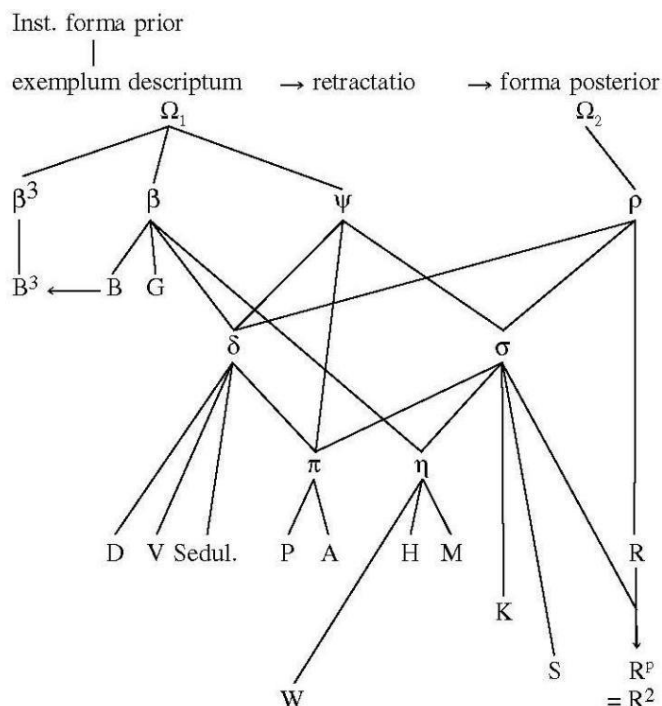


## Lactantius as a Panegyrist.

### The addresses to Emperor Constantine in the *Diuinae institutiones*

#### 1. The two versions of the *Diuinae institutiones* and the emperor's addresses

The *Diuinae institutiones* of Lactantius were written during the Diocletianic persecution of Christians in the years 303 to 311. Against the backdrop of this persecution, they present a polemical-apologetic account of the injustice of the measures taken against Christians and Christian doctrine. The work, comprising some 700 modern printed pages, is the most extensive product of Christian Latin literature to date. One problem has long preoccupied philology: The manuscript tradition offers new versions for some passages and additions in other places. The generally accepted explanation of this finding today is that Lactantius himself revised his work after an initial publication. The manuscripts thus go back partly to the first version, partly to the second, and partly manuscripts that go back to the first version are contaminated with additional material from the second. The stemma from the 2011 Teubner edition by Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok illustrates this complex finding, which nevertheless offers an overall satisfactory explanation:



The additional material of the second version is traditionally described in research as "dualistic additions and imperial addresses". It can be surveyed as follows:

Lactantius as a panegyrist

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| inst. 1,1,13–16                 | First great imperial address  |
| 1,6,12                          | Brief clarifying note   |
| 2,1,2                           | Short address at the beginning of the second book ( <i>Constantine imperator</i> )                  |
| 2,8,3–7                         | Double version of the passage on evil in the order of creation with long addition 2,8,6 add. 1–9    |
| 3,1,1                           | Short address at the beginning of the third book ( <i>Constantine imperator</i> )                   |
| 4,1,1                           | Short address at the beginning of the fourth book ( <i>Constantine imperator</i> )                  |
| 4,8,7                           | Perhaps (text-critically unclear) minimal clarifying addition                                       |
| 4,27,3f.                        | Two short clarifying additions to the account of a pagan sacrificial ritual disturbed by Christians |
| 5,1,1                           | Short address at the beginning of the fifth book ( <i>Constantine imperator</i> )                   |
| 5,1,10 add.                     | Brief clarifying note   |
| 5,1,13 add.                     | Short addition about the work of unclean spirits and the Holy Spirit                                |
| 5,7,5                           | Formulation replacement for one word and short explanatory addition                                 |
| 5,7,6                           | Formulation replacement for two words   |
| 5,21,2                          | Formulation replacement for a word  |
| 5,22,6                          | Short addendum  |
| 6,3,1                           | Short salutation ( <i>Constantine imperator</i> )   |
| 6,4,12                          | Two formulation replacements for one word each  |
| 6,7,4                           | Formulation replacement for a word  |
| 6,23,38                         | Short pointed addition  |
| 7,5,27 add. 1–17                | Long addendum on the function of evil   |
| 7,26,11–17                      | Second great imperial address   |
| opif. 19 to 1–5<br>(after 19,8) | Long addendum on the need for man to be exposed to the work of evil                                 |

