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## MARS PATER – IN THE STRATEGY OF CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

**Abstract.** During his reign Constantine the Great sought protection of various gods, finally choosing the Christian God as his main protector. The iconographic material gathered from the mints remaining under his power in the early period of his rule shows that in the years 306–309 Constantine regarded Mars as his guardian deity. The author attempts to explain why the emperor sought Mars's protection during that period and why he later began to look for a new divine guardian. This issue has not yet been properly explained in scholarly literature devoted to Constantine the Great.

**Keywords:** Constantine the Great, Mars Pater, iconographic material

The biographer of Constantine the Great, Eusebius of Caesarea, mentions the quandary faced by the emperor before his clash with Maxentius in 312. According to the bishop of Caesarea, during his preparation for an armed confrontation with the usurper, Constantine *wondered... which God he should turn to for help and guidance*<sup>1</sup>. Eusebius was in direct touch with the ruler and referred in his *Life of Constantine* to conversations they both held. The situation Constantine found himself in was extremely difficult and, in line with the Roman mentality, required the choice of a divine patron. It is therefore possible to assume the credibility of the biographer's account of this. The verb ἐννοέω (to think, to consider, to reflect<sup>2</sup>) – which the chronicler used to highlight Constantine's dilemma – suggests that the ruler relied on a certain logic in his search for a divine guardian. The choice of a divine protector was nothing out of the ordinary for Roman commanders, who typically resorted to such a practice. It stemmed from the Romans' deep-seated

<sup>1</sup> EUSEBIUS, *Vita Constantini*, I, 27, 2, ed. F. WINKELMANN, Berlin–New York 2008 (cetera: EUSEBIUS, *Vita Constantini*): ἐννοεῖ δῆτα ὁποῖον δέοι θεὸν βοηθὸν ἐπιγράψασθαι (trans. T. WNEȚRZAK, p. 116).

<sup>2</sup> *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G.W.H. LAMPE, Oxford 1961, p. 476, s.v. ἐννοέω.



belief that God's power could ensure the prosperity of their *civitas*. Thanks to their extraordinary piety<sup>3</sup> in which they surpassed all the other nations<sup>4</sup>, the Gods allowed them to build a great empire. Their *felicitas* was a reward for their *pietas*.

At the outset of Constantine's reign, legends on the coins struck at the mints remaining under his authority (those located in London, Lyon and Trier) can frequently be found to contain not only inscriptions devoted to Mars, but also iconographic representations of the deity. References to Mars appear on those coins significantly more often than mentions of Jupiter, Heracles or Sol Invictus<sup>5</sup>. It can thus be argued that in the years 306–309 Mars became Constantine's guardian deity. Why did this ruler look for Mars' protection during that period? Why did he later begin to look for a new divine guardian? Since this issue has not been properly examined in scholarly literature, my aim in this article is to try to answer those questions.

The answer to the first is tangled up in the very difficult situation that Constantine found himself in after 305. In 293, when his father, Constantius I, was appointed Caesar to Maximian Herculius<sup>6</sup>, Constantine was invited to Diocletian's

<sup>3</sup> In pagan Rome, *pietas* was not only considered to be one of the essential moral virtues and later the emperor's cardinal virtue, but it was also one of the most important ideas of the Roman state; see M.P. CHARLESWORTH, *The Virtues of Roman Emperor and the Creation of the Belief*, PBA 23, 1937, p. 105–133; J.R. FEARS, *The Cult of Virtues and Roman Imperial Ideology*, [in:] *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römi-schen Welt*, vol. II, 17.2, ed. W. HAASE, New York–Berlin 1981, p. 864; A. WALLACE-HADRILL, *The Emperor and his Virtues*, *Hi* 30.3, 1981, p. 298–323.

<sup>4</sup> See H. WAGENVOORT, *Pietas*, [in:] *Pietas. Selected Studies in Roman Religion*, ed. IDEM, Leiden 1980 [= SGRR, 1], p. 1–20; J. CHAMPEAUX, „*Pietas*”. *Piété personnelle et piété collective à Rome*, BAGB 3, 1989, p. 263–279.

<sup>5</sup> Legends on coins from the mint in London contain the following inscriptions: MARS VICTOR, MARTI CONSERVATORI, MARTI PACIF(ero), MARTI PATRI CONSERVATORI, MARTI PATRI PROPVGNATORI; in Lyon: MARTI PATRI CONSERVATORI, MARTI PATRI PROPVGNATORI, MARTI PATR SEMP VICTORI; in Trier: MARTI CONSERVATORI, MARTI PATRI CONSERVATORI, MARTI PATRI PROPVGNATORI, MARTI PROPUGNATORI; cf. *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. VI, *From Diocletian's Reform (A.D. 294) to the Death of Maximinus (A.D. 13)*, ed. C.H.V. SUTHERLAND, R.A.G. CARSON, London 1967 (cetera: RIC VI), *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> The appointment most likely took place on 1 March 293 (see *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors. The Panegyrici Latini*, VIII (V), 3, 1, ed. R.A.B. MYNORS, C.E.V. NIXON, B.S. RODGERS, Berkeley–Los Angeles–Oxford 1994 [= TCH, 21], cetera: *Panegyric*), that is, in the month dedicated to Mars. On the same day, the title of Caesar was conferred upon Galerius; see LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXXV, 4, ed. J. MOREAU, Paris 1954 [= SC, 39] (cetera: LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*). In his chronology of the first tetrarchy, Frank KOLB (*Chronologie und Ideologie der Tetrarchie*, *ATA* 3, 1995, p. 22) indicates 1 March as the day on which both Constantius and Glaerius were elevated to the dignity of Caesar. However, he adds in his comment (p. 23) that only Constantius may have then been appointed Caesar while Galerius may have been granted the honour a little bit later, that is on 21 May 293 (the author of *Chronicon Paschale* dates the appointment of both Constantius and Galerius to 21 May), and, argues Kolb, it is impossible to say which date reflects the true state of affairs. According to Robert SUSKI (*Galeriusz. Cesarz, wódz i prześladowca*, Kraków 2016, p. 114–115), they were both appointed Caesars on 1 March 293.

