

David Movrin  
 University of Ljubljana

## "He is Human, Too": The Empire and Its Emperors in Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*

In a somewhat enigmatic passage from his seminal *Life of Antony*, Athanasius of Alexandria<sup>1</sup> described a curious incident of his protagonist corresponding with the Emperor Constantine and his sons, Emperors Constantius and Constans. This single chapter in the hagiographic account is deceptively short, and the reader might not even realise how it represents a pivot in the relationship between the Church and the state, a turning point in the way the new religion saw the empire and its new, Christian, emperors:

Ἐφθασε δὲ καὶ μέχρι βασιλέων ἢ περὶ Ἀντωνίου φήμη. Ταῦτα γὰρ μαθόντες Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ Αὐγουστος καὶ οἱ υἱοὶ αὐτοῦ Κωνσταντίος καὶ Κώνστας οἱ Αὐγουστοί, ἔγραφον αὐτῷ ὡς πατρὶ καὶ ἠῤυχοῦ λαμβάνειν ἀντίγραφα παρ' αὐτοῦ. Ἄλλ' οὔτε τὰ γράμματα περὶ πολλοῦ τινος ἐποιεῖτο οὔτε ἐπὶ ταῖς ἐπιστολαῖς ἐγεγήθει. Ὁ αὐτὸς δὲ ἦν, οἷος καὶ πρὸ τοῦ γράφειν αὐτῷ τοὺς βασιλέας. Ὅτε οὖν ἐκομίζετο αὐτῷ τὰ γράμματα, ἐκάλει τοὺς μοναχοὺς καὶ ἔλεγεν· Τί θαυμάζετε, εἰ γράφει βασιλεὺς πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ἄνθρωπος γὰρ ἐστίν; Ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον θαυμάζετε, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς τὸν νόμον ἀνθρώποις ἔγραψε καὶ διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου Υἱοῦ λελάληκεν ἡμῖν. Ἐβούλετο μὲν οὖν μὴ δέχεσθαι τὰς ἐπιστολάς, λέγων οὐκ εἰδέναι πρὸς τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀντιγράφειν. Προτραπείς δὲ παρὰ πάντων τῶν μοναχῶν, ὅτι χριστιανοὶ εἰσιν οἱ βασιλεῖς, καὶ ἵνα μὴ ὡς ἀπορριφέντες σκανδαλισθῶσιν, ἐπέτρεπεν ἀναγινώσκεισθαι. Καὶ ἀντέγραφεν, ἀποδεχόμενος μὲν αὐτούς, ὅτι τὸν Χριστὸν προσκυνοῦσιν, συνεβούλευε δὲ τὰ εἰς σωτηρίαν· καὶ μὴ μεγάλα ἠγεῖσθαι τὰ παρόντα, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον μνημονεῦειν τῆς μελλούσης κρίσεως καὶ εἰδέναι, ὅτι ὁ Χριστὸς μόνος ἀληθῆς καὶ αἰώνιος ἐστὶ βασιλεὺς. Φιλανθρώπους τε αὐτούς εἶναι ἡξίου καὶ φροντίζειν τοῦ δικαίου καὶ τῶν πτωχῶν. Κάκεῖνοι δεχόμενοι ἔχαιρον. Οὕτω παρὰ πᾶσιν ἦν προσφιλές, καὶ πάντες ἔχειν αὐτὸν ἡξίου πατέρα. (*Vita Antonii* 81)<sup>2</sup>

1 For a good overview of the controversy about authorship, including the issues of the Syriac life (Draguet 1980), theological implications (Tetz 1982) and of the "Mystic Initiate" (Barnes 1986), see the relevant appendix by William Harmless (Harmless 2004, 111–113).

2 The text of *Vita Antonii* is taken from the critical edition published by Sources Chrétiennes (Bartelink 2004).



Antony's fame reached even the emperors. When Emperor Constantine and his sons, the Emperors Constantius and Constans, learned about these things, they wrote to him as to a father and expressed their wish to receive letters from him in return. But Antony neither cared about the letters, nor rejoiced over receiving them. He remained just as he was before the emperors wrote to him. When he received the letters, he summoned the monks and said, "Why are you so amazed that the emperor writes to us? He is human, too. Instead, be more amazed that God has written the Law for human beings and has spoken to us through his own Son". So Antony did not want to accept the letters, saying that he did not know how to write letters to the emperors in return. Persuaded, however, by all the monks that the emperors were Christians and that he ought not to cause them offense by rejecting the letters, he allowed them to be read. So he replied, welcoming the emperors' letters because they worshipped Christ, advising them concerning salvation, and counseling them not to regard present things as important but to be mindful instead of the coming judgement and know that Christ is the only, true, and eternal Emperor. He insisted that they be lovers of humanity and to be concerned about justice and the poor. When the emperors received his letter, they rejoiced. So Antony was beloved of all, and everyone deemed him worthy to be their father.<sup>3</sup>

