Lactantius as Architect of a Constantinian and Christian “Victory over the Empire”

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The historic events leading to the accession of Constantine irrevocably rely on a crucial but obscure rhetorician who taught in Nicomedia. It was a contemporary voice from North Africa that entered this eastern city into the court and life of the emperor, a voice of erudition and of suffering. The writings of Lactantius offer both a philosophical and historical report on the pursuits of the Roman leader who came to champion Christianity in an empire that resisted the new religion. In particular, his writings shaped Constantine’s understanding of the faith and influenced the later religious policies that he would enact. Scholars have established Lactantius as a contributor to the genius of a new religious empire and an inescapable historical voice of that evolution, but they are only beginning to scrutinize his exact influence. This chapter seeks to identify and disaggregate the contribution of Lactantius in his fourth-century influence and in his twenty-first-century legacy.

In particular, it depicts this influential turn-of-the-fourth-century philosopher using a paradigm of architectural narrative. This is the notion that a historian writes in a way with intentional design, employing a
metanarrative that creates not the events but the blueprint of those events—the frame for understanding, the interpretation, the significance, the divine providence of the events, or, to use the language of historical interpretation of Earle Cairns, “history as the product of inquiry.” Yet, for Lactantius, this is not *vaticinium ex eventu* or a theological spin on events crafted by the victors, but he was himself the champion for a cause of religious freedom that he was able to affect and witness fulfilled in his lifetime. In this way, a historian like Lactantius can be seen as a “narrative architect.” He designed a modified empire based on religious idealism but also records the impulses of the era in a way that history will forever view the development of this new empire. This essay, with an architectural theme, will consider his role as designer, as builder, and as narrator. After dealing with his role in the paradigmatic imperial shift, it will summarize his place in the edifice that we call history.

**Lactantius the Philosophical Architect**

Biographically, Lactantius was a rhetorician from North Africa called to Nicomedia to teach rhetoric there about the year 303. Jerome reports that he experienced the dream of many a professor there, that “on account of lack of students he betook himself to writing.” In his final years, he moved to Trier to tutor Crispus Caesar, son of the emperor, and participated in the imperial court there. This proximity to Constantine himself makes Lactantius’ influence hardly surprising. Lactantius composed his *Divinae institutiones* (*Divine Institutes*) sometime between 303 and 313, at roughly the same time that he made his way from Nicomedia, where he was no longer welcome because of his reputation of writing against imperial religious policy, particularly that of Diocletian and the philosophical guild that defended it.

The contemporary history of imperial persecution against the church of the day is the indubitable context in which Lactantius’ *pathos* must be interpreted. Under Gallienus (253–268), Christianity had been tolerated; yet Diocletian (284–305) and his maximus Galerius razed churches, burned Scriptures, and executed church leaders. According to Lactantius, an oracle of Apollo in 303 identified Christians as “enemies” of the state proved to be a typical, influential oracle to Diocletian that led him to issue notorious

2. Jerome, *Vir. ill. 80*. This chapter uses the translation from *NPNF* 2:3.
edicts against Christians.3 This situation made the rhetorician/writer take up his craft to engage the empire that he saw as unjustly persecuting the church.

**Lactantius the Designer**

We see his design for an empire that would be sympathetic to the Christian faith in two ways—an apologetic and a politically constructive approach, both of which are philosophical in nature.

**Apologetic Design**

The ideological foundation of a new empire characterized by religious freedom required a battle for the ideological landscape to establish the validity of building a religious-friendly empire. Here, the classical Lactantius is at home in his apologetic writings.