court to begin his military career under Diocletian's tutelage. While beginning to serve as *tribunus* in the eastern provinces, he had reason to believe that he was just taking the first steps in his education as a future ruler<sup>7</sup>. It seems that at that time, he took part in the victorious war against Persia, witnessing Galerius' great military triumph<sup>8</sup>. Raised to the rank of *tribunus ordinis primi*<sup>9</sup>, he participated in Diocletian's expedition to Egypt in the years 301–302. According to Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>10</sup>, he rode across Palestine by Diocletian's side, which indicates that he must have belonged to the ruling Augustus' close, immediate circle. However, in 305, following the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian, when new Caesars were appointed under the second tetrarchy, Constantine was left out of the nomination, as was Maxentius<sup>11</sup>, the latter despite having been already married for several years to Galerius' daughter, Valeria Maximilia<sup>12</sup>, to whom he became engaged as early as 293. At Galerius' instigation, a Roman commander from Pannonia named Severus<sup>13</sup>, with whom Galerius was on friendly terms, became Caesar in the West, while Maximin Daia<sup>14</sup>, Galerius' nephew, was awarded the respective office in the East. It is thus clear that Galerius attained the dominant position in the existing political

<sup>7</sup> *Panegyric*, VI (VII), 6, 2. The anonymous author of *Origo Constantini* (II, 2) suggests that Constantine was the hostage (obses) of Diocletian and Galerius. See T.D. BARNES, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, Mass.–London 1981, p. 25–26; C.M. ODAHL, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, London–New York 2004 [= RIM], p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> See *Origo Constantini. Anonymus Valesianus*, II, 2, ed. I. KÖNIG, Trier 1987 (cetera: *Origo Constantini*); *Constantini imperatoris oratio ad coetum sanctorum*, XVI, 2, [in:] EUSEBIUS, *Werke*, vol. I, ed. J.A. HEIKEL, Leipzig 1902. In 296, in the first phase of the war mentioned above Galerius was defeated in northern Mesopotamia. However, in 298–299, after bringing a new army from the Balkans, he won a great victory over the Persians. See T.D. BARNES, *Imperial Campaigns, A.D. 285–311*, *Phoenix* 30, 1976, p. 182–186. The debate regarding the possible capture of Ctesiphon by Galerius has been covered by Robert SUSKI (*Zwycięska kampania Galeriusza w wojnie z Persami 298–299*, [in:] *Chrześcijaństwo u schyłku starożytności. Studia źródłoznawcze*, vol. II, ed. T. DERDA, E. WIP-SZYCKA, Kraków 1999, p. 162–171; IDEM, *Galeriusz...*, p. 166–181).

<sup>9</sup> LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XVIII, 10.

<sup>10</sup> EUSEBIUS, *Vita Constantini*, I, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy BARNES (*Constantine. Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*, Oxford 2011, p. 57) presumes that Galerius, the fanatical advocate of traditional cults rejected the candidatures of Constantine Maxentius for religious reasons, because their pro-Christian attitudes.

<sup>12</sup> See *Origo Constantini*, III, 7; AURELIUS VICTOR, *Liber de Caesaribus*, XXXX, 14, [in:] *Liber de Caesaribus Sexti Aurelii Victoris (Sextus Aurelius Victor). Praecedunt Origo gentis Romanae et liber de viris illustribus urbis Romae. Subs. epitome de Caesaribus*, rec. F. PICHLMAYR, R. GRÜNDEL, Leipzig 1966 (cetera: AURELIUS VICTOR, *Liber de Caesaribus*); LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XVIII, 9; see also R. DONCIU, *L'empereur Maxence*, Bari 2012, p. 48; T.D. BARNES, *Constantine. Dynasty...*, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> The anonymous author of *Origo Constantini* (IV) wrote about Severus's friendship with Galerius: *ebrosius et hoc Galerio amicus*; According to LACTANTIUS, in turn (*De mortibus persecutorum*, XVIII, 11–12), Sewerus belonged to Galerius's close circle. See T.D. BARNES, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, London 1982, p. 38–39.

<sup>14</sup> See T.D. BARNES, *The New Empire...*, p. 39.

constellation despite the fact that Constantius, Constantine's father, formally was the higher ranking Augustus<sup>15</sup>. This can be considered surprising given Galerius' initially weak position under the first tetrarchy, which seems to be reflected by the account of how he was humiliated by Diocletian after his initial defeat during the clash with the Persians in 296<sup>16</sup>. The failure that befell Galerius at the time must have been all the more disconcerting as the memory of the defeat that Emperor Valerian suffered at the hands of the Persians several decades ago – having been taken captive, humiliated and finally killed – was still very vivid. However, the past difficulties probably only added to the joy the Romans felt at Galerius' recent success in the war against Persia. The victory he won proved that he was not only an eminent commander, but that he also enjoyed the support of the gods. According to Lactantius, Galerius gave credit for the victory to Mars, recognizing him as his parent and himself as a second Romulus<sup>17</sup>.

