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A Few Remarks on the Description of the Baptism of the Emperor Constantine in the *Chronicle* of George the Monk, *Actus Silvestri*, and the Byzantine Hagiographical Tradition¹

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the 9th century accounts of Constantine I's baptism. Sources from this period strongly reject Eusebius of Caesarea's account of Constantine's baptism on his deathbed and promote the tradition of the emperor's baptism at the hands of Pope Sylvester in Rome in the early years of the emperor's reign. The acceptance of the legend of Pope Sylvester seems to be connected with the idea of Emperor Constantine's personal holiness in opposition to the emperors' promotion of the emperor-priest ideal in the 8th century. However, the acceptance of the legend concerning Pope Sylvester may also be related to the perception – during the iconoclasm period – of the papacy as a bastion of orthodoxy.

KEYWORDS: George the Monk, Constantine the Great, Byzantine hagiography, *Actus Silvestri*

The figure of Emperor Constantine the Great was very important in the Byzantine period. This ruler was considered to be the second founder of the empire – the Christian empire – and, as a result, he soon gained

¹ I dedicate this article to the memory of Dariusz Brodka, with whom I have had the pleasure of discussing various aspects of late antique historiography on many occasions. I hope that full solutions to puzzles that surrounded us will be revealed to us in the future, better World.

the status of a saint in the Eastern Church. The picture of the holiness of the first Christian emperor was, however, obscured by the information given by Eusebius of Caesarea and, after him, by 4th and 5th century Church historians about Constantine's baptism on his deathbed. Is it possible that a person considered as a model of a pious ruler, who promoted Christianity not only in the empire but also beyond its borders, remained a pagan all his life? This question was particularly relevant during the 8th and 9th centuries.

The purpose of this article is not to analyse in detail the Byzantine traditions concerning Constantine's baptism, which have already been studied in detail on many occasions², still less to consider the historicity of the versions of baptism present in Byzantine historiography and hagiography. The article only analyses certain aspects of the development and spread – in the 9th century in Byzantium – of the version proclaiming Constantine's baptism in Rome at the hands of Pope Silvester and the negation of the version about the emperor's baptism on his deathbed, as well as the arguments accompanying this view. The analysis will focus on historiographical works written in the 9th century – the *Chronicle* of George the Monk and the *Chronography* of Theophanes – and a number of hagiographical works from this period, in the pages of which the motif of the emperor's baptism was very important.

Summarising the reign of the Emperor Constantine, George the Monk, in his *Chronicle*, refers to the controversy surrounding the emperor's baptism, categorically rejecting the version of his baptism on the deathbed:

Indeed, those who deceitfully claimed that Constantine the Great was baptised at the end [of his life] and that he had delayed baptism until then were fictionalising.

and then he goes on to put forward a number of arguments in favour of Constantine's earlier baptism:

² In this respect, see first of all the fundamental and still relevant work of Dölger 1913: 377–447; as well as Baynes 1930: 90–93; Fowden 1994a, especially 153–170; Amerise 2005; Kreider 2013: 41–57. For the development of the Byzantine tradition concerning the Constantinian legend, see also Kazhdan 1987: 196–250.

How could this pious, Christ-loving and exceptionally fervent believer in Christ endure so much time without participating in the sacred mysteries, one who resided primarily with such fathers and followed their holy teachings with joy and sincerity? How can unbelievers think that a perfect Christian died unbaptised? And he who insisted that others should accept [baptism] and receive salvation and remission of sins more quickly, since death can come suddenly and secretly, himself persevered to the end outside the community [of the Church] and uninitiated. This is impossible. For this lie is the mockery and rantings of the Arian frenzy. They wished to portray him as a follower of their own heresy [and to show that] he had been baptised by the Arians.³

³ Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 235r: Ἐματαιώθησαν τοίνυν οἱ καταψευδόμενοι τοῦ μεγάλου Κωνσταντίνου καὶ φάσκοντες αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ τελευτῇ βεβαπτίσθαι καὶ μέχρι τότε τὸ βάπτισμα ὑπερτιθέμενον. πῶς γὰρ ἂν ὁ τοιοῦτος ἀνὴρ θεοσεβῆς καὶ φιλόχριστος καὶ περὶ τὴν εἰς Χριστὸν πίστιν θερμότητος ἠνέσχετο χρόνους τοσοῦτους κεχωρίσθαι τῆς θείας μεταλήψεως τῶν μυστηρίων καὶ μάλιστα τοιοῦτοις πατρᾶσιν συνδιαιτώμενος καὶ τῆς ἱερᾶς αὐτῶν διδασκαλίας ἐπόμενος ἀσπασίως τε καὶ γνησίως; πῶς δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἀπίστοις ἐφαίνετο χριστιανὸς τέλειος μήποτε τελειωθῆς διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος; καὶ ὅπερ ἄλλοις κατεπίγει δέχεσθαι καὶ τὴν σωτηρίαν καὶ ἀπολύτρωσιν τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων θάπτον καροῦσθαι διὰ τὸ ἄδηλον τοῦ θανάτου καὶ αἰφνίδιον αὐτὸς ἀμέτοχος τε καὶ ἀμύητος διεκαρτέρει. μὴ γένοιτο· γέλωσ γὰρ τοῦτο καλῆρος καὶ τῆς ἀρειανικῆς μανίας τὸ κακούργημα βουλομένων τῆς οἰκειᾶς αἰρέσεως ὑπασπιστὴν αὐτὸν ἀποφῆναι δῆθεν καὶ ὑπὸ Ἀρειανῶν βαπτισθῆναι. In the version of the so-called vulgate, published by Carl de Boor, the content of this passus differs from the version in the Paris manuscript, but these differences do not affect the overall message, de Boor 1904: 525, 18–526, 11: Ἐματαιώθησαν τοίνυν οἱ καταψευδόμενοι τοῦ μεγάλου Κωνσταντίνου καὶ φάσκοντες, ὅτι ἐν τῇ τελευτῇ ἐβαπτίσθη καὶ μέχρι τότε ἀβάπτιστος ὑπῆρχεν. πῶς γὰρ ἂν ὁ τοιοῦτος ἀνὴρ θεοσεβῆς καὶ φιλόχριστος καὶ περὶ τὴν πίστιν θερμότητος ἠνέσχετο χρόνους τοσοῦτους κεχωρίσθαι τῆς θείας μεταλήψεως τῶν μυστηρίων καὶ μάλιστα γε τοιοῦτοις πατρᾶσιν ἁγίοις συνδιαιτώμενος καὶ τῆς ἱερᾶς αὐτῶν διδασκαλίας καὶ νοουθεσίας ἐπόμενος ἀσπασίως καὶ γνησίως; πῶς δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἀπίστοις ἐφαίνετο χριστιανὸς τέλειος μήπω τελειωθεὶς διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος; πῶς δὲ καὶ ὁ κατεπίγων καὶ ἀναγκάζων τοὺς ἄλλους ἅπαντας ἀπίστους δηλονότι πιστεῦσαι καὶ βαπτισθῆναι καὶ τὴν ἁγίαν τριάδα ὁμολογῆσαι καθαρώτερον τε καὶ τηλαυγέστερον αὐτὸς ἐν τοιοῦτῳ σκότῳ ἐτύγγανεν; ἀληθῶς ψεῦδος τοῦτο ὑπάρχει καὶ ἀνάπλασμα τῆς Ἀρειανικῆς καὶ ἀθεοῦ αἰρέσεως καὶ τῆς αὐτῶν ἀπιστίας καὶ ἀσεβείας κακούργημα βουλομένων τῆς οἰκειᾶς αἰρέσεως ὑπασπιστὴν ἀποδειῖξαι τὸν μέγαν Κωνσταντῖνον καὶ ὑπὸ Ἀρειανῶν αὐτὸν δῆθεν βαπτισθῆναι ἀναπλαττόντων.

At first glance, the presence of such a strong defence of the version about Constantine's baptism early in his reign may be surprising from an author writing in the 9th century, referring to events more than half a millennium earlier, but it was during this period that the issue was still, and perhaps only then, causing considerable excitement. What contentious issues does George address?

