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Persecution of Christians During the Reign of Emperor Licinius

STRESZCZENIE

Prześladowanie chrześcijan w czasach panowania cesarza Licyniusza

Licyniusz był władcą, który zmieniał swój stosunek do chrześcijan. Najpierw zagwarantował im wolność wyznania, następnie prześladował ich. Celem artykułu jest analiza tego, co na temat tych prześladowań mówią źródła powstałe w czasie panowania Licyniusza lub krótko po nim. Analiza źródeł pokazuje, że szczególnie prześladowań za Licyniusza znane są jedynie z dzieł Euzebiusza z Cezarei. Jednak choć przedstawia on Licyniusza w złym świetle, by uzasadnić wojnę między nim a Konstantynem, to inne źródła potwierdzają to, że za Licyniusza dochodziło do prześladowań, choć miały one ograniczony zakres.

Słowa kluczowe: Licyniusz, Konstantyn, prześladowania chrześcijan, Euzebiusz z Cezarei

ABSTRACT

Licinius was a ruler whose attitude towards Christians changed over the years. First, he guaranteed freedom of religion to them; then, he persecuted them. This article aims to analyse how these persecutions are described by sources originating from the period during or shortly after the reign of Licinius. The analysis of the sources shows that the details of the persecution under Licinius are known only from the works of Eusebius of Caesarea. However, although he portrays



Licinius in a negative light only to justify the war between him and Constantine, other sources confirm that there was indeed persecution though limited in scope under Licinius.

Keywords: Licinius, Constantine, persecution of Christians, Eusebius of Caesarea

Licinius was appointed Augustus in the western part of the empire in 308 at the Emperors' conference in Carnuntum, while Constantine remained as Caesar in the West¹. When Galerius died in 311, the empire was divided between the four rulers: Constantine, Maxentius, Licinius, and Maximinus Daza, who were preparing to fight each other for power². Constantine allied with Licinius in the winter of 311–312, giving him the hand of his sister Constance³. After Constantine had gained power in the western part of the empire, defeating Maxentius, Licinius and Constance's wedding took place in 313⁴. Next, the so-called Edict of Milan, which granted Christians freedom of religion, was an element of the alliance between Constantine and Licinius⁵. Licinius strove to gain power in the East. In 313, he succeeded in defeating Maximinus Daza and became the sole ruler in the eastern part of the empire⁶. Before the final battle on April 30, 313, between Hadrianopole and Heraclea, he ordered the soldiers to pray to the Highest God⁷. This prayer was written in such a way that everyone in the empire could say it, regardless of their religion. Licinius' aim was probably to win the favor of Christians⁸. Then Licinius applied

¹ Ch.M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, New York 2013, p. 90; D. Potter, *Constantine the Emperor*, Oxford–New York 2013, p. 120. Cf. J. Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*, Cambridge 2011, p. 84.

² Ch.M. Odahl, *op. cit.*, p. 96; cf. J. Bardill, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³ Ch.M. Odahl, *op. cit.*, p. 96; H.A. Drake, *Constantine, and the Bishops. The Politics of Intolerance*, Baltimore–London 2000, pp. 178, 235.

⁴ Ch.M. Odahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 116–117; J. Bardill, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

⁵ Ch.M. Odahl, *op. cit.*, p. 119; cf. H.A. Drake, *op. cit.*, p. 184; J. Bardill, *op. cit.*, pp. 132–133; D. Potter, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–146. According to A.H.M. Jones (*The Later Roman Empire, 284–602. A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, vol. I, Norman 1964, p. 81), Licinius agreed with the tolerance policy toward Christians only to gain the favor of Constantine. Cf. J. Bardill, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁶ A.H.M. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁷ Ch.M. Odahl, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁸ J. Helgeland, *Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, [in:] *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.23.1, ed. idem,

a policy of tolerance towards them in his lands⁹. Soon, however, there was a split between Constantine and Licinius, resulting in their clash in the Battle of Cibalae in 316¹⁰. Later, however, Licinius changed his attitude towards Christians and turned against them. It is not known precisely when that happens¹¹, nor how extensive the persecution of Christians was.

The primary sources that speak of the persecution of Christians by Licinius are the works of Eusebius of Caesarea: *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Vita Constantini*. *Demonstratio Evangelica* also mentions that the Church was persecuted. Next, Canon 11 of the Council of Nicaea (325) and one of the edicts preserved in the *Codex Theodosianus* speak about the persecution of Christians during Licinius' reign. The purpose of this article is to present and analyze what these sources say about the persecution under Licinius, as well as to answer questions on the nature and extent of these persecutions. The article also presents the researchers' discussion on their scope.