It thus seems that the triumph over the Persians (which the victor believed to owe to Mars' support) had the effect of strengthening his position already under the first tetrarchy, as testified in *On the Death of Persecutors* by Lactantius<sup>18</sup> who was a teacher in the imperial city (that is, in Nicomedia) at least until the outbreak of the persecution of Christians. The fact that Lactantius' account is clearly partial and pro-Christian does not change the essential point, for he was as critical of Diocletian as he was of Galerius. The chronicler can thus be considered to have had no reasons to misrepresent the relations between Diocletian and Galerius, which were certainly known in the imperial court, and his account of Galerius' dominant position can be argued as credible, especially as it is confirmed by the abdication of Diocletian and Maximin (effected despite the latter's protests and benefiting mainly Galerius) and the exclusion of Constantine and Maxentius<sup>19</sup> (that is, the sons of the present tetrarchs, Constantius and Maximian Herculus) from the appointment as new Caesars in favour of men with close ties to Galerius. The fact that both Constantine and Maxentius accepted the choice without protest only

<sup>15</sup> This could result only from Konstantius's older age; see R. SUSKI, *Galeriusz...*, p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> The event probably never took place (see W. SESTON, *L' « humiliation » de Galère*, REA 42, 1940, p. 515–519; R. SUSKI, *Upokorzenie Galeriusza przez Dioklecjana. Prawda czy mit*, [in:] *Chrześcijaństwo u schyłku starożytności. Studia źródłoznawcze*, vol. II, p. 129–152; IDEM, *Galeriusz...*, p. 134–150), but the very existence of this information may reflect his initially weak position.

<sup>17</sup> LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, IX, 9. See P. BRUGGISSER, *Constantin aux rostres*, [in:] *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Perusinum*, ed. G. BONAMENTE, F. PASCHOUD, Bari 2002, p. 84, n. 39. The view that Mars was Galerius's divine patron is rejected by O.P. NICHOLSON, *The Wild Man of the Tetrarchy: a Divine Companion for the Emperor Galerius*, B 54, 1984, p. 253–275 (who points to Dionizos-Liber as the ruler's divine guardian); Nicholson's opinion is shared by B. LEADBETTER, *Galerius and the Will of Diocletian*, London–New York 2009 [= RIM], p. 105, n. 72.

<sup>18</sup> LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, IX–XIV, XVIII–XXI. Cf. also T.D. BARNES, *Constantine. Dynasty...*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. A. PIGANIOL, *L'Empereur Constantin*, Paris 1932, p. 40–41; A. ROUSSELLE, *La chronologie de Maximien Hercule et le mythe de la Tétrarchie*, DHA 2, 1976, p. 459.

corroborates the view that they were not only aware of Galerius' position but that they also reconciled themselves to it, clearly numbering among those impressed by Galerius' victory over the Persians.

From the perspective of Constantine and Constantius, the former's failure to be appointed Caesar made his further stay in the East pointless. Hence, Galerius was requested to permit Constantine's return. Both Christian and pagan sources inform us of Constantine's escape from Nicomedia and of the hostile attitude Galerius adopted toward him despite formally consenting to his return to the west<sup>20</sup>. Soon, after his father's death, on 5 July 305<sup>21</sup> in Eburacum (now York), the army elevated Constantine to the dignity of Emperor and Augustus, which created a fait accompli for Galerius<sup>22</sup>. Having lost his father, his natural guardian and protector, Constantine seems to have been left with no other option since he had already to escape from Galerius before. Therefore, he staked everything on one card, simultaneously seeking recognition of his elevation by Galerius who was already officially the highest rank Augustus. Constantine's usurpation gained only partial acceptance by the princeps who awarded him the title of Caesar while conferring that of Augustus upon Severus. It is quite remarkable that Constantine accepted Galerius' decision and stopped using the title of Augustus, contenting himself with the rank of Caesar. This compromise allowed him, at least temporarily, to come out of the difficult situation unscathed. However, he had to take into account the necessity of an armed confrontation with his opponents within the empire, especially as the course of events was very dynamic. On 28 October 306, Maxentius, Maximian's son, that is the second of the tetrarchs' descendants who were left out of sharing power in 305, was clothed by the praetorians and the people of the city of Rome in purple robes and raised to the rank of Emperor<sup>23</sup>. This time, Galerius was unrelenting and refused to recognize Maxentius' power despite the fact that Maxentius was his son-in-law. That may have been because no tetrarch's throne was vacant. It thus became of key importance for Constantine to find a divine patron on whom he could rely and who could ensure a stable position for him within the system of tetrarchy.

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<sup>20</sup> LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXV, 5–8; EUSEBIUS, *Vita Constantini*, I, 20–21; *Origo Constantini*, II, 4; *Panegyric*, VII (VI), 7–8; AURELIUS VICTOR, *Liber de Caesaribus*, 40, 2–4; *Die Epitome de Caesaribus. Untersuchungen zur heidnischen Geschichtsschreibung des 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.*, 41, 2, ed. J. SCHLUMBERGER, München 1974; ZOSIME, *Histoire nouvelle*, II, 8, vol. I–III, ed. et trans. F. PASCHOUD, Paris 1979–2000 (cetera: ZOSIMOS).

<sup>21</sup> *Fasti Furii Dionysii Philocali (p. Chr. 354) et Polemii Silvii (p. Chr. 448/449)*, ed. Th. MOMMSEN, [in:] *CLL*, vol. I.1, Berolini 1893, p. 268–269; SOCRATES, *Kirchengeschichte*, I, 2, 1, ed. G.C. HANSEN, Berlin 1995 [= GCS].

<sup>22</sup> EUTROPIUS, *Breviarum ab urbe condita*, X 1, 3, trans., comm. H.W. BIRD, Liverpool 1993 [= TTH, 14]. On imperial elections see J. PROSTKO-PROSTYŃSKI, *Roma-solium imperii. Elekcja, koronacja i uznanie cesarza w Rzymie*, Poznań 2014.

<sup>23</sup> See LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXVI, 1–4; ZOSIMOS, II, 9, 2–3.

