
For more than a decade academic readers have benefited from an English translation of, with expansive and detailed commentary on, the *Vita Constantini*: Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and S.G. Hall (Oxford, 1999). Dutch readers now have an excellent translation by Pieter Willem van der Horst, with notes and an introduction by Jan Willem Drijvers. This attractive and inexpensive book replaces an inaccessible translation by the nineteenth-century Flemish classicist Jeroom Muylle, offering a balance between faithfulness to the Greek text and readability. The existence of the Cameron and Hall commentary obviates any need here to offer any more than cursory footnotes and a basic bibliography, which even now can be updated to include new biographical studies, many published to mark several 1700th anniversaries (Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Edict of Milan, etc.).

In his introduction, Drijvers does not agree with Cameron and Hall (p. 46), that the *VC* is “the single most important source for the reign of Constantine,” emphasising that it is simply “one of the most important sources” for historians. Indeed, one cannot rely on Eusebius for historical ‘facts,’ any more than one can rely on the rhetorical material preserved in the invaluable *Panegyrici Latini* or the terse *Origo Constantini*. As Drijvers notes, the *VC* has had a chequered history in both medieval and modern contexts. It was not translated into Latin before the seventeenth century, and failed to find favour with either Byzantine Greek or enlightened early modern readers. The former found its presentation of Constantine neither Christian nor miraculous enough, and proceeded to write at least 25 additional *encomia* and *Vitae* bearing little or no relation to the first life. Indeed, the *VC* appears to have been not much read after the fifth century, until Photius read it in the ninth. His judgement was not kind, and he found the style to be wanting (as it is), and that it included many passages from Eusebius’s own *Ecclesiastical History* (*HE*, which it does). He criticized its author, whom he did not doubt was Eusebius, for his position on Arius and Arianism. It may be that this was the issue which led to the neglect of the *VC* for so long. The earliest surviving manuscript of the text, Vat gr. 149, dates from the tenth century, significantly post-dating Photius’s copy.

Modern scholars have been equally critical of the *VC*. Its veracity and authenticity have both been questioned, as has the authorship of Eusebius. Recent studies, however, demonstrate convincingly that it was written by Eusebius, and provide a proper framework for understanding the work. The authors of this new book
are in no doubt that Eusebius was its author, as is clear even from the title of their work, and they are correct. Indeed, the structure of the VC suggests that Eusebius composed it in several stages, and for distinct reasons, modifying earlier content in the process. One hypothesis holds that the work was originally conceived as a continuation to Eusebius’s HE, which ended in 324. Therefore, Eusebius began collecting documents for a narrative shortly after Constantine’s victory over Licinius at the battle of Chrysopolis (September 324). Fifteen of these are incorporated into the text, starting at II.24, in a manner similar to that in the HE. However, events and encounters encouraged the author to modify his work, and rework the earlier section (the whole of book I, and II.1–19) into a laudatory apologia for Constantine’s rise to sole power, which can usefully be contrasted with book X of the HE. Eusebius met the emperor for the first time in person at the Council of Nicaea (325), and subsequently delivered speeches to the emperor in 335 (in praise of the construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre), and 335–336 (for Constantine’s tricennalia, or 30-year celebrations). Eusebius announced his intention of attaching these speeches to the VC, and similar subject matter is covered in the body of the text. The final stage of composition and revision was highly political, occurring as Constantine’s heirs seemed poised to destroy his legacy. This took place after 9th September 337 (following the dynastic murders of that summer), for Constantine’s three sons are called Augusti in the VC’s introduction and conclusion, and before Eusebius’s own death in May 339.

Eusebius states that his purpose in composing the VC was didactic, and his insights are guaranteed by his claim to special knowledge through his personal contacts with the emperor. Historical detail had a role to play in his work, but it was far from paramount. Eusebius’s portrayal of Constantine in the VC, therefore, may not be considered historically accurate, as Drijvers notes. Rather, the VC presents a distinctive vision of Constantine, drawing on various literary forms, especially imperial panegyric, and inventing aspects which were to become common in hagiography. Drijvers notes that the text reflects a combination of several distinct genres. The exact balance of these genres cannot easily be fathomed, nor is it particularly useful to attempt to do so. Eusebius was, above all, a biblical scholar and Christian apologist, but this should not lead us to follow the judgement of Jakob Burckhardt, that Eusebius was “the most objectionable of all eulogists who has utterly falsified his [i.e. Constantine’s] image.” It should, instead, challenge us to learn better how to read the text, and thereby approach the historical Constantine by different routes: by observing how the emperor came to view himself and his achievements, insofar as he explained them to Eusebius; and noting how the emperor and his leadership was viewed by those in the Church, as represented by Eusebius. This excellent