Historia Ecclesiastica

*Historia Ecclesiastica*¹² by Eusebius of Caesarea is the primary source describing the persecution by Licinius. The author devotes the whole of Chapter 8 of Book 10 to this issue. There is much discussion among researchers about when precisely this work by Eusebius was created, which we know was subject to later changes in connection with subsequent editions¹³. However, it took its final shape at the end of 324 or the beginning of 325, after Licinius'

New York 1979, p. 809; S. Bralewski, *Symmachia cesarstwa rzymskiego z Bogiem chrześcijan (IV–VI wiek)*, t. I, Łódź 2019, p. 49, note 114.

⁹ S. Bralewski, *op. cit.*, p. 120; J. Bardill, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, introd. transl. and comm. A. Cameron, S.G. Hall, Oxford–New York 1999, p. 226; D. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

¹¹ According to J. Bardill (*op. cit.*, p. 281), after 321 or even after 317. Perhaps Licinius removed Christians from his surroundings after the Battle of Cibalae, *vide*: T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and the Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA–London 1981, p. 71.

¹² Eusebius, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. E. Schwartz, Leipzig 1932.

¹³ About the date of creation and subsequent editions of *Historia Ecclesiastica* [hereinafter: *HE*], *vide*: A.J. Carriker, *The Library of Eusebius of Caesarea*, Leiden–Boston 2003, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. LXVII, pp. 38–40; R.W. Burgess, *The Dates and Editions of Eusebius' "Chronici Canones and Historia Ecclesiastica"*, "The Journal of Theological Studies" 1997, vol. XLVIII, no. 2, pp. 483–501.

defeat¹⁴. Eusebius then added information about the persecution of Christians by Licinius and about the campaign of Constantine against him¹⁵.

Before going on to present the persecution of Christians by Licinius, Eusebius describes how the relationship between him and Constantine deteriorated. Constantine was to be very kind to Licinius: he gave him a second position in the Empire, sharing power with him, and gave him his sister, Constance, as his wife¹⁶. According to Eusebius, however, Licinius could not settle for this and began to plot against Constantine, and when his plans came to light, he decided to wage war¹⁷. Licinius went against the Christians to strike at Constantine because he knew that the former worshiped their God. His conflict with Constantine turned into a war with God himself¹⁸.

The first move made by Licinius against the Christians was deciding to remove them from his court and then ordering soldiers in the cities to make sacrifices to demons under threat of expulsion from the army and degradation¹⁹. He was to condemn the bishops to death, but Eusebius did not provide any details about it²⁰. Then he closed or destroyed churches in Pontus' cities, including the Amaseia²¹. The governors in the areas ruled by Licinius were also to condemn the bishops to death to please him²². Eusebius concludes his story of Licinius' moves against Christians by stating that he decided to initiate their widespread persecution, but was stopped by Constantine²³.

In his account of Licinius' policies towards Christians, Eusebius of Caesarea also adds information about Licinius' immoral conduct in his private life²⁴, as well as about the fact that he was to introduce legislation oppressing the population.

¹⁴ M.J. Hollerich, *Making Christian History. Eusebius of Caesarea and His Readers*, Oakland, CA 2021, p. 31; R.W. Burgess, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

¹⁵ A. Cameron, S.G. Hall, *Introduction*, [in:] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, introd., transl. and comm. A. Cameron, S.G. Hall, Oxford–New York 1999, p. 13.

¹⁶ *HE* 10, 8, 2–4.

¹⁷ *HE* 10, 8, 2–7.

¹⁸ *HE* 10, 8, 8–9.

¹⁹ *HE* 10, 8, 10.

²⁰ *HE* 10, 8, 14.

²¹ *HE* 10, 8, 15.

²² *HE* 10, 8, 17.

²³ *HE* 10, 8, 18–19.

²⁴ *HE* 10, 8, 13.

Vita Constantini

*Vita Constantini*²⁵, one of the most important sources of the reign of Constantine, contains a more detailed description of the persecution of Christians by Licinius compared to *Historia Ecclesiastica*, where passages about this persecution and the war between Licinius and Constantine were written hastily as part of later editing²⁶. However, most information coincides in both texts.

Eusebius presents the relationship between Constantine and Licinius in such a way that shows Constantine shared power with Licinius, which was somehow his gift even in 313. However, it is difficult to believe that this was actually the case²⁷. According to *Vita Constantini*, when it comes to the open war between Constantine and Licinius²⁸, the latter acts against Christians. His first steps are a ban on bishops communicating with each other, visiting neighboring churches, as well as a ban on synods and councils²⁹. Such a law significantly limited the ability of the Church to function since, to ordain a bishop, it was necessary to gather a synod³⁰.

