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IOANNIS SPATHARAKIS

**Byzantine Portraits, Volume One: Late Roman Portraits to the Fall of Rome
Constantine I to Romulus Augustulus (306-486)**

With a contribution by

CHARALAMBOS BAKIRTZIS AND PELLI MASTORA

Mosaic Portraits in the Mausoleum of Constantine in the Rotunda of Thessaloniki

Spatharakis, in examining the Late Roman portraits, draws attention, examines and reaches different conclusions than his colleagues for several subjects: The adventus scene on the reverse of the Ticinum golden medallion of 313 AD, the obverse of which shows Constantine in bust form jugate with Apollo-Sol, suggests a triumphal entry after his victory on the Milvian Bridge made by a pagan and not by a Christian emperor.

Constantine's Arch of 315 is a purely pagan monument, attested as such by its decoration which includes pagan traditional ceremonies and the presence of deities, such as Apollo, Diana, Hercules, Silvanus, Dea Roma, Virtus, Victories, Sol, Luna and personifications of Rivers and Seasons. The decoration of the Arch also proves that the victory on the Milvian Bridge was not a Christian but a pagan one. Constantine learned only later, after the construction of the Arch, what meant the signs he dreamed of or saw. Christians like Lactantius, Nazarius and Eusebius informed him that these signs were Christian ones.

Several scholars asserted that Nazarius used the Arch of Constantine to write, e.g., "*Leaders in chains were not driven before the chariot, but the nobility marched along, freed at last*". On the contrary, the clearly visible scenes on the pedestals in the lowest part of the Arch, at eye level, which augment the scenes of the triumphal entry of Constantine on the Frieze, are full of captives '*in chains*'. The Adventus scene on the Constantinian Frieze shows only soldiers marching along, while the nobility mentioned by Nazarius is totally missing. These observations imply that he did not use the Arch to write his panegyric.

The reverse of the Ticinum Silver Medallion simply shows Constantine addressing his cavalry (Fig. 86). The Christogram on his helmet on the obverse specifies that a Christian emperor issued the silver medallion for his Christian cavalry officers, who defeated the persecutor of the Christians, i.e. Licinius. The battles in consideration are those of Adrianople and Chrysopolis in 324.

Ancient sources lead to the conclusion that the colossal gilded bronze statue in Constantinople represented Constantine as Apollo-Sol. Thus, even in Constantinople Constantine presented himself not as a reverted Christian, at least as we understand it now; he added a new god to his Pantheon.

Bakirtzis and Mastora date the construction of the Rotunda of Thessaloniki by Constantine I as a victory monument and mausoleum in 316/317-324/325 AD. It was, however, soon converted to Christian church. The Constantinian decoration of the Rotunda was especially luxurious with marble revetment and mosaics. The light entering it played on their surfaces and created phantasmagorical patterns of reflections and visual feasts.

The scenes in the first zone of mosaics of the dome represent luxurious, ornate buildings and a gathering of worshipping men belonging to the Constantinian elite. The almost entirely removed middle zone depicted ca. 36 men forming a circular dance of praise. In the third zone, haloed Archangels/Nikes with open wings touch a medallion of iridescent light woven from branches of fruit trees, a symbol of prosperity, wealth, and longevity. Between the archangels, on the east, the mythical phoenix is preserved.

In the medallion at the top of the dome of the Rotunda, the now-destroyed figure of haloed Constantine as Sol Invictus raised his right arm and held the rod of authority indicating the omnipotence of the Word. This composition is an iconographic doxology to the dominance of Constantine and a testament of praise to the restoration of the Roman Empire. The masterful mosaics in the Rotunda co-exist with the beauty of ancient art and the sublime spirituality of the Byzantine art.

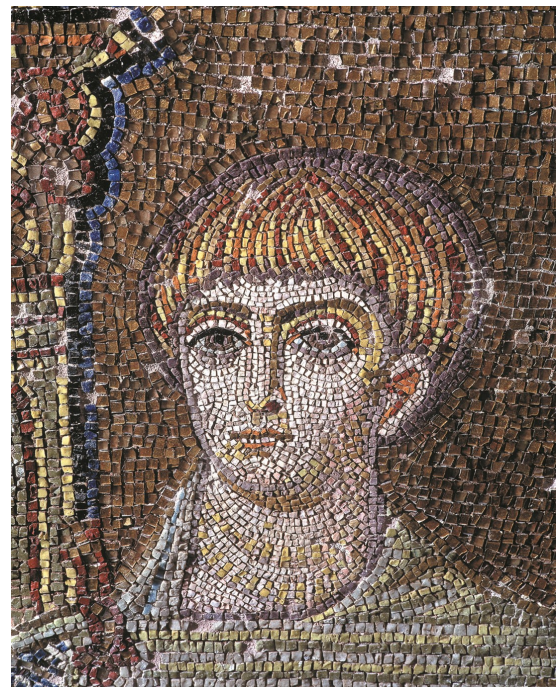
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Theodosius I, Valentinian II and Arcadius. Missorium of Theodosius, detail, 388 AD, Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid.



Priskos, Mausoleum of Constantine in the Rotunda of Thessaloniki, 316/317-324/325