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Rhetorical similarities in royal conversion narratives

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Rhetorical Similarities in Royal Conversion Narratives

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jolene Hunerlach

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ABSTRACT

Rhetorical Similarities in Royal Conversion Narratives

By Jolene Hunerlach

This thesis addresses the topic of the conversion narratives of four kings in the early middle ages. They will be examined and compared to Constantine's conversion narrative. Are these conversion stories merely forms of literary *topoi*, rhetorical commonplaces or formulae used to explain the conversions? More specifically, do all or most follow the story of Constantine's conversion?

Research on this subject reveals how Constantine's conversion story to some degree functions as a *topos* in each one. Two secondary *topoi*, the Christian queen and the priest, will also be seen in these conversion accounts. Although the conversion accounts obviously differ from each other, keeping these *topoi* in mind can help in the interpretation of the historical events. Each account gives us evidence both of historical events and the people who wrote the histories.

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Introduction

In late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, kings chose to convert to Christianity and their whole kingdoms followed them, or so some writers of the time would lead their readers to believe. Gregory of Tours makes it seem easy to convince all the people at once when he tells his readers that although Clovis was ready to accept Christianity he thought his people would not forsake their gods. Yet, when he arranged a meeting to discuss it with them, they shouted in unison, "We will give up worshipping our mortal gods, pious King, and we are prepared to follow the immortal God about whom Remigius preaches."¹ Was it really that simple to convert all the Franks to Christianity? This seems implausible. Obviously the groundwork had been prepared beforehand because the people knew the bishop and about the God to whom they were converting. Clovis is only one example of a king converting to Christianity during this time period. How exactly did these kings decide to adopt a new religion, and what can historians learn from their conversion stories?

¹ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:31.

In looking at the conversion of four kings and their peoples during this era, my thesis will examine the conversion accounts and compare them to the model of Constantine's conversion. Are these conversion stories merely forms of literary *topoi*, rhetorical commonplaces or formulae used to explain the conversions? More specifically, do all or most follow the story of Constantine's conversion? The examination of these conversion narratives will show how Constantine's conversion story to some degree functions as a *topos* in each one. In addition, each contains a secondary *topos* as well. In each conversion account, a Christian woman played an important role in converting the king. This becomes part of the *topos* or theme in the conversion stories. This is also a *topos* showing how a Christian queen should behave, and it originates with the ideal of Helena, Constantine's mother, as the model. Helena's example had a significant influence on the portrayal of all the later female figures in the accounts that will be examined. This topology thus connects all of these narratives. Although the conversion accounts obviously differ from each other, keeping these *topoi* in mind can help in the interpretation of the historical events. Each account gives us evidence

both of historical events and the people who wrote the histories.

The four accounts that will be considered are the conversions of King Mirian of Iberia, King Clovis of the Franks, King Æthelbert of Kent, and King Edwin of Northumbria. For each of these narratives, we will examine the primary sources and secondary sources in an attempt to explain how they relate back to the main *topos*. Before analyzing these conversion accounts, one needs first to examine Constantine's conversion story to discover the origin of the *topos* for these stories. As with any subject dealing with technical ideas, one also needs to define and discuss the important concepts for this topic. These specific ideas include *topos*, conversion, sources, and historical context.

The first term to define is *topos*. Ernst Robert Curtius, in his book *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* provides the best definition. Curtius not only defines *topos* but also explains how it evolved from being a defined part of rhetoric in antiquity, to becoming part of all literary genres. In antiquity *topoi* were intellectual ideas that were used to explain something the orator felt the inability to express with justice to the subject. An

example is the formula: "praise of forbearers and their deeds." *Topoi* were general helps toward composing orations. After the extinction of the Greek city-states and the Roman Republic, judicial and political oratories disappeared from everyday political reality and became part of rhetoric. Rhetoric changed, and *topoi* acquired a new function. They became clichés, used in all forms of literature dealing with all areas of life.² Historical *topoi* also developed and this paper examines the archetypal *topos* the use of Constantine's conversion story as a tool to explain the conversions of kings in late antiquity and the early middle ages.³

Richard Fletcher argues that these conversion narratives allow the "colonization by formulaic *topoi*."⁴ The authors of these narratives could use the *topoi* as a way to organize the conversion story. This allows the authors to praise the kings by comparing them to great Christian rulers who came before. When authors did this, the historical reality surrounding the conversion was likely more blurred and indistinct. Where hagiographies

2 Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 70.

3 Ibid., 82-83, 101.

4 Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 12.

can emphasize the missionary by "paganizing" peoples already touched by Christianity, the narrative can present the conversion as a moment in time and not as a process.⁵

The secondary *topos* within these conversion accounts revolves around the role played by the queen in the conversion. Each of these queens was Christian and brought a bishop with them to their marriage, and each worked to convert the ruling class to Christianity. Specifically, the queen and bishop worked first to convert the king; and once this was done, the bishop continued to work for the conversion of the people. Jo Ann McNamara argues that these queens were peace makers between their kings and the people they ruled; they acted as intermediaries between "the king's temporal power and the clergy's spiritual power." For the *topos*, this means they were instrumental in bringing the pagan king together with the Christian clergy. Through this practice they worked to convert the king. Constantine's mother, Helena, was the original model for the saintly queen.⁶

Helena while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, founded

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jo Ann McNamara, "Imitatio Helenae: Sainthood as an attribute of Queenship," in *Saints: Studies in Hagiography*, edited by Sandro Sticca, Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies Series, Vol. 141, (New York: State University of Binghamton, 1996), 51-52.

churches on the sacred sites, tying sacred history to the success of the new Christian dynasty.⁷ The Church historian Socrates describing her pilgrimage wrote this account,

Helena, the emperor's mother being divinely directed by dreams went to Jerusalem she sought carefully the sepulchre of Christ, from which he arose after his burial; and after much difficulty, by God's help she discovered it.⁸

A temple to Venus had been erected over the tomb. Helena had the temple destroyed and found three crosses. Socrates continues, "One of these was that blessed cross on which Christ had hung, the other two were those on which the two thieves that were crucified with him had died."⁹ The bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, put the three crosses over a neighborhood woman who was close to death. When she touched the true cross, she was healed. This was how the true cross was discovered. Socrates writes,

The emperor's mother erected over the place of the sepulchre a magnificent church, and named it *New Jerusalem*, having built it facing that old and deserted city. There she left a portion of the cross, enclosed in a silver case, as a memorial to those who might wish to see it: the other part she sent to the emperor, who being persuaded that the city would be perfectly secure where that relic should be preserved, privately

⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁸ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:17.

⁹ Ibid.

enclosed it in his own statue, which stands on a large column of porphyry in the forum called Constantine's at Constantinople.¹⁰

Socrates concludes this story by telling the reader he wrote this story from reports and almost all the people of Constantinople agree it is true. Regardless of the validity of this claim, it portrays Helena working to further the Christian cause.

In the *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius wrote that Helena established everlasting memorials of two sacred caves, "Helena Augusta, the beloved mother of the God-beloved Emperor, founded as tokens of her pious intent, he so providing her with the right arm of imperial authority."¹¹ Through Helena's acts as recorded by Eusebius and Socrates, we see her as the model of the female Christian "monarch" connected to piety, charity, and mercy that countered the warlike role of the king.¹² From Constantine forward, all of the kings, whom I address, were conquerors and the building of churches and monasteries was a way to atone for the warfare in which they were engaged. Part of the *topos* of the Christian queen modeled on Helena was the building of churches, but this construction most often happened

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3:43.

¹² McNamara, "Imitatio Helenae," 52-53.

after the king was converted.

Let us turn to defining conversion. Webster's defines conversion as, "a change from one belief, view, or course to another, the bringing over or persuasion of a person to the Christian faith." The subsequent entries include, "to change one's feelings or point of view from indifference or opposition to one of zealous acceptance."¹³ The kings examined converted for many reasons. The outward sign of conversion into Christianity is baptism. While Constantine was not baptized until he was on his deathbed, he did other things that showed his support for Christianity. The fact that he presided over the Council of Nicaea and was active in forming Church doctrine can be seen as a change from a pagan point of view to a Christian point of view. Part of the *topos* in these conversion narratives has to do with a vow that many of these kings made to convert, similar to Constantine, if God helped them be victorious. This vow began the process of conversion.

While many secondary sources have arguments on this topic and specific views on the primary sources, the main focus here will be on the primary sources. When dealing

13 Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged, s.v. "conversion."

with primary sources one must address two key questions: what exactly does the source say on the topic being examined, and how reliable is the source? The answers to these two questions can help one develop arguments on the topic and also form a better understanding of the sources themselves. By examining these narratives in detail, one can discover how kings and their peoples converted and what factors influenced them. Another important aspect to consider is the access the authors of these conversion accounts had to earlier accounts of Constantine's conversion. We will see that Rufinus, one of the authors of these accounts, actually translated Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* and this translation was used by both Gregory of Tours and Bede. These authors also had access to other histories and works which had utilized these accounts as parts of their own works.

Also, by comparing how women's roles were portrayed in the sources of the time helps us to better understand what, if any, role women played in the conversions. For example, scholars credit two queens, Clothilda of the Franks and Bertha of Kent, with playing a role in the conversion of their respective kings. Yet, the two main sources portray them very differently. Gregory of Tours gives much more

credit to Clothilda in the conversion of Clovis as compared to Bede's portrayal of Bertha's role in converting Æthelbert of Kent. Gregory describes how Clothilda preached to her husband and worked to try and convert him. Bede, however, only credits Bertha with bringing her bishop with her and convincing the king to listen to the missionaries when they landed in Kent. Both women played a role in the conversions of these kings, yet why do the different sources portray the roles differently? The writers may have had different objectives in mind as they wrote. Ian Wood suggests Gregory of Tours was using Clothilda as the primary person in Clovis's conversion, allowing of course for divine intervention in the battle with the Alamans.¹⁴ Bede, who is not known for giving credit to women, was either showing a different model of conversion for Anglo-Saxons or simply wanted it remembered that "men brought men to Christianity in England."¹⁵ Bede emphasized the priest's role. Indeed, the role of the priest could be seen as a third *topos*, although it only appears in divergent accounts of Constantine's conversion.

14 Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751*, (London: London Group UK Limited, 1994), 43.

15 Lisa Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 119.

Each account examined has a priest, who is brought by the Christian woman with the role of teaching the king the religion and working towards his conversion. Only by a close examination of the sources can one draw any conclusion about why these authors portrayed the women differently.

Other sources, including letters written to the queens from bishops and popes, and hagiographies also deal with the roles that queens played in the conversions of kings. Thus, letters written to queens extolling them to promote their faith to their pagan husbands will also be examined. Two examples include a letter written to Clothinda, the granddaughter of Clothilda and Clovis, and a letter written to Æthelberga of Northumbria. Clothinda married the king of the Lombards, Alboin. Bishop Nicetius of Trier wrote to her to use her influence on Alboin and all the Lombards so they would convert from heretical Arianism to the orthodox Catholicism. An important point in this letter is that Bishop Nicetius uses Clothilda as an example for Clothinda to follow to convert her husband.¹⁶ Pope Boniface V wrote a

16 Nicetius of Trier, "Letter to Clothinda," in *Christianity and Paganism 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe*, ed. J. N. Hillgrath, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 79-80.

similar letter to Æthelberga of Northumbria, telling her it was her duty to convert her husband Edwin to Christianity.¹⁷ These letters give us even more information to add to the picture of what role these women played in converting kings to Christianity.

Another group of sources that develop the roles women played in conversions are hagiographies. Historians need to examine hagiographies with an exact understanding of their purpose. Hagiographies as a genre often employed traditional clichés or themes to express why the saint should be venerated.¹⁸ Hagiographies were not written as histories but as testaments to the saints and veneration of their lives. Although this may be the official intent of the writer, it is much more complicated. Thomas Head in the introduction to *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* explains that the hagiographers were men of the Roman elite, Gregory of Tours in Gaul, Gregory the Great in Italy. They were not only writing to preserve the past but also to influence the present. They did this by portraying these holy men and women as examples of Christian conduct.¹⁹

17 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 2:11.

18 Curtius, *European Literature*, 160.

19 Thomas Head, ed., *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), xvii.

When using these texts for historical information, one must read them in the context in which they were written. Yet, we can still glean many historical facts from them, especially when using them in conjunction with other sources. For example, the *Life of Clothilda* has been used as a centerpiece of the struggle between the Catholic Roman population and the Arians of the Germanic tribes.²⁰ By comparing what this hagiography says with the history of Gregory of Tours, we can come to a better understanding of the role that Clothilda played in the conversion of Clovis.

Hagiographers often tell us parts of their motives for writing about a particular saint. For example, the author of the *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, Eddius Stephanus, an Anglo-Saxon priest wrote, "This very task of preserving the blessed memory of Bishop Wilfrid is of great gain and value to myself. Indeed it is in itself a ready path to virtue to know what he [Wilfrid] was."²¹ The author was not simply recording the actions of Wilfrid, but educating his audience in proper practice of Christianity and working to

20 Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, (London: Duke University Press, 1992), 39.

21 Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed and trans, Bertram Colgrave, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1985), 3.

advance the cause of his own salvation.²² Hagiographies can tell us at least as much about the author and those who used the text, as the saints who were the subjects.

Hagiographies include the lives of saints, collections of miracles stories, accounts of the discovery or movements of relics, bulls of canonization, liturgical books, sermons and visions into the categories of hagiography. The title "saint" came to designate those who had lived a life of heroic virtue and those posthumously judged by God to be worthy to enter heaven. The veneration of saints lay at the center of medieval Christianity.²³

Patrick Geary explains how the importance of hagiography has shifted to include the study of society as well as religion. Hagiographies can be a source of historical information and also information of the social values of the time. While using hagiographies for investigation of the social function, one must never forget the literary nature of the texts, and that they are a form of propaganda.²⁴ These sources are especially important in looking at women during the early middle ages.

22 Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, xiii.

23 Ibid., xiv.

24 Patrick Geary, "Saints, Scholars, and Society: The Elusive Goal," in *Saints Studies in Hagiography*, ed. Sandro Sticca, Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies Series, Vol 141, (New York: State University of Binghamton, 1996), 4-5.

Hagiographies present many difficulties for historians, yet they provide social and personal detail not found elsewhere. Unlike other sources, the lives of saints, offer views from their society including attitudes toward women.²⁵

Schulenburg believes women, denied access to the secular Church hierarchy, were recognized as saints for their roles as pious queens, abbesses, consecrated virgin nuns, hermits, and martyrs.²⁶ As noblewomen in powerful households, these women had opportunities to do works they would have been denied otherwise. The early Merovingian and Anglo-Saxon saints gained sanctity and a sense of identity by domestic proselytizing. The Church hierarchy recognized this role as a form of sanctity. These queens' success in their proselytizing activities had huge public and political repercussions. One can see how Clothilda, Clovis's queen, and her successful work in converting her husband became a prototype that would be followed by other royal female saints: Clothilda, queen of the Lombards, was praised for trying to convert her husband, Alboin, to

25 Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, "Female Sanctity," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Joel T Rosenthal, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), 103.

26 Ibid., 105.

Catholicism; Bertha, queen of Kent, was also praised for her role in converting her husband, King Æthelbert; and Æthelburga, queen of Northumbria, influenced the conversion of her husband, King Edwin.²⁷ What Schulenburg calls a prototype is the beginning of the *topos* of the queen's role in conversion. One can see this ideal or *topos* followed through all of the narratives that we have examined.

These queens appointed bishops and abbots, made alliances with bishoprics and monasteries, influenced religious policy and organization. They used their property to endow churches and founded monasteries. They also acquired relics for their royal collections and for their favorite monastic sites and prayed for both the living and dead. Although these acts underscored their piety and charity, they also were frequently based on political motives.²⁸

The primary sources, as is the same with histories written today, record the events from the perspective of each author. The historian must take into consideration not only the story the writer is telling, but also his motives. Therefore it is important to understand the

27 Ibid., 105-106.

28 Ibid., 106.

historical context of the time period. For instance, it is important to know Gregory of Tours ceaselessly wrote against the Arian form of Christianity. To understand what this meant, it is important to understand the Arian controversy.

The Arians questioned the unity of God, insisting that the Son was subordinate to the Father. Arius hypostasized worshipping three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, constituted polytheism. Only the Father existed for all eternity. The Son was created and therefore subordinate to the Father.²⁹ Was Christ identical with the Supreme God? If not, how could his incarnation have saved mankind? So Arius's theology claimed that the Son and Holy Ghost were secondary persons, mediating between God the Father and the world.³⁰ The Council of Nicaea, in 325, declared Arius's view a heresy, and excommunicated and exiled Arius. The controversy continued because Constantine arranged for Arius to be allowed back into the Church three years later.³¹ The Catholic doctrine of the trinity in unity was worked out and the distinction between the three persons of

29 E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 232.

30 Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 3.

31 Hinson, *The Early Church*, 233.

the trinity became a necessary component of Orthodox theology. God the Christ was equal to God the father. This supreme deity "became flesh," and men were saved by his passion.³²

Several emperors favored Arians in the following years, intensifying divisions within the Christian ranks. During this time of change, Ulfilas, who was part Greek and part Goth, became Bishop of the Goths. He was an Arian Christian, an Arian bishop, and an Arian missionary. In 341, while on an embassy in Constantinople with Goths, he was given the mission to convert his fellow Goths. He not only converted the Goths to Arian Christianity but also created the written Gothic script and translated the Greek Bible into Gothic. When the Visigoths entered the Empire in 376, they practiced what the native Latin Christians considered a heretical form of Christianity.³³ In the fifth century we see two societies in the West: one Germanic and Arian, the other Roman and Catholic.

Emperors and empresses were often blamed for tolerating Arians within the Empire.³⁴ The support of

32 Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 3.

33 Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, (New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1992), 40.

34 McNamara, "Imitatio Helenae," 54.

Arianism by several emperors made it hard to eliminate Arianism. Under Valans, the last emperor sympathetic to a form of Arianism, the Visigoths and other Germanic peoples became Arian Christians. The First Council of Constantinople, in 381, declared Arianism a heresy again, and the Emperors enforced it. In the meantime, Arian missionaries had been actively working to convert the Visigoths and other Germanic peoples to Arianism.³⁵ This became a problem for the Church as the western Empire moved in the fifth century from direct Roman rule to the successor states.

Arianism returned to the West with those Germanic converts who entered the Empire as either invaders or federates granted land. They brought their Arian Christianity with clergy and churches, placing a barrier between themselves and their Roman subjects, who were generally Catholics.³⁶ This fact brought about a crisis for these rulers, which included mixed languages, intermarriage, and an end to the comfortable way of Roman urban life. This crisis, along with the hostility of the Catholic Christian majority towards the Arian heresy,

35 Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 3.