The most extensive additions and changes are the first great imperial address to Emperor Constantine at the beginning of the first book, the double version of the passage on the role of evil in creation in the second book, the addition on the role of evil in the opening section of the seventh book, the second great imperial address at the end of the seventh book and the addition in the writing *De opificio dei*. The two great imperial addresses have attracted particular attention in research. On the one hand, they allow conclusions to be drawn about Lactantius' relationship to Constantine, and on the other, they provide clues for dating. This relationship of the author to the first Christian emperor is of particular relevance for several reasons: Constantine already knew and quoted the *Diuinae institutiones* in 314, he probably appointed Lactantius as prince educator at his court a little later, and his famous Christian interpretation of Virgil's 4th eclogue in the "Address to the Assembly of Saints" (the dates vary between 314 and 328) was probably significantly influenced by Lactantius.

As far as dating is concerned, the most important finding is a contradiction: The first imperial address presupposes that persecutions are raging in a distant part of the empire. In the second imperial address, the persecutors are defeated and in Constantine's hands. Most scholars associate this with the situation in 324: There was a war between Constantine and his co-ruler Licinius; Constantine accused his opponent of persecuting Christians; after the defeat in the battle of Chrysopolis on 18 September 324, Licinius, his son of the same name and his co-ruler were imprisoned and only later executed. Thus, the first emperor's address would have been written *before* Lactantius became aware of the battle, the second *afterwards*. The death of the author prevents harmonisation.

So much for the textual findings. The history of research has meant that the two imperial addresses have so far been seen primarily as source texts on questions of historical context. Here I would like to try to present the two great imperial addresses first in their train of thought and their structure, then to place them in the panegyric tradition and finally to put them in the context of the revision of the *Diuinae institutiones*.

## **2. Train of thought and structure of the great imperial addresses**

Let us first look at the train of thought and structure of the two imperial addresses. The texts can be found on the handout, there is a German, an English and an Italian version.

## 2.1 The first great imperial address (Lact. inst. 1,1,13–16)

The address first (§ 13) mentions the beginning of the work as the reason for now turning to the emperor. The emperor was the first *princeps* to reject heresies – that is, traditional religion – and to recognise and worship God's greatness (*maiestas*). For Lactantius, these two steps, the knowledge of God and the resulting worship of God, are part of man's creative destiny, which leads him to Christianity and thus to salvation. Now the author looks back to the happy day for the earth when Constantine was raised by God to rule – salvific, he says, because Constantine had withdrawn the measures against the Christians. Then (§ 14) follows a dynastic view from the assumption of rule as a young man (*iuuenis* – late dating!) from the father through the years still to come to the succession by his children – God would grant the ruler happiness. Now (§ 15) Lactantius turns to those who still persecute Christians in a distant part of the world: God, who is a patient father to the pious, will be a severe judge to them. Finally (§ 16), Lactantius once again addresses the situation of the address: Who should he address – in view of this persecution, one may understand – rather than the one who has already proven himself to be the advocate of persecuted Christianity.

## 2.2 The second great imperial address (Lact. inst. 7,26,11–17)

In the penultimate chapter of the *Diuinae institutiones*, it was said that Christian arcane discipline (or at least the caution about revealing the secrets of salvation to the outside world) had led to the telling of atrocity tales about Christians, their doctrine and their liturgy. In the original context, this was still said under the conditions of the time of persecution and thus obsolete at the time of the revision. Lactantius now ties his second great emperor's address to this: At the beginning (§ 11), he looks back in a kind of *correctio* at what had changed for the better since those days of persecution. Then (§ 12) he turns to Constantine: God had raised him to sole rule (*fastigium principale*) so that he would end the unjust persecutions. And God has given his opponents into his hands so that his – mind you, God's – greatness (*maiestas*) may be revealed. – One could say that the introduction to the second emperor's address is an antithesis of the past and the present.

