

After Constantine

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STORIES FROM THE LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY BYZANTINE ERA



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Table of Contents

Coptic Letters from the Brooklyn Museum

Sohair Ahmed p. 1

Easter recycling. Thanatological Motifs in the texts of the Christians of the North

Nadiezhda Gayevskaya p. 8

The Metaphors of Motion in Athanasius' Account of Idolatry

Viacheslav V. Lytvynenko p. 22

Book Review

Zeuxippos or Byzantion: The City of the Sun.

Valeria Fol p. 35

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Constantine the Great by *Chrysa Sakel*

ZEUXIPPOS OR BYZANTION THE CITY OF THE SUN BOOK REVIEW

Valeria Fol*

Prof. V. Lozanova[1] dedicated years of work to present us the monograph *Zeuxippos or Byzantion – The City of the Sun*. Knowing her publications in recent years, I can say that she consistently explores various issues from sacred geography and the mytho-legendary tradition of the founding of Constantinople to arrive at the proposed title of the book. In fact, the place of sun worship in the history of the city and of the Emperor Constantine the Great is an age-old topic, loaded with many biases of a different nature, and is a great challenge. In the scientific literature about the early centuries of the city's existence Zeuxippos as a mythological character and one of the manifestations of the cult of the sun always remains in the background. In the scientific literature about the early centuries of the city's existence, Zeuxippos as a mythological character and one of the manifestations of the cult of the sun always remains in the background.

Prof. Lozanova focuses her attention on this problem, considering it in the widest possible context, analyzing all available written and archaeological sources, and this is one of the contributions of her monograph.

The book's structure includes a preface, four chapters, an epilogue, and comprehensive bibliography. The *Preface* dramatically introduces the issue by outlining the two sacred *topoi* of the city: the Hippodrome and the *Forum of Constantine*, and by an overview of the challenges in their history that have sparked the author's interest. The big issue around which the analysis is built is the extent to which pre-Christian and/or

Christian elements are contained in the ideology of Constantine the Great, manifested in the founding and consecration of the new imperial capital, the symbolism of rituals, statues and other signs, of architectural solutions, their transformations and – last but not least – how the inhabitants of the city perceived all this over the centuries. V. Lozanova examines all the opinions about the symbolism of all the elements of the consecration of the city and rightly notes that they are spread over the entire spectrum between a completely pagan to an extremely Christian religious-ideological interpretation.

The first chapter, *The Sun Emperor in the City of the Sun*, is devoted to the specific role of the city's solar deity Zeuxippos, his identification with Helios and Zeus Helios, and his religious-ideological role in Constantine's public behaviour in Byzantion. V. Lozanova rightly points out the importance of this local cult tradition for connecting the figure of the ruler with the Sun in the rituals of the consecration of the city and with the sacred topography of Byzantion. In several places in the book, she emphasizes that the discrepancy in the identifications of the local solar deity in the sources actually proves that he should not automatically be identified with Apollo or Helios. In several places in the book, she emphasizes that the discrepancy in the identifications of the local sun deity in the sources actually proves that one should not

automatically equate him with Apollo or Helios. The author reasonably disputes the popular opinion that the solar aspects in the consecration of Constantinople and the solar cult of Constantine arose only from the traditions of the Megarian Apoikists.

The second chapter, Zeuxippos – Zeus Helios and Septimius Severus– begins with a historical excursus before analyzing the written records mentioning Zeuxippos in connection with the building activity of Septimius Severus and his attempt to be associated with the ancient Thracian deity. The second chapter, Zeuxippos – Zeus Helios and Septimius Severus begins with a historical excursus, before analyzing the written records mentioning Zeuxippos in connection with the building activity of Septimius Severus and his attempt to be associated with the ancient Thracian deity. Worthy of note is the hypothesis based on written sources and linguistic analysis that the name Zeuxippos is probably contamination by the Hellenic identification of a Thracian supreme solar deity and his possible visualization as a horseman, probably with Zeus Hippios. V. Lozanova emphasizes that Zeuxippos sometimes also appears in the sources as leader of the Megarian apoikists, since through the mythological figure of the sun god of the Thracians in Byzantium, autochthony, sacredness, and, from there, the correctness of their choice of a place for the foundation of the *apoikia* are justified.