36 Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 40-41.

created instability within the Arian kingdoms, none of which remained Arian for long. In 534 the Catholic Franks conquered the Burgundians, who abandoned Arianism in 517. The Visigoths adopted Catholic Christianity in 589, and the orthodox baptism of the heir to the Lombard throne occurred in 603. Apparently these conversions were political decisions made by rulers who needed the support of the Catholic bishops and the native populations.³⁷

Gregory of Tours barely makes reference to Clovis's dealings with Clothilda's Burgundian relatives who were Arian. He does not even allow for the possibility that Clovis might have had Arian influences, such as his sister Landechild who was likely an Arian.³⁸ Clovis may have been a practicing Arian instead of a pagan based on the evidence from contemporary texts.³⁹ Ian Wood suggests Gregory was more concerned with creating an image of Clovis as a Catholic king whose reign was granted divine support after his conversion.⁴⁰ Being aware of Gregory of Tours's motives, the historian must closely examine all available material to search for other perspectives. With this

37 Ibid., 41.

38 McNamara and Halborg, *Sainted Women*, 39.

39 Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe 300-1000*, (New York: St. Martins Press, 1999), 111.

40 Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, 42.

understanding, an important question arises. Were these conversions really as spiritual as the sources claim, or did these kings have political motives for converting which the sources leave out? Choosing to convert to orthodox Catholicism brought these kings the political recognition of the Church as legitimate rulers, and also the support of the Bishops within their kingdoms.

The conversion of the Franks to Catholicism around 500 and the overthrow of the Arian Ostrogoths and Vandals by the Catholic Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527-65), were major victories for the Catholic Church. The conversion of the Franks holds a central place in the conversion of Western Europe. They chose assimilation when they converted to Catholicism instead of Arianism.⁴¹ By 600 the Catholic Church was emerging from the barbarian crisis, having attained a very powerful position in Western Europe. The Church as a great landowner included members of the ruling classes. Thus the barbarian successors of Rome were converting and actively supporting the Church. These barbarian kings sought to help the Church stamp out any dissent, receiving in return the Church's consecration of

41 Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 73.

their troubled reigns.⁴² Gregory has Clovis say he is going with God's help to conquer the Goths: "I take it very hard that these Arians hold part of the Gauls. Let us go with God's help and conquer them and bring the land under our control."⁴³ Ernest Brehaut argues that Clovis is expressing the religious sentiment of the time. Gregory is telling us the Goths are heretics and enemies of the true God, the Franks superior in their Orthodoxy.⁴⁴

42 Ibid., 3.

43 Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:37.

44 Ernest Brehaut, trans., *Gregory of Tours: History of the Franks*, (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1965), xxiv.

Constantine's Conversion Narrative as a Paradigm

Richard Fletcher argues that Constantine's conversion was a model of how to bring a ruler to the faith.¹ The evidence from several accounts of kings who converted resembles Constantine's conversion narrative: Clovis of the Franks, Edwin of Northumbria, and King Mirian of Iberia, which today is eastern Georgia. For instance, Clovis converted on the battlefield, at a moment when he believed he would lose an important battle, which he then won through divine intervention. This battlefield conversion resembles the stories of Constantine's vision and subsequent victory over Maxentius at the Battle of Milvian Bridge. Assuming the battlefield conversion of Constantine is the *topos* followed in the conversion stories that we are investigating, it is important to closely examine the accounts and historical arguments made about this subject. Constantine's supposed vision happened on his way to face Maxentius for control of Italy and Africa. Eusebius wrote that in his vision Constantine saw the words: *In hoc signo*

1 Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 19.

vince (conquer by this sign), and the sign was a cross-shaped trophy.² Constantine ordered his men to mark their shields with a sign, an X with a P in the middle, the first two Greek letters in the Greek spelling of Christ. Most importantly, Constantine believed he was victorious at the battle of Milvian Bridge through divine help from the Christian God. This is a very specific part of the literature written concerning Constantine. However, differing accounts exist concerning how and why Constantine converted. The focus surrounding this Christian historical *topos* will only involve this aspect of the literature.

The four literary accounts that we will examine, which narrate the story of Constantine's victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in October 312, include: Lactantius's account that appears in his pamphlet *On the Deaths of Persecutors*, and Eusebius of Caesarea has two accounts, one in his *Ecclesiastical Histories* and the other in his *Life of Constantine*. According to John W. Eadie eyewitnesses did not write these accounts. Christian writers composed them years or decades later.³ It is important to note, these accounts contain the *topos* we are examining.

² Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 1:28.

³ John W. Eadie, *Conversion of Constantine*, (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 3.

Finally, we will examine Zosimus's account in his *Historia Nova*, which will supply a different view of Constantine's conversion. In examining the narratives that use this *topos*, we will see that the authors did have access to these earlier sources.

The historiographical problem for the turbulent times surrounding Constantine's rise to power is that no one "dared" to put out an impartial narrative.⁴ Nearly two decades of changes lapsed from the time Galerius recognized Constantine as a Caesar in 306 and the army invested him with the purple, until his sole rule and reunification of the Roman Empire in 324. Therefore, one must pay close attention to the contemporary evidence surrounding the rise of Constantine, including coins, inscriptions, calendars, and imperial laws and letters. Also to understand the moods and emotions of the time, one must look at contemporary literary productions.⁵ After examining the accounts from which this *topos* was created, we will look at two of the differing views on the subject.

The first literary account was written by Lactantius. Lactantius was most likely born in Africa around 250 AD and

4 T.D. Barnes, "Lactantius and Constantine," in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 63 (1973): 29.

5 Ibid., 29-30.

had acquired a considerable reputation in Latin rhetoric. He was summoned by Diocletian to teach the subject in Nicomedia, a city which this emperor used as a center of his government.⁶ Lactantius was known to have been a pupil of Arnobius, who gave lectures in rhetoric at Sicco in Africa. Lactantius was at Diocletian's court when Constantine met him. In about 315 Lactantius began the education of Crispus, Constantine's son.⁷

Lactantius was teaching rhetoric when the Great Persecution broke out in 303, and he began writing in defense of Christianity when pagan works began attacking Christianity.⁸ Lactantius's account appears in his pamphlet *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*. Creed explains that the theme of the work was that God brought emperors to power to repeal what the persecutors had done. Constantine's role is stressed and his victory over Maxentius is shown as divinely ordained.⁹ It was composed after 312, but the precise date of completion is not certain. Most scholars

6 J. L. Creed, ed. and trans., *Lactantius: De Mortibus Persecutorum*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), xxv.

7 William Fletcher, "Lactantius," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Vol 7. Eds. Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (Grand Rapids Michigan: WmB. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), 8.

8 Creed, ed. and trans., "Lactantius", xxvi.

9 Ibid., xxxvii.

prefer a date around 318.¹⁰ Barnes disagrees with other scholars, who date the work between the years 317 to 321. Barnes explains that this work has three features which seem to contradict one another; he wrote as if the persecutions recently ended, he records Diocletian's death, and he does not mention problems between Constantine and Licinius. Scholars believed the war between Constantine and Licinius began in 314, and it was widely accepted that Diocletian died in 316. This meant the later date was accepted with the belief that Lactantius deliberately omitted the war and lied about writing earlier than he did. Yet Barnes argues that the correct chronology redeems Lactantius. The date should be earlier around 314, because for the date of 318 to be true Lactantius would have been "indulging in a deliberate artifice."¹¹ In 314 the persecution would have recently ended. Diocletian died between 311-313, and Constantine and Licinius were not warring until 316. Lactantius's work, if accurately dated, serves as evidence of attitudes voiced in a particular historical context that may also show facts later

10 Eadie, *Conversion*, 3.

11 Barnes, "Lactantius," 39.

suppressed or embellished.¹² By assuming the earlier date of 314, these contradictions do not pose a problem. Thus one may accept the text as accurate.¹³

Lactantius addressed *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* to the confessor Donatus, who was tried and tortured nine times and was in prison in Nicomedia until Galerius, who was dying, decreed an amnesty for all Christians.¹⁴ Lactantius's purpose for writing is to show how those who attacked God were later destroyed by God so all may "learn how the Almighty manifested His power and sovereign greatness in rooting out and utterly destroying the enemies of His name."¹⁵ After briefly surveying the fates of earlier persecutors such as Nero, Domitian, and Valerian,¹⁶ he goes directly to a detailed description of Diocletian, Maximian and Galerius.¹⁷ He follows with a severe and detailed account of Galerius's actions as Augustus, which led to Constantine being proclaimed his father's successor.¹⁸

12 Ibid., 30.

13 Ibid., 39.

14 Ibid., 30.

15 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 1:1.

16 Ibid., 2, 4-6, 3.

17 Ibid., 7:23.

18 Ibid., 24.

Lactantius, describing how these persecutors died, tells us God struck Galerius with an incurable disease in his eighteenth year as Augustus. After a year of great agony, Galerius acknowledged God and began making restitution for his crimes,

He was obliged to acknowledge God, and he cried aloud, in the intervals of raging pain, that he would re-edify the Church which he had demolished, and make atonement for his misdeeds; and when he was near his end, he published an edict.¹⁹

Galerius published his dying edict in 311. It allowed his subjects to be Christians once more and to build meeting places, and he asked them to pray for him and the State. Galerius went on to say many Christians continue to hold to their beliefs and do not venerate the gods or their God publicly. He pardoned all and allowed them to be Christians again. As long as they would do their duty,

It will be the duty of the Christians, in consequence of this our toleration, to pray to their God for our welfare, and for that of the public, and for their own; that the commonweal may continue safe in every quarter, and that they themselves may live securely in their habitations.²⁰

So here we see that Galerius was the Emperor who published the edict making Christianity legal in 311.

¹⁹ Ibid., 33:11.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

Lactantius says war broke out between Constantine and Maxentius. He describes Maxentius staying in the city because the soothsayers foretold he would perish if he left. Maxentius had more men than Constantine, yet Constantine's forces prevailed. Constantine brought his entire army and camped opposite the Milvian Bridge.²¹ Here Lactantius reports Constantine's vision. He writes,

Constantine was directed in a dream to cause *the heavenly sign* to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of CHRIST. Having this sign, his troops stood to arms. The enemies advanced, but without their emperor, and they crossed the bridge. The armies met, and fought with the utmost exertions of valour, and firmly maintained their ground. [Maxentius] Led by this response to the hopes of victory, went to the field. The bridge in his rear was broken down. At sight of that the battle grew hotter. The hand of the Lord prevailed, and the forces of Maxentius were routed. He fled towards the broken bridge; but the multitude pressing on him, he was driven headlong into the Tiber.²²

Here we see the *topos* of God helping the victor to win on the battlefield that will be repeated throughout most of the royal conversion accounts that we will examine. Writers later used this *topos* to show how a king converted

21 Ibid., 44:1-4

22 Ibid., 44:5-11

just as Constantine converted and thereafter God favored them. As with Lactantius, the authors were Christian writers showing their readers not only how these conversions came about, but also how God favored these rulers. As we look at the later writers who utilized this *topos*, one can see they had access to the ideas from these sources. Lactantius and Eusebius are the principle sources for the great persecution of Diocletian and for Church history after the Edict of Milan. The permanent importance of Lactantius was his writing style; he was well versed in the classics and his Ciceronian style appealed to men of culture.²³ Lactantius's works included: *The Christian Institutions*, *On the Death of the Persecutors*, *the Anger of God*, and *The Workmanship of God*, and several poems. He has always held a high place among the Church Fathers because of his elegance and style.²⁴ Lactantius's works were used by Jerome, Augustine, Prudentius, and Cassiodorus.²⁵

Lactantius was not the only author, however, to write about the Battle at the Milvian Bridge. Eusebius wrote the second account of Constantine's conversion, which appears

23 Sister Mary Francis McDonald, trans., *Lactantius: The Divine Institutes, Book I-VII*, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), ix-x.

24 William Fletcher, "Lactantius," 7-8.

25 McDonald, trans., *Lactantius: The Divine Institutes*, xxiii.

in book nine of his *Ecclesiastical History*. After 325, Eusebius became an influential member of Constantine's court. This account is the shortest and omits any reference to the Emperor experiencing a dream or vision at the time of the battle of Milvian Bridge. Yet Eusebius clearly indicates that Constantine achieved his victory over Maxentius with the aid of the Christian God. In this version Eusebius has Constantine taking compassion on those oppressed at Rome, by bringing his whole army to "restore the Romans to their ancestral liberty."²⁶

Maxentius would not go beyond the city walls because it was predicted he would die. Eusebius wrote:

[Constantine] relying upon the assistance of God, attacked the first, second, and third army of the tyrant, and conquered them all; and having advanced through the greater part of Italy, was already very near Rome.²⁷

Eusebius explains that God drew Maxentius outside the gates:

With his soldiers and body-guards "went down into like a stone," when he fled before the power of God which was with Constantine, and passed through the river which lay in his way, over which he had formed a bridge with boats, and thus prepared the means of his own destruction. Thus, then, the bridge over the river being broken, the

²⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 9:2.

²⁷ Ibid., 9:3-4.

passageway settled down, and immediately the boats with the men disappeared in the depths, and that most impious one himself first of all Constantine, by his very deeds, sang to God, the universal Ruler, and Author of his victory, as he entered Rome in triumph.²⁸

Eusebius does not mention the vision in this account. Yet he attributes Constantine's victory to God. Eadie argues that in Eusebius's opinion, Constantine was a Christian, or at least cognizant of the power of Christ, after October 312.²⁹ Both Eusebius and Lactantius place Constantine's conversion before the Battle of Milvian Bridge.³⁰ Rufinus of Aquileia translated Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* around 402. As the first Latin Christian history it exerted great influence over both his contemporaries and later generations. Augustine relied on it for his historical sections of the *City of God*, and Byzantine Church historians Socrates and Sozomen were also deeply influenced by it. Socrates actually rewrote the first two books of his history in order to correct Rufinus's chronology. Yet he continued to use him nonetheless. More importantly, his history influenced the later Western Church throughout the middle ages. Once Greek was

28 Ibid., 9:5-8.

29 Eadie, *Conversion*, 3.

30 Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius Life of Constantine*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 204-205.

forgotten this translation and continuation was the only available view of the Churches formative history.³¹

The third and most detailed literary account is attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea, and it is found in his narrative *Life of Constantine*. Eusebius provides an alternative in which Constantine is actively trying to decide from which God to seek aid in taking over Rome. Eusebius explains that Constantine chose, "the God who transcends the universe."³² Then he wrote:

Accordingly he called on him with earnest prayer and supplications that he would reveal to him who he was, and stretch forth his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he was honored with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could not hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of after-time has established its truth? He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole

31 Philip Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia: Books 10 and 11*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xii.

32 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 1:27.

army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.³³

Eusebius not only gives us this account of Constantine's vision, but writes that Constantine confirmed it was true. He further states while Constantine doubted the "import of this apparition," he slept, and Christ appeared before him with the same sign, commanding him to use it to protect himself and his troops in engagements with his enemies.³⁴ Eusebius later explains how at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, God drew Maxentius outside the Gates and during the battle he had to retreat:

so at this time Maxentius, and the soldiers and guards with him, "went down into the depths like stone," when, in his flight before the divinely-aided forces of Constantine, he essayed to cross the river which lay in his way, over which, making a strong bridge of boats, he had framed an engine of destruction, really against himself, but in the hope of snaring thereby him who was beloved by God.³⁵

Constantine was victorious with God's help. By following the vision, he believed that God granted him his victory.

This document raises many questions. Did Eusebius write it? Or did an unknown Christian writer write it in the second half of the fourth century? Are the different

33 Ibid., 1:28.

34 Ibid., 1:29.

35 Ibid., 1:38.

"documents" within the text authentic? These problems are very relevant because belief in Constantine's conversion traditionally has been based on this account. The key elements in this account are the description of the miraculous vision and the subsequent dream, and the statement that the author obtained his information from Constantine.³⁶ Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall argue in their commentary on the *Life of Constantine* that few scholars today would say Eusebius was not the author, based on the similarities with his other works.³⁷ The prejudice against this work mainly comes from feelings about Eusebius as an author, because Eusebius altered what he had written about Constantine in the *Ecclesiastical History* as the political situation changed.³⁸ Eusebius changed what he had written about Licinius making him less a champion for Christianity, thus justifying Constantine's actions against him. Eusebius thus created a justification for Constantine's rise to power "written from a Christian point of view."³⁹

36 Eadie, *Conversion*, 4.

37 Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine*, 4.

38 Ibid., 5.

39 Ibid., 7.

A. H. M. Jones argues that the heavenly vision in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* was real. He sees no reason to doubt the *bona fides* of either Eusebius or Constantine. The vagueness of the setting for the incident bears the stamp of truth. If the vision were a fiction, it would have appeared in a more dramatic moment, like Lactantius's dream, not when Constantine was marching to an unspecified location. Jones believes that the vision was true because Eusebius explained that Constantine had never publicly acknowledged his experience.⁴⁰ Collins, however, argues that although Eusebius says his account of Constantine's vision is the Emperor's personal account, the years between the event and Constantine's recounting had changed "what had motivated him and what it signified."⁴¹

The *Life of Constantine* was known to Gelasius of Caesarea, the Church historian. After him it was used by the fifth-century Church historians Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Gelasius of Cyzicus.⁴² It has often been claimed this book was not known during the fourth century, but the work of Libanius, in his panegyric on Constantius

40 AHM Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, (London: English Universities Press, Ltd., 1948), 94-96.

41 Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe 300-1000*, (New York: St. Martins Press, 1999), 18.

42 Cameron and Hall, *Life of Constantine*, 48.

II and Constans, contains similarities to the *Life of Constantine*. Other writers such as Julian in his *Caesars* and Ammianus Marcellinus, were not likely to use such a strong Christian and partisan work when writing about Constantine.⁴³

Other views concerning Constantine and his conversion existed as well. The *Actus Silvestri* is dated to the second half of the fifth century and has as its main theme the conversion of Constantine and Helena. More than three hundred manuscripts of this work are known; the versions differ in details but the outline remains the same in all the versions. Constantine persecutes Christians in Rome. Sylvester, the bishop of Rome, leaves the city to escape the persecutions. Constantine becomes infected with leprosy. The pagan priests advise him to bath in the blood of new born babies, but he cannot do this. In a vision, the Apostles Peter and Paul instruct him to go to see Sylvester. The meeting between Constantine and Sylvester brings not only Constantine's conversion, but also through baptism he is cured of his leprosy.⁴⁴ The baptism and

43 Ibid.

44 Jan William Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of*

healing of Constantine, by Sylvester, helped the medieval Church out of the embarrassing problem of Constantine having been baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia, an Arian bishop, on his deathbed.⁴⁵ This legend also disputed the pagan writings which charged Constantine with only turning to Christianity after he murdered his son, Crispus and his wife, Fausta without a trial.⁴⁶

In this account, Constantine still proclaims pro-Christian measures, including, building Churches throughout the Empire and advising everyone to convert. In the *Actus Silvestri*, Helena is a convert of Judaism, and she congratulates Constantine on the denouncement of the pagan cults. Yet she believes he should have converted to Judaism. Constantine sets up a debate between Christian priests and Jewish scribes, with two pagan arbitrators, to establish which faith is best. This debate was won by Sylvester and the Christian priests. The people are so impressed by the power of Christianity they all convert: the Jewish scribes, the pagan arbitrators, and Helena

Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding the True Cross, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, Vol. 27, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 36-37.