One of the earliest coins minted in Constantine's name in general and the earliest to contain a legend referring to a specific deity is the gold coin struck from 306 to 308 at the mint in Nicomedia. It has MARTI PATRI written on the rim and its reverse shows an image of Mars standing frontally and wearing a helmet. The god's head is turned left, his right hand is resting on a shield and the left is holding a spear<sup>24</sup>. It should be emphasized that at the time, the mint was not under Constantine's authority. The coin in question began to be minted there as a result of the compromise under which Constantine was appointed Caesar in the western part of the empire. In the earlier period, soon after the re-composition of the first tetrarchy, that is after the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian Herculus, the gold coin struck at the mint from May 305 to July 306 contained the same legend and displayed the image of Mars, but it was dedicated to Severus who was then expected to become Caesar in the western part of the empire<sup>25</sup>. The new senior Augustus, Constantius, after taking over from Maximian Herculus, offered his special worship to Hercules (with the legend HERCULI VICTORI<sup>26</sup>) on his coins struck in Nicomedia. On the other hand Augustus, Galerius, after replacing Diocletian, honored there Jupiter (with the legend IOVI CONSERVATORI<sup>27</sup>) and Diocletian's Caesar, Maximin, worshiped Sol Invictus (with the legend SOLI INVICTO<sup>28</sup>). After Constantius' death in 306, which entailed a change in the composition of the tetrarchy, Galerius became the senior Augustus, while Severus, Constantius' Caesar, assumed the another Augustus. At that time, legends on coins struck in Nicomedia still linked Galerius with Jupiter (with the legend IOVI CONSERVATORI<sup>29</sup>), Severus was assigned to Constantius' former patron, that is, Hercules (with the legend HERCULI VICTORI<sup>30</sup>), and Sol remained the divine patron of Maximin, who was still Galerius' Caesar (with the legend SOLI INVICTO<sup>31</sup>). Constantine, in turn, after becoming Severus' Caesar and thus assuming his former place, was paired with Severus' former patron, Mars (with the legend MARTI PATRI<sup>32</sup>). It thus seems that Constantine was assigned to Mars quite automatically. Interestingly, during the first tetrarchy, Mars was absent from the coins struck in Nicomedia that assigned particular rulers to their respective deities. The coins dedicated to Diocletian presented an image of Jupiter<sup>33</sup>, those minted in the name of Galerius, Diocletian's Caesar, showed Jupiter<sup>34</sup> and Sol

<sup>24</sup> RIC VI, no 42; 45.

<sup>25</sup> RIC VI, no 34. C.H.V. SUTHERLAND (RIC, p. 547) emphasised that *Constantine, newly recognized as Caesar in the west, has the Marti Patri formerly assigned to Severus as Caesar.*

<sup>26</sup> RIC VI, no 32.

<sup>27</sup> RIC VI, no 33.

<sup>28</sup> RIC VI, no 35.

<sup>29</sup> RIC VI, no 44.

<sup>30</sup> RIC VI, no 41.

<sup>31</sup> RIC VI, no 43; 46.

<sup>32</sup> RIC VI, no 42; 45.

<sup>33</sup> RIC VI, no 1; 5; 10–11.

<sup>34</sup> RIC VI, no 12.

Invictus<sup>35</sup>, while Hercules appeared on the coins of Maximian Herculus<sup>36</sup> and Constantius<sup>37</sup>, who was Maximian's Caesar. It seems fully comprehensible that Jupiter and Hercules were chosen to serve as the tetrarchs' guardian deities, because Diocletian's system was based on the idea that the rulers were born of those two gods (*diis genti*) and as such belonged to a "divine family" (*domus divina*). Diocletian adopted the nickname "Jovius" while Augustus, Maximian, began to be referred to as Herculean<sup>38</sup>. One might ask why Galerius was assigned to Sol as early as 294 given the fact that this seems to have gone beyond Diocletian's idea of a divine family. In all probability, it was linked with the intensive growth in solar cult<sup>39</sup> in the third century and was the result of a top-down arrangement. After the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian Herculus, when Galerius began to appoint his men to the position of Caesar, references to Sol, just as before, were found on gold coins struck in Nicomedia in the name of Maximin, Galerius's successor. At the same time, references to Mars appeared on coins dedicated to Severus, Constantius's Caesar, which was a novelty in relation to the coins issued during the first tetrarchy. It is likely that this novelty was introduced by Galerius who was playing a crucial role in the tetrarchy (despite the fact that he was not the senior Augustus) and who, as can be presumed, ascribed his triumph over the Persians to Mars, recognizing him as his divine patron<sup>40</sup>.

Interestingly, on the coins from this issue Mars was referred to as father. Although such a designation was generally bound up only with the origin of Romulus, the founder of Rome, there was no official, state cult of *Mars Pater* either under the Republic or under the empire<sup>41</sup>. References to Mars found on the coins in question show the rulers of Imperium Romanum to have believed that, thanks to the

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<sup>35</sup> RIC VI, no 7; 17.

<sup>36</sup> RIC VI, no 2–3; 8.

<sup>37</sup> RIC VI, no 4; 9.

<sup>38</sup> Diocletian took advantage of the fact that Roman commanders had looked for the protection of Jupiter the Best and the Greatest since time immemorial. The god was worshipped on the Capitol and was linked with the ceremony of the triumph; see H.S. VERSNEL, *Triumphus. An Inquiry into the Origin, Development, and Meaning of the Roman Triumph*, Leiden 1970, p. 66–93; K. BALBUZA, *Triumfator. Triumfi i ideologia zwycięstwa w starożytnym Rzymie epoki Cesarstwa*, Poznań 2005, *passim*. In Diocletian's system, by adopting the nickname Iovius, the higher-ranking Augustus, Jupiter's chosen one became an intermediary between the highest god in Roman pantheon and all the people. The junior Augustus, bearing the nickname *Herculus*, acted as an intermediary between the people and Hercules. See H. MATTINGLY, *Jovius and Herculus*, HTR 45.2, 1952, p. 131–134; J. BARDILL, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*, Cambridge 2011, p. 28–125; in Frank KOLB's opinion (*Ideal późnoantycznego władcy. Ideologia i autoprezentacja*, trans. A. GIERLIŃSKA, Poznań 2008, p. 29) Diocletian created the perfect conception of the theocratic legitimization of power.