First, the historicity. The text refers to the three rulers as "Emperors," οἱ Αὐγούστοι, presenting the reader with a difficult conundrum. Emperor Constantine died in 337. Constantius was Caesar from 324 to 337 when he became Augustus; he was Augustus from 337 to 361. Constans was Caesar from 333 to 337 and Augustus from 337 to 350. The editor perceptively wrote, "Le texte n'est pas clair" (Bartelink 2004, 341). Indeed, one wonders whether it was Constantine that wrote to Antony, and then his sons as Augusti, after their father died; or whether this was a letter – or indeed several letters – sent by all three? Allowing for this possibility, Bartelink suggested a timeframe between the end of 333 and the first months of 337 as a possibility. However, he immediately added: "On peut aussi se demander si les informations sur cette correspondance sont historiques." While his view represents a departure from the earlier scholarship which understood the report as historical (Heussi 1936), recent scholars seem to share his guarded scepticism (Vivian and Athanassakis 2003, 229–231).

More important than the questions about when and whether it happened, however, is the fact that the emperors appear in the text at all – and that the only reference where they appear "is decidedly cool" (Barnard 1974b, 172). Scholars have noted that

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3 English translation by Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Vivian and Athanassakis 2003, 229–230).

the Roman state as such is conspicuously absent from the fourth-century historiography. Arnaldo Momigliano was right in pointing out that Christians were not interested in the traditional forms of higher historiography. Instead, they invented new ones. While ecclesiastical history and the biography of the saints became popular,<sup>4</sup> ordinary political history was not christianised. There was no Christian Thucydides and no Christian Tacitus, no reinterpretation of military or political history in Christian terms. The closest attempt was Lactantius with his hybrid *De mortibus persecutorum* (Momigliano 1963, 88–89).<sup>5</sup>

The new hagiographic genre developed by Athanasius had a very different focus. While it described the life of a perfect man, this was a new ideal type that was quickly becoming popular among ordinary believers; “in comparison, the ordinary biography of kings and politicians became insignificant” (Momigliano 1963, 93). This trend was so pervasive that even an author who attempted a biography of a politician, Eusebius with his *Vita Constantini*, was forced to present it as παράδειγμα θεοσεβοῦς βίου, “a model for pious life”, going as far to portray his protagonist as a “a bishop ostentatiously among bishops” (Corke-Webster 2020, 274).

The details from *Vita Constantini* are really quite astonishing. First, there are two explicit assimilations, so striking that they have been occasionally regarded as interpolations (Seston 1947, 131). The one in the first book, describing the emperor who, “like a universal bishop,” convokes councils, is made by the author of the text:

ἑξαίρετον δὲ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν παρ’ αὐτοῦ νέμων φροντίδα, διαφορομένων τινῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλους κατὰ διαφόρους χώρας, οἷά τις κοινὸς ἐπίσκοπος ἐκ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος συνόδους τῶν τοῦ θεοῦ λειτουργῶν συνεκρότει. (VC 1.44)

But to the Church of God he paid particular personal attention. When some were at variance with each other in various places, like a universal bishop appointed by God he convoked councils of the ministers of God.<sup>6</sup>

In the second, which is no less than “one of the most famous and puzzling statements in the *Vita Constantini*” (Cameron and Hall 1999, 320), the author describes Constantine dining with bishops, Eusebius included. During this dinner party, Constantine makes a remark drawing a parallel between his own position and that of his guests – they are the bishops of “those within the Church” while he is a sort of a bishop (in the

4 As described, for instance, by Aleš Maver (Maver 2008, 2010, and 2011).

5 Also noted by Leslie Barnard (Barnard 1974a, 127–128). For a survey of recent literature about Lactantius, see the studies by Zipp (Zipp 2021) and Lovenjak (Lovenjak 2021).

