The Colossus of Constantine

the_colossus_head.jpg

one_of_the_two_right_hands.jpg

head_right_knee_cap_right_hand_left_lower_leg_right_foot_left_knee_cap.jpg

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right_foot.jpg
**Patron/Sponsor:** Constantine the Great

**Original Location/Place:**
The west apse of the Basilica of Maxentius, near to the Forum Romanum in Rome.

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):**
The Colossus is no longer intact, but portions of it are now kept in the Courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori of the Musei Capitolini on Rome’s Capitoline Hill, above the west end of the Forum

**Original Inscription/Graffito:**
According to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* IX.9.11 (see also *Life of Constantine* I.40):

> Through this sign of salvation, which is the true symbol of goodness, I rescued your city and freed it from the tyrant’s yoke, and through my act of liberation I restored the senate and people of Rome to their ancient renown and splendor."

Rufinus, in his fifth century Latin translation of Eusebius’s Greek text, renders the inscription slightly differently (832.6-9). See the commentary for a discussion of this.

> "Under this singular sign (*singularius signum*), which is the mark (*insigne*) of true excellence, I restored (*restituo*) the city of Rome, the senate, and the Roman people, torn away by the yoke (*iugo*) of tyrannical rule (*tyrannicus dominatio*), to their former freedom (*libertas*) and nobility (*nobilitas*)."

(The translation from the Latin is my own)

**Description:**
The statue is no longer intact, but various parts remain of the acrolith (i.e. head, chest, arms, and legs made from marble, with bronze drapery). The striking head bears very distinctive features—a square jaw, with a dimpled chin, and a distinctive aquiline nose that is pointed at the tip, which was characteristic of the style introduced by Constantine’s father. The head in 2.97 metres high in total, and 1.74 metres from chin to crown. It seems that the head has been cut from a previously existing statue, as there are square dowels cut into the temples, indicating the locks of hair were added to an existing head. The hair itself is very Constantinian on the forehead, yet that on the top of the head is more in the style of earlier statues, more voluminous in its curls. The face is cleanly shaven, with a contemplative expression and extremely prominent, large eyes, deeply carved, which look upwards. The eyes are roughly 0.30 metres high. The detailed features of the head and face are somewhat uncharacteristic for a colossus (Jonathan Bardill, *Constantine*, p. 204). Two small holes in the centre of the head, just above the fringe, and an incision along the right side of the head, indicate that there was at one point something adorning Constantine’s head. Possibly, this was added after he adopted the diadem after 324 CE, following his defeat of Licinius. In addition to the head, there was also a closed right hand found at the basilica, which has a break at the thumb. There is also a small dowel hole at the top of the fist, suggesting that it once gripped something. The remains of the
right bicep, bent elbow, and forearm indicate that the right arm was raised up, and coming out from the shoulder horizontally. The back of the forearm, as well as the head, are flat, which suggests the statue was in direct contact with a wall. Another large right hand of 1.66 metres high was found in 1744 during building work near the Capitol, and so it is possible that this was the original hand of the Colossus, discarded when the statue was reworked to include a trophy of the cross in the form of a military standard (see commentary for further details, and Bardill, *Constantine*, p. 209).

**Material**: The head, arms and legs of the Colossus were carved from white marble, with the rest of the body constructed from a brick core and wooden framework, possibly covered with gilded bronze. The marble is a combination of Parian and Carrara.

**Measurements**: The head is 2.97 metres high, the feet are 2 metres long, and the right hand 1.61 metres high (another right hand, discovered in 1744, which was possibly discarded when the statue was reworked, measures 1.66 metres high).

**Commentary**: Dating from 312-330 CE, after Constantine’s victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge near Rome, which saw him go on to become sole ruler of the empire, the Colossus has attracted a lot of attention over the years and been the source of much discussion. The statue was discovered in pieces in 1486, in the ruins of the great basilica northeast of the Roman Forum. The marble indicates that it was reworked, as Parian marble was not imported to Rome beyond the Hadrianic era (see Linda Safran, “What Constantine Saw,” p. 43 n. 2). The colossus appears to have been carved from an existing statue, possibly of Hadrian (see Cécile Evers, “Remarques sur l'iconographie de Constantin,” p. 794). What is relevant for our discussion, is the debate as to what the remains of the statue might tell us about the relationship between Constantine’s apparent Christianity and his role as Roman emperor. For some scholars, as we shall see, the colossus is particularly revealing in this regard, especially when considered in conjunction with the words of Constantine’s contemporary, the church historian Eusebius. However, others are more cautious about drawing such conclusions, and prefer to understand the statue’s features as more in line with earlier Roman and Hellenistic tradition.