<sup>39</sup> See J.-P. MARTIN, *Sol Invictus: des Sévères à la tetrarchie d'après les monnaies*, CCGG 11, 2000, p. 297–307.

<sup>40</sup> See S. BRALEWSKI, "Ex Marte se procreatum" – Did the Roman Emperor Galerius Make Mars his Personal Protective Deitie?, SCer 13, 1923, p. 239–253.

<sup>41</sup> See O. HEKSTER, *Emperors and Ancestors. Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition*, Oxford 2015, p. 261.

protection of the deity, they would become the successors of Rome's founding fathers. By resorting to tradition, they hoped to bring about a religious renewal of the empire and, having secured the gods' support, to restore the power and greatness of Rome. By taking over the title of Caesar from Severus, who became Augustus, Constantine naturally adopted the legend MARTI PATRI that appeared on a series of gold coins issued at that time in Nicomedia and attached to his new title. However, it seems that he recognized the idea of relying upon the protection of Mars as his own. After all, he was witness to Galerius's victory over the Persians, which Galerius ascribed to Mars and which was actually quite unexpected as it came after the earlier defeat. Since he himself was in a difficult situation, he decided to seek help from the deity in question. Bearing witness to this are legends found on coins struck at the mints that remained under his authority. Mars is referred to on them, the same as Jupiter and Hercules, as a defender or savior (*conservator*), a fighting defender (*propugnator*), a victor, or a peace-bringer (*paciferus*). However, he is also referred to as father, a designation that was never applied to Jupiter and Hercules – neither under the tetrarchy nor in any other period of Roman history<sup>42</sup>.

Given an uncertain future filled with various threats, Constantine's appeal to Mars the Saviour or Mars the Defender is quite comprehensible. The term *Conservator* frequently appeared on Roman coins in reference to deities – Jupiter<sup>43</sup>, Hercules<sup>44</sup>, Apollo<sup>45</sup>, Sol<sup>46</sup> and Mars<sup>47</sup> – regarded by rulers as their patrons and protectors. Having recognized Jupiter as his divine guardian, Emperor Diocletian

<sup>42</sup> According to O. HEKSTER (*Emperors and Ancestors...*, p. 264) *the combination Iovi Patri does not exist at all in Latin epigraphy*. We know the coin struck for Galien in Antioch with the legend on the rim IOVI PATRI, with regard to which Ragnar HEDLUND (“...achieved nothing worthy of memory” *Coinage and Authority in the Roman Empire c. AD 260–295*, Uppsala 2008, p. 196) wrote *one single coin-type features the more novel legend* and the coin also struck for Galien with the legend dedicated to Janus: IANO PATRI; see R. GÖBL, *Die Münzprägung der Kaiser Valerianus I., Gallienus, Saloninus (253/268), Regalianus (260) und Macrianus, Quietus (260/262)* (*DenkschrWien*, 286), Wien 2000, no 1625 and no 449.

<sup>43</sup> The antoniniani of Gordian III (238–244) – *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. IV.3, *Gordian III to Uranius Antoninus*, ed. H. MATTINGLY, E.A. SYDENHAM, London 1968 (cetera: RIC IV.3, no 255 B); of Valerian (253–260) – *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. V.1, *Valerian to Florian (AD 253–276)*, ed. H. PERCY, H. MATTINGLY, E.A. SYDENHAM, London 1927 (cetera: RIC V.1), no 95; of Galien (253–268) – RIC V.1, no 210 k.

<sup>44</sup> The antoniniani of Diocletian (*The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. V.2, *Probus to Amandus*, ed. H. MATTINGLY, E.A. SYDENHAM, London 1933, cetera: RIC V.2, no 212 F; 214 F; 216 F; 218 F); of Maximian (RIC V.2, no 547 C; 549 C); of Diocletian (RIC V.2, no 584 C) and of Galerius (RIC V.2, no 719 C) with the legend Iovi ET Herculi CONS CAES.

<sup>45</sup> The antoniniani of Claudius II Gothicus (268–270) – RIC V.1, no 20; of Quintillus (270) – RIC V.1, no 44; of Valerian (253–260) – RIC V.1, no 71 A.

<sup>46</sup> The antoniniani of Galien (253–268) – RIC V.1, no 283 k; of Aurelian (270–275) – RIC V.1, no 353.

<sup>47</sup> Denarius of Commodus (172–192) – *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. III, *Antoninus Pius to Commodus*, ed. H. MATTINGLY, E.A. SYDENHAM, London 1930 (cetera: RIC III), no 258.



referred to him as his saviour and defender; this is evidenced by the antoninianus with the rim inscription IOVI CONSERVATORI AUG (USTI) struck during his reign. Appeals to the god in question reflected a longstanding tradition<sup>48</sup>.

The epithet *propugnator* was in turn used to denote Jupiter, as seen on Alexander Severus's denarii<sup>49</sup> and Galien's antoniniani<sup>50</sup>, or Mars, as shown by the antoniniani with the legend MARS PROPUGNATOR/MARTI PROPUGNATORI that were struck for Gordian III (238–244) in the years 243–244<sup>51</sup>, Hostilian (250–251)<sup>52</sup> and Galien (253–268)<sup>53</sup> or even earlier on the denarii of Caracalla (198–217) in the years 213–217<sup>54</sup>. However, the term was also used to designate Apolin, as supported by an antoninianus struck in the name of Valerian (253–260)<sup>55</sup>. The legend MARTI PACIFERI – the one referring to Mars the Peace-bringer – appeared on coins issued by emperors from the third century: Probus (276–282)<sup>56</sup>, Galien<sup>57</sup> or Gordian<sup>58</sup>, while the legend MARS VICTOR/MARTI VICTORI was found on coins minted for Geta (209–212)<sup>59</sup> and Probus (276–282)<sup>60</sup>.