Recently, many authors have dealt with the role of light and darkness in religious ideas, including in royal ideology. An essential place in these studies is occupied by the cult of Sol Invictus in Roman imperial ideology. The studies of the early scholars were dominated by the identification of the solar statues of Constantine I the Great in Constantinople on the *Forum Constantini* with Sol Invictus (Unconquered Sun). According to the author, the diverging accounts of the Byzantine sources leave no doubt that Constantine's statue on the porphyry column brought from Egyptian

Thebes stood far from the traditional iconographic schemes of Sol Invictus (Chapter I: The Sun Emperor in the City of Sun) that the Emperor seems to have abandoned in his other demonstrations of power considerably long before the inauguration of Constantinople in 330 AD. In her analysis of numismatic material from Constantinople and Constantine's coinage during the time of the inauguration of the city, V. Lozanova convincingly draws attention to a very important aspect of the Emperor's policy concerning the encouragement of the religious identity of the polis through toleration of local cults. Thus, the statue on the porphyry column clearly symbolized Constantine's claims that the roots of the "new city" founded by him went deeply into the most distant past of the city. As a background to these public demonstrations, she suggests that more attention be paid to Septimius Severus' efforts to "establish religious-political communication with the local cultic traditions of Byzantium" as noted in the sources.

In the third chapter, Byzas and the Birth of Byzantium, the most ancient layer of the sacred topography of the Byzantium region is reconstructed on the basis of mythical-legendary tradition and analysis of coin images. All the variants of the mythographic tradition about Byzas, the omens for the founding of the city, and their correlation with the ideological and political actions of Constantine in the consecration of the city are examined in great detail. It is logically concluded that the ancient local tradition was secondarily inscribed in the wider Hellenic mythical-literary framework of the story of Io and Zeus as a natural process reflecting the context of Hellenic colonization. The analyses of the sources again lead the author to the already-reached conclusion that Constantine consciously used the ancient local

mythological traditions of Byzantium to establish his cult and public behavior as Sun Emperor in the City of the Sun.

The fourth chapter, *In the Chariot of Helios*, is devoted to the consecration of the city, the dedication of the statues that patronize it, the sacred topography with which these activities are associated, and the coinage in which they are reflected. On the second day of the spectacular 40-day celebrations of the founding of the new city, the Emperor made clear religious manifestations with Tyche, the patroness of his newly founded city. Constantine resurrected the ancient religious and

mythological context of Byzantium's birth, "flirting" with the patron goddess of the city, Tyche-Keroessa, the mother of the heros-oikistes and the eponym Byzas – probably gracefully and discretely (?) replacing her with the figure of his own mother Helena. Thus, according to V. Lozanova, the propaganda messages and allegories were outlined, as derived from the mythological traditions of the city's founding and structured by the relations between the Great Goddess-Mother and her solar son.

The author's conclusions confirm her observations from the previous chapters to reach the conclusion in the Epilogue which reads: "Constantine made demonstrative and deliberate use of the solar symbolism in which late antique and medieval authors recognize a solar god identified by them most generally like Helios or Apollo, and the Christian authors – even like Jesus. The local population of Byzantium, however, called him Zeuxippos." In the analyses of the written sources, the sacred topography, and the images in the book proposed by Prof. Lozanova, one can see the transformational models by which Christianity gradually absorbed and put its own meaning into the pagan symbols, artistic-architectural solutions, and ritual actions. With that policy and behaviour, the Emperor perhaps was seeking a balance between the traditional religion of the city and the

local cult practices, on the one hand, and those of the imperial cult of the ruler or even his personal pre-Christian cult, on the other. That effort to achieve balance would explain the neutral language of Constantine's public messages and public demonstrations of his religious preferences. Certainly, the Emperor's aspiration at demonstrating universal religious tolerance and balanced concealment of his personal religious-philosophical views should not be underestimated in those processes.

The monograph has indisputable contributions and offers many challenges, both because of the vast source material collected, the different perspective from which it is analyzed and because of the reasoned conclusions about the place of the local mythographic tradition and the solar deity in the ideology and public behaviour of Constantine the Great in the renewal and consecration of Byzantium as a city of the Sun Emperor.

Notes

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