Eusebian version of Constantine's baptism

The earliest account of Constantine's baptism was given by his contemporary Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea Palestina, in his work the *Vita Constantini*, or by his successor on the bishop's throne in Caesarea, Acacius, who probably completed the work after Eusebius' death.⁴ The *Vita Constantini* was written almost immediately after the emperor's death and is therefore an important historical source, although fraught with distortions characteristic of the panegyric. Eusebius, in reporting on the baptism of Constantine, links it to the last moments of the emperor's life and places the event in Nicomedia:

Such were his words. They in their turn performing the customary rites fulfilled the divine laws and imparted the secret gifts, giving such preliminary instruction as is required. Alone of all the Emperors from the beginning of time Constantine was initiated by rebirth in the mysteries of Christ, and exulted in the Spirit on being vouchsafed the divine seal, and was renewed and filled with divine light, rejoicing in his soul because of his intense faith, awestruck at the manifestation of the divinely inspired power. When the due ceremonies were complete, he put on bright imperial clothes which shone like light, and rested on a pure white couch, being unwilling to touch a purple robe again (transl. Cameron, Hall).⁵

⁴ Eusebius died in 339 without completing his work, which was then published most likely by his successor on the episcopal throne of Caesarea, Acacius. The passage about Constantine's illness and death is probably an addition to the work, as is the mention of Constantine's three sons as Augusti, see Cameron, Hall 1999: 9–10.

⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini* IV, 62, 4–5 (Winkelman 1987: 146, 9–17): Ὁ μὲν δὴ ταῦτ' ἔλεγεν, οἱ δὲ τὰ νόμιμα τελοῦντες θεσμοὺς ἀπεπλήρουσι θεῖους καὶ τῶν ἀπορρητῶν μετεδίδοσαν, ὅσα χρὴ προδιαστειλάμενοι. καὶ δὴ μόνος τῶν ἐξ αἰῶνος

The *Vita* does not mention by name the person who baptised Constantine, mentioning only the unnamed bishops present. However, since Eusebius was the bishop of Nicomedia at the time of Constantine's agony, later tradition linked the ruler's baptism to him⁶. However, the silence on the name of the bishop who baptised Constantine began to raise doubts since in the 9th century Photius, in his *Bibliotheca*, seems to have complained about it:

He [Eusebius] also says that Constantine the Great was baptised in Nicomedia, and that he postponed his baptism until then because he desired to receive it in the waters of Jordan; however, he does not at all inform us who baptised him.⁷

Interestingly, similar problems did not accompany the continuators of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, composing in the 1st half of the 5th century – Socrates,⁸ Sozomen⁹ and Theodoret of

αὐτοκρατόρων Κωνσταντίνος Χριστοῦ μυστηρίοις ἀναγεννώμενος ἐτελειοῦτο, θείας τε σφραγίδος ἀξιούμενος ἠγάλλετο τῷ πνεύματι ἀνεκαινοῦτό τε καὶ φωτὸς ἐνεπίμπλατο θείου, χαίρων μὲν τῇ ψυχῇ δι' ὑπερβολὴν πίστεως, τὸ δ' ἐναργὲς καταπεπληγῶς τῆς ἐνθέου δυνάμεως. Ὡς δ' ἐπληροῦτο τὰ δέοντα, λαμπροῖς καὶ βασιλικαῖς ἀμφιάσμασι φωτὸς ἐκλάμπουσι τρόπον περιεβάλλετο ἐπὶ λευκοτάτῃ τε στρωμνῇ διανεπαύετο, οὐκέθ' ἄλουργιδος ἐπιγαῦσαι θελήσας. See a thorough analysis of the description of Constantine's baptism in the work of Eusebius in Amerise 2005: 25–60.

⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini* IV, 61, 3 (Winkelman 1987: 145, 25–26): Μεταβάς δ' ἐνθεν ἐπὶ προάστειον τῆς Νικομηδέων ἀφικνεῖται πόλεως, κἀνταῦθα συγκαλέσας τοὺς ἐπισκόπους ᾧδὲ πη αὐτοῖς διελέξατο. Modern scholars, following Franz Dölger (1913: 385–386), despite the silence of the author of *The Lives of Constantine*, unanimously accept that it was the Bishop of Nicomedia, Eusebius who baptised Constantine. See, for example, Fowden 1994a: 153.

⁷ Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 127 (Henry 1960: 100, 19–23): Λέγει μὲν οὖν καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν Νικομηδεῖα τὸν μέγαν Κωνσταντῖνον βαπτίσασθαι, μέχρι τότε τὸ λουτρὸν ἀναβαλλόμενον ἄτε δὴ ἐν ἐπιθυμία ποιούμενον τοῖς Ἰορδάνου τὸ λουτρὸν ὑποδέξασθαι. Τίς δὲ ὁ βαπτίσας, οὐδὲν διασαφεῖ.

⁸ Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica*, I, 39, 2 (Hansen, Širinjan 1995: 90, 18–21): ἐπεὶ δὲ σφοδρότερον τοῦ νοσήματος ἦσθετο, τὰ μὲν λουτρά ὑπερέθετο, ἀπαίρει δὲ ἐκ τῆς Ἐλενουπόλεως εἰς τὴν Νικομήδειαν, κάκει ἐν προαστείῳ διάγων τοῦ Χριστιανικοῦ μεταλαμβάνει βαπτίσματος.

⁹ Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* II, 34, 1 (Bidez, Hansen 1960: 99, 12–14): χαλεπώτερον δὲ διατεθεὶς διεκομίσθη εἰς Νικομήδειαν, ἔνθα δὴ ἐν προαστείῳ διάγων ἐμνήθη τὴν ἱερὰν βάπτισιν· ἐπὶ τούτῳ τε σφόδρα ἠσθεὶς χάριν ὠμολόγει τῷ θεῷ.

Cyrrhus.¹⁰ Their histories primarily describe the Arian dispute going on throughout the 4th century, thus the confession of the bishop who baptised Constantine should be important to them, yet they repeat the information about Constantine's baptism on his deathbed without attempting to modify it. At the beginning of the 6th century, when Arians were still a visible element in the empire, Theodore the Lector, compiling one *Historia tripartita* from the three works above, also sees no problem in these accounts and follows Socrates in reporting Constantine's baptism on his deathbed in Nicomedia.¹¹ Also, the *Epitome of Historia Tripartita*, written in the early 7th century, does not change this narrative.¹² Consistently, this branch of tradition does not mention the name of the bishop who baptised Constantine.

Some concern about the orthodoxy of Constantine's baptism, according to the testimony of Photius, was shown in the 2nd half of the 5th century by Pseudo-Gelasius of Kyzikos, who is said to have insisted that the emperor's baptism was prepared and led by 'a certain orthodox, and not a heretic, as some maintained'.¹³ However, the name of Eusebius

¹⁰ Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica* I, 32, 1 (Parmentier, Hansen 1998: 88, 22–89, 3): Ἐνιαντοῦ δὲ ἄλλου καὶ μηνῶν διεληλυθότων ὀλίγων, ἐν Νικομηδεῖα τῆς Βιθυνίας διάγων ἠρρώσθησε. τὸ δὲ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης βιότητος ἄδηλον ἐπιστάμενος, τοῦ θεοῦ βαπτίσματος τὸ δῶρον ἐδέξατο. An analysis of the accounts of Constantine's baptism in the aforementioned historians, see Amerise 2005: 85–87.

¹¹ Theodore Lector, *Historia tripartita* (Codex Marcianus gr. 344, f. 68r): ἀπαίρει δὲ ἐκ τῆς Ἐλενουπόλεως ἐν Νικομηδεῖας· κάκει ἐν προαστείῳ διάγων, τοῦ Χριστιανικοῦ βαπτίσματος μεταλαμβάνει. The same is true of the Latin version of the *Historia tripartita*, produced in Constantinople during the reign of Emperor Justinian I, where the message of the aforementioned historians is repeated without change, see Cassiodorus/Epiphanius, *Historia ecclesiastica tripartita* III, 12, 4 (Jacob, Hanslik 1952: 154, 15–17: *Qui cum Nicomedia degeret languore gravatus nec ignorans vitae huius incertum, gratia sacri baptismatis est adeptus*; following Theodoret's work). 6 (Jacob, Hanslik 1952: 154, 23–24: *Nicomedia in suburbano sacri baptismatis donis initiatus est*; following Sozomen's work).

¹² Theodore Lector, *Epitome* 51 (Hansen 1995: 27, 15–16): ἀσθενήσας ἐξῆλθεν ἐν προαστείῳ Νικομηδεῖας· κάκει τοῦ θεοῦ καταξιούται βαπτίσματος.