And it continues with a second antithesis: Now, namely (§§ 13f.), Lactantius contrasts certain opponents of Christianity (simply referred to as *illi*) with the emperor addressed in the second person with elegant polyptoton (*tu, te, tibi*). This is done in two thoughts: Firstly (§ 13), the followers of the false, old religion are now defeated, while Constantine, as the defender of the true God, can enjoy eternal glory. And secondly (§ 14), the opponents had suffered and would continue to suffer their punishment, while Constantine would receive divine support in his rule.

Now follows a third antithesis (§§ 15–17): Constantine is compared to the earlier emperors. They are introduced as *antiqui principes* (§ 15), but then, like the nameless opponents in the preceding antithesis, they are described as *illi* (§ 16) and contrasted with the ruler addressed: According to this idea, God had chosen Constantine (§ 15 *delegit*) in order to restore his true religion through him, because Constantine had "exceptional examples of virtue and holiness" (*praecipua uirtutis et sanctitatis exempla*). In this, according to Lactantius, he surpasses even those emperors who are generally regarded as good emperors (*bonos [sc. principes]*). The decisive restriction follows (§ 16): These earlier rulers could at best be "similar to just men" (*similes iustis*). For justice in itself (*ipsam [sc. iustitiam]*) could only be attained by those who knew God. Constantine, on the other hand (§ 17 *tu uero*), performs works of justice in everything he does (*in omni actu iustitiae opera consummas*). Lactantius justifies his ability to do this with two qualities: The first is an "innate sublimity of character" (*morum ingenita sanctitate*): This refers to Constantine's descent and thus has a dynastic connotation. Both the innateness of good qualities (that they are *ingenitus*) and *sanctitas* as a good quality of the ruler belong to the panegyric repertoire. As a second aspect that highlights Constantine, Lactantius mentions the "knowledge of truth and God" (*ueritatis et dei agnitione*). Thus it was only logical that the divinity (*diuinitas*) used Constantine "as executor and at the same time as servant" (*te auctore ac ministro*) in his "shaping of the state of humanity" (*in formando generis humani statu*). This passage is remarkable: Lactantius implicitly answers here, in a kind of small theodicy, the question why God did not lead one of the earlier emperors to turn to Christianity or at least to end the persecutions. This is at the same time an interesting continuation of the theme of the *Diuinae institutiones*: There it is about why God allows the persecutions (namely, because evil is necessary so that man can earn salvation by confronting it). Here, in view of the new situation of a Christian emperor, with whom the persecutions end, the problem is presented with a different emphasis. In this section of the second emperor's address, Lactantius also follows on remarkably clearly from his earlier argumentation: That *iustitia* coincides with the truthfulness of Christian doctrine and therefore with being a Christian is a basic motif of the *Diuinae institutiones*. And the concept of *boni principes*, who stand out positively from the persecutors, is also already found in *De mortibus persecutorum* (3,4).

At the end (still § 17) is what the Christians pray for the emperor: May God protect the guardian (*custodem [...] custodiat*) and keep him in his love of God (*in amore diuini nominis*), for it brings him happiness and peace to others.

The second emperor's address thus proves to be carefully structured into three antitheses with historical (once – now) and personal (*tu – illi*) juxtapositions and a concluding prayer:

|                          |   |  |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Antithesis 1 (§§ 11f.):  | <b>once:</b> Persecution of Christians            | <b>now,</b> under Constantine: No more discrimination  |
| Antithesis 2 (§§ 13f.):  | unjust persecutors ( <i>illi</i> ) as underdogs   | Constantine ( <i>tu</i> ) as the victor who restores justice   |
| Antithesis 3 (§§ 15–17): | <b>once:</b> Former good emperors ( <i>illi</i> ) | <b>now:</b> Constantine ( <i>tu</i> ) superior through his knowledge of God and his actions thereafter |
| Prayer (§ 17)            |   |  |

What makes the difference, that is, what spans the antithetics, so to speak, is God's constant working through and on Constantine. And it is precisely the closing prayer that shows that Constantine's happiness as a ruler also depends on his closeness to God.