6 Translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall (Cameron and Hall 1999, 87).

optative, ἐπίσκοπος ἄν εἴην) over "those outside". Banquets are not typically used to proclaim policy nuances, and scholarly consensus seems to be that this casual aside, or even witticism (Barnes 1981, 270), is not to be taken too seriously – yet the memorable image of a confident Emperor making this remark seems to have been realistic enough to warrant decades, if not centuries of academic discussion:<sup>7</sup>

Ἐνθεν εἰκότως αὐτὸς ἐν ἐστιάσει ποτὲ δεξιούμενος ἐπισκόπους λόγον ἀφῆκεν, ὡς ἄρα καὶ αὐτὸς εἶη ἐπίσκοπος, ὧδέ πη αὐτοῖς εἰπὼν ῥήμασιν ἐφ' ἡμετέραις ἀκοαῖς: "ἀλλ' ὑμεῖς μὲν τῶν εἴσω τῆς ἐκκλησίας, ἐγὼ δὲ τῶν ἐκτὸς ὑπὸ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος ἐπίσκοπος ἄν εἴην." ἀκόλουθα δὲ τῷ λόγῳ διανοούμενος τοὺς ἀρχομένους ἅπαντας ἐπεσκόπει, προὔτρεπέ τε ὅσπερ ἄν ἡ δύναμις τὸν εὐσεβῆ μεταδιώκειν βίον. (VC 4.24)

Hence it is not surprising that on one occasion, when entertaining bishops to dinner, he let slip the remark that he was perhaps himself a bishop too, using some such words as these in our hearing: "You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside." In accordance with this saying, he exercised a bishop's supervision over all his subjects, and pressed them all, as far as lay in his power, to lead the godly life.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, it is not these two loci that command recent scholarly attention regarding Constantine's episcopal equivalency. Apart from relating the anecdote about Constantine comparing himself to the bishops in VC 4.24 and appropriating the idea with a broader phrase of his own (κοινὸς ἐπίσκοπος ἐκ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος), making him a "universal bishop," in VC 1.44, Eusebius presented the evidence for the emperor acting like one. James Corke-Webster has shown that the model of Christian leadership, presented by Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, was threefold. First, ideal bishops are intellectuals, rooted in scriptures and producing speeches, treatises, and letters. Furthermore, they are dedicated to the community, defending it against heresy and schism. On top of this, they act as part of empire-wide network, supporting and regulating each other (Corke-Webster 2020, 270). Having established these characteristics for the bishops, Eusebius proceeded to present the protagonist in *Vita Constantini* according to the same model. Constantine was given the education of an elite Roman, later evidenced by his extensive study and writing of letters. He was focused on the wider community, using his learning for the benefit of society, and working for the unity of

7 Not only about the implications of the phrase (Straub 1967), its grammar (Sarra 2013 and Cusmà Piccione 2016) or Constantine's "episcopate" (De Decker and Dupuis-Masay 1980), but about its Biblical roots and connection to Moses (Rapp 1998) and indeed the entire idea of caesaropapism (Dagron 2003).

8 Translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall (Cameron and Hall 1999, 161).

the Church. Finally, he never acted in isolation and was consciously striving for a certain collectivity in his decisions (Corke-Webster 2020, 271–274).<sup>9</sup>

After this excursus about the emperor-posing-as-bishop in the *Vita Constantini*,<sup>10</sup> one can now return to the point of departure. Two decades later, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the Greek *Vita Antonii* tried to present a different model, and Averil Cameron has offered a meticulous analysis of how much it had in common with the biography that preceded it (Cameron 2000). Constantine comes to his knowledge gradually, as does Antony, and in both cases mere school cleverness is contrasted with the learning of the spirit (Cameron 2000, 75). Both protagonists fight with their demons. Constantine is surrounded by pagan gods in the temples and idols that he keeps removing and destroying, as well as by the demons which cause dissent and division in the Church. In the *Life of Antony*, this motif is famously further developed into a central feature of the text, “destined to become a classic motif in Greek ascetic works” (Cameron 2000, 76). As far as visions are regarded, *Life of Constantine* presents the seminal vision of the cross, accompanied with the words “In this conquer” – and followed by a dream with the apparition of Christ (Cameron 2000, 77). Antony’s visions, while different in nature, likewise end with a vision of Christ promising the exhausted ascetic: “Since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be your helper forever, and I will make you famous everywhere” (VA 10). Constantine is “a healer of disputes and of men’s error,” just like Antony is a healer of the sick (Cameron 2000, 77). Another quality that Eusebius ascribed to the emperor, even more remarkable, was that of a teacher, presented in VC 4.29 and 55 – preaching to his court about conversion and divine punishment (Cameron 2000, 78). Clearly, this characteristic received a significant upgrade in the *Life of Antony*, as is shown, in a nuanced way, through his relationships with his disciples (Rousseau 2000). There are even parallels in the physical appearance of the two men. Eusebius in VC 3.10.3 remarks that Constantine looked like a heavenly angel of God, shining with brightness; and Antony’s face, as described by Athanasius in VA 67, was bright and shining with cheerfulness. Moreover, just as Constantine, at his baptism, “was initiated by rebirth in the mysteries of Christ” (VC 4.62.4), so was Antony described as being “like a mystic initiate” after returning from his ascetic withdrawal in VA 14 (Cameron 2000, 81). The two men are even alike in death, with Constantine living on in his sons (VC 4.71) and with Antony (VA 91) leaving a spiritual legacy in his teachings and his example (Cameron 2000, 81).<sup>11</sup>

9 One should nonetheless note the presence of segments in the text that are critical of the emperor, inserted later (Bleckmann 2008).