First, Lactantius carefully employed Greco-Roman values to justify the success of the new emperor and to promote the cause of the faith in the imperial political shift at work. His powerful rhetorical skills are his most commonly recognized attribute, immediately respectable to his Roman audience. His *Divinae institutiones* is an opus that marshals the classical tradition of literary and philosophical figures to show their principled support of Christianity. He posits that the Emperor Constantine is like the best thinkers of the Greek tradition: “We may be able to instruct the minds of men to the worship of the true majesty. For they, the [Greek] philosophers, were considered teachers of right living . . . We now commence this work under the auspices of your name, O mighty Emperor Constantine, who were the first of the Roman princes to repudiate errors, and to acknowledge and honor the majesty of the one and only true God.”4 Likewise, Christianity embodies the best virtues of the Greek tradition. “This road, which is a path of truth and wisdom and virtue and justice is the one source, the one force, the one seat of all these things. It is a single road by which we follow . . . and worship God; it is a narrow path—since virtue is given to rather

3. Lactantius, *MP*, 11; Digeser, “Lactantius, Eusebius, and Arnobius,” 36. *De Mortibus persecutorum* was written ca. 318, and this chapter uses the translation from *ANF* 7.

4. Lactantius, *DI*, preface and 1. The *Divinae institutiones* was written between 303-313, and this chapter uses the translation from *ANF* 7.
few.” Karl Baus comments on his rhetorical power and its influence: “In Lactantius there is a found a Christian writing in Latin whose regard for the greatness of the past of Rome made possible a more favorable estimate of its literary achievements.”

Secondly, he presented Constantine as a *pater familias* with cultural household principles governing an entire empire. For example, his work *De Ira Dei* (*On the Wrath of God*) displays anger as an application of punishment and evenhandedness that would apply to any respectable head of a household and that similarly characterized the Emperor Constantine. The theological foundation of this quality lies in scripture’s testimony of God himself. In more subtle terms, his work *De Opificio Dei* (*The Workmanship of God*) depicts how anthropology finds its origin and its potential for great accomplishment not in the natural human rationale or in the inspiration of the Greco-Roman pantheon, but in the Christian God. The work has been described this way: “It analyzes the physical equipment of man and shows how the perfect adaptation of the parts of the body to their ends can be due to none other than the Divine Artificer.”

Thirdly, his essays and histories are defensive of both the emperor and the success of Christianity that targeted the negative liabilities of the culture as causes of its own demise. His writing *De Mortibus persecutorum* (*On the Manner in which the Persecutors Died*) chronicles the terminal violent sufferings of prior emperors who had persecuted Christianity. Eloquent journalism, promotion of vindicated martyrs, and prosecution of past imperial policies collaborate for a case of divine providential conquest through the agency of Constantine. For example, describing the pattern of destruction following emperors who persecuted the church, he writes: “Thus did God subdue all those who persecuted His name, so that neither root nor branch of them remained . . . So, by the unerring and just judgment of God, all the impious received according to the deeds that they had done.” Frend describes how Lactantius saw the decline of the Greco-Roman culture,

5. Ibid. 6.7–8.
8. Introduction to *OD* in *FC* 54, 3.
9. For a discussion of the events surrounding the writing that lead to the contemporary dating of the work, see Barnes, “Lactantius and Constantine,” 29–46.
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particularly the religious component: “He wrote as one who was disillusioned with the injustices of the time and the vanished vision of the Golden Age. The work of assimilation and absorption which he was performing in literature resembles what the unknown painters in the catacomb on the Via Latina were attempting in art.”

Likewise, he offers a positive review of all powers favoring the cause of the faith, tying their constructive influence into the popular values of Roman culture. In its most obvious expression of divine handiwork, the inauguration of the Constantinian era followed the divine judgment of imperial leadership. Lactantius writes, “All the adversaries are destroyed, and tranquility having been re-established throughout the Roman Empire, the late oppressed church rises again.”

Generations of imperial rejection of the faith paradoxically led to a united Roman Empire ruled solely by the champion of that same persecuted faith. Such indicators should indeed be an omen to the Roman Empire at the turn of the fourth century. On the other side of the same coin, Lactantius promoted an optimistic belief that divine providence would lead human history to reward principles of righteousness and justice while counterbalancing pagan and impious values. In this reasoning, he foreshadows the case of Augustine in *City of God*.