### 3. Lactantius as a Christian panegyrist

So far, we have looked at the two great imperial addresses in Lactantius, more or less assuming that they are somehow panegyric. Whether and to what extent this is so, however, actually still needs to be clarified. Of course, one will attribute to Lactantius a fundamental knowledge of what we understand today by panegyric: After Quintilian, he is the first to comment on the *panegyricus* as – and I say this unprotectedly – a literary genre: In the first book of the *Divinae institutiones*, Lactantius explains within the framework of his euhemeristic argumentation that in the past, people were repeatedly so esteemed and praised for outstanding achievements that they were finally considered gods (inst. 1,15,13):

*Accesserunt etiam poetae et compositis ad uoluptatem carminibus in caelum eos sustulerunt, sicut faciunt qui apud reges etiam malos panegyricis mendacibus adulantur.*

"For the poets came along and raised them to heaven in poems written for pleasure, as do those who flatter even before bad kings with their lying eulogies."

It is remarkable that Lactantius here – one could say in a small anachronism – mentions rhetorical praise of rulers in addition to poetry, whose great age is beyond question for him, for a process that in itself is to be located in a very early epoch of human history (it is about the emergence of Greek religion). He projects back a practice that he knows from his own time. Thus, as is well known, some of the speeches collected in the *Panegyrici Latini* date from the time before the *Diuinae institutiones* were written, some from shortly after. In general: As a former teacher of rhetoric at the imperial court, Lactantius must have been familiar with this genre in theory and practice.

Certainly, the two imperial addresses differ from a *panegyricus* in the narrower sense in that they are not an independent speech, but only an address at a prominent place within a large work. One can speculate whether their addition was connected with a selection reading from the work and they were then intended for this performance situation after all, but that is pure conjecture. However, the communication situation of a single rhetor (and this is the self-image that Lactantius also maintains in his work) addressing the emperor in front of an audience, which here is surely a reading audience, remains common.

Against this background, those elements that the two great imperial addresses have in common with the usual topicality of a *panegyricus* may be regarded as deliberately set. In general, we can say: In the imperial addresses, too, we can observe the *amplificatio* of deeds and virtues of the addressed ruler and his dynasty that is characteristic of *panegyrici*. The following overview illustrates this:

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <i>amplificatio:</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Superlatives 1,1,13 <i>imperator maxime</i>, 1,1,13 <i>primus Romanorum principum</i>, 1,1,13 <i>dies ille felicissimus</i>, 7,26,11 <i>sanctissime imperator</i>, 7,26,17 <i>cum summa omnium gratulatione</i></li> <li>- Uniqueness: 1,1,16 <i>quem adloquar nisi eum</i>, 7,26,15 <i>unus ex omnibus</i> extitisti</li> <li>- other hyperbolic statements: 1,1,13 <i>salutarem universis et optabilem principatum</i>, 7,26,13 <i>praepollens immortalibus tuis gloriis</i>, 7,26,17 <i>in omni actu iustitiae opera consummas</i></li> </ul> |
| Deeds:               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Acts of war: 7,26,12 <i>summa potestate deiectos in manus tuas idem deus tradidit</i></li> <li>- Acts of peace: 1,1,13 <i>iustitiam reducens taeterrimum aliorum facinus expiasti</i>; 1,1,16 <i>per quem rebus humanis iustitia et sapientia restituta est?</i>, 7,26,12 <i>uera pietate aliorum male consulta rescindere, peccata corrigere, saluti hominum paterna clementia prouidere, ipsos denique malos a re publica submouere</i>, 7,26,17 <i>in omni actu iustitiae opera consummas</i></li> </ul>                                      |
| Virtues:             | 7,26,15 <i>praecipua uirtutis et sanctitatis exempla praeberes</i> , 7,26,17 <i>et morum ingenita sanctitate et ueritatis et dei agnitione</i>  |
| Dynasty:             | 1,1,14 <i>tuisque liberis ut ipse a patre accepisti tutelam Romani nominis tradas</i> , 7,26,15 <i>morum ingenita sanctitate</i>  |