As Jai? Elsner explains, the colossus differs from earlier representations of emperors in that Constantine is not depicted with a beard, despite earlier portraits of the emperor where he does indeed have one (e.g. coins struck in 306 and 307 CE after his proclamation as his father’s successor). For instance, in the group sculpture of the Tetrarchs, dating from the turn of the fourth century, only the young caesars are clean shaven (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venice_%E2%80%93_The_Tetrarchs_03.jpg [11]). In the second and early-third centuries, flowing beards came to represent the notion of the ‘philosopher emperor,’ for instance in portraits of Marcus Aurelius and Caracalla, then changing to show shorter, more military style facial hair on ‘soldier emperors.’ Elsner argues, therefore, that the presentation of Constantine here intends to portray him as “the archetypal Roman general of the distant imperial past, a new Augustus, a new Trajan”; indeed, the famous arch of Constantine also presents him as a new Trajan (*Imperial Rome*, p. 61).

The large, otherworldly eyes of the colossus have been the subject of much discussion, with many seeing them as intended to represent the emperor’s spirituality and connection to God. The same heavenward gaze is also found on coins minted after the defeat of Licinius in 324 CE (see, for example, *Solidus depicting the head of Constantine celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of his rule, 335 CE* [12]). For Bardill, the statue was likely recut from a previous colossus after 312 CE, when Constantine defeated Maxentius, and then restyled again after the defeat of Licinius to feature the deep, ethereal eyes that it now has (*Constantine*, p. 204). However, this upward gaze characteristic of the emperor’s portraiture, which Eusebius claims showed him with his eyes heavenward, often accompanied by his hands stretched out in prayer (*Life of Constantine* IV.15), was already well established in the pagan world. For instance, Lysippus’s statue of Alexander the Great was reportedly designed like this, and there are many other examples (Bardill, *Constantine*, p. 19). It cannot be argued with any certainty, then, that Constantine intended his expression on the colossus to show his reverence for, or affiliation with, the Christian God specifically. Linda Safran has argued that the colossus declared Constantine’s divinity by mimicking the temple images of Jupiter and Zeus. Safran looks to late-Roman understandings of the eye as an active organ, which shaped the objects it beheld and had the power to transform them (e.g. Plotinus, *Enneads* I.2.4; “What Constantine Saw,” p. 46-47).

Moreover, as Bardill argues, the upward gaze was also adopted in late antiquity for philosophers, who were understood to be possessing of divine qualities. He points to the Neo-Platonist Proclus, for instance, who is described by his biographer Marinus of Samaria as having radiant eyes, and a countenance “resplendent with a divine light” (*The Life of Proclus* XXIII). It is likely that Constantine’s expression on the colossus was understood within this framework, in which the emperor was filled with divine power. Moreover, in words attributed to
Constantine himself (although some have questioned their authenticity over the years), “the only power in man which can be elevated to a comparison with that of God, is sincere and guileless service and devotion of heart to himself, with the contemplation and study of whatever pleases him, the raising our affections above the things of earth, and directing our thoughts, as far as we may, to high and heavenly objects: for from such endeavours, it is said, a victory accrues to us more valuable than many blessings” (Oration to the Assembly of the Saints XIV) (see Bardill, Constantine, p. 22-23). Possibly, then, the image of Constantine reinterprets a classic Hellenistic pose in Christian terms, or perhaps more likely, it is intended to be ambiguous, portraying the emperor’s divine inspiration, but leaving the question of which God, or gods, this came from for the viewer to decide (Bardill, Constantine, p. 24).

Further arguments for the colossus’s potential connection to the relationship between Constantine and the Christian deity have been inspired by what are commonly believed to be references to the statue in the writings of Eusebius. In his panegyrical Life of Constantine I.28 [13]. Eusebius describes how prior to the battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine received a vision from God: “He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, bearing the inscription, conquer/prevail (??????, nika?) by this. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.” His victory over Maxentius therefore proved that God supported him, and Eusebius tells us that this partnership between the Christian God and the Roman emperor was subsequently proclaimed far and wide by Constantine both through inscriptions, and through the setting up of this “trophy of victory” prominently in Rome, so that all would know the true source of protection of the Roman government and the wider empire (I.40). Eusebius claims that the emperor “ordered a lofty spear in the figure of a cross to be placed beneath the hand of a statue representing himself, in the most frequented part of Rome, and the following inscription to be engraved on it in the Latin language: “Through this sign (???????, s?meion) of salvation, which is the true symbol of goodness, I rescued your city and freed it from the tyrant’s yoke, and through my act of liberation I restored the senate and people of Rome to their ancient renown and splendor.”

A common interpretation has therefore been that since the colossus was remodelled into Constantine’s likeness after the victory over Maxentius, that this is the statue which Eusebius refers to. Indeed, as Bardill observes, the fact that the statue seems to have once held something supports this theory. Moreover, Eusebius argues that when Constantine entered Rome after his victory, the people and senate of Rome hailed him as a saviour (?????, s?ti?) and benefactor (?????????, euerget?) (I.39). However, the emperor, knowing that his help had come from God, did not indulge in these acclamations, but rather at once ordered a trophy of Christ’s passion to be set up in the hand of a statue of himself. This was likely the military standard that Constantine carried into battle, which combined with the inscription added below made clear the emperor’s debt to and connection with the divine. In the Life of Constantine I.30-31 Eusebius describes how after his vision of Christ prior to the battle with Maxentius, he instructed a standard to be made which was gilded with gold and jewels, and bore Christ’s initials, the Greek letters Chi and Rho. Eusebius tells us that a long spear with a horizontal bar laid across it gave the standard the appearance of Christ’s cross, and the emperor ordered similar standards to be carried at the head of his armies as a symbol of their divine protection. The placing of the trophy in the hand of Constantine’s statue is also described in the Ecclesiastical History IX.9.10, and Eusebius in both instances seems to make clear that it is an existing statue which the trophy is added to. It is possible, therefore, that a statue of a previous emperor was remodelled after the victory in 312 CE to represent Constantine (Constantine, p. 206-207).