⁴⁵ Samuel N. C. Lieu, "Constantine in Legendary Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*. Ed. Noel Lenski, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 299-300.

⁴⁶ Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 2:29.

herself. Drijvers argues that the Sylvester legend is not based on an historical *Life of Constantine* event. But these religious debates between Jews and Christian were popular literary themes, to show how Christianity was the "correct belief".⁴⁷ Eusebius's account in the also credits Constantine with Helena's conversion. Eusebius wrote, "He rendered her through his influence so devout a worshipper of God, and that she seemed to have been instructed from the first by the Savior of mankind."⁴⁸ While praising Helena's piety, Eusebius is also praising Constantine for his piety and missionary zeal to convert his mother. Drijvers argues that Helena was definitely not a Christian before Constantine worked to convert her.⁴⁹ Helena was most likely brought to Christianity along with the other members of Constantine's family around 312 when Constantine began favoring Christians and their religion.⁵⁰

Zosimus, who is considered to be the last of the pagan historians, offers the view that Constantine converted after he killed his wife and son.⁵¹ Zosimus was a Byzantine

47 Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 37.

48 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3:47.

49 Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 35.

50 Ibid., 38.

51 James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis, trans. *Zosimus: Historia Nova*, (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 1967), ix.

historian whose work is dated between 450 and 503.⁵² He was a retired treasury advocate and his *Historia Nova* covered from the third century to the year 410.⁵³ Zosimus provides this account of Constantine's conversion,

The universal sovereignty having devolved upon Constantine alone, no longer did he conceal his innate badness of disposition but he indulged himself in every licentious act. Still, he made use of the ancestral rites, not so much out of respect as out of necessity. And therefore he had faith in soothsayers of whom he had made trial, just as though they had truly foretold all the things that had prospered for him. When he had arrived at Rome he was altogether full of vainglory, and he thought he should make a beginning of impiety with his own household. For he put to death his son Crispus, whom he had honored with the rank of Caesar as I have related earlier, for having come under suspicion of being intimate with his stepmother Fausta; no consideration was accorded natural law. When Constantine's mother, Helena, bore with irrepressible bad grace the pathetic destruction of one so young, as if consoling her Constantine cured the evil with a greater evil: he ordered an extraordinarily hot bath to be prepared, put Fausta in it, and removed her only after she had died.⁵⁴

Zosimus explains that Constantine then went to the priests and asked for purification. The priests replied,

That no method of purification had been handed down capable of cleansing such abominations. But a certain Spaniard named Aegyptius, who had

52 Ibid., viii.

53 Walter Goffart, "Zosimus, The First Historian of Rome's Fall," in *The American Historical Review*, 76 no. 2 (April 1971): 412.

54 Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, 2:29.

entered Rome and become a close friend of the women in the palace, in a conversation with Constantine maintained confidently that 'the doctrine of the Christians could wash away any crime and held out this promise, namely, that the unrighteous who accepted it would immediately stand free and clear of all sin.' Constantine most readily received this word and laid aside the ancestral rites in favor of those which Aegyptius imparted to him. Constantine, having apostatized from the sacred service, incurred the hatred of the Senate and the People.⁵⁵

This is another version of why Constantine converted.

Zosimus believed that Constantine was wrong to stop performing the old rituals and convert to Christianity.

Although Zosimus portrays Constantine in an unfavorable light, his description of the Battle at Milvian Bridge is similar to Lactantius and Eusebius. The difference is he did not include a vision of Christ in his narrative. These other views were also available to the authors who wrote the later narratives. For instance, Gregory of Tours gives qualified praise to Clovis when he refers to him as a new Constantine. Gregory had read a version of the *Actus Silvestri* and did not like Constantine's politics.⁵⁶

Although scholars have addressed the conversion of Constantine many times, no final conclusion has emerged as

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Walter A. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon, (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 219.

to when or if he converted. Generally scholars have given three interpretations to the conversion of Constantine: one, Constantine was never a sincere Christian and pretended to accept faith for political reasons; two, he merely considered the Christian God another member of his pantheon; or, three, he had a genuine conversion.⁵⁷ Yet, the story of Constantine's conversion from the Christian sources appears later as a theme or *topos* in the other conversion narratives. Thus the three interpretations are important because they put forth the same arguments that have been used to interpret the conversion of the four kings under examination. Scholars can only evaluate the evidence available and decide for themselves, which, if any, of these arguments is correct.

If you look at the evidence including, imperial favor, Churches built, land endowments, legal privileges and immunities granted to the Christian clergy, one sees Constantine favoring the Church after 312. Yet he chose to postpone baptism until shortly before his death in 337.⁵⁸ We see this idea also repeated in the later conversions of kings; many waited to be baptized until right before death.

57 Eadie, *Conversion*, 5.

58 Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 19.

Holding off baptism until they were dying prevented them from sinning after they were baptized. Attempts to understand the conversion fail because of the problem of understanding individual motivation.⁵⁹ The only evidence dealing with Constantine's religious thinking comes from a pagan panegyrist who tells us Constantine became a devotee of Apollo in 310. Constantine may have considered Apollo a "manifestation of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun)," the eastern deity, whom Constantine's father adored.⁶⁰ Although most pagan deities stopped appearing on coins after 312, the imagery of Sol Invictus lasted until shortly after 317.⁶¹ Those coins occasionally had a Christian symbol, either a cross or a monogram of Christ next to *Sol Invictus*. Mattingly argues that either Constantine seemed to have associated his old faith with his new one by the combination of symbols or he could have been aiming for religious neutrality.⁶² Thus it would seem that prior to 312 Constantine was a polytheist and not exclusively a

59 Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, 18.

60 Eadie, *Conversion*, 2.

61 Harold Mattingly, *Christianity in the Roman Empire*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967), 62.

62 Ibid.

Christian, although, like his father, he did not participate in the persecution of Christians.⁶³

Although we do not know the exact reasons for the "great persecution" (AD 303-305), Eadie argues that Diocletian and his colleagues were trying to eliminate Christianity as a viable religious option for Roman citizens. The eastern provinces carried out these repressive edicts most effectively. There political opportunists encouraged local pagan-Christian disputes. In the West there was a civil war, and Christians did not pose a political threat.⁶⁴ Eadie argues that the two civil wars from 314 to 324 saw the development of politics and religion becoming so entangled that contemporary observers described Constantine's political attack on Licinius as a "crusade against paganism and its spokesman." So Constantine emerged from the civil war as the champion of the Christian faith.⁶⁵

Constantine began to favor the Christian Church when he entered Rome in 312 as the ruler of the Western Roman Empire. Most scholars agree that he was taking a

63 Eadie, *Conversion*, 2.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 3.

considerable risk.⁶⁶ The divine intervention of Constantine's victory over Maxentius marked the beginning of a new day for the Christian church in that the purposes of Constantine and the Christian God would hence forth be identical.⁶⁷ The emperor's acceptance of Christianity was a development of significant importance for the Church. The Church went from a small fringe group to become part of the establishment.⁶⁸ Precisely at this time Constantine began building the first explicitly Christian Church buildings.⁶⁹ Both Lactantius's pamphlet and Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* portray Constantine and Licinius as acclaimed champions of Christianity.⁷⁰ Constantine and Licinius issued the edict of Milan in 313, which officially recognized Christianity in a universal edict of toleration; this essentially was a ratification of Emperor Galerius's edict in 311.⁷¹ Constantine eventually made the Church most-favored with near endless resources and Imperial favor.⁷²

66 J. N. Hillgarth, ed., *Christianity and Paganism, 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1986), 2.

67 Eadie, *Conversion*, 3-4.

68 Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 22.

69 Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, 20.

70 Jones, *Constantine*, 89.

71 Eadie, *Conversion*, 2-3.

72 Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 19.

The way the Senate and others spoke changed relatively quickly. As late as July 311, Eumenius, in giving thanks for remission of taxes, could say without offense, "Our gods have created your Emperor for our benefit."⁷³ When the Senate in celebration of Constantine's victory over Maxentius erected a triumphal arch to Constantine in 315, the inscription read:

to the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine, the Greatest, the Pious, the Fortunate, Augustus, because by the prompting of the Divinity and the greatness of his soul, he with his forces avenged the commonwealth with just arms both on the tyrant and on all his faction, the Senate and people of Rome dedicated this triumphal arch.⁷⁴

Jones argues that the vague allusion to a nameless Divinity indicates the Senators believed that any mention of the immortal gods would be offensive to the Emperor. Thus they must have believed he was a Christian, for Christians were intolerant of other Gods.⁷⁵ This argument may or may not be correct, the nameless Divinity could very well have been *Sol Invictus* or another god.

The church repaid Constantine by portraying him as the model Christian Emperor.⁷⁶ Eusebius, in his *Oration in*

⁷³ Jones, *Constantine*, 80.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 22.

Praise of the Emperor Constantine, writes that Constantine models his rule after God and God favors him for it: "Our divinely favored emperor, receiving, as it were a transcript of the Divine sovereignty, directs, in imitation of God himself, the administration of this world's affairs."⁷⁷

Eusebius, in the *Oration in Praise of the Emperor Constantine*, carefully directed the image of Constantine to show his admirable qualities while glossing over the less desirable qualities.⁷⁸ Those who wrote under Constantine's rule needed to be very careful of how they portrayed the emperor. Eusebius, being a member of the court, was definitely trying to portray Constantine as a grand admirable Christian emperor.

In the *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius records Constantine's own perception of his role,

The emperor himself, as a sharer in the holy mysteries of our religion, would seclude himself daily at a stated hour in the innermost chambers of his palace; and there in solitary converse with his God, would kneel in humble supplication, and entreat the blessings of which he stood in need.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Eusebius, *Oration in Praise of the Emperor Constantine*, 1:6

⁷⁸ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 22.

⁷⁹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 4:22.

Although he was not baptized, he behaved as if he were a full member of the Christian Church.⁸⁰ Constantine may have viewed himself as a kind of bishop, and Eusebius describes Constantine as a bishop-at-large ordained by God.

Constantine says on the occasion of his entertaining a company of bishops, he let fall the expression, "that he himself too was a bishop," addressing them in my hearing in the following words: "You are bishops whose jurisdiction is within the Church: I also am a bishop, ordained by God to overlook whatever is external to the Church."⁸¹

At the very least, Constantine was the Pontifex Maximus. Therefore he had a right to preside over the Roman state cult within the Empire. Consequently, it should not seem unlikely he felt he had power over the Christian bishops as well.

Whether Constantine converted, or if he merely favored the Christians as a political move, the Church became powerful because of his actions. Although there were many sources with different views on why Constantine acted in the manner he did. The three sources that show the *topos* of the battlefield conversion provide the archetype that later Christian writers used to explain why the later kings

80 G.W. Bowersock, "From Emperor to Bishop: The Self-Conscious Transformation of Political Power in the Fourth Century A.D.," in *Journal of Classical Philology*, 8 no. 4 (Oct 1986), 301.

81 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 4:24.

converted. After Constantine's conversion, Christianity occupied a privileged position within Roman society, with laws in its favor and against external rivals.⁸² Whereas the conversion of Constantine had the greatest impact on the later stages of classical antiquity,⁸³ the decisive centuries of transition were the fifth and sixth centuries.⁸⁴ The fifth century saw the "collapse" of one region after another in the west. The sixth century saw the Western Empire divided among Germanic tribes. Christianity adapted to the new situation.⁸⁵

82 Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, (New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1992), 11.

83 Bowersock, "From Emperor to Bishop," 298.

84 Lynch, *Medieval Church*, 19.

85 Ibid.

Two Continental Conversion Accounts

King Mirian of Georgia

In his *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, David Marshall Lang writes about the conversion of King Mirian of Iberia, which was the name of eastern Georgia in the fourth century. This conversion involves Saint Nino, who was a Christian captive in Iberia. Lang explains that around 330, many states surrounding Iberia converted to Christianity, and these states were under the suzerainty of the Roman Empire. Both Armenia and western Georgia (comprising provinces of Colchis, Abkhazia and Lazica,) had had active missions and conversions before the Council of Nicaea in 325. Bishops from these areas appear to have attended the Council. Reliable sources show that a bishop from this area, Patrophilus, bishop of Pithyonta (Pisunda), attended the ecclesiastical Council of Nicaea in 325. The site for his bishopric on the Black sea coast suggests that maritime contact with the Roman Empire gave rise to the Christian

community over which he presided.¹ Thus these circumstances favored the conversion of Iberia at this time.²

Mirian's conversion narrative follows the *topos* of Constantine's conversion in that King Mirian turns to the Christian God for help and in return promises to follow him. The basis of the story comes from a chapter in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, by Tyrannius Rufinus, written about 403, it contains oral information given to Rufinus by a Georgian prince named Bakur. Rufinus translated Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica* from Greek into Latin and brought it up to date, continuing where Eusebius left off in Constantine's day, down to the death of the Emperor Theodosius I in 395.³ Rufinus is mainly known for his relationship with Jerome and the controversy that resulted from his mention of Jerome in the preface of a translation of Origen's work.⁴ Rufinus is also known for his work on the Nicene Creed, and his translations of Origen brought

¹ Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 26.

² David Marshall Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, (Oxford: The Alden Press, 1976), 13.

³ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 25.

⁴ William Henry Fremantle, "Life and Works of Rufinus with Jerome's Apology Against Rufinus," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Second Series, Vol. 3, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), 617-618.

many of the works of Origen down to us.⁵ Rufinus's translation and continuation of Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica* in Latin was a great success. As the first Latin Christian history, it exerted great influence over both his contemporaries and later generations. Augustine relied on it for his historical sections of the *City of God*, and Byzantine Church historians Socrates and Sozomen were also deeply influenced by it. Socrates actually rewrote the first two books of his history in order to correct Rufinus's chronology. Yet he continued to use him nonetheless. Once Greek was forgotten, his translation and continuation provided the only available view of the Churches formative history.⁶

Rufinus educated in Rome and from a noble and wealthy family, joined an ascetic community in Aquileia, where he was baptized in 369 or 370. He was inspired to visit Egypt and see the birthplace of monasticism. He studied for six years in Egypt and Didymus the Blind introduced him to Origen's work. He later joined the widow Antonia Melania at her double monastery in Jerusalem. Rufinus directed the copying of books in his part of the monastery. Rufius

⁵ Ibid. 614.

⁶ Philip Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia: Books 10 and 11*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xii.

returned to Italy in 397 and spent time at the monastery of Pinetum, translating Basil's *Rule* for Abbot Ursacius.⁷ In 402, when Alaric and his Goths laid siege to Milan, Chromatius of Aquileia asked Rufinus to translate Eusebius of Caesarea's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. According to Amidon, Eusebius's work had a "well-deserved reputation for its learned and edifying survey of Christian History."⁸

Rufinus's work does not give more than the general events, yet some documents of great importance appear in this work, such as the canons of Nicaea, and the Creed as it issued from the council. Rufinus has not been seen as a credible historian on account of his condemnation by Jerome for his work on Origen.⁹ Freemantle argues that Rufinus had none of the critical power needed for a true historian.¹⁰ Although he is criticized for his skills as a historian, it seems his *Historia Ecclesiastica* remained very important to the Western Church.

Events surrounding the conversion of King Mirian happened around sixty years before Rufinus wrote this work. Lang argues if allowance is given for the "pious raptures

⁷ Ibid. viii.

⁸ Ibid. x.

⁹ Fremantle, "Life and Works of Rufinus," 621.

¹⁰ Ibid., 622.

of Rufinus and his informant," the accuracy of the account should not be challenged.¹¹ He uses this argument to compare this account to the other accounts of the conversion of Iberia, which clearly are embellished and have been changed throughout the centuries. Regardless of whatever may lie behind the story, we know that Christian communities existed in Georgia during the reign of Constantine.¹² Rufinus explains his methodology in the preface to the translation and continuation of the *Ecclesiastical History*,

We have omitted what seemed superfluous and joined what history there was in it to the ninth book, which we have made the conclusion of Eusebius's account. The tenth and eleventh books we have composed based partly on what has come down from those before us, and partly on what we remembered.¹³

Although this may not fit into the historian's need for documentation, it allows one to see how history was written during antiquity.

The embellishment of the narratives surrounding the conversion in Iberia and Saint Nino's part in it came from a mix of legends which surround the saint. Lang explains that during the eighth or ninth century, an Armenian writer

¹¹ Lang, *Georgian Saints*, 14.

¹² Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 25.

¹³ Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Preface.

combined the story from Rufinus with the story of the conversion of Armenia by Ripsime and Gregory the Illuminator. This fusion of stories defies chronology.¹⁴ Later Saint Nino's biographers changed the story with many variants including the Saint's description, which was changed from Nino being a slave to Nino being the niece of a patriarch and a Roman princess.¹⁵ Thus one must keep in mind that the story Rufinus tells us was an oral tradition passed on by a prince of Iberia around sixty years after the events. An examination of this story reveals that the *topos* of Constantine's conversion forms part of it.

Rufinus writes that Nino was a captive woman who lived a life of faith while in captivity. In this area it was customary to take sick children from house to house to see if anyone could cure them. Rufinus tells us that a woman who could not find a cure for her child took the child to Nino. The saint prayed for the child telling the mother that there was no human remedy but, "Christ her God, whom she worshipped, could give it the healing despaired of by

¹⁴ Lang, *Georgian Saints*, 14.

¹⁵ Ibid. For the complete cycle of lives of Saint Nino see the classical work, *The Life of Saint Nino*, by Marjory and Oliver Wardrop, from the Clarendon Press Series *Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica*, Vol. 5, 1900.

humans."¹⁶ This report spread and when the queen, who was suffering from a "grave bodily complaint," heard it, she asked the captive woman for help. Nino prayed for her and she was restored to good health. Nino taught the queen that Christ had healed her and that she should worship him. The queen told her husband what happened and he ordered presents sent to the woman. The Queen said,

"O King, the captive deigns to accept none of these things. She despises gold, rejects silver, and battens on fasting as though it were food. This alone may we give her as a gift, if we worship as God the Christ who cured me when she called upon him."¹⁷

Here we see the queen working to convert her husband after she had been healed. As in the other conversion stories, the queen does not actually convert her husband, but she plants the seed for the conversion that will take place.