Legends that appeared on coins struck at the mints remaining under Constantine's authority allow us to reconstruct his expectations regarding Mars. The first mint that came under his power was located in London. Among the types of folles that were struck in the summer of 307, which was a year after the army announced Constantine Augustus, one was issued with the legend MARS VICTOR<sup>61</sup> while the others appeared with the legends MARTI PACIFERO<sup>62</sup> and MART PATR CONSERVATORI<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> As conservator, Jupiter appeared already on coins struck for Commodus (172–192) – RIC 308, 1525, for Galien (RIC V.1, no 214) or for Diocletian – antoninian – RIC V.2, no 228; 270 – that is as early as the second century A.C., see F. KOLB, *Diocletian und die Erste Tetrarchie. Improvisation oder Experiment in der Organisation monarchischer Herrschaft?*, Berlin 1987 [= ULG, 27], p. 89, n. 263. See also C. ROWAN, *Becoming Jupiter: Severus Alexander, the Temple of Jupiter Ultor, and Jovian Iconography on Roman Imperial Coinage*, AJN 21, 2009, p. 136–140.

<sup>49</sup> See C. ROWAN, *Becoming Jupiter...*, p. 141–142.

<sup>50</sup> RIC V.1, no 48.

<sup>51</sup> RIC IV.3, no 145–147.

<sup>52</sup> RIC IV.3, no 175–177.

<sup>53</sup> RIC V.1, no 25; 152 A, 153 A and 237.

<sup>54</sup> *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. IV.1, *Pertinax to Geta*, ed. H. MATTINGLY, E.A. SYDENHAM, London 1936 (cetera: RIC IV.1), no 307.

<sup>55</sup> RIC V.1, no 74.

<sup>56</sup> RIC III, no 42.

<sup>57</sup> RIC V.1, no 112; 236; 359; 492.

<sup>58</sup> RIC IV.3, no 212.

<sup>59</sup> RIC IV.1, no 103.

<sup>60</sup> RIC V.2, no 36–38; 82–84; 86; 89.

<sup>61</sup> RIC VI, no 92.

<sup>62</sup> RIC VI, no 94.

<sup>63</sup> RIC VI, no 95.

Interestingly, only rarely did the coins minted for Constantine refer to Mars the Victor. One such coin was struck at the mint in London<sup>64</sup> and featured an image of a naked Mars who, clad only in chlamys and armed with a spear, carried a trophy, a symbol of victory, on his left shoulder<sup>65</sup>. The other coin of this kind was issued in Lugdunum from 307 to 309. Bearing the legend MARTI PATRI SEMPER VICTORI (MARTI PATR SEMP VICTORI), it showed a naked Mars advancing to the right while keeping his head turned to the left. His right hand held a spear across his arms while his left supported a trophy resting on his shoulder<sup>66</sup>. This iconography was quite characteristic of the legend of this type, as evidenced by a denarius struck for Emperor Geta (209–212) in Laodicea<sup>67</sup>. The coin minted in Lugdunum was enhanced in relation to that struck in Londinium by referring to Mars as father and emphasizing that he is always a victor. However, it seems that Constantine's appeals to Mars the Victor were infrequent, since at that time he was not expecting any serious conflict with the barbarians. He found himself in a situation where he was in greater need of a defender, having to stabilize his position within the tetrarchy. Appeals to Mars the Peace-bringer or Mars the Saviour and Defender thus seemed to make more sense.

On the coin with the legend MARTI PACIFERO, the deity is shown marching in military uniform. His right hand holds an olive branch while his left hand wields a spear and a shield<sup>68</sup>. The coin with the legend MARTI PATRI CONSERVATORI presents the deity standing. Mars's left hand rests on a spear while his right is placed on a shield set on the ground. Mars's coat is slung over his right shoulder<sup>69</sup>.

Folles with the legend MARTI PATRI COSRVATORI were struck at the mints subject to Constantine's power in Trier (in the summer of 307, from the fall of 307 until the end of 308<sup>70</sup>, and in 309<sup>71</sup>) and in Lyon (in the fall of 307<sup>72</sup> and from the fall of 308 to the spring of 309<sup>73</sup>). On the folles from Trier, Mars is shown standing, holding a reversed spear – which sometimes assumed the form of an ordinary scepter – in his right hand and resting his left on a shield set on the ground<sup>74</sup>.

The somewhat simplified version of the folles with the legend MARTI CONSERVATORI was issued in Trier, Pavia, Aquileia, Rome and Ostia Antica: in Trier,

<sup>64</sup> In Trier, in the years 295–303, Constantine's father, Constantius struck the coin with the legend MARTI VICTORI, RIC VI, no 31. Similarly, in Sisci in the years 302–305 Constantius's coin was struck with the same legend, RIC VI, no 27a.

<sup>65</sup> RIC VI, no 92.

<sup>66</sup> RIC VI, no 263; 296.

<sup>67</sup> RIC IV.1, no 103.

<sup>68</sup> RIC VI, no 94.

<sup>69</sup> RIC VI, no 95.

<sup>70</sup> RIC VI, no 772.

<sup>71</sup> RIC VI, no 829–831.

<sup>72</sup> RIC VI, no 240–241.

<sup>73</sup> RIC VI, no 293–294.