In addition, there are numerous individual motifs, such as the address *sanctissime imperator* (7,26,11), which belongs to the panegyric repertoire (Plin. epist. 10,1,1; Fronto 8,1; 4 x *Panegyrici Latini*) as well as the metaphor of *gubernaculum* (1,1,14 such as Plin. paneg. 6,2, Paneg. 10,4,2; 8,3,3 etc.), the description of the ruler's performance as *restituere* (1,1,16 and 7,26,11 such as Plin. paneg. 32,2; paneg. 10,1,5; 10,3,1 etc.), the talk of *felicitas* of the ruler (1,1,14; 7,26,13; 7,26,17 as Plin. paneg. 74,1; paneg. 11,6,1; 11,13,1 etc.), the characterisation of his rule as "salutary" (*salutaris* 1,1,13; 7,26,17 as Paneg. 10,4,2; 11,15,3; 4,2,2) or the formulation that something happens *auspicio* of the ruler (1,1,13 as Paneg. 8,2,2; 8,5,4; 8,15,2). A somewhat more extensive topos is that of the inauguration of the ruler as a happy day that had appeared to the world or the empire (1,1,13 *cum dies ille felicissimus orbi terrarum inluxisset*) – it is also found several times in the *Panegyrici Latini*



(Paneg. 8,2,2 *diuinus ille uestrae maiestatis ortus ipso quo inluxit auspicio ueris inlustrior, cui dies serenus [...] incaluit*; 5,7,6 *quisnam ille tum nobis inluxit dies [...], cum tu [...]*; 4,30,5 *nullus post urbem conditam dies Romano inluxit*).

Against this background, the specifically Christian elements in the panegyric of Lactantius can be seen all the more clearly: A first important detail is already that the word *maiestas*, which otherwise in panegyric denotes the sublimity of the praised ruler (Paneg. 10,14,3; 11,15,1; 8,1,1 etc.), is used in Lactantius' great imperial addresses for the greatness of God (1,1,13; 7,26,12). In general, if one goes through the statements about Constantine's deeds that are found in the great imperial addresses, a clear pattern becomes apparent: It is never about the emperor's own deeds, ultimately God acts through Constantine – the emperor is worthy of praise because he implements God's will:

- God led Constantine to rule (1,1,13 *te deus summus ad beatum imperii columen evexit*; 7,26,11 *te deus [...] excitauit*; 7,26,12 *te prouidentia summae diuinitatis ad fastigium principale prouexit*), he chose him (7,26,15).
- Constantine's great deeds are that he pushed back paganism (1,1,13 *repudiatis erroribus*) and ended the persecution of Christians (1,1,13; 7,26,11).
- What sets Constantine apart from other emperors is that he recognised the true God and acted accordingly (1,1,13 *maiestatem dei singularis ac ueri et cognouisti et honorasti*).
- Constantine's victory over the persecutors is due to God, he has given them into his hand (7,26,12 *in manus tuas idem deus tradidit*).
- Constantine's reign will flourish in happiness and peace as long as he remains faithful to God (7,26,13).

Thus the imperial addresses, for all their panegyric colouring, are fully integrated into the soteriological and salvation-historical train of thought of the work as a whole: Christians are the true righteous, the *iusti*, Christianity the true *iustitia*, and God will sooner or later punish all rulers who oppose him and his justice (inst. 5,23). Thus, almost in the habitus of an Old Testament prophet, Lactantius shows the ruler that his power and greatness and legitimacy are outstanding because they are given by God, who has chosen him, but at the same time they also depend on this God and faithfulness to him. If, as Lactantius says at the end of the second emperor's address, the Christians pray that Constantine may persevere in love for God because this is best for him and for all (7,26,17 *semper in amore diuini nominis perseueres, quod est omnibus salutare et tibi ad felicitatem, ceteris ad quietem*), then this results ex negativo in an almost threatening scenario for apostasy. The panegyric of Lactantius is thus by no means adulatory, but consistently theological.