Rufinus continues:

But the king was not then inclined to do so and put it off for the time, although his wife urged him often, until it happened one day when he was hunting in the woods with his companions that a thick darkness fell upon the day, and with the light removed there was no longer any way for his blind steps through the grim and awful night. Each of his companions wandered off a different way, while he, left alone in the thick darkness which surrounded him, did not know what to do or where to turn, when suddenly there arose in his

¹⁶ Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 10:11.

¹⁷ Ibid.

heart, which was near to losing hope of being saved, the thought that if the Christ preached to his wife by the woman captive were really God, he might now free him from this darkness so that he could from then on abandon all the others and worship him. No sooner had he vowed to do so, not even verbally but only mentally, then the daylight returned to the world and guided the king safely to the city.¹⁸

Although King Mirian did not have a battlefield conversion, he experienced a situation in which he needed divine intervention. He asked God to help him in return for his worshiping of the Christian God alone. As in the other conversion accounts, God intervened, and King Mirian was saved.

On returning to the city King Mirian immediately told his wife what happened and summoned the captive woman. He asked her to instruct him in the ritual of worship. Then Saint Nino

instructed him that Christ is God, and explained, as far as it was lawful for a woman to disclose such things, the ways of making petition and offering reverence. She advised a church be built and described its shape. The king therefore called together all of his people and explained the matter from the beginning, what had happened to the queen and him, taught them the faith, and before even being initiated into sacred things became the apostle of this nation.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 10:11.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Although Saint Nino taught all of the forms of worship and the ideals of Christianity, Rufinus points out that she was not a priest but a mere woman. In later conversion stories, we will see that all of the queens have their own bishops and spiritual advisers who teach the kings what they need to know in Christian worship.

Rufinus then describes a miracle performed by Saint Nino while the people were building a church. A pillar could not be raised and Saint Nino prayed all night and the next day miraculously the pillar had been raised. Rufinus wrote,

After the church had been built with due magnificence, the people were zealously yearning for God's faith. So an embassy is sent on behalf of the entire nation to the Emperor Constantine, in accordance with the captive woman's advice. The foregoing events are related to him, and a petition submitted, requesting that priests be sent to complete the work, which God had begun. Sending them on their way amidst rejoicing and ceremony, the Emperor was far happier at this news than if he had annexed to the Roman Empire peoples and realms unknown.²⁰

Here we see the Christian hierarchy being sent to Iberia to sustain the new Christian community. This may also have been a political move by King Mirian, in that he saw the Roman Empire moving into the area and the conversion of his

²⁰ Ibid., 10:11.

neighbors to Christianity. He probably saw the advantage of coming into the Empire as a client kingdom as opposed to being brought into the Empire by force. Scholars suggest Rufinus related the story at face value but placing it during Constantine's reign may have been his own contribution.²¹ While this conversion narrative does not follow Constantine's battlefield conversion directly, one can see the *topoi* of both the queen working to convert her husband and God intervening with divine aid when King Mirian vowed to abandon his other gods and serve Christ.

²¹ Amidon, *Church History of Rufinus*, 47.

King Clovis of the Franks

The conversion account of Clovis, King of the Franks, follows the *topos* of Constantine's conversion narrative. The story of Clovis's conversion is transmitted in Gregory of Tours's *History of the Franks*. Gregory finished this work not long before his death in 594. Clovis succeeded his father Childeric in 481-2, and he was the first Orthodox Christian king of the Franks.¹ As king of the Franks, he settled around Tournai. He was only one of a number of Frankish kings in the area of modern Belgium, Northern Gaul, and the Rhineland.² Hillgarth argues that this explains the tone of the letter Clovis received from Bishop Remigius of Rheims, which said, "You have taken over the administration of the Second Belgic Province" Remigius then admonished Clovis to be fair and to "defer to your bishops and always have recourse to their advice." He also advised him, "If you wish to reign show yourself worthy to

¹ Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 105.

² J. N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism, 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 76.

do so."³ Although this letter from Bishop Remigius welcomed Clovis as the administrator of the province of Beligica Secunda and advised Clovis to stay on good terms with the bishops of the province, it contained no suggestion that he should convert. Fletcher argues that this idea portrays traditional Romans as not believing that Orthodox Christianity was for the barbarians.⁴

Although Remigius's diocese fell within the sphere of influence of Syagrius, a Roman general who became the independent "King of Soissons," he had no hesitation in corresponding with Clovis. At this time the Roman State, with its capital in Constantinople, was not active in the west leaving the Church to deal with the barbarians.⁵ Remigius of Rheims was not the only bishop who wrote to Clovis. He also had dealings with Arian kings, the Visigoths, who were in southern Gaul, the Burgundians, and Theodoric in Italy. As Clovis extended his kingdom south to Soissons and Rheims, he saw the importance of the Church. He did not have enough warriors to occupy Gaul so he could not disregard the leaders of the local populations. Thus, long before becoming Catholic, Clovis

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 105.

⁵ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 74.

was aware of how important the Church leaders were.⁶

Gregory of Tours does relate a story that may show that Clovis did try to work with the Church. He wrote that in the fifth year of Clovis's reign, many churches were ransacked because Clovis was still a heathen. One of the bishops of a church in Soissons asked Clovis to return a vase that had been stolen. Clovis decided to do this, but one of his warriors destroyed it instead of giving it to Clovis. Clovis returned the pieces of the vase to the Bishop. Clovis later beheaded the man, an act that showed he expected to be obeyed. Gregory portrays Clovis as cooperating with the Church even before he was converted. Yet this story also betrays Clovis's strength and violent character. He expected to be obeyed when he was asking something of his warriors.⁷

Clovis's conversion story by Gregory of Tours has been described as the model of how the Church won pagan barbarian peoples.⁸ Gregory of Tours was born in 539, both of his parents came from distinguished Senatorial families. Gregory's family had a long tradition of service to both

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:27.

⁸ Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, (New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1992), 42.

the State and to the Church.⁹ He was chosen to succeed his mother's cousin, Eufornius, on his death as Bishop of Tours.¹⁰ Gregory's education was probably the best available in sixth-century Rome, including grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, and legal training.¹¹ Gregory's classical education shows in his writings; his intellectual vocabulary can be attributed to Cassius, Augustine, and Ambrose. Straw argues that Gregory is nearer the Greek tradition in his sensibilities. Although he may not have known Greek himself, he seems to have known in translation Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa.¹² Gregory references the encyclopedia of the seven *artes liberales*. This implies Gregory was familiar with this pagan text which was under Christian censure in the fifth century.¹³ At the start of the *Histories*, Gregory mentions the authors whose example he followed including the *Chronicles* of Eusebius and Jerome.¹⁴

⁹ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 7-8.

¹⁰ Edward James, *The Franks*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988), 16.

¹¹ Carole Ellen Straw, *Gregory the Great: perfection in Imperfection*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13-15.

¹³ Martin Heinzelmänn, *Gregory of Tours: history and society in the sixth century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

Gregory of Tours mentions in his writings both the Bible as a historical classic as well as Eusebius's *Church History*. The version of Eusebius that was accessible to westerners during this time was the translation that Rufinus had made.¹⁵ Heinzelmann argues that Gregory's oath formula in the last chapter of the *Histories* provides evidence of what sources influenced Gregory.

Even though I have written these books in a rustic style, I conjure you all, you bishops of the Lord who shall lead the church of Tours after my unworthy self, I conjure you by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the judgement day feared by all sinners, that you never permit these books to be destroyed or rewritten- Rather, keep them in your possession, intact and unchanged, just as I have left them.¹⁶

This oath formula is similar to St John's in *Revelation*, but also the wording was borrowed from the text of Irenaeus of Lyons, which was transmitted in Rufinus's translation of Eusebius's *Church History*. After this oath Gregory then gave directions specifically to his direct successor asking him not to remove anything from Gregory's writings.¹⁷

Edward James argues that Gregory was proud of his Roman and Christian traditions, and, although he wrote

¹⁵ Walter A. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 8.

¹⁶ Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 94.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

about the Franks, he had little knowledge of the Frankish people's customs or institutions. Gregory's judgments on the kings and queens of his day were accepted solely because he was the source of the information.¹⁸ Fletcher, on the other hand, argues that Gregory was writing for the kings of his day and wished to use their ancestors as an example of how they should behave. Gregory also wished to show how God helped the Catholic Clovis in all his wars. This purpose affected his chronology of Clovis's reign and of his conversion. Yet Fletcher also believes we should make allowances for Gregory's ignorance; his sources were meager and he wrote a century after the events, so he did not really know much about Clovis.¹⁹

Historians recently have begun to question some parts of his works. The facts that Gregory presents are hard to corroborate or correct due to the general lack of other sources. He did not participate in most of the events about which he wrote. He collected reports of hearsay and rumor. He wished to tell a good story and offer a good moral. However, modern historians should be careful not to underestimate Gregory because he was skilled and writing

¹⁸ James, *Franks*, 16-17.

¹⁹ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 103.

with specific theological and literary goals in mind.²⁰

Gregory saw Clovis's adoption of Catholicism as a central theme for his *Histories*.²¹ Unfortunately, Gregory's dates are often wrong. For example, he gives three different dates for Clovis's death. Historians believe Clovis reigned from 481/2 to 511, the year he died.²² Gregory's account of Clovis's reign is a simple and dramatic version of history.²³ Gregory's account is important not for the facts of what happened "as they can be shown false," but because it shows what Gregory thought was appropriate in presenting a king's conversion. Moreover, it was immensely important for its influence on other descriptions of royal conversion.²⁴ Gregory of Tours's Clovis had a specific role to play: he was the ideological image of the Catholic warrior king granted divine support.²⁵ Gregory of Tours's account spared Clovis any weakness by ascribing his conversion to his generosity toward his queen and her God, who gave him power to have victory.²⁶

²⁰ James, *Franks*, 17.

²¹ Ibid., 78-79.

²² Ibid., 84.

²³ Ibid., 80.

²⁴ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 103.

²⁵ Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751*, (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1994), 42.

²⁶ Jo Ann McNamara, "Imitatio Helenae: Sainthood as an attribute of Queenship," in *Saints: Studies in Hagiography*, ed. Sandro Sticca,

The conversion of Clovis was necessary to enable the conversion of his people. The conversion is worth studying because the considerations that influenced Clovis may reasonably be thought to have influenced other men of the time.²⁷ Clovis's queen, Clothilda, was a Burgundian princess and a Catholic Christian. She had been exiled after her uncle killed her father and mother. Gregory wrote,

His two daughters he condemned to exile; the older of these, who became a nun, was called Chrona, and the younger Clothilda. And as Clovis often sent embassies to Burgundy, the maiden Clothilda was found by his envoys. And when they saw that she was of good bearing and wise, and learned that she was of the family of the king, they reported this to King Clovis, and he sent an embassy to Gundobad without delay asking her in marriage. And Gundobad was afraid to refuse, and surrendered her to the men, and they took the girl and brought her swiftly to the king. The king was very glad when he saw her, and married her.²⁸

As we examine Gregory of Tours's account of the conversion of Clovis, we can also see how it compares to the hagiographical treatment told in the *Life of Clothilda*. In hagiography one must keep in mind the author is not

Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies Series, Vol. 141, (New York: State University of Binghamton, 1996), 60.

²⁷ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 73-74.

²⁸ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:28.

presenting history but a story to venerate the life of the saint. The *Life of Clothilda* gives a fuller account of how Clovis came to marry Clothilda:

Legates sent from King Clovis²⁹ saw Clothilda in Gundobad's care and they advised King Clovis, to have an eye to King Gundobad's niece who was famed for her manners and physical beauty for she was worthy of a royal marriage. Clovis was glad of these tidings. He told his trusty warrior: "My time of life demands that a noble wife should join me from whom royal progeny may spring to govern the kingdom after my death. King Gundobad has a niece whom I want to take as wife, if you so counsel me." Oh, highest wisdom and knowledge of God, whose will and prescience none can resist! All approved the royal will. Word came from the palace that the most noble maiden Clothilda be brought and made queen and was praised by all. For it was fitting that from a royal stock, future kings of the Franks be born, destined to build for God, the immortal King, the many monasteries that now exist all over Gaul.³⁰

Although both accounts offer the same general information, the hagiographer makes sure to expound on the fact that God is guiding Clovis to take Clothilda as wife. He also shows how worthy she is to be the mother of future kings.

²⁹ In the text Clovis is called Flodoveus until his baptism when Bishop Remigius calls him Ludovic(Clovis). McNamara explains it was popular from ninth century to take a baptismal name. I have kept the name as Clovis throughout the work so it is uniform.

³⁰ *Life of Clothilda*, 3.

The writer of the *Life of Clothilda* first has Clothilda protest a marriage to a pagan king until Clovis threatens war with Gundobad to marry Clothilda. Clovis sends a messenger, Aurelian, to approach Clothilda. When Aurelian approaches her he says,

"My Lord, King Clovis of the Franks, sends me to you. He wishes to have you for his wife. Behold his ring and other ornaments and the betrothal regalia." Clothilda said, "My lord, I give salutations to King Clovis. But I do not know how I can do what you ask. For it is not lawful for a Christian to marry a pagan. Let no one know about this: let God's will be done. Go in peace and may you return safely to your own."³¹

Clovis then demands Gundobad send Clothilda. Gundobad refuses and says,

"Let him come when he likes. He will perish and die and thus all those whose blood he has shed may be avenged." Hearing this, the Burgundians feared the anger of the Franks and counseled Gundobad, saying, "give your niece to the king of the Franks and let there be firm friendship between you and him." Then he gave the Blessed Clothilda, with royal ornaments to Aurelian. And she agreed that he lead her to King Clovis in the city of Soissons in Francia. There the king received her with joy and legally married her.³²

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 4.

Gregory saw Clothilda as responsible for initiating the process of Clovis's conversion.³³ The *Life of Clothilda* describes Clothilda beginning to request Clovis's conversion on their wedding night.

After Clovis initiated her into the ways of the flesh, Clothilda said, "I ask that you will believe in almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and that you will destroy the idols you worship and restore the churches you have burned." The king answered: "I will not desert my gods and I will not pay honor to your God. If you will ask for something else you will obtain it easily."³⁴

When Clothilda wanted their first son, Ingomer, baptized, Gregory devised a sermon for her to preach to her husband, which made the same points early medieval preachers made to pagans. Clothilda tells him,

"The gods you worship are nothing, and they will be unable to help themselves or any one else. For they are graven out of stone or wood or some metal. And the names you have given them are names of men and not of gods, as Saturn, who is declared to have fled in fear of being banished from his kingdom by his son; as Jove himself, the foul perpetrator of all shameful crimes, committing incest with men, mocking at his kinswomen, not able to refrain from intercourse with his own sister as she herself says: *Jovisque et soror et conjunx*. What could Mars or Mercury do? They are endowed rather with the magic arts

³³ James, *Franks*, 84.

³⁴ *Life of Clothilda*, 5.

than with the power of the divine name. But he ought rather to be worshipped who created by his word heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is out of a state of nothingness, who made the sun shine, and adorned the heavens with stars, who filled the waters with creeping things, the earth with living things and the air with creatures that fly, at whose nod the earth is decked with growing crops, the trees with fruit, the vines with grapes, by whose hand mankind was created, by whose generosity all that creation serves and helps man whom he created as his own."³⁵

Although Clothilda preached this, Clovis was not moved to believe. Instead he told her that her God has no power and does not belong in the family of the gods.³⁶

Clothilda had her son baptized. She adorned the Church with hangings and curtains to show Clovis the mystery of the ceremony. Ingomer died after his baptism. Clovis was violently angry and reproached Clothilda, saying,

"If the boy had been dedicated in the name of my gods he would certainly have lived; but as it is, since he was baptized in the name of your God, he could not live at all." To this the queen said: "I give thanks to the omnipotent God, creator of all, who has judged me not wholly unworthy, that he should deign to take to his kingdom one born from my womb. My soul is not stricken with grief for his sake, because I know that, summoned from

³⁵ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:29.

³⁶ Ibid.

this world as he was in his baptismal garments,
he will be fed by the vision of God."³⁷

Gregory explained that Clothilda's second son, Chlodmer, was also baptized and fell sick but he lived because of Clothilda's prayers, and the Lord's command.³⁸ Here we see how Gregory developed the *topos* of the queen working to convert her husband. Clothilda continues to preach about her God even when her husband refuses to convert.

Clovis's argument that the boy's death was a sign of the impotence of her Christian God was to be expected. The native Germanic religion was one in which the gods were expected to be powerful enough to give good things to their worshippers, including, fertility, wealth and victory in war.³⁹ The *Life of Clothilda* gives the same story as Gregory of Tours. Clothilda has her first son baptized and he dies. Clovis blames the baptism. The second son is baptized and God saves him through Clothilda's prayers when he is sick.

Next Gregory gives us the battlefield conversion story. This happened at the Battle of Tolbiac, in which Clovis conquered the neighboring Alamanni. The *Life of*

³⁷ Ibid., 2:29.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 43.

Clothilda follows Gregory's account almost exactly.

Gregory writes,

The queen did not cease to urge him to recognize the true God and cease worshipping idols. But he could not be influenced in any way to this belief, until at last a war arose with the Alamanni, in which he was driven by necessity to confess what before he had of his free will denied. It came about that as the two armies were fighting fiercely, there was much slaughter, and Clovis's army began to be in danger of destruction.⁴⁰

Just as Constantine had his vision and had the sign of Christ put on the shields of men and believed in the one God, Clovis chose on the battlefield to put his faith in the Christ that his wife had been preaching to him.

Gregory wrote,

He saw it and raised his eyes to heaven, and with remorse in his heart he burst into tears and cried: "Jesus Christ, whom Clothilda asserts to be the son of the living God, who art said to give aid to those in distress, and to bestow victory on those who hope in thee, I beseech the glory of your aid, with the vow that if thou wilt grant me victory over these enemies, and I shall know that power which she says that people dedicated in your name have had from thee, I will believe in thee and be baptized in thy name. For I have invoked my own gods but as I find, they have withdrawn from aiding me; and therefore I believe that they possess no power, since they do not help those who obey them. I now call upon

⁴⁰ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:30.

thee, I desire to believe thee only let me be rescued from my adversaries." And when he said thus, the Alamanni turned their backs, and began to disperse in flight. And when they saw that their king was killed, they submitted to the dominion of Clovis, saying: "Let not the people perish further, we pray; we are yours now." And he stopped the fighting, and after encouraging his men, retired in peace and told the queen how he had had merit to win the victory by calling on the name of Christ. This happened in the fifteenth year of his reign.⁴¹

Religion was a part of the Germanic king's society and this meant when Clovis chose to convert he needed the support of his warriors.⁴² Clovis's battlefield conversion shows how victory over enemies convinced Clovis of the power of Christ. In secret Clovis took his religious instruction from Bishop Remigius of Rheims. He then held a meeting with his warriors. Clovis won them over and "more than three thousand" retainers were baptized between 496 and 506.⁴³ The Franks were officially Catholic then, but it took generations for the new religion to oust the old ones. After Clovis won the battle over the Alamanni he fulfilled his promise to convert. His people said they would follow Clovis, "like a new Constantine," he was cleansed in the waters of baptism. Among the three thousand of his

⁴¹ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:30.