Political Design

Confronted with what he considered a biased and ineffective case for persecution of the church in the name of this piety, Lactantius in *Divinae institutiones* sought to challenge the rationale of an exclusive restoration of Greco-Roman worship. In the spirit of Justin, he argued for an illumination that lent itself to philosophical monotheism yet also advanced the cause into the political arena. Elizabeth DePalma Digeser writes, “Lactantius accorded the classical tradition and those who treasured it respect beyond that of any previous Christian author.”

The very form and manner of his writing could garner the respect of a Greco-Roman reader, citing Roman philosophers and employing allusion to Greek ideals. His writing style and

11. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 451; cf. DI 5.6 on the collapse of a Golden Age of justice. The catacomb art of the *Via Latina* outside Rome included Christian images that were iconic expressions of belief in an era inimical to Christian belief, at times similar the era of Lactantius.


classical knowledge has long impressed Latin scholars, earning him the historic title of *Cicero Christianus* (“Christian Cicero”).

More importantly, his writings unmistakably call for a monotheistic state and the legitimacy of Christianity. Robert Wilken insists, “He is the first thinker in western culture to defend freedom of religion on religious grounds. Religion must be voluntary, he wrote.”¹⁴ Lactantius seemed content with a broader scope of religion inclusion: “His efforts to articulate a broadly based Christian theology that was compatible with the beliefs and practices of late Roman philosophical monotheism are important.”¹⁵

Diggeser identified three qualities foundational to Lactantius’ appeal: forbearance without force, free will in the realm of religion, and a policy of concord—not tolerance.¹⁶ These values should be practiced by both Diocletian’s Rome and then by a Christian Rome. Like a natural selection of ideals, such permission would eventually lead to the dissolution of ancient paganism and the triumph of the Christian faith.¹⁷ An underlying premise for this rhetorician and tutor, Diggeser says, is that “education was the tool that would craft a change in policy.”¹⁸ It is noteworthy that sometimes this cause came at the expense of the revived Roman nostalgia for her own classical heroes while permitting the highest values of the culture to continue.

**Lactantius the Builder**

The philosopher from North Africa influenced directly and indirectly the mind and heart of Constantine. Indirectly, the above writings persuaded readers, philosophers, and politicians to weigh Christianity, especially compared and contrasted with Greco-Roman ideals, that helped to shift the empire towards greater religious latitude. Constantine saw the effects of this momentum, although we cannot quantify the exact influence of Lactantius on the pagan philosophical guild or on the popular culture. Yet, for validity

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14. Wilken, *Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 297. Wilken (“In Defense of Constantine,” 37) adds that Lactantius provides “the first theological rationale for religious freedom, because it is the first rationale to be rooted in the nature of God and of devotion to God.”


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for any cause to be established, it would have to build a philosophical and rhetorical case in the culture of the day.

More directly and interpersonally, Lactantius was personal tutor to the emperor’s son and held a presence at the imperial court in Trier. We have no evidence of their personal relationship, yet scholars easily suppose one. In the seminal work on the place of Lactantius in the life of Constantine, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome*, Digeser sets out to evidence the exact influence that this seasoned philosopher had on the person and policies of Constantine as he began to implement imperial laws in favor of a free Christianity.¹⁹ Their shared religious concerns to protect the church, their exposure to one another at court in Trier, the authorship of the *Divinae institutiones*, and their shared value not to aggressively harass those practicing traditional religion seem to reflect a genuine personal affinity. She argues that Lactantius’ views contributed to Constantine’s own understanding of religious tolerance as early as 310.²⁰ Digeser asserts that by 324, “the Lactantian motifs come thick and fast” and that “Constantine incorporated all the major elements of Lactantius’ notion of concord into the edicts and speeches” that year, although not with the same forbearance to traditional cults.²¹ Some scholars claim that Lactantius regularly read the *Divinae institutiones* to Constantine.²²