10 For a detailed idea about the propagandistic implications of the *Vita Constantini*, one only needs to look at its appendix in the manuscript tradition, *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum*, “an overt plea for monarchic rule” (Marinčič 2020, 228).

11 The link was further elaborated by Adele Monaci Castagno (Monaci Castagno 2006).

Seen from this perspective, as a document that establishes the *differentia specifica* between two deceptively similar authorities, the report about Antony corresponding with the emperors shines with an almost programmatic glow. There is a certain coldness in Antony's reply to the Augusti, and scholars have noticed that he seems to see beyond their deference, recognising the dangers that empire poses to the Church (Cartwright 2016, 247); some have even described his attitude as prophetic (Brennan 1985, 210). Antony's position seems to be that the Christian's allegiance lies elsewhere, despite everything that the politicians of this world do to win it for themselves. Some have seen the imperial letter as merely another trial, one in the form of a temptation, akin to the last of the temptations of Christ in the wilderness (Mt 4; Lk 4), the offer of earthly power in exchange for worship – which he rejects along the same lines as he repels the daemons; “ὁ Χριστὸς μόνος ἀληθῆς καὶ αἰώνιος ἐστὶ βασιλεὺς” (Cartwright 2016, 250). Indeed, *Vita Antonii* is decidedly sceptical regarding the very possibility of earthly society as such. Their own community presented its thinly veiled criticism: “To see it was truly to see a land like no other, a land of righteousness and devotion to God. No one suffered an injustice there, nor was there a complaint about the tax collector”,<sup>12</sup> presenting a reality “established on principles diametrically opposed to those of the Roman Empire” (Cartwright 2016, 259).

The consequences of *Vita Antonii* redefining and actively questioning the very power structures that *Vita Constantini* tried to consecrate were immediate. Soon after its composition, the Greek life was translated into Latin, twice,<sup>13</sup> it was read widely, and the subversive portrayal of the emperors was not lost on its readers. Sulpicius Severus, the author of its arguably most influential aemula, *Vita Martini*, written at the end of the fourth century, discovered that “it was impossible for him not to refer” to its paradigmatical predecessor (Tornau 2001, 158). The three emperors from *Vita Antonii* are now paralleled by three different emperors, in a much sharper relief. As was pointed out by Marianne Sághy, Martin, still a soldier, first encounters Emperor Julian, who challenges Martin's God.<sup>14</sup> Later, already a bishop, his opponent is Magnus Maximus, the usurper emperor, who challenges Martin's priestly authority.<sup>15</sup> And finally, he is faced with Satan, the ruler of this world (Jn 14.30), who challenges Martin's faith (Sághy 2012, 47). This final show-down is particularly remarkable, since Satan makes the effort of appearing in an emperor's clothes:

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12 VA 44.3–4, translated by Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Vivian and Athanassakis 2003, 153).

13 The background of both translations remains an under-researched issue (Andelović and Geréby 2021, 5 ff.).

14 *Vita Martini* 4.

15 *Vita Martini* 20.

Quodam enim die praemissa prae se et circumiectus ipse luce purpurea, quo facilius claritate assumpti fulgoris illuderet, veste etiam regia indutus, diademate ex gemmis auroque redimitus, calceis auro illitis, sereno ore, laeta facie, ut nihil minus quam diabolus putaretur, oranti in cellula adstitit.

One day, he appeared before him, sending before him a purple light in which (the better to deceive him with the glory of his assumed radiance) he was himself clad, robed in kingly raiment, crowned with a diadem of gold and gems, his shoes smeared with gold, his countenance so calm, his face so joyful, that one would think him anyone but the Devil, as Martin was praying in his cell.<sup>16</sup>

There are parallels for this image, in both 2 Cor 11:14 and in *Vita Pachomii* 87, but the striking difference lies in the fact that Sulpicius Severus reuses this anti-imperial imagery under a *Christian empire* (Burton 2017, 247). Indeed, scholars have noted that the description is strangely reminiscent of the one already mentioned above and used by Eusebius in *Vita Constantini* (VC 3.10).<sup>17</sup> At the crucial moment, during the inaugural session of the Council of Nicaea in 324, Constantine appears “like some heavenly angel of God, his bright mantle shedding lustre like beams of light, shining with the fiery radiance of a purple robe, and decorated with the brilliance of gold and precious stones”.<sup>18</sup> Whether conscious or coincidental, the parallel illustrates how Athanasius and Sulpicius Severus have taken a genre that started by consecrating the emperor in a radically different direction, by subverting the secular power and underlining the superiority of its spiritual alternative.