¹³ Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 88 (Henry 1960: 14, 12–14): Τυχεῖν δὲ φησι τοῦ βαπτίσματος ὀρθοδόξου μυσταγωγῆσαντος καὶ τελέσαντος, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὥς τισιν ἔδοξε, τῶν αἰρετικῶν τινος χειραπτήσαντος. However, when discussing the codices, Photius often added his own comments, so it is possible that the second part of the above sentence is his own remark.

as the person who administered the sacrament appears in a later historiographical work – the 7th century *Paschal Chronicle*, which report that Constantine on his deathbed received baptism from Eusebius, the bishop of Constantinople¹⁴. Although the anonymous author commits an anachronism by erroneously reporting that Eusebius was the bishop of the capital at the time, since he was still the bishop of Nicomedia and only took the throne of the Constantinopolitan Church during the reign of Constantius, the chronicler saw nothing wrong in reporting that Constantine was baptised by a bishop known for his Arian beliefs.

In short, for three centuries after Constantine's baptism, the person administering it to him did not unduly inflame the minds of historians, nor did the fact that the ruler only received baptism on his deathbed. Why then, in the 9th century, does George the Monk so emotionally deny the account given over the centuries, calling it 'the mockery and rantings of the Arian frenzy' (γέλωτος γὰρ τοῦτο καλῆρος καὶ τῆς ἀρειανικῆς μανίας)?

George the Monk's *Chronicle*

George the Monk not only denies the account of Constantine's baptism on his deathbed, but he also gives an alternative version of the event.¹⁵ In an extensive narrative, placed by the author chronologically in the section on the reign of his father, Constantius I, he gives the legend of

¹⁴ *Chronicon Paschale*, s.a. 337 (Dindorf 1832: 532, 9–12): ἐλθὼν ἕως Νικομηδείας, ἐνδόξως καὶ εὐσεβῶς μεταλλάττει τὸν βίον ἐν προαστείῳ τῆς αὐτῆς πόλεως μὴνὶ ἀρτεμισίῳ ια', καταξίωθεις τοῦ σωτηριώδους βαπτίσματος ὑπὸ Εὐσεβίου ἐπισκόπου Κωνσταντινουπόλεως,... However, the conjecture that Constantine was baptised by Eusebius of Nicomedia appears much earlier, as evidenced by the Latin *Chronicle* of Jerome, written around 380, see Jerome, *Chronicle* s.a. 337 (Helm 1956: 234, 3–5): *Constantinus extremo uitae suae tempore ab Eusebio Nicomedensi episcopo baptizatus in Arrianum dogma declinat*. In Greek sources from the 4th and 5th centuries such information does not appear.

¹⁵ Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219r–v; George the Monk, *Chronicon* (de Boor 1904: 485, 4–487, 20). Canella 2013: 249 erroneously reports that George the Monk does not mention the conversion and baptism of Constantine at all. This error is probably due to the fact that George places relevant events not in the section on Constantine but on his father, Constantius I.

Constantine's illness, which he contracted after his father's death¹⁶. The type of illness was not specified by the author, but it was so serious that neither medicine nor magic could cure it. In an attempt to find a remedy for this illness, pagan priests were approached and they suggested that Constantine should bathe in a pool filled with the warm blood of children. The emperor agreed to this cure and ordered that children from all the dioceses were to be delivered to Rome, but on seeing their lamenting mothers, the emperor ordered the children to be given back to them, supplied for the return journey and gave up the cure. Then, in a dream, the apostles Peter and Paul appeared to him and directed to the Bishop Silvester 'of Mount Serapios'¹⁷, who will remedy his misfortune. The emperor sent for the bishop, whom he received with great respect. He questioned the bishop about the Apostles and asked for their preserved images. Assured that it was they who had appeared to him in a dream, the emperor asked Silvester for a saving spring. The bishop baptised Constantine, who immediately recovered to the amazement of the people. His mother, relatives and friends were then baptised.

The version about Constantine's baptism in Rome at the hands of Pope Silvester was not something new in the 9th century, as John Malalas already included it in his *Chronographia* three centuries earlier, albeit in a very brief form: 'After fasting and having taken instruction, he was baptised by Silvester, bishop of Rome – he himself and his mother Helena and all his relatives and his friends and a whole host of other Romans.'¹⁸ Malalas, however, in reporting this event, omits the aspect of the ruler's illness, linking it only to the miraculous vision of the cross experienced by the emperor.¹⁹ This version, however, was not convincing for the anonymous author of the *Chronicon Paschale* who used the *Chronicle* of John Malalas but he chose to include the Eusebian

¹⁶ Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219r; de Boor 1904: 485, 4: μετὰ τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς τελευτήν.

¹⁷ Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219r; de Boor 1904: 486, 5: ἐκ τοῦ Σεραπίου ὄρους.

¹⁸ John Malalas, *Chronographia*, XIII, 2 (Thurn 2000: 243, 24–27): καὶ νηστεύσας καὶ κατηχηθεὶς ἐβαπτίσθη ὑπὸ Σιλβέστρου, ἐπισκόπου Ῥώμης, αὐτὸς καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ Ἑλένη καὶ πάντες οἱ συγγενεῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ οἱ φίλοι αὐτοῦ καὶ πλῆθος ἄλλων πολλῶν Ῥωμαίων.

¹⁹ Canella 2013: 248–249. John Malalas links this vision to Constantine's victory over the barbarians in the West, not over Maxentius. See also Amerise 2005: 106–112.

version in his work, as we mentioned above. From the perspective of the analysis of the *Chronicle* of George the Monk, it is interesting to note the final information of Malalas, who reports the baptism of Constantine's immediate circle in a form similar to that given by George.²⁰

The one-sentence information of John Malalas, however, could not have been the source of George the Monk's elaborate narrative. George's testimony is important not only because it is the earliest Greek source attributing Constantine's baptism to Silvester, but also because the first version of his *Chronicle* was written in Antioch.²¹ From the eastern provinces of the empire comes also the Syriac *Ecclesiastical History* of Pseudo-Zachariah, written in the 6th century.²² It contains a very elaborate story about Constantine's baptism, analogous to that of George.²³ In addition to the legendary account of Constantine's baptism in Rome, the *Ecclesiastical History* contains other legends concerning Pope Silvester present also in the Latin work known as *Actus Silvestri*²⁴. This extensive passus of several dozen pages is unlikely to have been taken from the original Greek *Ecclesiastical History* of Zechariah of Mitylene, but comes from the editor of its Syriac version, composed in 569 by the anonymous monk of Amida. In any case, the legend associated with Pope Silvester and Constantine's baptism in Rome reached in its full version the eastern provinces of the empire in the 2nd half of the 6th century at the latest. However, the first traces of its use in Constantinople appeared two centuries later, which leads us to look at the tradition associated with the Greek version of the *Actus Silvestri*.

²⁰ George the Monk, *Chronicon*, Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219v: αὐτίκα δὲ καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ Ἑλένη βαπτίζεται καὶ οἱ τοῦτου συγγενεῖς τε καὶ φίλοι.

²¹ For the work of John Malalas in Antioch, see Croke 2006: 6–11; Treadgold 2007: 715–718; Saliou 2016: 59.

²² Zachariah Rhetor's *Ecclesiastical History* was written in the 490s, but only a Syriac version of this source has survived to our times – in a work dated 568/569 by an anonymous author, the so-called Pseudo-Zachariah, who included it in Books III–VI of his own history. Pseudo-Zachariah was a monk living in Amida, where he had access to important historical sources, collected in the local cathedral library by the bishop Mara, see Greatrex 2009: 33–37.

²³ Pseudo-Zachariah, *Historia ecclesiastica* (Brooks 1919: 62, 27–67, 3).

²⁴ Pseudo-Zachariah, *Historia ecclesiastica* (Brooks 1919: 56, 6–93, 3). Canella 2013: 249 states that the passus of Pseudo-Zachariah corresponds to the Latin version B1 of *Actus Silvestri* and its Greek version 1a.

Actus Silvestri

The *Actus Silvestri* was a very popular work, as evidenced by a huge number of its manuscripts. The Latin version of the *Actus* is preserved in some 350 manuscripts and the Greek version in 90 manuscripts.²⁵

In addition to the legend of Constantine's baptism in Rome, the *Chronicle* of George the Monk contains two more stories, presented in both Pseudo-Zachariah's *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Actus Silvestri* – one about a dragon inhabiting the Capitolium and plaguing the people of Rome, defeated thanks to the Pope's intervention, and the other about his dispute with the Jews, ending with the miracle of resurrecting a dead bull. Both stories portray the Pope in a very positive light.²⁶ This indicates that George the Monk also used the *Actus Silvestri*, either directly or indirectly.