<sup>74</sup> RIC VI, no 724–729; 739–740.

the folles were struck in 309–313<sup>75</sup>. On the folles from Pavia, minted in 312–313, Mars is shown standing in military uniform, turned to the left. His right hand holds a globe with a statue of Victoria on top of it, while his left hand wields a spear and a shield<sup>76</sup>. The folles of a different kind with the same legend show Mars in a helmet, with his right hand holding a reversed spear and his left resting on a shield<sup>77</sup>. In Aquileia, the coins were struck in 312–313. Here, Mars is shown standing frontally, wearing a helmet, with his head turned to the right. His right hand holds a reversed spear, while his left rests on a shield set on the ground<sup>78</sup>. The coin of yet another kind with the same legend features Mars standing in a helmet with his coat hanging down behind him. The deity is turned to the right. His right hand holds a reversed spear while his left is lowered resting on a shield set on the ground<sup>79</sup>. In Rome, the folles with the legend mentioned above were struck from the end of 312 and throughout 313. On the folles, Mars is shown standing, turned to the left, with his head turned to the right. His right hand leans on a reversed spear or a scepter; his left rests on a shield<sup>80</sup>. Finally, in Ostia Antica, the folles were struck in 312–313. On the reverse of the coins, Mars is moving, turned to the right, with his coat fluttering. His right hand holds a spear across his arms and his left holds a shield<sup>81</sup>. The coin of a different kind with the same legend features Mars turned to the left, his right hand holding an olive branch<sup>82</sup>.

The next legend, MARTI PATRI PROPUGNATORI, appeared on bronze coins struck in Trier<sup>83</sup> and Lyon<sup>84</sup> in 307–309. There was also a simplified version of the legend, MARTI PROPUGNATORI, that appeared on coins struck in Trier in 307–308<sup>85</sup>.

It is thus clear that references to Mars the Father appeared on coins struck for Constantine only in 306–309. References to Mars the Victor were rare and appeared only on two series of the coins: one struck in London in 307 and one issued in Lyon in 307–309. The most widespread were the legends referring to Mars the Defender and Saviour (Conservatori and Propugnatori). These references appeared on coins

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<sup>75</sup> RIC VI, no 854–864; 877–885; 896–897.

<sup>76</sup> RIC VI, no 121–122.

<sup>77</sup> RIC VI, no 124–126.

<sup>78</sup> RIC VI, no 139.

<sup>79</sup> RIC VI, no 141.

<sup>80</sup> RIC VI, no 305–306; 364–365; 367. Similar coins with the same legend that feature Mars standing turned to the right: no 307–309, that feature Mars standing straight-ahead, with his right hand resting on a spear and his left on a spear-sceptre: no 31, and that feature Mars moving, turned to the right, with a fluttering cloak, and his right hand holding a spear across his arms, and his left holding a shield: no 311.

<sup>81</sup> RIC VI, no 80.

<sup>82</sup> RIC VI, no 81.

<sup>83</sup> RIC VI, no 730–731; 741; 775–778; 832–834.

<sup>84</sup> RIC VI, no 242–243; 260; 295.

<sup>85</sup> RIC VI, no 732; 742; 779.

struck at different mints until 313. However, it should be noted that folles with the legend SOLI INVICTO COMITI<sup>86</sup> and gold coins with the legend SOLI INVICTO AETERNO AVGG<sup>87</sup> were struck in Constantine's name in Pavia in the years 312–313. Similarly, Constantine's coins with the legends IOVI CONSERVATORI AVGG<sup>88</sup> and SOLI INVICTO COMITI<sup>89</sup> were struck in the same period in Aquileia. At that time, Rome also saw the minting of coins with the legends SOLI INVICTO COMITI<sup>90</sup> and HERCULI VICTORI<sup>91</sup>. Constantine's solidus was then struck bearing the legend IOVI CONSERVATORI AVGG<sup>92</sup>. In Ostia, in the years 312–313, Constantine's coins appeared with the legends HERCULI VICTORI<sup>93</sup> and SOLI INVICTO COMITI<sup>94</sup>. Thus, apart from Mars, there were also other divine patrons (Sol, Jupiter, Hercules) who appeared on the coins struck in Constantine's name in the years 312–313. As Constantine's divine guardian Mars dominated coin issues minted only in the period 306–309. If in light of the facts discussed above 306 was clearly the year when the deity was recognized as the ruler's divine guardian, then the closing date requires some explanation.

In 309, Constantine must have finally realized that he had to look for a new divine protector since he believed he could not rely on Mars. The situation in the empire became complicated significantly by Galerius's reluctant attitude towards the claims of Maxentius, against whom two Augustuses, first Severus<sup>95</sup> and then Galerius<sup>96</sup>, organized armed expeditions, both of which ended in failure. It is likely that Constantine associated both rulers with Mars, as I have noted above. The failed expeditions to Rome seem to have changed the way in which Constantine perceived Galerius. The expeditions indicated that the senior Augustus had been abandoned by extraterrestrial powers headed by Mars and that now Maxentius enjoyed the support of the gods, ensuring his victory. While facing danger, Maxentius offered the Purple to his father, Maximian Herculus. Father and son then tried to secure Constantine's support. The alliance was sealed by Constantine's marriage to Maximian's younger daughter, Fausta, and by his being awarded the title

<sup>86</sup> RIC VI, no 131–133; 135–136.

<sup>87</sup> RIC VI, no 113. A gold coin featuring Constantine with the legend HERCULI COMITI AVGG NN (RIC VI, no 90), was struck in Pavia in 307–308. At that time, however, Pavia remained under the control of Maxentius in whose name a similar coin was struck (RIC VI, no 89).

<sup>88</sup> RIC VI, no 136.

<sup>89</sup> RIC VI, no 144–145.

<sup>90</sup> RIC VI, no 313–319; 321–340; 342–343; 368–369; 371–372; 374; 376–377.

<sup>91</sup> RIC VI, no 298–302.

<sup>92</sup> RIC VI, no 282. Interestingly, a solidus with the legend MARTI CONSERVATORI was also struck in Rome at that time, but it was the coin struck in the name of Licinius and not of Constantine (RIC VI, no 283).

<sup>93</sup> RIC VI, no 79.

<sup>94</sup> RIC VI, no 83; 85; 87; 89; 91; 93.

<sup>95</sup> See LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXVI, 5–10; ZOSIMOS, II, 10, 1–2.