⁴² Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 43.

⁴³ Ibid., 44.

followers baptized were his sister Albofled, and another sister Lanthechild, who had been Arian.⁴⁴

Clovis's followers at this meeting said,

"O pious king, we reject our mortal gods, and we are ready to follow the immortal God whom Remigius preaches." This was reported to the bishop, who was greatly rejoiced, and bade them get ready the baptismal font.⁴⁵

Gregory wrote that the church was adorned with white curtains, incense and candles spreading a divinely fragrant odor. Gregory then describes the baptism,

And the Lord gave such grace to those who stood by that they thought they were placed amid the odors of paradise. And the king was the first to ask to be baptized by the bishop. Another Constantine advanced to the baptismal font, to terminate the disease of ancient leprosy and wash away with fresh water the foul spots that had long been borne. And when he entered to be baptized, the saint of God began with ready speech: "Gently bend your neck, Clovis; worship what you burned; burn what you worshipped." The holy bishop Remigius was a man of excellent wisdom and especially trained in rhetorical studies. And so the king confessed all-powerful God in the Trinity, and was baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and was anointed with the holy ointment with the sign of the cross of Christ. And of his army more than 3000 were baptized. His sister also, Albofled, was baptized, who not long after passed to the Lord. Another sister also was converted, Lanthechild by name, who had fallen into the heresy of the Arians, and she confessed that the Son and the Holy Spirit were equal to the Father,

⁴⁴ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 103-104.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:31.

and was anointed.⁴⁶

The *Life of Clothilda* presents the baptism and its mystical meaning. The difference lies in the nature of the texts; one is a history and one a hagiography. In the *Life of Clothilda*, the Holy Spirit brought oil and chrism to the bishop directly.

The new Constantine came to baptism, Blessed Remigius in the lead and Blessed Clothilda following. The Holy Spirit ordered these things to show their mystical meaning. For as was fitting in the pagan king's approach to baptism, Saint Remigius took the lead as he entered playing the role of Jesus Christ and the holy Queen Clothilda followed as the embodiment of God's Church. The holy bishop consecrated the font. The king was stripped of his corporal vestments and baptized by the aforesaid Bishop. And since there was not enough chrism, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, carrying two ampoules full of oil and chrism, which Saint Remigius devoutly received. With these he anointed the king according to the custom of the church he called him Clovis, which means a laudable man. Oh happy Gaul! Rejoice and exult, praise the Lord, delight in the true God! For through the prayers of Saint Clothilda, the mystical embodiment of the church, your first king was chosen by the King of Heaven and torn from the cult of demons.⁴⁷

The only contemporary evidence of Clovis's baptism is a letter written by Bishop Avitus of Vienne to congratulate him. In his letter Avitus suggests Clovis was a heretic

⁴⁶ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:31.

⁴⁷ *Life of Clothilda*, 7.

and not a pagan.⁴⁸ This means Avitus believed Clovis was an Arian Christian. When Avitus congratulates the king on his conversion, he was celebrating the one from heresy to orthodox Catholicism. This complicates the picture. Arian proselytizers were at work among the Frankish elite.⁴⁹ Avitus's letter shows the Arians were trying to draw Clovis to them. Avitus of Vienne was the Catholic Bishop of an Arian king.⁵⁰ He wrote:

The followers of [Arian] error have in vain, by cloud of contradictory and untrue opinions, sought to conceal from your extreme subtlety the glory of the Christian name. While we committed these questions to eternity and trusted that the truth of each man's belief would appear at the Future Judgment, the ray of truth has shone forth even among present shadows. Divine Providence has found the arbiter of our age. Your choice is a general sentence. Your faith is our victory.⁵¹

Avitus does not specify which heresy is at issue. Shanzer argues the Bishop of Vienne seems prepared to let the matter of Arianism go until the last judgment because of Clovis's choice. Avitus is eager to forget the immediate past and his not mentioning the heresy suggests that he was addressing someone recently involved in the

⁴⁸ James, *Franks*, 122.

⁴⁹ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 104-150.

⁵⁰ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 74.

⁵¹ Ibid., 76; Bishop Avitus of Vienne to Clovis (c. 496), ed. R. Peiper, MGH, AA, VI.2 (Berlin, 1883), pp. 75-76.

heresy. Interestingly when Avitus refers to those around the Franks as pagans, he uses the phrasing *populi paganorum*. Avitus had no problem calling them pagan to Clovis, who was supposed to be a pagan. Shanzer argues Avitus would not have called them pagan if Clovis had been one.⁵²

The evidence, including this letter from Avitus, suggests Clovis was either an Arian Christian or had had contact with Arian proselytizers. Clovis's sister was an Arian Christian, and several other Germanic kings were also Arians. Yet Gregory purposely portrayed Clovis as a pagan because he wrote against Arianism. McNamara argues that the Germanic kings most likely saw an advantage in Arianism to their public life. This could have been because many of their Germanic citizens were Arian. They stayed with Arianism even though the Roman clergy, who held most of the religious control in their new lands, declared it heretical. Clothilda's Burgundian uncle Gundobad was Arian, and he ruled and was on friendly terms with the Gallo-Roman bishops in his territory. Another example is Alaric II, the Visigothic King, he passed laws to pacify

⁵² Danuta Shanzer, "Dating the baptism of Clovis the Bishop of Vienne vs the Bishop of Tours," in *Early Medieval Europe*, 7 no. 1 (1998): 35-37.

his Roman subjects by regulating their relationships with his Arian subjects.⁵³ Whether or not Clovis was an Arian as the evidence suggests, he did have contact with Arians. This may have been enough to lead Avitus of Vienne to consider Clovis part of this heresy.

Traditionally the date of Clovis's conversion is 496, yet recently scholars have pushed it up to 508. James argues that Gregory of Tours showed the conversion in stages. Gregory's story of Clovis's conversion deals with the complex issues an important person within a society would consider before converting to a different religion. When Gregory has Clovis fight the Alamanni his prayer and victory suspiciously parallel the conversion of Constantine.⁵⁴ The intellectual acceptance of Christ's message, the conversion proper, forms the first stage. The second stage was Clovis's decision to announce his conversion publicly to his followers when he was not sure of their acceptance. The final stage of the conversion comprised the baptism itself. The stages of Constantine's conversion can be compared to Clovis's. Constantine accepted Christ's message in 312, he never took the second

⁵³ Jo Ann McNamara and John E Halborg, eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, (London: Duke University Press, 1986), 38-39.

⁵⁴ James, *Franks*, 121.

stage of announcing his conversion publicly, and he was baptized on his deathbed in 337.⁵⁵ In contrast, Clovis progressed through all these stages and may have taken up to ten years to do it. Gregory compresses this process for a reason; whether it was his sources or his need to tell a good story, he presents the stages in a short time frame.⁵⁶ The themes running through Gregory of Tours's account, including the role of the Christian queen, the power of the Christian God, the king's reluctance in believing his people will convert, and the baptism of the king all are repeated in the conversion accounts that come later. While these themes become a "topos or conventional literary formula," Fletcher nevertheless believes that we need not doubt their plausibility.⁵⁷ Hillgarth also points out how Gregory's Clothilda had influence and had Clovis appeal to Christ for aid in battle. Though this scene recalls the well-known story of Constantine's conversion after the victory of Milvian Bridge, it does not mean that it is "inauthentic." The Alamanni were a serious threat to Clovis, and he may well have seen himself as a new

⁵⁵ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 104.

Constantine.⁵⁸

Gregory was influenced by other accounts as well as by Lactantius and Eusebius. Goffart argues that for Clovis to be called a 'new Constantine' at his baptism was qualified praise. Gregory's view of Constantine was partly formed from the Sylvester Legend which mentions Constantine killing his wife and son. Gregory portrayed Clovis as a model of God's rewards to champions of Orthodoxy, and once to current kings as achievement in battle against foreign kings.⁵⁹ Gregory equates Bishop Remigius with the saintly Pope Silvester, therefore he claims for Clovis the mythical quality of the 'first Christian Emperor' Constantine.⁶⁰ Yet Heinzelmann argues that Gregory was not trying to tie Clovis to Constantine's political tradition, which Gregory associated with the persecution of the Church. He argues this reference is referring to a Christian society in which Bishops and Kings have a 'decisive share.'⁶¹ Gregory saw Constantine playing a limited role in the history of the Church, because of his sordid family affairs. Heinzelmann argues that Gregory's sources other than the Acts of Saint

⁵⁸ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 75.

⁵⁹ Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, 219.

⁶⁰ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:31.

⁶¹ Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 133.

Sylvester, may have been the same as Venantius Fortunatus, who employed the same phrase 'new Constantine' when referring to the election of Justinian I in 518. By omitting Constantine's baptism Gregory is emphasizing Saint Martin in the foreground as the 'outstanding member of the Church.' Therefore, attributing Clovis with Constantine's quality of being the first Christian ruler, does not detract from Gregory also showing Clovis as inheriting Saint Martin's working to advance the Church.⁶²

Other forces, including Roman diplomacy, were at work to convert Clovis. In 507 after his victory over the Visigoths at Vouille, the Emperor Anastasius sent letters conferring the office of honorary Consul.⁶³ Clovis performed actions that were similar to Constantine's. He built a new capital in Paris. He built a church there dedicated to the holy apostles. Clovis presided over a church council at Orleans in 511.⁶⁴ Thus Gregory is presenting Clovis as a new Constantine. Clovis probably recognized the political advantages of sharing the religion of his new subjects.⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid., 130-133.

⁶³ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:38.

⁶⁴ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 106.

⁶⁵ McNamara, "Imitatio Helenae," 60.

Gregory portrays Clovis's victory over the Visigoths in Southwest Gaul as a Catholic King inspired by religious zeal against the Arian Visigoths. Gregory shows how signs of heavenly favor were bestowed on Clovis's army as it passed the Churches of St. Martin of Tours and St. Hilary of Poitiers.⁶⁶

Now Clovis the king said to his people: "I take it very hard that these Arians hold part of the Gauls. Let us go with God's help and conquer them and bring the land under our control." Since these words pleased all, he set his army in motion and made for Poitiers where Alaric was at that time. But since part of the host was passing through Touraine, he issued an edict out of respect to the blessed Martin that no one should take anything from that country except grass for fodder, and water.⁶⁷

A man in the army broke this command and was killed swiftly, "and the king said: 'And where shall our hope of victory be if we offend the blessed Martin? It would be better for the army to take nothing else from this country.'" ⁶⁸ Clovis sent envoys to the blessed church to see if they would find an omen for victory. They did hear a song that predicted victory. Then when they came to river Vienne, they did not see a good place to cross so

⁶⁶ James, *Franks*, 86.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:37.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Clovis prayed and, "in the morning by God's will a hind of wonderful size entered the river before them, and when it passed over the people saw where they could cross."⁶⁹ When they passed Poitiers, another sign from God came showing victory in defeating Alaric,

a ball of fire came out of the church of Saint Hilarius and passed, as it were, over him, to show that, aided by the light of the blessed confessor Hilarius, he should more boldly conquer the heretic armies, against which the same bishop had often fought for the faith.⁷⁰

Clovis met Alaric on the plain of Vouille. Gregory states that the Goths fled at one point in battle. Clovis won the victory and slew King Alaric.⁷¹

The *Life of Clothilda* also discusses the Arian problem in a more succinct form. The hagiographer writes,

King Clovis says to Clothilda in Paris, "It is unseemly and indecent that Arian Goths should hold the greater part of Gaul. With God's help, let us go and drive them out of this land." This counsel pleased the queen and all the nobles of Gaul and Blessed Clothilda said to the king: "If you wish, Lord King, to expand your kingdom on earth and to reign with Christ in his celestial kingdom, build in this place a church in honor of Saint Peter, Prince of the Apostles, that, with his help you will succeed in subjugating the Arian people to yourself, and with him as your

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:37.

leader, return victorious." The queen's counsel pleased the king. Then the king went forth with a mighty army. The queen remained at Paris and built the church of the Holy Apostles. Having gained victory, the king returned and strenuously governed the Frankish kingdom. He built more monasteries for monks and, as he had promised Saint Remigius and Saint Clothilda, he led a religious life even to the end.⁷²

We see that both of these accounts attribute the defeat of the Arians and Alaric to God's being on Clovis's side. This again follows the *topos* of Constantine's conversion. Once these kings converted to Orthodox Christianity, God took their side and allowed them to defeat their enemies. The defeat of Arianism was extremely important to Gregory. His anti-Arian feelings should be taken seriously because he understood the political implications of Arian rulers being in power for the Catholic Church. Although Clovis converted to Catholicism, Arianism still had a hold during Gregory's day. Gregory had problems with Chilperic I, a third generation Catholic king, who was using his own interpretation of the trinity which came very close to Arianism.⁷³

⁷² *Life of Clothilda*, 8.

⁷³ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, "The Work of Gregory of Tours in the Light of Modern Research," in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Ser., 1 (1951): 34.

We also see the secondary *topos* of the Christian queen working to convert her husband. Although Gregory's account of Clothilda's effort to convert Clovis is "clumsy and often implausible," the story of the Christian queen working to convert her husband is repeated.⁷⁴ For example, Clothilda's granddaughter, Clothinda, was asked by Bishop Nicetius of Trier to secure the conversion of the Lombards. Queen Bertha, another descendant, opened Kent to Roman missionaries.⁷⁵ This ideal only worked when the king was willing to be converted. For instance, Clothilda's daughter, also Clothilda, who once married to her Visigothic husband, was so abused she died. McNamara argues he most likely saw her as a threat she might have helped her Catholic brothers against him.⁷⁶ The *Life of Clothilda* explains that Almaric's treatment of Clothilda caused a war, in which he died.

After Clovis's death his four sons divided his kingdom equally among themselves. Saint Clothilda also had a daughter whom she called by her own name of Clothilda and gave in marriage to Almaric (Amalaric, son of Alaric II), king of the Goths. He hated her greatly because she was strong in the Catholic faith while he was polluted with the Arian faith and whenever she

74 McNamara, "Imitatio Helenae," 60-61.

75 Ibid., 61.

76 Ibid., 62.

went to church, he threw dung on her. And he would beat her severely with whips but she would in no way let herself be torn from her Catholic faith. Instead she sent a legation to her brothers and mother telling them how she was treated. Moved to wrath, they gathered a great army and went to war with Almaric until the Arian king and his followers turned in flight and sought to take refuge in a Catholic church. But before he could reach the entrance of the church, he was struck by a Frankish soldier's spear and perished cruelly as he deserved.⁷⁷

To Clothsinda, Clothilda's granddaughter, Bishop Nicetius of Trier sent a letter, advising her how to convert the Lombard prince Alboin, whom she was to marry.⁷⁸ We learn in the letter written in c. 565 by Nicetius that Clovis had been very impressed by the miracles which took place by the Tomb of St. Martin of Tours. Nicetius questions, "Do these things happen in Arian Churches? They do not."⁷⁹ Bishop Nicetius then tells Clothsinda, "read this letter carefully" and "try to expound it to your husband [King Alboin]."⁸⁰ Thereafter he sets forth arguments from the Bible in favor of the Catholic doctrine the

⁷⁷ *Life of Clothilda*, 9.

⁷⁸ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 105.

⁷⁹ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 80.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

Trinity against Arianism.⁸¹ Nicetius continues by citing the example of Clothilda,

You have heard how your grandmother, Lady Clothilda of good memory, came into France, how she led the Lord Clovis to the Catholic Law, and how, since he was a most astute man, he was unwilling to agree to it until he knew the truth. When he saw the things I have spoken of were proved he humbly prostrated himself at the threshold of the Lord Martin [at Tours] and promised to be baptized without delay.⁸²

Bishop Nicetius ends his letter to Clothsinda,

I beg you not be idle; clamor without ceasing, do not cease to sing. You have heard the saying: "the unfaithful husband shall be saved by the faithful wife" (1 Corinthians 7:14). You know that salvation will be granted first to those who convert a sinner from his sin. Watch, keep vigil, for God is propitious to you. I pray that you so act that you both make the Lombard people strong over their enemies and allow us to rejoice at your salvation and at that of your husband.⁸³

One can see how clearly the *topos* of Constantine's conversion pervades these accounts. Moreover, a secondary *topos* of the pious queen working to convert her husband also occurs in Gregory's work. Bishop Nicetius used this ideal behavior to guide Clothsinda.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 80-81; Bishop Nicetius of Trier to Clotsinda, Queen of the Lombards (563-65), ed. Gundlach, CCSL, 117, pp. 419, 421-23.

⁸³ Ibid.

Two Insular Conversion Accounts

King Æthelbert of Kent

King Æthelbert of Kent was the first Anglo-Saxon king to convert to Christianity. Æthelbert's conversion follows the *topos* of the queen's role in the conversion. Bertha was a Christian when she married King Æthelbert. The *topos* here is one of marrying a Christian bride and having her bishop come with her to the marriage. These Christian princesses who married pagan kings were points of access for the church in the conversions of both Kent and Northumbria.¹ Once married, the queen and bishop worked toward converting the king. This *topos* is found in almost all of the conversion stories we have examined. While it is not clear to what degree this practice worked in influencing the conversion of a king, the link between the stories reveals the underlying idea that women do have influence in the conversion process. While most sources do

¹ Carol Neuman de Vegvar, "Saints and Companions to Saints: Anglo-Saxon Royal Women Monastics in Context," in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*. ed. Paul E. Szarmach, (New York: State University of New York, 1996), 54.

not mention what roles women played during this time period, here we see specific instances where their roles are highlighted.

Depending on the specific writer of a conversion narrative we can see also how this influence was viewed. Gregory of Tours used Clothilda's influence to praise her, whereas Bede glosses over Bertha and Æthelburga's roles to emphasize the parts priests played in the conversions. Fletcher points out the queen's role in converting the king as a *topos* when he describes Æthelbert's conversion as reminiscent of Clovis's, "a Germanic king, ruling a sub-Roman kingdom, married a Christian wife and then became a Christian."² Queen Bertha knew of her great-grandmother's part in converting Clovis.³

In examining Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the source for Æthelbert's conversion narrative, one can see this *topos* clearly. Bede explains that knowledge

about the Christian religion had already reached him (Æthelbert) because he had a Christian wife of the Frankish royal family whose name was Bertha. He had received her from her parents on the condition that she should be allowed to

² Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 111.

