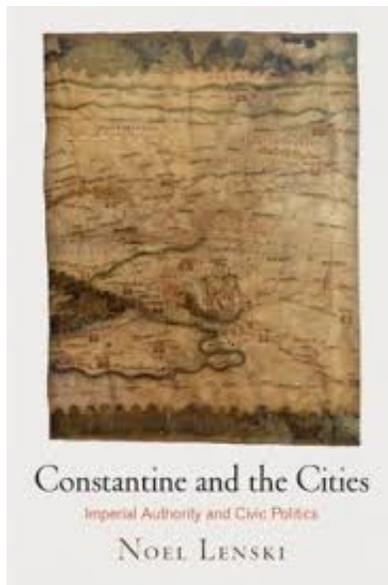


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Book Note | Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics

by Mark Letteney in Book Notes

Noel Lenski. *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.



Few historical figures have so commanded the interest of historians as Constantine, Rome's first Christian emperor. Hardly a year goes by without the publication of a major work of learned erudition, rearranging the familiar evidence into a new mosaic portrait of the enigmatic leader. Noel Lenski's *Constantine and the Cities* presents a new portrait of Constantine that, by definition, resists simple or singular description.

This is a remarkable book. It is remarkable not in its revolutionary new assessment of who Constantine was – in fact, Lenski scrupulously avoids anything that might be cast as a depiction of an essential Constantine, along with the seductive idea that if historians could just get at the core of

Constantine's being and worldview, we could use this prism to see the underlying coherence of portraits of the first Christian emperor. Lenski's lasting contribution to Constantinian studies lies rather in his penetrating ability to define, discover, and sometimes divine readings of Constantine's public presentation to inhabitants of the early fourth century Roman empire that resist, subvert, or negotiate Constantine's stated or apparent intention, or the intention of his professional image makers. Using recent advances in reception theory, particularly those associated with Hans Robert Jauss and Stuart Hall, Lenski rereads the evidence for Constantine's life and reign with an eye toward ambiguity and polyvalence, dispensing with the very idea of finding a single, authoritative portrait of Constantine, and embracing Constantine as an evolving object of study. Constantine's self presentation (and, apparently, self-understanding) was in a state of near-constant flux during his own lifetime, and contemporary historians' depictions of the emperor are at least as varied as the faces that he presented during his reign.

Lenski's first section, comprising chapters one through three, analyzes coins, inscriptions, literary sources, and iconography from various periods in Constantine's reign. Although Lenski is quick to point out that temporal divisions are, ultimately, arbitrary, this evidence allows him to distinguish one set of traits, interests, and outlooks that remained static throughout Constantine's reign from another set that underwent near constant flux. For instance, Constantine's use of light as a metaphor for universal power remained constant throughout his reign, while only at the end of his life does his self-presentation metamorphose from that of a triumphant military leader to that of a divine monarch. Lenski presents this material against the background of an increasingly tenacious embrace of catholic Christians to the exclusion of others beginning early in his reign and continuing through his thirty years in the purple.

The next four chapters, part two of the book, briefly consider the history of the petition system under the Tetrarchy before investigating in detail Constantine's use and reformulation of the empire-wide system of petition and rescript for the advancement of his own political and religious agenda. Lenski helpfully includes the text and a fresh translation for the rescripts that animate chapters four and five – the so-called Orcistus Dossier and the Hispellum rescript – and demonstrates that different cities, with different dominant religious allegiances, interacted with Constantine's public image in individual and politically expedient ways. While Orcistus reflected back to Constantine his own religiously charged language in a bid to gain favor, Hispellum accepted certain restrictions on their traditional cult in return for permission to erect a temple in honor of Constantine's family, thus reducing the civic burden placed upon them during the Tetrarchy. In both cases, Constantine deftly employed the standard system of petition and rescript to move religiously divergent cities further toward his own cultic goals.

Chapters six and seven begin by exploring one clear example of a city, Maiouma on the Palestinian coast, that requested and received the honor of a new Constantinian name by virtue of their majority Christian status. In light of this, Lenski turns to cities in the west and east, respectively, whose Constantinian benefactions appear to have some relation to their civic confession of Christianity, further demonstrating Constantine's adept manipulation of local political exigencies to move populations toward his own stated religious preferences. Lenski is able to show a strong, though not strictly causal, link between the willingness of cities throughout the empire to advance Constantine's

religious program and their benefactions from the emperor.

In part three, Lenski spends two chapters considering Constantine's material reorganization of the empire. Chapter eight contains an analysis of the emperor's expropriation of civic (and especially temple) holdings and redistribution of vast amounts of material wealth into the coffers of Christian churches through mechanisms of the *res privata*, a kind of imperial slush fund that could be exploited at the emperor's prerogative. These chapters are less interpretive than the previous, impressing upon the reader the breadth of the material evidence for Constantine's benefactions to the Christian community in the aftermath of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. Chapter nine compellingly relates Constantine's empire-wide program of architectural creation and expansion, with the most striking examples coming from Palestine, many of which still stand today, albeit in significantly transmogrified forms.

Finishing part three on a slightly different note, chapter ten concisely details an aspect of Constantine's legacy that was among the most significant for the progression of Roman Christianity in the aftermath of his reign. Here Lenski provides a brief overview of the expanded legal power given over to Christian clerics, reading evidence primarily from the *Theodosian Code* and *Sirmondian Constitutions*. The extensive work on this material by scholars of later Roman jurisprudence may account for Lenski's limited engagement.