The Greek version of the *Actus Silvestri* has survived to our times in several versions.²⁷ Unfortunately, it is not known when and where this Greek translation was produced, but it seems to have been known in Constantinople at the turn of the 9th century.²⁸

²⁵ Canella 2013: 242; Wirbelauer 2021: 84.

²⁶ Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 221v–222r and 223v–225r; George the Monk, *Chronicon* (de Boor 1904: 490, 18–491, 23 and 496, 4–499, 7).

²⁷ All Greek versions of the *Actus Silvestri* are derived from its Latin version. The basic text of the Greek version of *Actus Silvestri* is a translation of the younger Latin version (B1), and all later Greek versions also refer to this text. There are more than 90 Greek manuscripts of the *Actus Silvestri*, attesting to the considerable popularity of this work in the East, see Dagron 1996: 157; Levison 1924: 224; Canella 2013: 242; Kazhdan 1987: 210. The Greek translation of the *Actus Silvestri* was published by François Combefis (1660: 258–336). It was based on the 10th century manuscript Codex Parisinus gr. 513 (f. 77v–99v), representing the Greek version Ia, but the editor revised the text on the basis of the 11th century manuscript Codex Parisinus gr. 1448 (f. 1r–24r), which in turn represents version Ib, see Combefis 1660: 337–338. Due to the mixing of the two versions, modern scholars consider the Combefis edition to be unreliable, see Levison 1924: 225; Pohlkamp 1992: 136–137. For this reason, in the present work I have compared the text published by Combefis with both of the Paris manuscripts he used.

²⁸ Kazhdan 1987: 248 assumes that the *Actus Silvestri* appeared in Constantinople in the 780s. Although the legend mentions images of Peter and Paul kept in the Roman Church, to which it does not refer negatively, it is impossible to link this passus to the iconoclastic controversy, since it already appears in the Latin version, which was

Part of the story of Constantine's baptism by Silvester (albeit without the details present in the *Chronicle* of George the Monk) was known in Constantinople since at least 787, when Pope Hadrian's letter to Constantine VI and Irene of 25 October 785 was read out at the second session of the Council of Nicaea. In his letter, the Pope cites information taken from the *Actus Silvestri* about a vision of the Apostles Peter and Paul that Constantine supposedly received in a dream. It is interesting to note that in the original Latin version of the letter the Pope does not mention Constantine's baptism in Rome at the hands of Pope Silvester. This information was added at the end of his letter in the Greek version of the Council *Acts*, which means that at the time of the Council (or at the time of the editing of the *Acts*) this version was well established in Constantinople.²⁹ It is also surprising that the legend used by the Bishop of Rome as an argument in ecclesial policy aimed at increasing the role of the papacy was not only rejected by Constantinople but very quickly accepted in the East and incorporated into the official message.³⁰

The truncated version of the legend read at the Council could not have been George's source, but it may have formed the basis for another chronicle, written in the 2nd decade of the 9th century – the

written at the turn of the 6th century and therefore long before the iconoclastic dispute, see Mombritius 1910: 512, 13–17. Kazhdan 1987: 232 also points out that George (or his source) avoids the term 'icon' in describing the dialogue between Constantine and Sylvester. The emperor asks the Pope to show him 'διὰ τινος ζωγραφίας', and the deacon brings the 'στηθάρια' of the Apostles painted on a board (ἐν σανίσιν). See Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219v; George the Monk, *Chronicon* (de Boor 1904: 486, 17–21). The Greek version of the *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 83rB (Combefis 1600: 278) has the term 'εἰκόνες'.

²⁹ A letter from Pope Hadrian to Emperor Constantine VI and Irene (Lamberz 2008: 123, 21–125, 27). The information about the emperor's baptism itself is a one-sentence addition from the Greek *Acts* of the Council to Pope Hadrian's letter (Lamberz 2008: 124, 27–28: καὶ γενομένης κολυμβήτρας ἐβαπτίσθη καὶ παραχρῆμα ἰάθη.), absent in the original Latin version. The original version focuses on the vision of the Apostles Peter and Paul supposedly experienced by the emperor and the Pope's showing him image (Lamberz 2008: 125, 23: *imago, pictura*) of the Apostles, and ends with Constantine's exhortation to the Pope to show him a pool in which the Apostles promised the Pope healing; see Lamberz 2001: 225.

³⁰ Dagron 1996: 157. The Pope's letter gave an official dimension to the story, which became part of Roman propaganda.

Chronography of Theophanes. The author gives here a version of Constantine's baptism according to which the emperor was baptised in Rome by Pope Silvester in the early years of his reign, dating the event to 5814 from the Creation of the World, which coincides with 321/322 AD. It is interesting to note that Theophanes, like George, attaches to this information arguments against Eusebius' account:

In this year, as some say, Constantine the Great together with his son Crispus was baptized in Rome by Silvester. The inhabitants of Old Rome preserve even today the baptismal font as evidence that he was baptized in Rome by Silvester after the removal of the tyrants. The easterners, on the other hand, claim that he was baptized on his death-bed in Nicomedia by the Arian Eusebios of Nicomedia, at which place he happened to die. They claim that he had deferred baptism in the hope of being baptized in the river Jordan. In my view it is more likely to be true that he was baptized by Silvester in Rome and the decrees addressed to Miltiades that are ascribed to him are Arian forgeries, since they were eager to win some glory from this or else wanted to denigrate this completely pious emperor by revealing in this fashion that he was not baptized, which is absurd and false. For if he had not been baptized at the Council of Nicaea, he could not have taken the holy sacraments nor joined in the prayers of the holy Fathers, something that is most absurd both to say and to hold (transl. Mango, Scott)³¹.

³¹ Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 5814 (de Boor 1883: 17, 24–18, 10): Τούτω τῷ ἔτει, ὡς φασί τινες, Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ μέγας σὺν Κρίσπῳ, τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ, ἐν Ῥώμῃ ὑπὸ Σιλβέστρου ἐβαπτίσθη, ὡς οἱ κατὰ τὴν πρεσβυτέραν Ῥώμην μέχρι σήμερον τὸν βαπτιστήρα ἔχουσιν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ὅτι ὑπὸ Σιλβέστρου ἐν Ῥώμῃ ἐβαπτίσθη μετὰ τὴν ἀναίρεσιν τῶν τυράννων. οἱ δὲ κατὰ τὴν ἀνατολὴν ἐν Νικομηδεῖα φασὶν αὐτὸν περὶ τὸν θάνατον ὑπὸ Εὐσεβίου τοῦ Νικομηδέως Ἀρειανοῦ βεβαπτίσθαι· ἔνθα καὶ ἔτυχεν αὐτὸν κοιμηθῆναι. ἀναβαλλόμενος γὰρ ἦν, φασίν, τὸ βάπτισμα, ἐλπίζων ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ βαπτισθῆναι ποταμῷ. ἐμοὶ δὲ ἀληθέστερον φαίνεται τὸ ὑπὸ Σιλβέστρου ἐν Ῥώμῃ βεβαπτίσθαι αὐτόν, καὶ τὰς ἐπ' ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ φερομένας διατάξεις πρὸς Μιλτιάδην πεπλασμένας εἶναι τοῖς Ἀρειανοῖς, δόξαν ἐντεῦθεν περιποιεῖσθαι σπουδάζουσιν ἑαυτοῖς, ἢ καὶ τὸν πανευσεβῆ βασιλέα κακίζειν ἐθέλουσιν, ἀβάπτιστον δεικνύντες ἐντεῦθεν, ὅπερ ἄτοπὸν ἐστὶ καὶ ψευδές. εἰ γὰρ οὐκ ἦν βεβαπτισμένος ἐν τῇ κατὰ Νίκαιαν συνόδῳ, λοιπὸν οὐδὲ μετελάμβανε τῶν θείων μυστηρίων, οὐδὲ συνήχето τοῖς ἁγίοις πατράσιν, ὅπερ ἀτοπώτατόν ἐστι καὶ λέγειν καὶ φρονεῖν. ἄλλοι δὲ Ἀρειανοὶ καὶ Ἕλληνας ὡς νόθον διαβάλλουσι τὸν μέγαν Κωνσταντῖνον· ψεύδονται δὲ καὶ οὗτο.