³ Ibid., 115.

practice her faith and religion unhindered, with a bishop named Liudhard whom they had provided for her to support her faith.⁴

Interestingly, Gregory of Tours, a contemporary witness to the marriage of Bertha of the Franks to Æthelbert of Kent, merely says she was joined to the son of a certain king in Kent.⁵ Æthelbert allowed Bertha to bring her priest and let her use a Church built in ancient times by the Romans, next to the city of Canterbury, to house the priest. Fletcher argues that Bede's telling us this may suggest a presence of a Christian community in Canterbury.⁶ It is hard to believe a Christian community was still in Canterbury when King Æthelbert tells Augustine the Christian faith is new to him. Bede may have been merely pointing out that the Christians had been in Roman Britain.

Queen Bertha was the daughter of King Charibert of Paris (561-7), so she was a cousin of both the Merovingian rulers, Chlothar II and Childebert II (died 596).⁷ Æthelbert's early kingship is obscure. Gregory of Tour's reference to him as "the son of a certain king in Kent"⁸ implies he was not king at the time of his marriage to

⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 1:25.

⁵ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 9:26.

⁶ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 111.

⁷ N. J. Higham, *Convert Kings Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 66.

⁸ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 9:26.

Bertha.⁹ Bertha's marriage to Æthelbert created an alliance with the Merovingians. Bertha was significant in the Kentish court because her marriage signaled good relations with the Merovingians. This alliance also brought potential for all kinds of cross-channel contacts, including imports to England, which enriched Æthelbert. Bertha brought along her Bishop, Liudhard, who officiated thereafter at St. Martin's church, outside the walls of Canterbury. Higham believes Liudhard was a familiar figure in the Frankish court and that he brought Frankish ideas about government to the Kentish court.¹⁰

After Bertha had married Æthelbert, Pope Gregory the Great sent a party of missionaries to Æthelbert's court in 596.¹¹ As with Gregory of Tours, Gregory the Great saw himself as a Roman citizen and believed he was part of a Roman Empire even in its changing state. Rome had not had a Western Emperor since 476, and the imperial government representative was the Exarch of Ravenna.¹² When Gregory the Great was elected bishop of Rome in 590, he had two major problems, the economy and the Lombards. Gregory took

⁹ Higham, *The Convert Kings*, 82.

¹⁰ Ibid., 86-87.

¹¹ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 114.

¹² Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 55.

over the defense and management of the city of Rome and worked to feed and protect the people in and around the city. When Gregory was unable to count on assistance from the Byzantine government in Ravenna in dealing with the Lombards, he came to terms with them.¹³ Consequently, Pope Gregory had good relations with Queen Theolinda of Lombardy, he maintained relations with the Frankish rulers, and he sponsored a missionary expedition to the Anglo-Saxons.¹⁴ Gregory the Great sent Augustine on a mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons. Augustine and his group of missionaries reached Kent in the early summer of 597.¹⁵ Augustine was a monk and the prior of the monastery Gregory had founded in Rome. Not much information is known about Augustine before the mission to Kent.¹⁶ The mission consisted of Augustine and forty monks. They traveled through Gaul with letters from Gregory to the bishops who were on their journey. They also picked up Frankish interpreters for their work in Kent.

When using Bede's text, one must remember that he had a dual purpose in his writing: to convey the history of the

¹³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴ Joseph Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, (New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1992), 26-27.

¹⁵ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 117.

¹⁶ Ibid.

events and to teach lessons in Christian living to the kings and clergy of his own day by holding up good examples from the past.¹⁷ Bede may have known little about this Gregorian mission except what he gleaned from some of Gregory's letters, which the priest Nothelm had transcribed and brought to him.¹⁸ These letters do not show clearly when Æthelbert was baptized. The majority of the sources Bede used for his information on Augustine's mission came from material collected by Abbot Albinus, of SS Peter & Paul at Canterbury. This material came from oral tradition and from written records that existed in Kent at that time.¹⁹ Other sources corroborate much of Bede's information, including Liudhard being at Canterbury, Æthelbert's marriage to Bertha, and Bede's facts dealing with the churches at Canterbury. Yet Bede's work also contains implausible items, for example, the length of Æthelbert's reign and the Roman origins of Augustine's church (the cathedral of Canterbury).²⁰ Wood argues that "despite the vindication" of aspects of Bede's account, his

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 69.

¹⁹ Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds, *Bede Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), xxxii.

²⁰ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 60.

overall interpretation causes concern.²¹ Bede provides the only early narrative for the mission to Kent, while the outline of what happened is reasonable, the interpretation is open to question.²²

Bede, like Gregory of Tours, was well educated in the classics. There is little information about the schools at Wearmouth and Jarrow, where Bede received his education. Both Benedict Biscop and Abbot Ceolfrith had brought a great many books with them. From Bede's earliest works, Laistner argues that one can see he was widely read and he had 'mastery over Latin idiom.'²³ Bede adapted and excerpted from writers including Donatus, Charisius, Audax, Caper, and others of the later Roman imperial age. Laistner argues that Bede admired Pope Gregory I, and because of this he used pagan authors sparingly. He does have lines from Virgil and Cicero that show he read them more than just in the 'grammars' used to teach Latin.²⁴ Bede constantly used Rufinus's translation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* in his works. Bede's historical

²¹ Ian Wood, "The Mission of Augustine of Canterbury to the English," *Speculum* 69, no. 1 (Jan 1994): 2.

²² Ibid., 4.

²³ M. L. W. Laistner, "Bede as a Classical and a Patristic Scholar," in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4th Ser., 16 (1933): 71.

²⁴ Ibid., 72-74.

library included Josephus, Jerome's translation of Eusebius' *Chronicle*, Rufinus's version of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, Orosius, Eutropius, Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus* with Gennadius's continuation. He also had the *Liber Pontificalis* and Gildas.²⁵ It is important to note, that although Bede wrote that he spent his whole life from age seven at Jarrow; allusions elsewhere show he visited Lindisfarne and York. He may also have even visited Canterbury and his library may have borrowed manuscripts from other libraries to copy.²⁶ One can see that Bede had access to the sources that form the *topos*, and he was a very skilled writer.

First Bede tells how Augustine and his companions landed on the Isle of Thanet with their Frankish interpreters and sent a message to Æthelbert saying,

they were come from Rome, and brought a joyful message, which most undoubtedly assured to those that hearkened to it everlasting joys in heaven, and a kingdom that would never end, with the living and true God. The king hearing this, gave orders that they, should stay on the island where they had landed, and be furnished with necessaries, till he should consider what to do with them. For he had before heard of the Christian religion, having a Christian wife of the royal family of the Franks, called Bertha; whom he had received from her parents, upon

²⁵ Ibid., 75-77.

²⁶ Ibid., 92.

condition that she should be permitted to preserve inviolate the rites of her religion with the Bishop Liudhard, who was sent with her to support her in the faith.²⁷

Thus, it seems Æthelbert was familiar with Christianity to some extent.

Yet Bede argued that Augustine's preaching convinced Æthelbert to allow them to stay and preach their religion.²⁸ Colgrave hypothesizes that Æthelbert was remaining cautious about Christianity "on behalf of his followers."²⁹ Bede may have been trying to tell a better story and to show how Æthelbert was a pagan, holding onto pagan beliefs in magic.

When they had sat down, in obedience to the king's commands, and preached to him and his attendants there present the Word of life, the king answered thus: "Your words and promises are fair, but because they are new to us, and of uncertain import, I cannot consent to them so far as to forsake that which I have so long observed with the whole English nation. But because you are come from far as strangers into my kingdom, and, as I conceive, are desirous to impart to us those things which you believe to be true, and most beneficial, we desire not to harm you, but will give you favorable entertainment, and take care to supply you with all things necessary to your sustenance; nor do we forbid you to preach and gain as many as you can to your religion."³⁰

²⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:25.

²⁸ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 62.

²⁹ Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 74-75.

³⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:25.

King Æthelbert thus provided the group of missionaries with a place to live in Canterbury and allowed them to preach at liberty. Fletcher argues that Æthelbert was hesitant for a time and then consented to be baptized.³¹

At last the king, as well as others, believed and was baptized, being attracted by the pure life of the saints and by their most precious promises, whose truth they confirmed by performing many miracles. It is related that the king, although he rejoiced at their conversion and their faith, compelled no one to accept Christianity; though none the less he showed greater affection for believers since they were his fellow citizens in the kingdom of heaven.³²

Although Bede places Æthelbert among the earliest converts in 597, we cannot be certain when the king was baptized.³³ The date of Æthelbert's baptism seems to have been sometime in 597, according to two of Gregory the Great's letters to Eulogius, bishop of Alexandria in 598. One letter read,

For while the English race, who live in a corner of the world, still remained faithless in their worship of trees and rocks, thanks to the support you gave me with your prayer, I decided to send over a monk of my monastery to preach to them. And with my permission he was elected bishop by the bishops of Germany, and with their support also, he crossed over to the aforesaid people at the edge of the world, and now letters have already reached us about his safety and work,

³¹ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 117.

³² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:26.

³³ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 63.

stating that either he, or those who crossed over with him, are ablaze with such great miracles among that same race, that they seem to be imitating the virtues of the apostles with the proofs that they provide. And in the solemnity of our Lord's nativity, which was celebrated during this first indiction, it was reported that our brother and fellow-bishop baptized more than ten thousand English.³⁴

Gregory connected the event to a Christian festival. Higham claims that this would only have worked if Æthelbert had been baptized either on Christmas day of 597 or shortly before, because this would fit with the ideas of sacral kingship.³⁵ Tying Æthelbert's baptism to Christmas is very symbolic because Christ came to earth as a mediator between God and man. When Æthelbert became a Christian king favored by God, he becomes like Christ, raised above men to rule over them for God. Just as Clovis's followers converted with him, Æthelbert's followers followed him into this new religion. Because he was baptized, they were also.

Bede wrote that Pope Gregory sent a letter as well as numerous gifts of every kind to King Æthelbert. Bede provides a copy of the letter:

³⁴ Gregory the Great, "Letter to Eulogius, bishop of Alexandria," in John R.C. Martyn, trans. *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, Vol. 2, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004), 8:29, 524.

³⁵ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 58.

Bishop Gregory to his most worthy son, the glorious lord Æthelbert, king of the English. Almighty God raises up certain good men to be rulers over nations in order that he may by their means bestow the gifts of his righteousness upon all those over whom they are set. We realize that this has happened to the English race over whom your Majesty is placed, so that, by means of the blessings granted to you, heavenly benefits may also be bestowed upon your subjects. So, my most illustrious son, watch carefully over the grace you have received from God and hasten to extend the Christian faith among the people who are subject to you.³⁶

Next the Pope instructs Æthelbert to have righteous zeal in converting his people and to suppress the worship of idols.

Overthrow their buildings and shrines; strengthen the morals of your subjects by outstanding purity of life, by exhorting them, terrifying, enticing, and correcting them, and by showing them an example of good works; so that you may be rewarded in heaven by the One whose name and knowledge you have spread on earth. For He whose honour you seek and maintain among the nations will also make your glorious name still more glorious even to posterity.³⁷

The Pope then offers Constantine as an example for Æthelbert to follow.

It was thus that Constantine, the most religious emperor, converted the Roman State from the false worship of idols and subjected it and himself to Almighty God, our Lord Jesus Christ, turning to Him with all his heart, together with the nations

³⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:32. This letter can also be found in the correspondence of Gregory the Great, Bede's copy is accurate. John R.C. Martyn, trans. *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, Vol. 3, 11:37, 782.

³⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:32.

under his rule. And now let your Majesty hasten to instill the knowledge of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into the kings and nations subject to you.³⁸

It is interesting how Pope Gregory compares King Æthelbert to Constantine. This letter shows that Æthelbert, like Constantine was already a Christian in Pope Gregory and Bede's eyes. Constantine, the prototype, would be the king's model for a royal convert who prospered.³⁹ Although Æthelbert's conversion does not have any battlefield scene, Gregory still sees him as following Constantine's model. Following Æthelbert's personal conversion Gregory admonishes him to work to convert the people as Constantine converted the Roman State.

Pope Gregory also wrote a letter to Bertha, praising her assistance in converting Æthelbert and asking her to work on getting Æthelbert to convert the nation.⁴⁰ Bede does not include this letter in his narrative, most likely because he did not know about it.⁴¹ In his letter to Bertha, Pope Gregory compares her to Helena, the mother of Constantine. Thus the *topos* of the Christian queen working

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People A Historical Commentary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 46.

⁴⁰ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 115.

⁴¹ Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 46.

to advance Christianity emerges again. Pope Gregory wrote:

So with the return of my most beloved son and priest, Laurence, and my monk, Peter, I heard from them how your Glory behaved towards our most reverend brother and our fellow-bishop, Augustine, and what great support and special love you bestowed on him. And we praise almighty God, as he has deigned most graciously to reserve the conversion of the English race for your reward. For just as he enflamed the hearts of the Romans with the Christian faith through Helena, of well-recorded memory, the mother of most pious Christian emperor, Constantine, even so, through the enthusiasm of your Glory, we are sure that His mercy is at work for the people of England. Therefore, with assiduous encouragement, strengthen the mind of your glorious husband in his love of God, and inflame his thoughts also for the most complete conversion of the race subject to him.⁴²

Higham argues that Bede saw Æthelbert's acceptance of baptism as the "avalanche of Christianization." Yet, Bede did not even describe the actual baptism of Æthelbert, date it, or locate it. Later, Bede did date King Edwin's baptism. Bede may have purposefully left out Æthelbert's baptism to emphasize what he saw as the triumph of Christianity in England in the Northern courts of Edwin and Oswald.⁴³ The fact that Bede omitted the date of the baptism may simply derive from his lack of sources for King Æthelbert's time period. All that is certain is that he

⁴² Gregory the Great, "Letter to Bertha, Queen of the English," in John R.C. Martyn, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, Vol. 3, 11:35, 778-779.

⁴³ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 56.

was baptized before his death in 616.⁴⁴

All the sources for the spread of Christianity in early England come either from Rome, in the form of letters, or from the major monasteries in Britain. These sources contain the views of their authors looking at the conversion era as a period of divine providence.⁴⁵ They are all Christian sources because we have no written records from the pre-conversion communities of the time period that have survived.

Æthelbert's conversion was extremely important because he was the first leader of the area to convert. One must question, however, whether the conversion occurred solely because of Æthelbert's attraction to spiritual truths, as Bede implies, or if political or other reasons played a role in the conversion.⁴⁶ Mayr-Harting suggests that Æthelbert knew of the advantages Clovis and his successors received from their association with the Catholic Church. Yet he may not have been willing to convert early in the Augustine mission because he felt it would imply a political dependence on the Merovingians.⁴⁷ Some pressure

⁴⁴ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 63.

⁴⁵ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁷ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 63.

would have reasonably come from the Frankish court to accept Christianity because of his marriage to Bertha.⁴⁸ Although Æthelbert may have been willing to convert, he probably would have remained tolerant of those who remained loyal to the old religion. There were at least five places of heathen worship within twelve miles of Augustine's Church in Canterbury. So the attachment to paganism remained strong in Kent and surrounding areas.⁴⁹

Conversion was very political in this Anglo-Saxon world. Mayr-Harting argues that Æthelbert's conversion was a calculated risk. For instance, his own son, Eadbald, remained pagan, and after Æthelbert's death Eadbald led a pagan reaction in Kent, before later being converted.⁵⁰ The decision to become Christian was bound to have political aspects because these men were kings. Mayr-Harting uses Redwald, King of the East Angles, as an example. He converted while visiting Æthelbert of Kent. Bede explains how he converted and was then convinced by his wife and advisers to return to paganism.

Redwald had long before been initiated into the mysteries of the Christian faith in Kent, but in vain; for on his return home, he was seduced by

⁴⁸ Wood, "The Mission of Augustine," 10.

⁴⁹ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 64.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

his wife and certain perverse teachers, and turned aside from the sincerity of the faith; and thus his latter state was worse than the former; so that, like the Samaritans of old, he seemed at the same time to serve Christ and the gods whom he served before; and in the same temple he had an altar for the Christian Sacrifice, and another small one at which to offer victims to devils.⁵¹

The political significance of Redwald's conversion and relapse is clear. He converted when he was an underking of Æthelbert. When he relapsed, he was coming out of the "overlordship of Kent" and becoming a *bretwalda* himself.⁵² A *bretwalda* was a king who gained a position of power or influence over other kings and kingdoms. Æthelbert was a *bretwalda* over the southern provinces of England.⁵³ Redwald was the only East Anglian King who ever became a *bretwalda*.⁵⁴

Bede tells us Redwald's baptism took place in Kent; it most likely happened on a visit of Redwald to the court of his overlord. The event is undated but it seems to have occurred in the first half-decade of the Canterbury mission. Æthelbert acted as a sponsor for the royal initiate, with the baptismal ceremony an event for showing Æthelbert's status as *bretwalda*, which the role could

⁵¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:15.

⁵² Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 65.

⁵³ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 65.

reinforce. This ceremony would advertise and reinforce existing relationships between the two kings to Æthelbert's advantage.⁵⁵ It may have been carried out as much for a Frankish audience as for an insular one. Even though Redwald reverted to paganism on his return home, the baptism showed that he was accepting Æthelbert's God. Thereby he was surrendering a portion of his own sacral kingship and his powers of mediation between his people and the divine. Bede's description of Redwald setting up a Christian altar beside his pagan one in the temple may be closer to Æthelbert's own perspective on conversion than is generally recognized. For the act of royal baptism did not significantly further the English conversion as Gregory the Great envisioned it. It did, however, reinforce Æthelbert's *bretwalda* status and may have furthered his political agenda.⁵⁶

The Anglo-Saxon convert kings saw religion as a strategy to use in pursuit of their interests. Christianity became the favored religion among rulers of the time not for spiritual reasons but for its "ideology,

⁵⁵ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 102.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

organization, and authoritarian characteristics."⁵⁷ As churches and monasteries were founded, they supported the kings. The bishops and clerics worked to convert the population and gave support to the king as rightful ruler. These characteristics helped in reinforcing their kingships and offering "social control and political advantage."⁵⁸ Æthelbert may have had political reasons for conversion in the late 590's because of a change of kings in Francia when Childebert II came to power. He used religious difference as a reason not to make a marriage alliance in Lombardy, and then invaded and extracted tribute from Lombardy. Æthelbert may have seen this action as having disturbing implications for a non-Christian Kent.⁵⁹

At King Æthelbert's death in c. 616, the Roman mission of Augustine was in crisis. Bede explains that when Eadbald, Æthelbert's son, became king, the faith in Kent received,

a great injury to (its) tender growth: He says not only had Eadbald not wanted to receive the faith of Christ, he also took the wife of his father, and these crimes' gave the opportunity to return to their former vomit to those who had received the rules of faith" under Æthelbert.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1-2.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 88-89.