Part four of this study rewards the reader who assented to Lenski's theoretical rejection of a monolithic Constantine in chapter one, only to find that the bulk of the subsequent study understands Constantine against the background of his expressed Christianity. Chapters eleven and twelve consider resistance to Constantine by cities which rejected or refused to engage Constantine on the terms of his own self-presentation. In these chapters we encounter, with Lenski as our guide,

"...a cluster of pagan Constantines, each conceptualized along locally conditioned parameters that reflect in part images projected by the emperor himself and in part the expectations and desires of the cities engaging with him. Theirs was neither the right reading of Constantine nor the wrong one, but simply an alternative Constantine, a Constantine that could be accommodated into the context of their own locally delimited understanding of proper rulership." (210)

These chapters depict a strikingly new Constantine, at least in relation to the traditional scholarly narrative. We find a Constantine who, even during the days of his most public promotion of Christianity, accepts public cult from Sagalassus and pagan religious offices from Athens; a Constantine who is honored by Termessus as the solar divinity Apollo even during the years in which

he presided over the Council of Nicaea. These cities managed to reserve religious assent while expressing their devotion to their emperor and receiving recompense from him. We meet a tolerant Constantine with an “experimental” and pragmatic religious policy. (229) But we also observe a Constantine prone to decisive, violent acts of destruction against pagan monuments, like those at Jerusalem, Mamre, and Ageae – actions which sparked local resistance and began trends of sacred violence and iconoclasm that would build to a fever pitch in the decades after his death.

Chapter thirteen details Constantine’s deployment of imperial violence against fellow Christians in the early years of his public Christian career, and the very real limits to his own power that were made clear in his inability to enforce his goal of theological unity among competing Christian communities in the East and in North Africa. Lenski skillfully uses the Donatist controversy to explore the tragic irony, which Constantine came to realize later in his reign, that the very violence he tolerated, sanctioned, and directed in view of a unified Christian community led instead to a bloody contest for authority that smoldered well into the sixth century. Chapter fourteen follows the trend of Constantine’s involvement with ecclesiastical politics and the tightening straightjacket that the intermingling of theological and political factionalisms imposed on Constantine’s ability to rule. He argues convincingly, however, that a distinction between the doctrinal and the political, the local and the imperial, are mirages.

“Insofar as doctrinal disputes truly mattered to the late antique mindset, and indeed they did, in many ways they simply constituted yet another arena of contention that took its place alongside more traditional fields of competition like wealth, status, euergetic display, and rhetorical or intellectual showmanship. Peer polity interaction/rivalry thus simply absorbed Christian credal dispute as an additional arena within which the new local leaders could vie for power and prestige.” (276-7)

It is easy to review an excellent book, and this book is excellent. For the scholar of Late Antiquity, it is full of original insights and surprising reversals of common scholarly dogma about Constantine, and it deserves a close reading by anyone interested in the emperor and sources for his reign. For those in adjacent fields or for readers with a general historical interest, Lenski’s deployment of reception theory and his analysis of non-dominant readings serves as an ideal model for an historiography that moves beyond the analysis of intention and expressions of power to a more sensitive, localized approach to the negotiations involved in every system of governance.

Lenski’s command of a wide-ranging and unruly dataset is unceasingly impressive, and while specialists may quibble with some points of interpretation, none overshadows the methodological and conceptual advance that Lenski has made. Specialists of late antique Christianity will find

intermittent reason to doubt the credulity of Lenski's readings (for instance in proposing a "scriptural basis" (50) for Constantine's use of Sol imagery), his occasional positivist impulses (for instance his desire to find a naturalistic explanation for Constantine's vision as reported by Lactantius), or the very occasional interpretive lapses (for instance reading standard ecclesiastical epistolary language in chapter 3 as evidence for Constantine's self-understanding as a bishop). Archaeologists, as well, will see space for greater interaction with primary archaeological data and reports, rather than the synthetic works that form the backbone of Lenski's presentation of early Christian architecture and material remains. But the import of the volume is broader than any series of historical data. Lenski's epilogue reminds the reader that history has produced an endless array of Constantines, and while some are better than others, none can reasonably express a claim to be the "right" snapshot of the first Christian ruler. Lenski's book thus offers not a picture of Constantine at all, but a series of portraits artfully arranged – some by Constantine himself, some by his image-makers, and some by contemporary scholars trying to make sense of this complex, enigmatic, kaleidoscopic character. This book is endlessly impressive, and deserves a space on the shelf of any scholar interested in the later Roman empire.

Finally, this is a beautiful book. It is not traditional to comment on the book as object, but in this case and in this academic climate, in which the experience and materiality of books has received renewed focalization, it is worth noting that University of Pennsylvania Press's volume stands out as a peculiarly satisfying object. It is bigger than expected, at 7.5 x 10.2 inches, and weighing in over 2 pounds. It is printed on smooth matte paper reminiscent more of art history books than ancient history monographs, and the paper is put to good use with 7 beautiful maps and nearly 50 plates strewn throughout the book. Lenski's able deployment these of paratextual features only enhances the pleasure of reading the book's contents.

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