Theophanes also limits himself to information about the emperor's baptism, omitting other stories about Pope Silvester that are presented in the *Chronicle* of George the Monk, but the author does not state where he got this information from. Although Carl de Boor in his edition of Theophanes points in the margin to Alexander Monk's work *De inventione sanctae Crucis* (PG, vol. 87.3, col. 4068A), one of Theophanes' main sources for this period, as the English translators of the *Chronography* do,³² in the place indicated by de Boor Alexander states: Ἐπιβίωσας δὲ ἔτι ἔτος ἕν καὶ μῆνας ὀλίγους περιέπεσεν ἀρρώστια τινὶ, ἐν ἧ καὶ βαπτισθεὶς ἐν Νικομηδεῖα ἀπέθανεν, which is consistent with the Eusebian tradition. Alexander, like Eusebius and 5th century historians, does not indicate by name who baptised Constantine. Theophanes was an ardent defender of icons, living in the time of the Council of Nicaea, so he did not necessarily learn the account of Constantine's Roman baptism from the *Actus Silvestri*. It is possible that Theophanes found the information about the Roman baptism in the *Acts* of the Council of Nicaea of 787, although a baptismal font preserved in Rome, which the chronicler refers to, is not mentioned there.

Theophanes seems not so much to refer to the sources he has but expresses a personal opinion (ἐμοὶ δὲ ἀληθέστερον φαίνεται), which is unique in the pages of his *Chronography*.³³ Moreover, in denying the emperor's baptism on his deathbed, he uses an argument similar to that expressed by George the Monk: an unbaptised ruler could not partake in the sacraments and pray with the bishops at the Council of Nicaea. Did George, therefore, simply take over Theophanes' opinion and develop it in the pages of his *Chronicle*?

Although George was familiar with the work of Theophanes, it seems not in its full version, but rather in an abridged version of the epitome. With regard to the information about Constantine's baptism in Rome, the two sources differ significantly, both in terms of the chronology and in the content of the information provided, so that Theophanes' abridged account certainly could not have been George's source. George places Constantine's baptism immediately after the death of his father, Constantius Chlorus, i.e. in 306, while Theophanes, as

³² Mango, Scott 1997: 32, n. 1.

³³ Mango, Scott 1997: 33, n. 3.

mentioned above, places it 15 years later. What caused this difference? George the Monk paid little attention to chronological issues, creating a story that was more theological and moral than historical. Theophanes, on the other hand, despite his many stumbling blocks in dating, sought to produce a work par excellence annalistic and was aware that Silvester only began his pontificate from 314 onwards³⁴, so he could not, as the bishop, baptise Constantine before that date. George was not concerned with such nuances. It seems that the author's aim was to Christianise Constantine's entire reign, making him in effect the first Christian emperor and sanctioning all his policies.³⁵

Byzantine Lives of Constantine

In 1987 Friedhelm Winkelmann published an attempted reconstruction of the so-called *Grundvita*, the oldest Byzantine *Vita Constantini*, on which later hagiographical texts on this ruler were based.³⁶ The basis for this reconstruction is the anonymous text BHG 366, which Winkelmann identifies as being written – at the latest – at the end of the 8th century, and was probably written earlier, even in the 7th century. The hagiographer gave here the following information concerning Constantine's baptism: 'This thrice-blessed and [residing] among the saints Constantine, the great emperor who appeared as the first Christian emperor, was baptised in Rome by Silvester, Archbishop of Rome, after a vision of the holy and all-venerable Cross appeared to him from God in the sky in Byzantium.'³⁷ This information, devoid of detail, is

³⁴ On Sylvester's pontificate, see Pohlkamp 1995: 1905–1908.

³⁵ George the Monk mentions in just one sentence the reign of Philip the Arab, who was promoted as the first Christian emperor, see George the Monk (de Boor 1904: 465, 8–10). On the ascribed Christianity of Philip the Arab, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* VI, 34 (Schwartz, Mommsen 1999: 588, 25–590, 9) and Orosius, *Historia adversum paganos* VII, 20 (Zangemeister 1889: 478, 10–479, 6).

³⁶ Winkelmann 1987: 623–638.

³⁷ *Vita Constantini – Grundvita* II (Winkelmann 1987: 633, 39–634, 43): οὗτος (αὐτὸς) τοίνυν ὁ τρισμακάριος καὶ ἐν ἀγίοις (ἀγιος) Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ μέγας (βασιλεὺς) πρῶτος ὢν καὶ ἐπιεικῆς (ὢν) πρῶτος Χριστιανῶν βασιλεύσας (βασιλεὺς) ἀναδείκνυται, βαπτισθεὶς ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ Ρώμῃ ὑπὸ Σιλβέστρου ἀρχιεπισκόπου Ρώμης μετὰ τὴν θεόθεν

similar in its brevity to the account of Theophanes, except the fact that chronologically it links, like Malalas, the baptism of Constantine with the vision of the cross. In this case, however, it seems that the author, in reporting the vision ‘in Byzantium’,³⁸ links the said vision with the Battle of Chrysopolis. It is therefore possible that the hagiographer based his account precisely on Malalas’ information.

From the 9th century onwards, the information about Constantine’s baptism in Rome at the hands of Pope Silvester becomes the main leitmotif of hagiographical works on Constantine. The emphasis on the Roman version of the emperor’s baptism is accompanied by a negation of the Eusebian version, as we see already in Theophanes and George the Monk. The rise in popularity of this version is linked to the development of the idea of the sanctity of Constantine. This idea required the removal of ambiguous or embarrassing information from accounts of the emperor’s life.³⁹ Deathbed baptism, long out of practice in the 9th century, was at odds with the image of the saintly emperor, and the Arian, heretical beliefs of the Bishop Eusebius further exacerbated the whole issue, as in the reality of the 9th century it meant that Constantine himself was a heretic, which was incompatible with the idea of his sanctity. To counter this charge, Byzantine authors presented apologies of the ruler’s orthodoxy, and the version proclaiming Constantine’s baptism at the beginning of his reign in Rome provided an opportunity for them to defend this vision of sanctity, even if it necessarily involved the promotion of a Roman bishopric.⁴⁰

It is assumed that the description of George the Monk was used by the anonymous author of the *Vita Constantini* preserved in Codex

δειχθεῖσαν αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ τοῦ τιμίου καὶ πανσέπτου σταυροῦ ὀπτασίαν (ἐν τῷ Βυζαντίῳ).

³⁸ The phrase ἐν τῷ Βυζαντίῳ is a lesson from *Vita* BHG 366a that Winkelmann considers to be older than the *Vita* BHG 365z.

³⁹ Dagron 1996: 155–157.

⁴⁰ Amerise 2005: 23 sees the reason for Photius’ silence about Constantine’s Roman baptism in his very negative stance towards papal interference in Constantinople. This is possible, although it should be borne in mind that the *Bibliotheca* was written before Photius began to hold the patriarch office in 858 and before Constantinople’s relations with Rome were exacerbated.

Angelicus 22, published by Hans-Georg Opitz (BHG 365).⁴¹ Because of this relationship, the *Vita* is usually dated to the late 9th or rather 10th century.⁴² The anonymous author of the *Vita* had at his disposal an impressive set of historiographical works written in late antiquity, including the *Vita Constantini* of Eusebius of Caesarea, the ecclesiastical histories of Philostorgius, Socrates, Theodoret, the *Historia tripartita* of Theodore the Lector, the work of Hesychius or the *Epitome* of ecclesiastical histories written in the early 7th century. Despite the availability of numerous historical works, including the work of Eusebius, the *Vita* describes the baptism of Constantine in a manner similar to the account of George.⁴³ Immediately following it with the stories inserted by George about the dragon inhabiting the Capitolium, defeated by Silvester (*Vita* 4)⁴⁴ and the Pope's debate with the Jews (*Vita* 5–7).⁴⁵ The stories differ in some elements from the version of George the Monk, especially the one concerning the debate, but they show a mutual dependence. First of all, the arrangement of the stories taken from the *Actus Silvestri* is the same: first the description of Constantine's baptism, then the dragon story and finally the disputation with the Jews, whereas in the *Actus Silvestri* the baptism of Constantine separates the dragon story and the disputation.⁴⁶ It should be noted, however, that the author of the *Vita Constantini* gives the stories taken from the *Actus* one after the other, while George separates the story of Constantine's baptism from the story of the dragon and the dispute with the Jews with a series of information taken from the *Epitome* of Theodore Lector. George does not give the source of any of these three stories in his *Chronicle*. Correctly grouping them into a single sequence in the *Vita Constantini* might suggest the opposite relationship: George's taking information about the emperor's baptism from the *Vita*.

A comparison of the two accounts, however, rules out such a relationship. The account contained in BHG 365 is much shorter than in the

⁴¹ Opitz 1934: 535–593.

⁴² Opitz 1934: 537.