#### 4. The Christian panegyric emperor's addresses in the context of revision

It was already mentioned at the beginning that the addresses to the emperor, both the major and minor ones just discussed, are part of a revision of his main work, which Lactantius obviously undertook in the summer and autumn of 324. However, as we have seen at the beginning, this revision consists only in part of the addition of five minor addresses and the two major addresses. The scope of those additions that make it clear that man must necessarily be confronted with evil is noticeably greater. They are found in the work on the nature of man in divine creation (behind opif. 19,8) and in the passages of the *Diuinae institutiones*, which explain the creation of the world (2,8,3–7) and the creative meaning of human existence (7,26,11–17).

One will therefore have to state: Firstly, he wanted to dedicate the *Diuinae institutiones* to the emperor, who, according to the author's conviction, as an instrument of God, had made it possible for Christians to live their faith, and thus also to swear him to fidelity to Christianity. Secondly, he wanted to say even more clearly that evil has its fixed place and function in divine creation: Evil gives man the opportunity to prove his faith in the struggle with it, in the struggle of virtue. In this way he acquires eternal life as the highest good.

In my opinion, this leads to the following scenario of the revision's genesis: In the summer of 324, Lactantius learns of open warfare between Constantine and Licinius and of Licinius' measures, which are effectively interpreted in Constantine's environment as a resumption of the persecutions of Christians.

Under these circumstances, the prominent role played by Licinius in the *De mortibus persecutorum* hardly seems tenable. Shortly after the Milan agreement of 313, it may have seemed opportune to pay tribute to *both* rulers involved. In the summer and autumn of 324, however, a text that attested that Licinius, like Constantine, had been divinely chosen might seem in need of revision. And indeed, in the second emperor's address, Lactantius takes up thoughts and formulations from the proemium of *De mortibus persecutorum* and now refers them to Constantine alone:

mort. pers. 1,2–7

*Ecce, ademptis omnibus aduersariis, restituta per orbem tranquillitate, profligata nuper ecclesia rursum exurgit [...]. (3) **Excitauit** enim **deus principes** qui tyrannorum nefaria et cruenta imperia **resciderunt, humano generi prouiderunt, [...]** (5) **Qui** insultauerant deo, **iacent, qui** templum sanctum euerterant, ruina maiore ceciderunt, **qui** iustos excarnificauerant, caelestibus plagis et cruciatibus meritis nocentes animas profuderunt. (6) Sero id quidem, sed grauiter ac digne. Distulerat enim **poenas** eorum deus, ut ederet in eos magna et mirabilia exempla, [...].*

inst. 7,26,11–14

*Sed omnia iam, sanctissime imperator, figmenta sopita sunt, ex quo te **deus** summus ad **restituendum** iustitiae domicilium et ad tutelam **generis humani excitauit**. quo gubernante Romanae rei publicae statum iam cultores dei pro sceleratis ac nefariis non habemur, [...]* (12) *te prouidentia summae diuinitatis ad fastigium principale prouexit, qui posses uera pietate aliorum male consulta **rescindere**, peccata corrigere, saluti hominum paterna clementia **prouidere** [...]* (13) *illi enim, **qui** ut impias religiones defenderent, caelestis et singularis dei cultum tollere uoluerunt, profligati **iacent**, [...]* (14) *illi **poenas** sceleris sui et pendunt et pependerunt, te dextera dei potens ab omnibus periculis protegit, tibi quietum tranquillumque moderamen cum summa omnium gratulatione largitur.*

A second basic idea of the revision is more psychological and speculative: With the propagandistically overformed news from the East about a Licinius who is now again taking action against the Christians, the trauma of the years of persecution catches up with the aged Lactantius again. He asks himself how God can allow wickedness to rise up again against the righteous Christians. His answer is differentiated: On the one hand, the year 313 by no means meant the eradication of all evil, for without the evil with which he contends victoriously, man could not attain his salvation. Evil is not an episode but belongs to the order of creation. And secondly, Constantine is an instrument of God who should continue to make possible the spread of Christian doctrine and thus equip us for the struggle with evil. Constantine could and can, according to the train of thought, push back the worst excesses of pagan superstition, which goes back to the work of evil demons. In my opinion, the Christian panegyric of the two great imperial addresses can be understood against this background.