemy because he was forced to do so by Rome and the “divine spirit” (“divina mens”): “But the divine spirit and the eternal majesty of the City itself robbed the accursed man of good sense”⁴¹. This further reinforces the belief that god was on Constantine’s side and supported him in this campaign.

When the panegyrist reports on the events in Rome after the battle, he does not mention the essential element of the Roman triumph, which is the victorious commander entering the Capitol to sacrifice to Jupiter⁴². Constantine’s omission of this event would be a significant change in the Roman triumph ceremony and a clear expression of the emperor’s Christian views⁴³. However, the fact that the author of the speech does not mention the sacrifice does not mean that it certainly did not happen. Reporting this could have been omitted⁴⁴. Therefore, drawing far-reaching conclusions based on what is not in the speech is impossible.

When the panegyrist finishes reporting what happened in Rome, he presents later events in 313. He does not mention the meeting with Licinius in Milan and his marriage to Constantine’s sister⁴⁵. He speaks at once of Constantine’s expedition to Lower Germany and of the victorious campaign against the Franks⁴⁶. Therefore, the speaker emphasizes that Constantine is not at rest for a moment but is still in a rush to act, which again becomes an opportunity to raise religious

³⁹ *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 313, n. 80; *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth, E. Eidinow, Oxford 2012, p. 779.

⁴⁰ Cf. R.Sh. Kraemer, *Gender*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, ed. B.S. Spaeth, Cambridge 2013, pp. 295–298.

⁴¹ *Panegyric XII* 16.2, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 602: “Sed diuina mens et ipsius Urbis aeterna maiestas nefario homini eripuerit consilium”. English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 318.

⁴² Cf. M. Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, Cambridge, Massachusetts–London 2007, p. 1; cf. also a map of Triumphal Rome, *ibidem*, p. 334.

⁴³ For discussion on the issue whether Constantine made a sacrifice to Juppiter, cf. *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 323, n. 119.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*. Cf. T. Barnes, *Constantine*, pp. 99–100.

⁴⁵ Cf. T. Barnes, *Constantine*, pp. 90–91.

⁴⁶ *Panegyric XII* 21.4–22.6.

issues⁴⁷. Finally, the narrator asks the emperor: “Now what is this constant impatience of yours? What is this divinity thriving on perpetual motion?”⁴⁸. Constantine is thus attributed with the divine eternal movement⁴⁹, and he himself is shown as a deity. The narrator also adds that everything in nature takes breaks – only Constantine is constantly waging wars and winning them⁵⁰.

Eventually, at the end of the speech, the panegyrist turns to the deity, asking it to protect Constantine forever⁵¹. At this point, the vital issue is the speaker’s language to talk about the deity. So he calls the god “supreme creator of things, whose names you wished to be as many as the tongues of the nations”⁵². So, again, the statement appears that this god is a creator, which has clear Christian connotations. At the same time, the fact that this deity has many names does not limit the perception of it to only a Christian God but has a highly syncretic character. Then the speaker continues to turn to the deity: “whether you are some kind of force and divine mind spread over the whole world and mingled with all the elements and move of your own accord without the influence of any outside force acting upon you, or whether you are some power above all heaven which look down upon this work of yours from a higher pinnacle of Nature”⁵³. In the further part of the paragraph, the panegyrist also adds that there is “supreme goodness and power” in this deity⁵⁴.

The speaker thus draws from the philosophical vision of God⁵⁵, which at the same time, is easy to reconcile with the Christian vision. Such a perception of

⁴⁷ *Panegyric XII* 22.1.

⁴⁸ *Panegyric XII* 22.1, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 605: “Quisnam iste est tam continuus ardor? Quae divinitas perpetuo uigens motu?” English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 327.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 327, n. 140.

⁵⁰ *Panegyric XII* 22.2.

⁵¹ *Panegyric XII* 26.1.

⁵² *Panegyric XII* 26.1, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 607: “summe rerum sator, cuius tot nomina sunt quot gentium linguas esse uoluisti” English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 332.

⁵³ *Panegyric XII* 26.1, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 607: “Quamobrem te, summe rerum sator, cuius tot nomina sunt quot gentium linguas esse uoluisti (quem enim te ipse dici uelis, scire non possumus), siue tute quaedam uis mensque diuina es, quae toto infusa mundo omnibus miscearis elementis, et sine ullo extrinsecus accedente uigoris impulsu per te ipse mouearis, siue aliqua supra omne caelum potestas es quae hoc opus tuum ex altiore Naturae arce despicias: te, inquam, oramus et quaesumus ut hunc in omnia saecula principem serues” English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, pp. 332–333.

⁵⁴ *Panegyric XII* 26.3, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 607: “Et certe summa in te bonitas est (et) potestas” English translation, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 333.

⁵⁵ *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 332, n. 158.

God can be found in ancient Stoicism⁵⁶, Platonism⁵⁷, and Neoplatonism⁵⁸. In this way, we are again dealing with an extensive perception of the deity, with which both the followers of pagan religions and Christians can identify themselves⁵⁹.

Conclusions

The Italian campaign of Constantine in 312 and the conquest of Rome undoubtedly involved a religious transformation of the emperor. The main source of this transformation was to be the miraculous vision from the Christian God, which Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea tell. The author of *Panegyric XII* does not mention this event, nor does he speak directly about the Christian God. However, he probably knew that Constantine ordered the use of Christian signs in his army before the battle of the Milvian Bridge. So he was aware of Constantine's liking for Christianity, even if it was not clear whether it could be said that Constantine himself had converted to this religion. Therefore, when he mentions the deity, the panegyrist presents it in a very syncretic way, trying to ensure that the follower of almost every religion of the Roman world can identify with this vision. God, shown by the author of the speech, has the attributes of a pagan god⁶⁰, Jupiter, but at the same time, has Christian connotations as the creator of the world. Many of its features are also taken from ancient philosophy.

One should ask the question about the relationship between religious views expressed in speech and the views of Constantine himself. We cannot assume that the emperor dictated to the panegyrist what exactly should be in the piece,

⁵⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, London 1968, p. 13.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 14–15.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 15–17.

⁵⁹ In J. Drijvers' opinion, the panegyrist does not mention any particular god because in 313 the religious position of the emperor was not clear; J. Drijvers, *Panegyricus Latinus*, p. 69; Ch.M. Odahl claimed that Christian God is not mentioned in the speech because there were also pagans in the audience and the author of the panegyric was also a pagan, Ch.M. Odahl, *A Pagan's Reaction to Constantine's Conversion-Religious References in the Trier Panegyric of A.D. 313*, p. 47, 49; B.S. Rodgers states that the author of the speech was a monotheist, but it is difficult to say more precisely about his religion; B.S. Rodgers, *Divine Insinuation in the Panegyrici Latini*, "Historia" 35 (1986), no. 1, p. 88.

⁶⁰ Cf. T. Barnes, *Constantine*, p. 98–99, who compared references to pagan religion in *Panegyric XII* with the earlier orations in the *Panegyrici Latini* collection, where they were more frequent.

but the speaker certainly tried to say what the ruler wanted to hear⁶¹. At the same time, the author of the speech had to bear in mind other listeners to whom the speech was addressed, hence the pagan and philosophical elements in *Panegyric XII*.

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⁶¹ H.A. Drake, *Century of Miracles*, p. 59.

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