⁴³ *Vita Constantini* (BHG 365) 3 (Opitz 1934: 546, 15–547, 19).

⁴⁴ *Vita Constantini* (BHG 365) 4 (Opitz 1934: 547, 20–548, 7).

⁴⁵ *Vita Constantini* (BHG 365) 5–6 (Opitz 1934: 548, 8–551, 28).

⁴⁶ *Actus Silvestri* (Combefis 1600: 269–272 (tale of the dragon), 272–282 (baptism of Constantine), 293–333 (dispute with the Jews).

George's *Chronicle*. The anonymous author removes from the description any elements that put Constantine in a negative light, such as the emperor's initial agreement to bathe in the blood of children.⁴⁷ In the account of the *Vita*, the emperor immediately rejects the idea of such a treatment as 'something absurd.'⁴⁸ The meeting between the emperor and the Pope is also dealt with briefly in the *Vita*; the author removed the dialogue between the two, including the issue concerning the images of the Apostles, which is present in the *Chronicle*.⁴⁹ In the *Vita* account, the emperor was simply healed as a result of his baptism,⁵⁰ without any description of the fish scales that fell off the emperor's body and remained in the baptistery.⁵¹ Finally, George concludes the story with information about the baptism of Constantine's mother Helena, his relatives and friends,⁵² whereas in the *Vita* not only Helena but also Constantine's son Crispus was baptised⁵³, which is the only Anonymus information extending George's account. Nor does the author of the *Vita* use anti-Arian invectives; at the beginning of the passus concerning Constantine's baptism he merely states: 'As regards his baptism, some of the historians say that it occurred towards the end of his life.' The possibility of George's use of *Vita* should therefore be excluded.

Another anonymous *Vita Constantini* dating to the 2nd half of the 9th century, published by Michelangelo Guidi (BHG 364),⁵⁴ also repeats the account of Constantine's baptism known from the *Chronicle* of

⁴⁷ George the Monk, *Chronicon*, Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219v (de Boor 1904: 485, 7–12).

⁴⁸ Opitz 1934: 546, 25: καὶ τῷ πράγματος ἀτοπήματι. A situation in which it is necessary for the health of the emperor to shed the innocent blood of children is also described as absurd by *Actus Silvestri* (Combefis 1600: 274: καὶ πῶς οὐκ ἄτοπὸν ἔσται). However, this sentence is not found in the Codex Parisinus manuscript gr. 513 (on f. 82rB – the sentence ending in the Combefis edition with the word κέκτηκε is followed by the sentence beginning with ἴνα). However, a sentence absent from this manuscript appears in the manuscript Codex Parisinus gr. 1448, f. 6rA.

⁴⁹ Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219v (de Boor 1904: 486, 10–487, 3).

⁵⁰ Opitz 1934: 547, 10–14.

⁵¹ George the Monk, *Chronicon*, Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219v (de Boor 1904: 487, 5–6).

⁵² Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219v (de Boor 1904: 487, 18–20).

⁵³ Opitz 1934: 547, 17–19.

⁵⁴ Guidi 1907: 306–340, 637–660.

George the Monk, placing the event chronologically after Constantine's victory over Maxentius in 312, which does not agree with the dating of either Theophanes or George the Monk, but is close to the account of John Malalas, but the latter reports Constantine's victory over the barbarians, not Maxentius. The *Vita*'s account⁵⁵ of the circumstances of the baptism is very close to that of George's but includes many elements absent from the *Chronicle*, found in the pages of the *Actus Silvestri*: the precise identification of Constantine's illness, which was unknown to George, as a type of leprosy called elephantiasis,⁵⁶ the presence of Persian healers⁵⁷; Constantine's rejection of the doctor's help after the night vision of the Apostles,⁵⁸ Emperor's preparation for baptism by fasting.⁵⁹ In addition, there is information in the *Vita*, absent from either the Greek version of the *Actus Silvestri* or the pages of the *Chronicle* of George the Monk, that Constantine's son Crispus was baptised along with the ruler.⁶⁰ Instead, this information is present in the *Vita* BHG 365 and in the *Chronography* of Theophanes. On the other hand, George

⁵⁵ *Vita Constantini* (BHG 364) (Guidi 1907: 324, 27–329, 20).

⁵⁶ Guidi 1907: 325, 2: εἰς ἐλεφαντικὴν λείπρα ~ *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 81vB ~ Combefis 1600: 273: ἐλεφαντικῆ λείπρα. This is how Constantine's illness was already referred to in the Latin version of the *Actus Silvestri*, see Pohlkamp 1984: 380, n. 91, who quotes version A(1): *elephantiae a deo lepra percussus est*. Pohlkamp (1984: 381) believes that the author of the *Actus* is referring here to Egyptian leprosy (*elephantiae lepra*), the treatment of which in the case of an Egyptian ruler was described by Pliny, who reports that a pool in the royal baths was filled with warm human blood for this purpose, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* 26, 7–8 (Mayhoff 1897: 176, 12–14).

⁵⁷ Guidi 1907: 325, 5: ἐκ Περσίδος ἀχθέντες ἔμπειροι τῆς ἰατρικῆς τέχνης ~ *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 81vB ~ Combefis 1600: 273: οἱ ἐκ Περσίδος ἀχθέντες ἔμπειροι τῆς ἰατρικῆς ἐπιστήμης); the bloodbath ritual on the Capitolium (Guidi 1907: 325, 11: ἐν τῷ Καπετωλίῳ ~ *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 82rA and Codex Parisinus gr. 1448, f. 5vB: Καπετώλιον ~ Combefis 1600: 273: Καπετωλίου).

⁵⁸ Guidi 1907: 327, 7–12 ~ *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 83rA ~ Combefis 1600: 276.

⁵⁹ Guidi 1907: 328, 4–6: ὁ δὲ μακάριος καὶ ἅγιος Σίλβεστρος ἐπτά ἡμέρας τῷ βασιλεῖ νηστείαν κηρύξας εὐλόγησεν αὐτόν, καὶ ποιήσας κατηχούμενον ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ~ *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 83vAB ~ Combefis 1600: 279–280.

⁶⁰ Guidi 1907: 328, 28–329, 1: ἐβαπτίσθη δὲ σὺν αὐτῷ καὶ Κρίσπος ὁ πρῶτος υἱὸς αὐτοῦ. Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 5814 (de Boor 1883: 17, 24–28): Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ μέγας σὺν Κρίσπῳ, τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ...

the Monk gives information that is present in the *Actus Silvestri* and absent from the *Vita*: Pope Silvester comes to the Emperor from the ‘Mount Serapios’⁶¹; the Pope explains to the ruler that Peter and Paul are not gods but servants of the one God⁶²; the bringing of the image of the Apostles by a deacon,⁶³ while in the *Vita* by the Pope himself.⁶⁴

Finally, the author of the *Vita* reports that ‘we have heard it from reverent men, that in Old Rome to this very day they preserve the baptistery as evidence that Constantine the Great was baptised in Rome’.⁶⁵ This information is present in almost the same form in Theophanes’ *Chronographia* (‘The inhabitants of Old Rome preserve even today the baptismal font as evidence that he was baptised in Rome by Silvester’⁶⁶). The *Vita* therefore shares elements not only with the *Chronicle* of George the Monk but also with the work of Theophanes.

⁶¹ Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219r ~ de Boor 1883: 486, 5: ἐκ τοῦ Σεραπίου (or Σεραπειου) ὄρους ~ *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 82vB–83rA ~ Combefis 1600: 277: ἐν τῷ Σοραπτινῷ.

⁶² Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219v ~ de Boor 1883: 486, 15–18: ἡμεῖς ἕνα θεὸν ἔχομεν ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς, οὗ Πέτρος καὶ Παῦλος δοῦλοι γνήσιοι τγγχάνουσιν ~ *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 83rA ~ Combefis 1600: 277: Πέτρος καὶ Παῦλος, θεοὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν, ἀλλὰ δοῦλοι εἰσὶν τοῦ Θεοῦ.

⁶³ Codex Coislinianus 305, f. 219v ~ de Boor 1883: 486, 19–21: καὶ παραχρῆμα κελεύσας ὁ ἐπίσκοπος τῷ ἰδίῳ διακόνῳ ἐνεγκεῖν τὰ στηθάρια τῶν ὁμοιωμάτων αὐτῶν ἐν σανίτιν ~ *Actus Silvestri*, Codex Parisinus gr. 513, f. 83rB ~ Combefis 1600: 278: ὁ Σιλβέστρος ἐκέλευσεν τῷ διακόνῳ αὐτοῦ κομίσει τὰς ιδέας αὐτῶν.