This leads to the greatest question of all: the exact influence of Lactantius on Constantine. Here, Digeser excels, as her interest in history focuses on the broadly inclusive new Christian order that Constantine would champion, rather than the theological examination that has been

¹⁹. As a matter of approach, Digeser claims that the historical view of the overlooked Lactantius neglects several important influences, and she claims in fact that the *DI* has not been interpreted as a scholarly source. Ibid., ix.


more common.\textsuperscript{23} The writings of Lactantius and his presence as a premier Christian philosopher exerted an influence on the emperor's life that cannot be denied. His writings take on an apologetic flair that is usually covert, comparing the value of the ancient Romans to the case for Christian thought for the fourth-century state. He sets up two clearly dichotomous and competing models that were used by opposing emperors to unify an empire to their advantage, and makes judgment about the inferiority of traditional Roman piety. Lactantius writes, “For the worship of God being taken away, men lost the knowledge of good and evil. Thus the common intercourse of life perished from among men, and the bond of human society was destroyed.”\textsuperscript{24} The coming of Christ brought back “justice which had been put to flight, that the human race might not be agitated by very great and perpetual errors. Therefore the appearance of that golden time returned, and justice was restored to the earth, but was assigned to a few.”\textsuperscript{25}

Maijastina Kahlos explains that Lactantius promoted the virtue of \textit{patientia} against pagan opponents. Christians should exercise patience towards the impious as God does, then expect God to meet them “quickly” (\textit{celeriter}) at final judgment.\textsuperscript{26} This is the justification of the imperial suffering in \textit{De Mortibus}—time will reveal the power of God, as it always has, not the intolerant persecution of a new way of imperial Christianity.\textsuperscript{27} Kahlos contrasts this method to that of Firmicus Maternus, Eusebius, and Athanasius who employed a stronger “rhetoric of intolerance and policy of coercion.”\textsuperscript{28} These are just some of the influential ideas promoted by Lactantius to the culture and person of Constantine.

\textsuperscript{23} Shelton, review Digeser, 166. \\
\textsuperscript{24} Lactantius, \textit{DI} 5.5. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. Bowlin (“Tolerance among the Fathers,” 25) describes the intentions of Lactantius’s case: “Christian’s wisdom and worship can restore Rome to the piety and equity of the golden age that Cicero describes and the absence of which the poets lament. Their monotheism can return Rome to the virtues of the Principate, with its uncluttered calculus of one God and one emperor. Above all, Christians can carry the educated elite along this path, an elite whose own commitments place them just a short step away from this salvific restoration.”

\textsuperscript{26} Kahlos, “The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance,” 86. \\
\textsuperscript{27} For a thorough reflection on the effects of compulsion of religion in the early church, see Bowlin, “Tolerance among the Fathers,” 3–36. For a historical and linguistic treatment of compulsion of religion in this regime, see Kahlos, “The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance,” 79–95. \\
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 94.
Finally, this ever-important figure Lactantius provides one of the key biographical episodes of the events of the empire at the beginning of the fourth century. In this way, he not only influences his own era, but through writing influences every era to follow as one of the few voices to testify to these events as Christianity’s victory over the empire. For example, concerning the vision at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Lactantius declares, “The hand of the Lord prevailed, and the forces of Maxentius were routed.” Likewise, against Licinius and his army, “The Supreme God did so place their necks under the sword of their foes, that they seemed to have entered the field, not as combatants, but as men devoted to death.”