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16 *Vita Martini* 24; translation by Philip Burton (Burton 2017, 124–125).

17 See the commentary *ad loc.* in the recent edition (Burton 2017, 247).

18 English translation by Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall (Cameron and Hall 1999, 125).



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## **"He is Human, Too": The Empire and Its Emperors in Athanasius' *Vita Antonii***

**Keywords:** Athanasius of Alexandria, Life of Antony, Eusebius, Constantine, Roman Empire

The paper analyses the passage from Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*, where Antony is corresponding with Constantine, Constantius and Constans, contrasting it with a very different portrayal of Constantine in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*. While Eusebius, in a famous statement, presented the emperor as a sort of a bishop, the Greek *Vita Antonii* tried to present a very different model, one that seems to be sceptical of the imperial power and perhaps of earthly society as such. The point was not lost on those who later developed the genre, as can be seen in the writings of Sulpicius Severus, the author of *Vita Martini*, written at the end of the fourth century, where the three emperors from *Vita Antonii* are paralleled with three different emperors, in a much sharper relief, subverting secular power and underlining the superiority of its spiritual alternative.

### **»Tudi on je človek«: Imperij in njegovi cesarji v Atanazijevi *Vita Antonii***

**Ključne besede:** Atanazij Aleksandrijski, *Vita Antonii*, Evzebij, Konstantin, rimski imperij

Članek analizira odlomek iz Atanazijeve *Vita Antonii* 81, kjer si Anton dopisuje s Konstantinom in njegovima sinovoma, Konstancijem in Konstansom, ter besedilo primerja z zelo drugačnim prikazom Konstantina v Evzebijevi *Vita Constantini*. Medtem ko je Evzebij v znanem odlomku cesarja predstavil kot nekakšnega škofa, je grška *Vita Antonii* ponudila zelo drugačen model, za katerega se zdi, da je skeptičen do cesarske oblasti in morda do družbe na zemlji kot take. Tega niso spregledali pisci, ki so pozneje razvili isti žanr; to je razvidno iz spisov Sulpicija Severa, avtorja *Martinovega življenja*, napisanega ob koncu četrtega stoletja, kjer se namesto treh cesarjev iz *Vita Antonii* pojavijo trije drugačni cesarji, ki v veliko ostrejših potezah subvertirajo posvetno oblast in poudarjajo premoč njene duhovne alternative.

## ● avtorju

**David Movrin** je docent na FF UL. Študiral je v Ljubljani, v Budimpešti (CEU) in v Oxfordu. Objavil je vrsto razprav, sodeloval pri redakciji *Latinsko-slovenskega slovarja* ter prevedel učbeniški komplet *Latinščina od besed do branja*. Prevajal je Evripida, Atanazija, Sulpicija Severa ter druge, uredil vrsto prevodov ter izdal monografiji *Fidus interpres / zvest prevajalec* (2010) in *Izviri meništva* (2011). Knjigo *Classics and Communism* (2013), ki jo je uredil s skupino raziskovalcev, je ARRS uvrstila v serijo *Odlični v znanosti*; sledili sta *Classics and Class* (2016) in *Classics and Communism in Theatre* (2019); še ena, *Proletarian Classics* (2022), je pred izidom.

E-naslov: david.movrin@ff.uni-lj.si

## About the author

**David Movrin** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Classics in Ljubljana. Having studied at universities in Ljubljana, Budapest (CEU), and at Oxford, he published several papers, co-redacted the *Latin-Slovenian Dictionary*, and translated a textbook set (*Reading Latin*). He has translated works by Euripides, Athanasius, Sulpicius Severus, and others, edited a series of translations, and published two monographs, *Fidus Interpres* (2010) and *Sources of Monasticism* (2011). *Classics and Communism* (2013), which he co-edited with a team of researchers, was included by the Slovenian Research Agency in their Excellence in Scholarship series. This was followed by *Classics and Class* (2016) and *Classics and Communism in Theatre* (2019); another title, *Proletarian Classics* (2022), is forthcoming.

E-mail: david.movrin@ff.uni-lj.si