For our purposes, the statue and the debate surrounding it is particularly significant for what it might reveal about the changing attitude towards the compatibility not only between Christianity and Roman rule more generally, but particularly Christianity and the Roman army. Earlier Christian writers had struggled to accept the idea of Christians within Rome’s military ranks, seeing the two as fundamentally opposed. For instance, the second century author Tertullian in his On Idolatry XIX [14] objects to Christians in the Roman army on the grounds that military service necessarily involved idolatry, such as the swearing of an oath of allegiance to the emperor, and in some roles the performing of sacrifices (see also Tertullian, On the Military Garland I.1-4 [15]; On the Military Garland XI.1-4 [16]: Tertullian is not opposed to the Roman army and its role in the empire’s expansion per se, as is made clear elsewhere in his writings where he asserts Christianity’s support for and prayers for the emperor and his army). It is also interesting to note in connection with Eusebius’s claims that Constantine’s statue was furnished with a “trophy” of the cross, that Justin Martyr in his First Apology LV.4-8 [17] viewed Roman vexilla and trophies as unwittingly representing Christ’s cross due to their T-Bar shape. For Justin, the fact that the symbolism of the cross permeates Roman displays of power and dominion without them even realising it shows that through Roman power, God’s greater plan is at work, regardless of whether the Romans acknowledge Him or not.

From what we can deduce from Eusebius—and it must of course always be borne in mind that his portrayal of the
emperor as the archetypal Christian ruler is highly stylised—the relationship between the emperor, the Roman army, and the Christian deity had evolved since Tertullian and Justin Martyr’s day. Rather than being something present in the background, using the Roman military to work towards a greater purpose, yet not properly acknowledged, the support of the Christian God was now visible, accepted, and promoted. The discussion above shows that the artistic portrayal of Constantine still retained features linking the emperor to Rome’s past and established pagan imagery, such as his image as a new Augustus, and his Hellenistic style heavenward gaze. If we consider for a moment non-Christians, including Jews, who saw this statue, with the exception of the sign of the cross (if it was indeed added to the colossus), the style would likely not have appeared much different from previous statues of pagan emperors. These roots to the past remained in a very visible and prominent way, therefore, even if the Roman power and that of the Supreme Deity were now acknowledged by the head of the empire as working towards a common cause. In the colossus, especially if it can indeed be connected with Eusebius’s narrative, the classic Augustan imagery of a divinely chosen leader liberating the Roman people and taking the empire forward into a new golden age is drawn upon and adapted, reimagined to include a pious emperor who recognised that true strength was found in the God of the Christians. However, the colossus was ultimately a visual piece of propaganda, and so Eusebius’s account, while illuminating to us now, must be taken with caution. For those who looked upon this great statue, Constantine’s depiction would not have struck them as drastically departing from Roman tradition.

Thematic keywords:

- colossus [18]
- statue [19]
- Constantine [20]
- Augustus [21]
- Roman emperor [22]
- Roman people [23]
- senate [24]
- Rome (city) [25]
- tyranny [26]
- Roman power [27]
- freedom [28]
- Basilica of Maxentius [29]
- Roman forum [30]
- kingship [31]
- Greek philosophy [32]
- Roman army [33]
- Christian emperor [34]
- Milvian Bridge [35]
- Christianisation of the empire [36]

Bibliographical references:  
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Safran, Linda, *“What Constantine Saw: Reflections on the Capitoline Colossus, Visuality, and Early Christian
Solidus depicting the head of Constantine celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of his rule (335 CE) [44]

- Read more about Solidus depicting the head of Constantine celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of his rule (335 CE) [44]

Text

Tertullian, On Idolatry XIX [45]

Christians and military service

- Read more about Tertullian, On Idolatry XIX [45]

Text

Tertullian, On the Military Garland I.1-4 [46]

A Christian soldier is imprisoned because he refuses to wear the laurel crown

- Read more about Tertullian, On the Military Garland I.1-4 [46]

Text

Tertullian, On the Military Garland XI.1-4 [47]

The contradiction between Roman military service and God's laws

- Read more about Tertullian, On the Military Garland XI.1-4 [47]

Text

Justin Martyr, First Apology LV.4-8 [48]

The hidden symbolism in Rome's displays of power
Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine I.26, 28-29* [49]

Constantine’s vision of Christ prior to the battle at the Milvian Bridge

Read more about Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine I.26, 28-29* [49]

Realized by:

Kimberley Fowler [50]

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[10] https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo1.ark:/13960/t6m04pr8j;view=1up;seq=378