⁶⁴ Guidi 1907: 327, 25–26: ὧν δὴ τὰς εἰκόνας εὐθὺς ὁ ἱεράρχης ἐγχειρίσας τῷ βασιλεῖ. Kazhdan 1987: 231–232.

⁶⁵ *Vita Constantini* (BHG 364) (Guidi 1907: 329, 2–7): λέγεται δὲ πρὸς πληροφορίαν τοῦ θείου βαπτίσματος αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῦτο, ὡς παρὰ ἀνδρῶν φιλευσεβῶς ἀκηκόαμεν, ὅτι κατὰ τὴν πρεσβυτέραν Ῥώμην μέχρι σήμερον τὸν βαπτιστῆρα ἔχουσιν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ὅτι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐν ἀγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ οἰκουμενικοῦ διδασκάλου Σιλβέστρου ὁ μέγας Κωνσταντῖνος ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ ἐβαπτίσθη... Cf. Kazhdan 1987: 239, who regards the reference to the extant baptistery as an attempt to ‘scientifically’ argue for the thesis of Constantine’s baptism in Rome.

⁶⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 5814 (de Boor 1883: 17, 25–27): ὡς οἱ κατὰ τὴν πρεσβυτέραν Ῥώμην μέχρι σήμερον τὸν βαπτιστῆρα ἔχουσιν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ὅτι ὑπὸ Σιλβέστρου ἐν Ῥώμῃ ἐβαπτίσθη... Constantine’s baptistery in Rome is also reported in the *Liber Pontificalis* 34, 13 (Duchesne 1886: 174): *Fontem sanctum, ubi baptizatus est Augustus Constantinus*. On this issue see Dölger 1913: 422–426.

The anonymous author goes on to report that ‘those who dwell in the East, Arian-minded persons holding false beliefs’,⁶⁷ proclaim a version of the Emperor’s baptism on his deathbed at the hands of the Arian Eusebius of Nicomedia. Here the author develops Theophanes’ information (οἱ δὲ κατὰ τὴν ἀνατολήν), explaining that the emperor’s version of baptism on his deathbed has Arian provenance. The author of the *Vita* concludes this information with a personal note, for he writes in the 1st person:

But remove the object of their frivolity from their vain and diabolical imaginings! This is not how the truth is, ye mad and senseless people! Nay, to me the notion of his having been baptised by the blessed Sylvester in the older Rome seems nearer the truth, and it does indeed cling fast to the truth, and I accept it and unhesitatingly believe it as something safer and secure, and I testify this to everyone, that the regulations which are attributed to Miltiades are inventions found in the writings of the Arians who are eager to claim some credit for themselves from them, who also want to slander the all-reverent emperor Constantine by showing him as an unbaptised person, which indeed is unworthy of belief and untrue.

This is followed by an argument almost identical to the one we know from the message of George the Monk:

for if he had not been baptised, then he could not have taken part in the holy sacraments at the Council of Nicaea, nor could he have joined the meeting with the holy fathers, which it is as absurd to think as to say. (transl. Beetham).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Vita Constantini* (BHG 364) (Guidi 1907: 329, 21–22): Οἱ δὲ κατὰ τὴν ἀνατολήν οἰκοῦντες κακόδοξοι ἀρειανόφρονες... It is possible that the author of the *Vita* combined the above account of Theophanes with another passus from his work, where he reports that a version about Constantine’s baptism in Nicomedia proclaims: ‘some Arians’, see Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 5828 (de Boor 1883: 33, 19): ὡς τινὲς φασιν Ἀρειανίφρονες... However, the reverse dependence is also possible.

⁶⁸ *Vita Constantini* (BHG 364) (Guidi 1907: 329, 25–330, 13): ἀλλ’ ἄπαγε τῆς ματαίας αὐτῶν καὶ διαβολικῆς φρονήσεως τὸν ληρώδη σκοπόν· οὐκ ἔξει οὕτως ἢ ἀλήθεια, ἄφρονες καὶ ἀνόητοι. ἐμοὶ δὲ ἀληθέστερον φαίνεται τὸ ὑπὸ τοῦ μακαρίου Σιλβέστρου ἐν Ρώμῃ τῇ πρεσβυτέρᾳ βεβαπτίσθαι αὐτόν, ὅπερ καὶ ἀληθείας ἔχειται,

The *Vita Constantini* contains information present in the works of both Theophanes and George the Monk. The *Vita*'s narrative, however, is more elaborate than the works of the two historiographers, not only giving a more detailed account of the information given in the *Actus Silvestri*, but also adding a number of rhetorical elements, using numerous invectives, including calling those proclaiming the view of Constantine's baptism on his deathbed as 'mad and senseless' people.⁶⁹ In other parts of his work, the author uses equally strong and even harsher language, especially towards pagans.⁷⁰ Since the two sources also show significant differences in other stories they report, such as in their descriptions of the proceedings of the Council of Nicaea, the interdependence of the author of the *Vita* and George the Monk, who probably drew on a common source independently of each other, must be excluded.

The Greek version of the *Actus Silvestri* appears to have been widely known and widely used during the period in which George the Monk was writing. A direct reference to the *Actus Silvestri* is found in another *Vita Constantini*, published by François Halkin (BHG 365n), who also dates it to the 9th century.⁷¹ Referring to the baptism of the Emperor, the anonymous author informs here: 'Anyone who wishes to study in detail these events in sequence, should turn to the *Vita* of our father among the saints Silvester, who was bishop in Rome at the time, by whom Constantine was judged worthy of holy baptism, where a fuller account will be found. Because of the length of the story I have

καὶ ἀποδέχομαι τοῦτο καὶ ἀδιστακτῶς πιστεύω ὡς ἀσφαλέςτερον καὶ βέβαιον, καὶ πᾶσι τοῦτο διαμαρτύρομαι, ὅτι τὰς ἐπ' ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ φερομένας διατάξεις πρὸς Μιλτιάδης πεπλασμένας εἶναι παρ' Ἀρειανοῖς, δόξαν ἐντεῦθεν σπουδάζοντες ἑαυτοῖς περιποιήσασθαι, οἱ καὶ τὸν πανευσεβῆ βασιλέα Κωνσταντῖνον κακίζειν ἐθέλουσιν ἀβάπτιστον δεικνύντες, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἄπιστον καὶ ψευδές· εἰ γὰρ οὐκ ἦν βεβαπτισμένος, ἐν τῇ κατὰ Νίκαιαν συνόδῳ λοιπὸν οὐδὲ μετελάμβανε τῶν θείων μυστηρίων, οὐδὲ συνήρχετο τοῖς ἁγίοις πατράσι, ὅπερ ἄτοπὸν ἐστὶ καὶ φρονεῖν καὶ λέγειν.

⁶⁹ Guidi 1907: 330, 2: ἄφρονες καὶ ἀνόητοι.

⁷⁰ Guidi 1907: 325, 7–9: οἱ ἀνοσιουργοὶ καὶ ταῖς ἑαυτῶν μαγγανείαις σοφοὶ ἐπιφημιζόμενοι καὶ τοῦ διαβόλου ὑπασπισταὶ γηνησιώτατοι Ἕλληνες...; Guidi 1907: 325, 14–16: ὃ τῆς τῶν Ἑλλήνων φρενοβλαβείας, μᾶλλον δὲ τὴν ἀπανθρωπίας καὶ ἀβελτερίας...; Guidi 1907: 325, 20: οἱ κακοὶ καὶ παράφρονες Ἕλληνες.

⁷¹ Halkin 1959: 63–107.

omitted it' (transl. Vermes).⁷² Since neither George the Monk nor the author of the *Vita Constantini*, BHG 364, refer explicitly to the *Actus Silvestri* in their accounts, the author of the *Vita* published by Halkin must himself have had the aforementioned Pope's *Life* in his hands, which confirms its widespread use in this period.