<sup>96</sup> LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXVII, 2–8.

of Augustus<sup>97</sup>. After repelling Galerius's attack, Maxentius gained in confidence, which as early as the spring of 308 resulted in a split with his father, Maximian Herculeus, whom he forced into banishment. Constantine must have been aware of the imminent danger and of the ineluctable clash with the hitherto victorious Maxentius. Maxentius, who also sought Mars's divine protection<sup>98</sup> and presented himself and his son as the successors of the legendary founders of Rome could have become convinced that the deity whose favor allowed Galerius to win the most significant victory during the tetrarchy transferred its support to him. Constantine may have shared the belief, and this time he was quite firm in his demand for Galerius to grant him the title of Augustus<sup>99</sup>. Galerius's position was further weakened by the spectacular failure regarding the persecution of Christians. The edict of toleration he issued on his deathbed two years later, in 311, bearing marks of a kind of a surrender, only confirmed the failure<sup>100</sup>. Unable to count on Mars

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<sup>97</sup> Maxentius and his father sought an ally, afraid that Galerius and Maximian Daia could join forces to attack Italy; see LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXVII, 1. However, after Galerius's failed expedition to Rome, Constantine did not give him armed support; see ZOSIMOS, II, 10, 6; R. DONCIU, *L'empereur Maxence...*, p. 99.

<sup>98</sup> This is supported by the son's name that refers to the Romans' mythical progenitor and numerous coins whose legends and iconography also refer to the deity (struck in Rome in 306–307: RIC VI, no 140, 148; in 307–312: RIC VI, no 172, 186; in 307–310: RIC VI, no 189; in 308–310: RIC VI, no 218–222; minted in Ostia – in 308/309–312: RIC VI, no 3, 11–12; in 309–312: RIC VI, no 58–50). As well as the monument dedicated to Mars and his mythical twin sons, Rome's founders, Romulus and Remus set on the Forum Romanum near the Rostri. Part of the monument's base with its inscription was found in 1899 half-way between Curia and the arch of Septimius, not far from Lapis Niger, that is, Romulus's supposed grave. The monument was most likely erected on 21 April 308, after Maxentius's break with his father, Maximian. Cf. P. BRUGGESSER, *Constantin aux rostrès...*, p. 81–83. In E. MANDERS' (*Coining Images of Power. Patterns in the Representation of Roman Emperors on Imperial Coinage, A.D. 193–284*, Leiden–Boston 2012 [= IE, 15], p. 118, n. 107) opinion *Maxentius wanted to distance himself from 'the Herculean house' and thus from the Tetrarchy*.

<sup>99</sup> In 306 Constantine accepted the decision of being awarded only the title of Caesar. However, by the end of 308 he no longer wanted to resign himself to his low status as Galerius refused to recognize his elevation to Augustus, to which the tetrarchs' decisions made in Carnuntum on 11 November 308 clearly testify. See C.M. ODAHL, *Constantine...*, p. 77–78; T.D. BARNES, *Constantine. Dynasty...*, p. 70–71. Constantine was not alone in refusing to submit to Galerius and demanding the title of Augustus for himself. The same demands were put forward by Maximian Daia. In an effort to find a compromise, Galerius conferred the title of *Filii Augustorum* upon both of them, but during the following year he was forced to capitulate and agree to awarding them the rank of Augustus. (See LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXXII; Cf. RIC VI, p. 215–228, 513–519, 561–568, 626–644, 676–686; C.M. ODAHL, *Constantine...*, p. 78).

<sup>100</sup> See EUSEBIUS CAESARIENSIS, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VIII, 17, 5–10, ed. H. PIETRAS, Kraków 2013 [= ŽMT, 70]; LACTANTIUS, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XXIV. See also J.R. KNIPPING, *The Edict of Galerius (311 A.D.) Re-considered*, RBPH 1.4, 1922, p. 693–705; E. HERRMANN-OTTO, *The So-called Edict of Millan and Constantinian Policy*, BLRev 61.3, 2013, p. 42–46; *Serdica Edict (311 AD). Concepts and Realizations of the Idea of Religious Toleration*, ed. V. VACHKOVA, D. DIMITROV, Sofia 2014, *passim*; R. SUSKI, *Galeriusz...*, p. 342–349.

in the face of an impending conflict with Maxentius, Constantine decided to look for a more powerful divine guardian than Mars.

## Conclusions

Iconographic material from the mints subject to Constantine's authority at the beginning of his reign shows that in the years 306–309 Mars remained Constantine's protective deity. Left out of the appointment as Caesar to the second tetrarchy, Constantine found himself in a very difficult situation, and with the death of his father, Constantius, he lost his natural guardian and protector. Going down the path of usurpation, he created a *fait accompli* for Galerius, the senior Augustus clearly unfavorable to him. At the same time, however, he put himself in grave danger that he only temporarily staved off by reaching a compromise with Galerius who agreed to grant him the title of Caesar. Acting in line with the typically Roman mentality, he tried to secure the support of a divine guardian who could become his defender or even savior. As can be presumed, Galerius himself assigned Constantine to Mars as early as 306, when Constantius' son became Severus' Caesar under the system of tetrarchy, as evidenced by the gold coins struck in Constantine's name in Nicomedia. On the coins, Mars was referred to as father (*Marti Patri*), and Constantine, having witnessed Galerius's triumph over the Persians (with which Mars was credited), recognized the idea of relying on the protection of the deity as his own, as evidenced by legends on coins struck at the mints remaining under his authority. Mars was referred to on the coins as a savior (*conservator*), a fighting defender (*propugnator*), a victor, a peace-bringer, but also as father (*pater*). At the turn of 309, it became clear to Constantine that Galerius had lost Mars's protection and that Maxentius now enjoyed the god's support, posing an increasing threat to him. Therefore, Constantine began to look for a new divine protector who would help him defeat Maxentius.

*Translated by Artur MękarSKI*

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