Unlike the historian Eusebius who witnessed and recorded the reign and legacy of Constantine after his success, Lactantius saw and wrote about the emperor’s rise to power before its final solidification. His subject for analysis was a nascent series of religious and military gains, an experiment in imperial Christianity of which he had not yet seen permanent success. His sympathy for the cause was no less, however, and like Eusebius, his writings must be filtered for this bias. Thus, Lactantius inevitably invades any historical judgment of “the first Christian emperor” in a way that will always deserve recognition and scrutiny. The establishment of his influence is thus uncomplicated while his exact influence remains mysterious.

The title of this chapter gets its name from the most obvious fingerprint of Lactantius: that Christianity overcame an empire inimical to the faith. R. G. Collingwood describes how Christian historical narratives have four key elements, including the notion of an “apocalyptic” dimension to their history. He writes, “A history is divided into two periods, a period of darkness and a period of light” because of a distinguishing, qualitative event between the periods. This is typical of the conditions of Lactantius’ writing about Constantine. Yet, the language of “victory over the empire” is underused by history but best depicts the paradigm shift. Lactantius uses it comfortably in De Mortibus to describe such things as the legacy of Diocletian and Maximian, enemies of the church: “The Lord has blotted them out and erased them from the earth. Let us therefore with exultation celebrate the triumphs of God, and oftentimes with praises make mention of His

29. Lactantius, MP 44.
30. Ibid., 47.
victory.”

Opening the essay, he declares, “The late oppressed church rises again.” Philip Schaff recognizes this feature in Lactantius, as he describes the self-destruction of the inimical past emperors in the work: “This treatise is, in fact, a most precious relic of antiquity, and a striking narrative of the events which led to the ‘conversion of the Empire,’ so called.” Colot has argued that this work was a first history of its kind, depicting the powerful culture change that had been developing for generations. However, he says it was quickly displaced in its narrative style with Eusebius’ “canonical history” form expected of today’s readers. Nonetheless, its use of triumphal language came to characterize the empire. The work has been described elsewhere, “In its burning accents, we find a passionate outcry, the chant of Christian victory, the bursting of flood gates previously held in restraint through long years of oppression.”

In the end, our inability to secure his exact historical narrative of influence is probably limited by our understanding of Constantine himself. This is what makes works like Digeser’s so important in the present, as scholars will continue to probe the mind of a Christian emperor who showed persecution against pagan religious practice in the military, on one hand, while allowing traditional imperial cult principles to apply to himself. He claims a Christian conversion and clearly advanced the church’s cause, but he also syncretized the new faith with the old Roman traditions seemingly to his political advantage. The emperor’s ambiguous religious position makes our identification of Lactantius’ influence that much more elusive.

32. Lactantius, MP 52.
33. Ibid., 1.
34. See Schaff’s note in Lactantius, MP 1 (ANF 7:301n1).
36. Ibid., 136; Lactantius, MP 52. Eusebius (HE 10.8.19–9.1, 10.9.8) reports: “God led forth Constantine in the dense and impenetrable darkness of a gloomy night, caused a light and a deliverer to arise to all. To him, therefore, the supreme God granted from heaven above the fruits of his piety, and the trophies of victory over the wicked . . . Edicts were published and issued by the victorious emperor, full of clemency, and laws were enacted indicative of munificence and genuine religion.” This chapter uses the NPNF translation.
37. Introduction to Lactantius, MP.
38. Glen Thompson’s chapter has certainly raised the issue of the seemingly duplicitous behavior of Constantine as Christian emperor.
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CONCLUSION

With attention given to Constantine these anniversary years, Lactantius will be a crucial figure in the literature and in scholarly dialogue. Lactantius’ work should be considered inspirational and foundational to understanding the enigmatic first Christian emperor in the decade ahead. With respect to the larger enterprise of this book, Lactantius is an inevitable source for any effort to rethink Constantine. Inspiration came to the emperor from the writings and relationship of the apologist philosopher. His articulation and architectural design of religious freedom and the Christian cause seemed to win the respect of some, the ire of others, and the heart of an emperor seeking to make sense of his own faith experience and a growing Christian community changing the makeup the Roman Empire.