Conclusions

Wilhelm Pohlkamp put forward the concept of an early composition of the *Actus Silvestri*, placing its creation in the early 5th century.⁷³ This concept has met with a rather cool reception from scholars. Garth Fowden considered that the work could be dated to the mid-5th century at the earliest.⁷⁴ Indeed, the earliest testimonies referring to the *Actus Silvestri* date back to the late 5th and early 6th centuries.⁷⁵ The so-called *Decretum Gelasianum* mentions that the *Actus Silvestri* was read in the churches of Rome.⁷⁶ The dating of this document is, however, uncertain, although it is assumed that the fourth part of the *Decretum*, in which the *Actus Silvestri* is mentioned, dates from the late 5th century or the 1st half of the 6th century.⁷⁷ Tessa Canella identifies the period of unrest in Rome associated with the Laurentian schism during the pontificate of Pope Symmachus as the time when the legend associated

⁷² *Vita Constantini* (BHG 365n) 5 (Halkin 1959: 80, 49–53): Τὰ δὲ τούτων ἐξῆς εἴ τις βούλοιο μετὰ ἀκριβείας γινῶναι, ἐπὶ τὸν βίον τοῦ ἐν ἁγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Σιλβέστρου, πάπα Ῥώμης τὸ τηνικαῦτα ὑπάρχοντος, ὑφ' οὗ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου βαπτίσματος ἠξιώθη, ἐλθὼν λεπτομερέστερον εὐρήσει. Ἡμεῖς γὰρ διὰ τὸ τοῦ λόγου μῆκος ταῦτα παρήκαμεν. Kazhdan 1987: 239 considers that the author of this *Vita* deliberately minimises Sylvester's involvement in the conversion and baptism of the emperor, while emphasising the involvement of a certain Euphratas in the emperor's conversion.

⁷³ Pohlkamp 1992: 181–183.

⁷⁴ Fowden 1994a: 154–155; Fowden 1994b: 274–284. The author believes that the *Actus* originated in Rome, but that some elements of it may have come from the East.

⁷⁵ Canella 2013: 246. Fowden 1994a: 154 emphasises that *Actus* appears in Roman sources after 500, while it is known in the East at the latest around 526.

⁷⁶ *Decretum Gelasianum* 4 (Thiel 1868: 460): *Item actus beati Silvestri apostolicae sedis praesulis, licet ejus qui conscripsit nomen ignoretur, a multis tamen in urbe Romana catholicis legi cognovimus, et pro antiquo usu multae hoc imitantur ecclesiae.*

⁷⁷ Mimouni 2011: 250.

with Pope Silvester became widespread, linking to the early 6th century the emergence of texts aimed at exonerating Symmachus from charges brought against him by his opponents, including the so-called *Constitutum Silvestri*, while also pointing to the growing importance of deacons in the Roman Church.⁷⁸ In a recent article, Eckhard Wirbelauer puts forward some additional arguments in favour of the thesis that the *Actus Silvestri* was written in the late 5th or early 6th centuries. He points out that the pagan world is depicted in the pages of the work in a caricatured manner, which would not have been possible in the early 5th century, but completely acceptable in the second half of this century. He also states that the Latin version B of *Actus* emphasises the role of deacons in the Roman community, which corresponds to the reality of the late 5th and early 6th centuries, when the successor to the deceased Pope came from a group of seven deacons.⁷⁹ Finally, in the *Actus*, the emperor is referred to as *Augustus*, *imperator*, *princeps*, but also as *rex*, which does not correspond to the Latin imperial nomenclature, as does the use of the adjective *regius*. However, the use of such a nomenclature was already possible in the era of Theodoric's rule of Italy.

If we assume, following Wirbelauer, that both versions of the *Actus* originated in Rome within a relatively short interval of time precisely during this period⁸⁰ and were rapidly spread to the East, it is possible to hypothesise that the fast development of the legend associated with Pope Silvester, above all in Syria, had to do with the propaganda offensive of the papacy during the Acacian schism. During this period, the popes maintained lively relations with opponents of Emperor Anastasius' religious policy in the East.⁸¹ One such centre that supported the policy of the bishops of Rome was the monastery of the Acoemetæ. During the period of the Acacian schism, the monks of this monastery

⁷⁸ Canella 2013: 246.

⁷⁹ Wirbelauer 2021: 83–108. In the *Actus*, Pope Miltiades ordains Sylvester as a deacon according to Latin version B, and according to A as a presbyter.

⁸⁰ Wirbelauer 2021: 92 emphasises that version B is a shorter redaction of the *Actus*, but is not a summary of version A. Levison 1924: 200–214 already recognised that both versions of the *Actus* came from the pen of the same author, whom the researcher identified with Arnobius the Younger.

⁸¹ Kazhdan 1987: 239 considers that *Actus* was used in the 6th century in the struggle between the papacy and Constantinople.

not only denied the policies of Anastasius, but also actively produced apocryphal texts in support of Chalcedonian Definition, such as the false correspondence of the western bishops with Peter the Fuller,⁸² which would be consistent with Fausto Parente's hypothesis that the *Actus* had an eastern origin.⁸³ The aforementioned use of the title *rex* in the *Actus* may also support the thesis of the Greek origin of the legend. Indeed, the Greek term βασιλεύς is both the equivalent of the Latin *rex* and *Augustus*.

However, the Greek translation of the *Actus* did not gain real popularity until after the Second Council of Nicaea,⁸⁴ which may be related to the negation of the institutional role of the emperor in the Church during the iconoclasm era. During this period, the idea of Constantine's individual and personal holiness not resulting from the mere exercise of imperial power was contrasted with the idea of the emperor-priest standing at the head of the Church and deciding not only organisational but also theological questions.⁸⁵ Emphasising Constantine's personal holiness led to the elimination of elements from the emperor's biography that cast a shadow over his sanctity, such as the baptism granted at the hands of a heretic on his deathbed.

As was the case during the Acacian schism, the papacy during the iconoclastic disputes appeared in the East as a stronghold of orthodoxy independent of imperial power.⁸⁶ Emphasising the pope's role as the guardian of orthodoxy in opposition to the heretical emperor led to a renewed recourse to the legend portraying the pope as the guide of the first Christian emperor on the road to sainthood, thus postulating the emulation of Constantine by contemporary rulers. The independent accounts of George the Monk and a number of *Vitae* of Constantine (*Grundvita*, BHG 364, 365n), and perhaps the perfunctory information of Theophanes, attest to the immense popularity of the legend from the

⁸² Grillmeier, Hainthaler 2004: 265–277.

⁸³ Parente 1978: 878–897. Already Leclercq 1914: 2686–2686 put forward the conjecture that the *Actus Silvestri* could not have originated in Rome, but in the East.

⁸⁴ Canella 2013: 246 links the development of the legend's popularity in the East to a letter from Pope Hadrian to Constantine VI and Irene.

⁸⁵ Dagron 1996: 169–200.

⁸⁶ Chadwick 2003: 71–76.

second half of the 8th century onwards and the authors' hostile attitude towards the version of the baptism given by Eusebius of Caesarea.

Hagiographical and historiographical works in this period share a number of common motifs concerning Constantine's baptism, although establishing their interdependence or chronology poses considerable difficulties. Both the *Vita* BHG 364 and Theophanes report the existence in their time (μέχρι σήμερον) of Constantine's baptistry in Rome. The author of the *Vita* further emphasises that he heard this information from 'reliable people' (ὡς παρὰ ἀνδρῶν φιλευσεβῶς ἀκηκόαμεν). It is possible that this is merely a rhetorical phrase, used to increase the credibility of this information, but it is also possible that Theophanes took a similar formulation from this *Vita* or a common source. The *Vita* BHG 364 also gives other information that appears in the *Chronography*. Both sources report writings related to Pope Miltiades to be forged, with Theophanes mentioning Constantine's letter to this Pope, while the *Vita* mentions 'regulations' attributed to Miltiades. These sources also mention that Constantine's son Crispus was baptised along with the father.

The concise entry of Theophanes admittedly corresponds to the information about the emperor's baptism interpolated to the letter of Pope Hadrian in the Greek Acts of the Council of Nicaea or present in the *Grundvita*, but the personal opinion of the author of the *Vita* BHG 364, who considered the version proclaiming Constantine's baptism in Rome rather than in Nicomedia to be more credible, which is also presented in Theophanes, leads us to accept the hypothesis that Theophanes used this very *Vita*.

Given the significant differences, however, it does not appear that George the Monk, who seems to have used the *Actus Silvestri* directly, drew his information from BHG 364. A wider familiarity with this work in the 9th century is confirmed by the *Vita* BHG 365n. Both Theophanes and George the Monk as well as the author of the *Vita* BHG 364 use a similar argumentation to negate the deathbed version of Constantine's baptism, which may also suggest a dating of the latter to the late 8th and early 9th centuries. The *Chronicle* of George the Monk probably popularised the legend associated with Pope Silvester to some extent in

Byzantium, as evidenced by the *Vita* BHG 365 and, with its Slavonic translation, in the Balkans and Rus.

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