⁶⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:5.

Bede seems to believe that many of those who had been baptized under Æthelbert had done so as a matter of policy rather than faith.

King Edwin of Northumbria

The conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria was very important in the spread of Christianity throughout Anglo-Saxon England. The conversion account of Edwin contains both types of *topoi* that we examined in these narratives. We see Edwin's conversion is similar to Clovis's and Æthelbert's conversion.¹ Edwin promises to convert to Christianity if God grants him victory in battle, and he marries a Christian bride who brings her priest with her. Edwin is the first English king whose life story can be reconstructed in detail and whose baptism can be placed securely in an historical context.²

The main source for Edwin's conversion likewise is Bede, who in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, wrote the account a century after the events. Bede relied on oral testimony and stories about King Edwin preserved at the monastery of Whitby, where the King was buried. Bede had a dual purpose in his writing. First, he was conveying the history of the events. Second, he was

¹ Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion from Paganism to Christianity*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 119.

² N. J. Higham, *The Convert Kings Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 143.

working to teach the kings and clergy of his day lessons in Christian living by holding up good examples from the past.³ Edwin was the most powerful Anglo-Saxon ruler of his day. Seventh-century English kings were powerful because of predatory warfare. They took tribute from those whom they defeated and then distributed among their retainers as payment for past and future loyalty.⁴ Being a successful king meant being victorious in battle and conquest.

When Edwin decided to marry, he sought an alliance with the Kentish royal family. An alliance between Edwin and Eadbald would help both kings secure their hegemony over the English between their two kingdoms.⁵ This was a good political reason for Edwin to make a marriage alliance to secure Æthelburga. Since Edwin sought the alliance with Eadbald, he conceded on the religious issues to secure the alliance.⁶ Bede wrote,

When he [Edwin] first sent ambassadors to ask her in marriage of her brother Eadbald, who then reigned in Kent, he received the answer, "That it was not lawful to give a Christian maiden in marriage to a pagan husband, lest the faith and the mysteries of the heavenly King should be profaned by her union with a king that was altogether a stranger to the worship of the true

³ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 5.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 164.

⁶ Ibid., 158.

God." This answer being brought to Edwin by his messengers, he promised that he would in no manner act in opposition to the Christian faith, which the maiden professed; but would give leave to her and all that went with her, men and women, bishops and clergy, to follow their faith and worship after the custom of the Christians. Nor did he refuse to accept that religion himself, if, being examined by wise men, it should be found more holy and more worthy of God.⁷

So we see part of the marriage-alliance between Edwin and Æthelburga involved sending Paulinus as Æthelburga's chaplain.⁸ Paulinus's goal was not simply to minister to Æthelburga but to try and convert her husband. Bede says,

So the maiden was promised, and sent to Edwin, and in accordance with the agreement, Paulinus, a man beloved of God, was ordained bishop, to go with her, and by daily exhortations, and celebrating the heavenly Mysteries, to confirm her, and her company, lest they should be corrupted by intercourse with the pagans... But his mind was wholly bent upon calling the nation to which he was sent to the knowledge of truth.⁹

Paulinus came to Edwin's court in 625 and was able to seek converts. This mission was difficult because as Higham explains, the elite community in Northumbria had no history with either Francia or Kent, so they had no respect for Germanic Christianity.¹⁰ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also

⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:9.

⁸ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 2-3.

⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:9.

¹⁰ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 165.

places Paulinus's arrival in Northumbria in 625. It says, "A.D. 625. This year Paulinus was invested bishop of the Northumbrians, by Archbishop Justus, on the twelfth day before the calends of August."¹¹ Paulinus is the first priest, within the *topos* of the pious queen, whose activities are more fully described. Bede highlighted the priest's role in the conversion of Edwin.

Pope Boniface V wrote to Edwin even before he became a Christian. There are similarities in the letter sent to Edwin from Pope Boniface and the letter from Pope Gregory to Æthelbert. This is interesting because one was sent to a baptized king and one to a pagan king. Boniface opened with a Christian vision of creation and history, which allowed Edwin to see the attractions of Christianity for his kingdom.¹² Bede recorded the letter:

To the illustrious Edwin, king of the English, Bishop Boniface, the servant of the servants of God. We have thought fit to extend our Episcopal care so far as to make known to you the fullness of the Christian faith; to the end that, bringing to your knowledge the Gospel of Christ, which our Saviour commanded should be preached to all nations, we might offer to you the cup of the means of salvation. This God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the undivided Trinity, from the east unto the west, through faith by confession to the saving of their souls, men worship and

¹¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, AD 625.

¹² Higham, *Convert Kings*, 165.

adore as the Creator of all things, and their own Maker; to Whom also the heights of empire and the powers of the world are subject, because the pre-eminence of all kingdoms is granted by His disposition.¹³

Pope Boniface then focuses on the alliance between Northumbria and Kent, showing how by converting to Christianity, Edwin will experience a better kingdom and kingship over his people.

For we suppose, since the two countries are near together, that your Highness has fully understood what the clemency of our Redeemer has effected in the enlightenment of our illustrious son, King Eadbald, and the nations under his rule; we therefore trust, with assured confidence that, through the long-suffering of Heaven, His wonderful gift will be also conferred on you; since, indeed, we have learnt that your illustrious consort, who is discerned to be one flesh with you, has been blessed with the reward of eternity, through the regeneration of Holy Baptism.¹⁴

Pope Boniface then works to compel Edwin to convert because God has put him in his position of power and he sends him gifts and offers protection through these items of St. Peter. This is very interesting because it shows a strong belief in the power bestowed by God on earthly objects.

It behooves you, therefore, by taking upon you the sign of the Holy Cross, by which the human

¹³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

race has been redeemed, to root out of your hearts all the accursed deceitfulness of the snares of the Devil, who is ever the jealous foe of the works of the Divine Goodness, and to put forth your hands and with all your might set to work to break in pieces and destroy those which you have hitherto fashioned of wood or stone to be your gods. Almighty God has appointed you to be descended, after many ages and through many generations, from the first man whom he formed. We have, moreover, sent you the blessing of your protector, the blessed Peter, chief of the Apostles, to wit, a shirt of proof with one gold ornament, and one cloak of Ancyra, which we pray your Highness to accept with all the goodwill with which it is sent by us.¹⁵

Boniface wrote this letter to Edwin before he converted. In this letter one can see an aspect of the *topos* of the queen working to convert her husband. Pope Boniface is acting as the priest laying out the reasons why Edwin should convert to Christianity. He is telling Edwin that his kingship will be stronger once he converts because God will favor him as he had favored Christian kings before him.

Pope Boniface not only wrote to Edwin but to his Christian Queen Æthelburga. He wanted to ensure her attempt to convert Edwin.¹⁶ Boniface calls on Queen

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Carol Numan de Vegvar, "Saints and Companions to Saints: Anglo-Saxon Royal Women Monastics in Context," in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*. ed. Paul E. Szarmach, (New York: State University of New York, 1996), 54.

Æthelburga to labor for her husband's conversion by prayer, teaching and persuasion. One can see the Pope reinforcing the role the pious queen is expected to play. Just as Clothilda worked to convert Clovis, Boniface is urging Æthelburga to do likewise:

To the illustrious lady his daughter, Queen Æthelburga, Boniface, bishop, servant of the servants of God. Our heart, has greatly rejoiced in the benefit bestowed by the bounty of the Lord, for that He has vouchsafed, in your confession, to kindle a spark of the orthodox religion, by which He might the more easily inflame with the love of Himself the understanding, not only of your illustrious consort, but also of all the nation that is subject to you.¹⁷

Next Boniface admonishes Æthelburga to work to convert her husband because a Christian should not be joined with a non-Christian.

When our fatherly love earnestly inquired concerning your illustrious consort, we were given to understand, that he still served abominable idols, and delayed to yield obedience in giving ear to the voice of the preachers. This occasioned us no small grief, that he that is one flesh with you still remained a stranger to the knowledge of the supreme and undivided Trinity. Whereupon we, in our fatherly care, have not delayed to admonish and exhort your Christian Highness, to the end that, filled with the support of the Divine inspiration, you should not defer to strive, both in season and out of season, that with the co-operating power of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, your husband also

¹⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:11.

may be added to the number of Christians; that so you may uphold the rights of marriage in the bond of a holy and unblemished union.¹⁸

Pope Boniface next gives Æthelburga advice on what to preach to Edwin. This is same sort of advice Bishop Nicetius of Trier used with Clothilda when advising her on working to convert King Alboin of Lombardy.¹⁹ Just as Gregory of Tours wrote the sermon Clothilda was to deliver to Clovis, Boniface is telling Æthelburga what to preach to Edwin.

Wherefore, applying yourself continually to prayer, do not cease to beg of the long-suffering of the Divine Mercy the benefits of his illumination; to the end that those whom the union of carnal affection has manifestly made in a manner to be one body, may, after this life continue in perpetual fellowship, by the unity of faith. Persist, therefore, illustrious daughter, and to the utmost of your power endeavour to soften the hardness of his heart by carefully making known to him the Divine precepts; pouring into his mind a knowledge of the greatness of that mystery which you have received by faith, and of the marvellous reward which, by the new birth, you have been made worthy to obtain. Inflamm the coldness of his heart by the message of the Holy Ghost, that he may put from him the deadness of an evil worship, and the warmth of the Divine faith may kindle his understanding through your frequent exhortations; and so the testimony of Holy Scripture may shine forth

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ J. N. Hillgarth, ed, *Christianity and Paganism, 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 79.

clearly, fulfilled by you, 'The unbelieving husband shall be saved by the believing wife.' For to this end you have obtained the mercy of the Lord's goodness that you might restore with increase to your Redeemer the fruit of faith and of the benefits entrusted to your hands. That you may be able to fulfill this task, supported by the help of His loving kindness we do not cease to implore with frequent prayers.²⁰

After explaining the seriousness of Æthelburga converting not only her husband but also his nation, Pope Boniface then asks her to send word when she has accomplished this feat and tells her of the gifts he sent her. Although Bede focuses on the priest's role in this conversion narrative, his inclusion of this letter from Boniface to Æthelburga indicates that she was expected to help in converting her husband.

At Easter in 626, Bede reveals the incident that brought Edwin to the place of the bargain to convert to Christianity. There was an attempted assassination, in which two of Edwin's "theghns" were killed while shielding him from a poisonous dagger. Bede wrote,

The next year there came into the province one called Eumer, sent by the king of the West-Saxons, whose name was Cuichelm, to lie in wait for King Edwin, in hopes at once to deprive him of his kingdom and his life. He had a two-edged dagger, dipped in poison, to the end that, if the wound inflicted by the weapon did not avail to

²⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:11.

kill the king, it might be aided by the deadly venom. He came to the king on the first day of the Easter festival, at the river Derwent, where there was then a royal township, and being admitted as if to deliver a message from his master, whilst unfolding in cunning words his pretended embassy, he startled up on a sudden, and unsheathing the dagger under his garment, assaulted the king.²¹

Bede explained that even with two of Edwin's men protecting him the dagger also wounded him. Bede continues:

On that same holy Easter night, the queen had brought forth to the king a daughter, called Ænflæd. The king, in the presence of Bishop Paulinus, gave thanks to his gods for the birth of his daughter; and the bishop, on his part, began to give thanks to Christ, and to tell the king, that by his prayers to Him he had obtained that the queen should bring forth the child in safety, and without grievous pain. The king, delighted with his words, promised, that if God would grant him life and victory over the king by whom the murderer who had wounded him had been sent, he would renounce his idols, and serve Christ; and as a pledge that he would perform his promise, he delivered up that same daughter to Bishop Paulinus, to be consecrated to Christ. She was the first to be baptized of the nation of the Northumbrians, and she received Baptism on the holy day of Pentecost, along with eleven others of her house.²²

Edwin was testing the strength of the Christian God. His vow was if God would grant him life and vengeance on the king responsible, then he would renounce his idols, gods and rites and accept baptism. One can see the

²¹ Ibid., 2:9.

²² Ibid.

Constantine *topos* in this vow. Just as with the vow Clovis made on the battlefield, Edwin vowed to forsake his gods if the Christian God would grant him victory. This was the ultimate test, the Christian God versus Woden and the pagan deities;²³ God had to prove he was stronger than Woden by granting Edwin victory over his enemy.

Edwin then gathered his forces and went against the West Saxons and defeated them.

At that time, the king, being recovered of the wound which he had received, raised an army and marched against the nation of the West-Saxons; and engaging in war, either slew or received in surrender all those of whom he learned that they had conspired to murder him. So he returned victorious into his own country, but he would not immediately and unadvisedly embrace the mysteries of the Christian faith, though he no longer worshipped idols, ever since he made the promise that he would serve Christ; but first took heed earnestly to be instructed at leisure by the venerable Paulinus, in the knowledge of faith, and to confer with such as he knew to be the wisest of his chief men, inquiring what they thought was fittest to be done in that case. And being a man of great natural sagacity, he often sat alone by himself a long time in silence, deliberating in the depths of his heart how he should proceed, and to which religion he should adhere.²⁴

Even after Edwin defeated them, he still did not accept baptism, because he may have been unsure if he could bring

²³ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 151.

²⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:9.

the bulk of the warrior class of Deria and Bernicia with him.²⁵ Bede makes it clear Edwin took his vow seriously but was not ready to convert at the time.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* gives a similar account, adding only that Edwin promises his daughter to God should he win and that he killed several kings.

Then promised the king to Paulinus, that he would devote his daughter to God, if he would procure at the hand of God, that he might destroy his enemy, who had sent the assassin to him. He then advanced against the West-Saxons with an army, felled on the spot five kings, and slew many of their men.²⁶

Edwin did not convert to Christianity for several years after Paulinus arrived. There were political factors in Edwin's hesitation. The most obvious difficulty was Redwald of East Anglia.²⁷ Redwald had secured the Northumbrian kingdom for Edwin. Edwin was deeply reliant on Redwald as his *bretwalda* in the beginning of his reign in Northumbria. Edwin embraced traditional English religious beliefs because Redwald did.²⁸ So we can see how conversion may have been a problem. Edwin was under

²⁵ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 168.

²⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, AD 625.

²⁷ Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 66.

²⁸ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 151-152.

Redwald's *bretwalda*, meaning he owed his loyalty to Redwald. Redwald turned from Christianity, although he kept an altar to Christ with his other gods. Edwin had to wait for a change in power between his kingdom and East Anglia. Redwald died in 624/625, but Edwin still was not powerful enough to disregard the pagan East Anglia.²⁹ Higham argues Edwin needed to influence events after Redwald's death. This crisis went on for three years, after which Edwin finally decided to accept baptism by Paulinus.³⁰

Since Edwin did not accept baptism immediately in 625 or 626, Bede tells us the famous miracle story of the vision at Redwald's court, which foretells Edwin's eventual conversion. With this story, Bede is preserving the priest-centered vision of conversion that he preferred.³¹ The story tells of the stranger who came to Edwin at Redwald's court and foretold that Redwald would deliver him from his troubles.³² Bede portrays Edwin as a non-Christian prince over whom God is watching. Bede wrote the following account,

²⁹ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 66-67.

³⁰ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 157.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

³² Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 67-68.

The vision was this. When Æthelfrid, his predecessor, was persecuting him, he wandered for many years as an exile, hiding in diverse places and kingdoms, and at last came to Redwald, beseeching him to give him protection against the snares of his powerful persecutor. Redwald willingly received him, and promised to perform 'what was asked of him. But when Æthelfrid understood that he had appeared in that province, and that he and his companions were hospitably entertained by Redwald, he sent messengers to bribe that king with a great sum of money to murder him, but without effect. He sent a second and a third time, offering a greater bribe each time, and, moreover, threatening to make war on him if his offer should be despised. Redwald, whether terrified by his threats, or won over by his gifts, complied with this request, and promised either to kill Edwin, or to deliver him up to the envoys.³³

Bede tells us a friend of Edwin went to tell him that Redwald was going to turn him over to Æthelfrid. His friend offers to take him and hide him where neither Redwald nor Æthelfrid could find him. But Edwin tells him he cannot accept because he will not break faith with Redwald. His friend left him, and Bede says Edwin was sitting outside the palace with a heavy heart. A stranger approached Edwin asking him why he was outside alone. Edwin in turn asked what business it was of his?³⁴ Bede then wrote that the stranger replied,

³³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:12.

³⁴ Ibid.

"Do not think that I am ignorant of the cause of your grief, your watching, and sitting alone without. For I know of a surety who you are, and why you grieve, and the evils which you fear will soon fall upon you. But tell me, what reward you would give the man who should deliver you out of these troubles, and persuade Redwald neither to do you any harm himself, nor to deliver you up to be murdered by your enemies." Edwin replied, that he would give such an one all that he could in return for so great a benefit. The other further added, "What if he should also assure you, that your enemies should be destroyed, and you should be a king surpassing in power, not only all your own ancestors, but even all that have reigned before you in the English nation?" Edwin, encouraged by these questions, did not hesitate to promise that he would make a fitting return to him who should confer such benefits upon him. Then the other spoke a third time and said, "But if he who should truly foretell that all these great blessings are about to befall you, could also give you better and more profitable counsel for your life and salvation than any of your fathers or kindred ever heard, do you consent to submit to him, and to follow his wholesome guidance?" Edwin at once promised that he would in all things follow the teaching of that man who should deliver him from so many great calamities, and raise him to a throne.³⁵

After Edwin answered the man, the stranger laid his hand on his head and said, "When this sign shall be given you, remember this present discourse that has passed between us, and do not delay the performance of what you now promise."³⁶ The man vanished, leading Edwin to believe

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

he was a spirit. Edwin was sitting and wondering who the man was when his friend came to say,

"Rise," said he, "go in; calm and put away your anxious cares, and compose yourself in body and mind to sleep; for the king's resolution is altered, and he designs to do you no harm, but rather to keep his pledged faith; for when he had privately made known to the queen his intention of doing what I told you before, she dissuaded him from it, reminding him that it was altogether unworthy of so great a king to sell his good friend in such distress for gold, and to sacrifice his honour, which is more valuable than all other adornments, for the love of money." In short, the king did as has been said, and not only refused to deliver up the banished man to his enemy's messengers, but helped him to recover his kingdom.³⁷

Here one sees Bede emphasizing how God directed Edwin to Redwald in order for Redwald to restore his kingdom to him. This follows the Constantine *topos* of God working to bring victory to the kings who convert. Here Edwin vowed to this stranger he would follow the person who would deliver him and make him victorious.

Bede explains that this victory was at the battle of the river Idle, which King Redwald won by killing King Æthelfrid; afterwards Edwin became king of the Northumbrians, including both Deria and Bernicia. Although Northumbria as a state was not unified in 616, and there

³⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:12.

was still serious friction between these two peoples, Bede did not wish to acknowledge this, so he presented it as a unified polity.³⁸ Bede wrote,

Thus Edwin, in accordance with the prophecy he had received, not only escaped the danger from his enemy, but, by his death, succeeded the king on the throne.³⁹

Just as God intervened to bring Constantine victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, God intervened to bring Edwin his kingdom.

After Edwin defeated the West Saxons and still did not accept baptism, Paulinus reminded him of the incident at Redwald's court. Paulinus touched his head bringing the incident back to Edwin. Paulinus had seen the East Anglican difficulty and tried to show Edwin it was God who had put him in his kingdom through Redwald's hand.⁴⁰ Bede writes,

King Edwin, therefore, delaying to receive the Word of God at the preaching of Paulinus, and being wont for some time, as has been said, to sit many hours alone, and seriously to ponder with himself what he was to do, and what religion he was to follow, the man of God came to him one day, laid his right hand on his head, and asked, whether he knew that sign? The king, trembling, was ready to fall down at his feet, but he raised him up, and speaking to him with the voice of a

³⁸ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 151.

³⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:12.

⁴⁰ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 67-68.

friend, said, "Behold, by the gift of God you have escaped the hands of the enemies whom you feared. Behold, you have obtained of His bounty the kingdom, which you desired. Take heed not to delay to perform your third promise; accept the faith, and keep the precepts of Him Who, delivering you from temporal adversity, has raised you to the honour of a temporal kingdom; and if, from this time forward, you shall be obedient to His will, which through me He signifies to you, He will also deliver you from the everlasting torments of the wicked, and make you partaker with Him of His eternal kingdom in heaven."⁴¹

Paulinus is pointing out to Edwin how God has put him in his position.

When Edwin finally became a Christian in 627, he had enough power to disregard East Anglia. Edwin's victory over the West Saxons was no doubt an important factor in this change.⁴² Yet Edwin still needed to get the support of his warriors before converting or he would not stay king for long. Thus he held a conference with his associates to achieve a collective decision.⁴³ Bede implies a meeting took place in the winter of 626-7 in a royal hall in the heartland of Deria.

The king, hearing these words, answered, that he was both willing and bound to receive the faith which Paulinus taught; but that he would confer about it with his chief friends and counsellors,

⁴¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:12.

⁴² Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 68.

⁴³ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 168.

to the end that if they also were of his opinion, they might all together be consecrated to Christ in the font of life. Paulinus consenting, the king did as he said; for, holding a council with the wise men, he asked of every one in particular what he thought of this doctrine hitherto unknown to them, and the new worship of God that was preached?⁴⁴

As a rhetorical device, Bede placed the condemnation of the pagan rites in the mouth of the leading pagan priest, Coifi.⁴⁵

The chief of his own priests, Coifi, immediately answered him, "O king, consider what this is which is now preached to us; for I verily declare to you what I have learnt beyond doubt, that the religion which we have hitherto professed has no virtue in it and no profit. For none of your people has applied himself more diligently to the worship of our gods than I; and yet there are many who receive greater favours from you, and are more preferred than I, and are more prosperous in all that they undertake to do or to get. Now if the gods were good for anything, they would rather forward me, who have been careful to serve them with greater zeal. It remains, therefore, that if upon examination you find those new doctrines, which are now preached to us, better and more efficacious, we hasten to receive them without any delay."⁴⁶

Bede then has another chief man of Edwin's give a speech about how short life is. He says, "If, therefore, this new doctrine tells us something more certain, it seems

⁴⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:13.

⁴⁵ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 168.

⁴⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:13.

justly to deserve to be followed." ⁴⁷ Coifi then demands to hear Paulinus preach and declares he will destroy the temples to the gods once Edwin decides to convert. Bede writes,

But Coifi added, that he wished more attentively to hear Paulinus discourse concerning the God Whom he preached. When he did so, at the king's command, Coifi, hearing his words, cried out, "This long time I have perceived that what we worshipped was naught; because the more diligently I sought after truth in that worship, the less I found it. But now I freely confess, that such truth evidently appears in this preaching as can confer on us the gifts of life, of salvation, and of eternal happiness. For which reason my counsel is, O king, that we instantly give up to ban and fire those temples and altars which we have consecrated without reaping any benefit from them." In brief, the king openly assented to the preaching of the Gospel by Paulinus, and renouncing idolatry, declared that he received the faith of Christ: and when he inquired of the aforesaid high priest of his religion, who should first desecrate the altars and temples of their idols, with the precincts that were about them, he answered, "I, for who can more fittingly than myself destroy those things which I worshipped in my folly, for an example to all others, through the wisdom which has been given me by the true God?"⁴⁸

Because of this conference, which assured the support of the leaders among his people, Edwin was able to accept baptism without causing rebellion.⁴⁹ Edwin was baptized in

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:13.

⁴⁹ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 169.

627 on Easter, in a church at York.

King Edwin, therefore, with all the nobility of the nation, and a large number of the common sort, received the faith, and the washing of holy regeneration, in the eleventh year of his reign, which is the year of our Lord 627, and about one hundred and eighty after the coming of the English into Britain. He was baptized at York, on the holy day of Easter, being the 12th of April, in the church of St. Peter the Apostle, which he himself had built of timber there in haste, whilst he was a catechumen receiving instruction in order to be admitted to baptism.⁵⁰

Bede then tells of all the people who converted with Edwin.

So great was then the fervour of the faith, as is reported, and the desire for the laver of salvation among the nation of the Northumbrians, that Paulinus at a certain time coming with the king and queen to the royal township, which is called Adgefrin, stayed there with them thirty-six days, fully occupied in catechizing and baptizing; during which days, from morning till night, he did nothing else but instruct the people resorting from all villages and places, in Christ's saving Word; and when they were instructed, he washed them with the water of absolution in the river Glen, which is close by.⁵¹

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* provides us similar information to Bede's account.⁵² Few of these converts could have had much knowledge of what they were

⁵⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:14.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, AD 627.

undertaking, and Edwin was described as a catechumen under instruction during the time before Easter. As with the people of Kent accepting conversion in 597, these conversions meant religious affiliation with a successful king more than a spiritual acceptance of Christ.⁵³ Although Bede's aims and methods of writing history differ from those of contemporary historians and his chronology presents problems, scholars do not doubt that Edwin was baptized on Easter in 627.⁵⁴

When Pope Honorius heard Edwin and the Northumbrians converted he sent a letter to Edwin. Bede tells us Honorius wrote,

To his most noble son, and excellent lord, Edwin king of the Angles, Bishop Honorius, servant of the servants of God, greetings. The wholeheartedness of your Christian Majesty, in the worship of your Creator, is so inflamed with the fire of faith, that it shines out far and wide, and, being reported throughout the world, brings forth plentiful fruits of your labours. For the terms of your kingship you know to be this, that taught by orthodox preaching the knowledge of your King and Creator, you believe and worship God, and as far as man is able, pay Him the sincere devotion of your mind. For what else are we able to offer to our God, but our readiness to worship Him and to pay Him our vows, persisting in good actions, and confessing Him the Creator of mankind? And, therefore, most

⁵³ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 170.

⁵⁴ Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*, 4.

excellent son, we exhort you with such fatherly love as is meet, to labour to preserve this gift in every way, by earnest striving and constant prayer, in that the Divine Mercy has vouchsafed to call you to His grace; to the end that He, Who has been pleased to deliver you from all errors, and bring you to the knowledge of His name in this present world, may likewise prepare a place for you in the heavenly country.⁵⁵

Edwin founded a church at York, of which Paulinus was the first Bishop. For the remainder of his life Edwin encouraged missionary activities. Here one can see Edwin building up the Church as Constantine did after God intervened to help him win the Battle of Milvian Bridge.

Edwin died in 633 in a battle. Edwin possibly saw himself as pursuing a divinely appointed path with the special protection of St. Peter as Pope Boniface had promised him. He gained a powerful means to expand his kingship legitimately at the expense of various neighbors, whose conversion was divinely appointed.⁵⁶ When Edwin fell in battle at Hatfield in 633, Paulinus took Æthelburga, their children, and his grandson south to the safety of Kent. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says,

A.D. 633. This year King Edwin was slain by Cadwalla and Penda, on Hatfield moor, on the fourteenth of October. He reigned seventeen years. His son Osfrid was also slain with him.

⁵⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:17.

⁵⁶ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 179.

After this Cadwalla and Penda went and ravaged all the land of the Northumbrians; which when Paulinus saw, he took Æthelburga, and went by ship to Kent. Eadbald and Honorius received him very honourably, and gave him the bishopric of Rochester, where he continued to his death.⁵⁷

Edwin's death brought down both his dynasty and his religious policies. Since Edwin's God and St. Peter did not protect him in battle, Christianity's credibility was ruined.⁵⁸ Although Paulinus returned to Kent after Edwin's death, the Church and its converts were still in Northumbria. Edwin's conversion account, even more than Æthelbert's develops the priest's role in the *topos* of the pious queen. Just as Gregory of Tours developed the *topos* of the pious queen working to convert her husband, Bede expanded the role of the priest and glossed over the role the queen played.

⁵⁷ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, AD 633.

⁵⁸ Higham, *Convert Kings*, 190.

Conclusion

In examining these conversion narratives, we see how the authors use the *topos* of Constantine's conversion to show the importance of these other conversions. The Church saw Constantine as a religious emperor who worked to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity. By using Constantine as the example, these conversions showed how these great kings also would work for the conversion of their kingdoms. This *topos* provides the authors of these works with a known and accepted idea to use as the outline for their work. Their audience would recognize the theme as soon as they read it, go back to the original image, and have a better understanding of what they were reading. Although the authors of these conversion accounts used this *topos* to ensure that their readers would understand the specific conversion they wanted to explain, they also reveal other reasons why these kings may have converted that were not as spiritual. Each of these accounts presents us with evidence of these historic conversions in a formulaic way to emphasize the importance of the conversion on multiple levels.

One sees the political reasons for the conversions of these kings despite the historians' use of the *topoi* which highlight the spiritual motivations of the kings. The conversion of King Mirian of Georgia, for example, may have been a political move. Christian priests were in the process of converting his neighbors. The Roman Empire was also moving into these areas. King Mirian saw the advantage of coming into the Empire as a client kingdom as opposed to being brought into the Empire by force.

When we study Clovis's conversion, we must keep in mind that Gregory was writing against Arianism. He was working to portray Clovis as a pagan king coming to Catholicism, not an Arian Christian converting to orthodoxy. He barely makes reference to Clovis's dealings with Clothilda's Burgundian relatives who were Arian. He does not include any material showing that Clovis could have had Arian influences. Yet the evidence has shown he was very involved with Arian groups of people, including Clothilda's relatives. Gregory portrays Clovis as a Catholic king. He wanted to show how God supported Clovis after his conversion. Clovis's conversion, however, may have been less spiritual and more political than Gregory suggests. In fact, the evidence we see from Bishop Avitus

of Vienne's letter after Clovis's conversion shows that he believed Clovis was in fact an Arian Christian and not a pagan. In choosing to convert to orthodox Catholicism, Clovis gained political recognition from the Pope as well as the support of the Bishops. This was very important for Clovis's kingship because the Church was in a powerful position to help him politically.

King Æthelbert also had political motives for converting when he did. His marriage to Bertha signified good relations with the Merovingians. This alliance also had potential for all kinds of cross-channel contacts. These contacts resulted in trade between Kent and the Franks, which brought profit to Æthelbert and his kingdom. Æthelbert did not convert immediately when Augustine of Canterbury arrived. He likely already knew something about Christianity, but he clearly had political reasons for delaying his conversion. Æthelbert almost certainly knew of the advantages that Clovis received from converting to Catholicism. He may not have wanted to seem dependent on the Franks by converting too soon. Moreover, pagan influences had a long history within Kent. Æthelbert may have wanted to secure his position by getting the support of his followers. When he did convert, Pope Gregory

compared him to Constantine. Gregory tells him to work on converting the people as Constantine had converted the Roman State.¹ Once again Constantine was held up as the example of how a good Christian king should act.

King Edwin also had political reasons for delaying his conversion. After Edwin defeated the West Saxons, he did not immediately accept baptism, claiming he was unsure if he could convince the bulk of the warriors. Bede makes it clear that Edwin took his vow seriously but was not ready to convert at the time. The most obvious political reason for delay was Redwald of East Anglia. Redwald had secured the Northumbrian kingdom for Edwin. Edwin was deeply reliant on Redwald during the beginning of his reign in Northumbria. The fact that Redwald had turned away from Christianity in favor of the traditional pagan beliefs was a definite problem for Edwin. Edwin was under Redwald's *bretwalda*, meaning he owed his loyalty to Redwald. So it was not until Redwald was dead and Edwin had secured his position that he felt at liberty to convert.

King Mirian converted to Christianity after an experience where he needed divine intervention to save himself. He vowed that if God saved him from the unnatural

¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1:32.

darkness, he would convert to the religion preached by the captive Nino. Rufinus wrote the account sixty years after the events took place, using oral information he had received from a Georgian prince. He had access to the sources and had spent his life studying, translating, and commenting on both classic and religious works. The fact that Rufinus had translated and was continuing Eusebius's work was very important. Although he claimed that the story came directly from the Georgian prince, one can see that he used the *topos* of Constantine's conversion to shape the narrative. Constantine's victory over Maxentius came because he chose to follow his vision. Both Eusebius and Lactantius attribute Constantine's victory to his choosing to believe in the Christian God. King Mirian likewise chose to call on the Christ and vowed to convert if God saved him.

Gregory wrote Clovis's conversion account to portray him as the ideal Catholic warrior supported by God. He used the *topos* of Constantine's battlefield conversion to aid in telling his story. Clovis vowed to God that he would convert to the Christ his wife believed in if God would turn the tide in the battle with the Alamanni. Although historians question parts of Gregory's work, they

generally agree one should be careful not to underestimate Gregory, who was a skilled writer with specific theological and literary goals in mind.² Not only does Gregory use the *topos* of Constantine to relate Clovis's conversion, he explicitly portrays Clovis as a new Constantine. The *Life of Clothilda* actually says, "The new Constantine came to baptism, Blessed Remigius in the lead and Blessed Clothilda following."³ We have seen that Gregory did not have a favorable view of Constantine's politics, but he did not see a problem with providing Clovis with Constantine's quality of being the first Christian ruler.⁴ The audience understood who Constantine was and what he had done for the Church. The authors were not only portraying the conversion, but showing what it meant for the Church that such a powerful person was converting.

Edwin promised to convert to Christianity, after an assassination attempt, if God would grant him victory in battle. Edwin would convert after his victory against the West Saxon king responsible for the attack. He was in effect testing the strength of the Christian God. He vowed

² Edward James, *The Franks*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988), 17.

³ *Life of Clothilda*, 7.

⁴ Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: history and society in the sixth century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 133.

that if God healed him from his wound and granted vengeance on the king responsible, he would renounce his gods and accept baptism. This represented the ultimate test: the Christian God versus Woden and the pagan deities.⁵ God had to prove he was stronger than Woden by granting Edwin victory over his enemy. This idea also goes back to Constantine's conversion story. Constantine chose to follow the God he believed would grant him victory. By painting the symbol from his vision on the shields of his men, he was testing God's strength against the pagan gods.

All of the conversion accounts examined also contain a secondary *topos*: that of the pious queen. Each Christian queen played a role in converting the king. This *topos*, or theme, shows how a pious Christian queen behaves. Just as Helena, Constantine's mother, worked to advance the Church, each of these queens also helped the Church. In King Mirian's conversion story, Saint Nino healed the queen and taught her about Christ. The queen in turn worked to convert her husband to Christianity. Rufinus made sure to point out that Saint Nino could only teach King Mirian so much because she was not a priest. He also emphasized that

⁵ N. J. Higham, *The Convert Kings Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 151.

priests were sent from Constantine to continue the work. Just as Eusebius praised Helena for her work to improve the Church, Rufinus in turn used the pious queen *topos* to show how St. Nino helped convert a people for the Church.

Gregory used Clothilda as a major player in the conversion of Clovis. He fully developed the *topos* of the pious queen by having Clothilda preach to Clovis and work to try and convert her husband. When Clovis had his battlefield conversion and called on Christ, Gregory made sure to give Clothilda credit.⁶ Gregory thus gives much of the credit for Clovis's conversion to Clothilda. She preached to Clovis, and when he vowed to convert, Clothilda called in Bishop Remigius to instruct him.

Æthelbert's conversion narrative also follows the *topos* of the pious queen's role in the conversion. Bertha was a Christian when she married King Æthelbert, and she brought her bishop with her to the marriage. Once Bertha and Clovis were married, the queen and bishop worked toward converting the king. Yet Bede does not give as much credit to either Queen Bertha or Queen Æthelberga for their roles in converting their husbands as Gregory did to Clothilda. Rather, Bede emphasized the priests' roles in the

⁶ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2:30

conversions. Bertha brought her Bishop, Liudhard, as part of her marriage agreement. He officiated at St. Martin's church outside the walls of Canterbury. Liudhard most likely also worked to convert King Æthelbert, who was already familiar with the religion when Augustine of Canterbury came to Kent on his mission. Queen Bertha most likely knew of her great-grandmother's part in converting Clovis. Bede also includes a letter from Pope Gregory guiding Queen Bertha to work on converting her husband.

In addition, this secondary *topos* is also present in the conversion account of King Edwin. Edwin marries a Christian bride, Æthelburga, who brings her priest, Paulinus, with her. Paulinus's goal was not simply to minister to Æthelburga but to try and convert her husband. Paulinus is the first priest within the *topos* of the pious queen whose activities are fully described. Bede emphasized the priest's role in the conversion of Edwin. Pope Boniface V wrote to Queen Æthelburga in order to instruct her in her attempt to convert Edwin.⁷ Boniface

⁷ Carol Numan de Vegvar, "Saints and Companions to Saints: Anglo-Saxon Royal Women Monastics in Context," in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, ed. Joel T. Rosenthal, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 54.

calls on Queen Æthelburga to labor for her husband's conversion by prayer, teaching, and persuasion.

By applying this literary form, the authors ensure their audience understands what is going to happen in their stories. Not only will the kings convert, they will then be great leaders like Constantine. Using this topology is one important way to connect these conversion stories. Although these stories differ from each other, keeping the *topos* in mind can help in the interpretation of the historical events.

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