Another move by Licinius, described in *Vita Constantini*, is the removal of Christians from the court and their condemnation to exile³¹. He then prohibited the gathering and common prayer of men and women, as well as educating women on moral issues and the teaching of women by bishops³². Licinius also decreed that congregations of the faithful might only take place outside the city in the open air³³. In addition, in the army, commanders were to be demoted if they did not offer a sacrifice to the pagan gods³⁴.

In *Vita Constantini*'s second book, Eusebius states that, although Licinius did not openly kill Christians for fear of Constantine, he did murder Christians by using the provincial authorities. In this

²⁵ Greek text: Eusebius, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, ed. F. Winkelmann, Berlin–New York 1991, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte (*Vita Constantini* = VC).

²⁶ A. Cameron, S.G. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 226.

²⁸ VC 1, 49–50, 2.

²⁹ VC 1, 51, 1.

³⁰ VC 1, 51, 2; cf. A. Cameron, S.G. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

³¹ VC 1, 52.

³² VC 1, 53, 1.

³³ VC 1, 53, 2.

³⁴ VC 1, 54, 1.

way, the bishops were brutally killed in Amaseia, Pontus³⁵, and the churches were closed or destroyed³⁶. Eusebius concludes the description of the persecution by saying that the most respected leaders of the Church were killed, some dismembered, and their bodies were thrown into the sea³⁷. Eusebius also states that Licinius planned to initiate general persecution, but Constantine prevented him from doing so³⁸. It should be taken into consideration, however, that for Eusebius, the persecution of Christians by Licinius is an excuse to justify the war between the emperors³⁹.

Eusebius then talks about the preparations of the two emperors for war, setting them against each other⁴⁰. Constantine was also prepared for the fight from the religious side, providing the army with the service of Christian priests and banners with Christian signs to ensure the favor of the Christian God. Licinius offered sacrifices to the pagan gods and turned to the pagan diviners who promised him victory. Therefore, this depiction of the religious preparations for the war between the two rulers has an apologetic meaning because Licinius was finally defeated, proving the ineffectiveness of worshiping the pagan gods.

Demonstratio Evangelica

Demonstratio Evangelica does not describe the persecution during the reign of Licinius but, as T.D. Barnes points out, this work is written from such a perspective that the persecution of Christians still took place⁴¹. *Demonstratio Evangelica* was completed by approximately 324⁴², which confirms the account of Eusebius that Christians were threatened under the rule of Licinius in the years preceding his defeat. One reference in this work to this persecution of Christians is as follows: "These were the prophecies of what would happen to them for His Name's sake – in which He bore witness, saying that they should be brought before rulers, and come even unto kings, and undergo all sorts of punishments, not for

³⁵ VC 2, 1, 2.

³⁶ VC 2, 2, 1.

³⁷ VC 2, 2, 2.

³⁸ VC 2, 2, 3.

³⁹ A. Cameron, S.G. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

⁴⁰ VC 2, 4, 2.

⁴¹ T.D. Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 322, note 94.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 71–72.

any fault, nor on any reasonable charge, but solely for this – His Name’s sake. And we who see it now fulfilled ought to be struck by the prediction, for the confession of the Name of Jesus ever inflames the minds of rulers”⁴³. The words written by Eusebius clearly show that the persecution of Christians continued at the time when the work was written. *Demonstratio Evangelica* does not say anything about the nature of the persecution under Licinius but confirms that it took place.

Canon 11 of the Council of Nicea (325)

The text of Canon 11 of the Council of Nicea⁴⁴ concerns Christians who departed from the faith during *Licinius’ tyranny*⁴⁵ without coercion, property deprivation, or danger. This canon confirms, therefore, that the persecutions under Licinius took place⁴⁶. However, they were not universal since some departed from the faith, even though they were not in danger.

Codex Theodosianus 16.2.5

The *Codex Theodosianus* preserves Constantine’s edict, likely issued on December 25, 323⁴⁷, which informs that Christians were forced to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods on the occasion of Licinius’ quinquennial celebrations: “Whereas We have learned that certain ecclesiastics and others devoting their services to the Catholic sect have been compelled by men of different religions to the performance of lustral sacrifices [...]”⁴⁸. This reference does

⁴³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospel Being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea*, vol. I, transl. W.J. Ferrar, New York 1920, p. 137. Greek text: Eusebius Caesariensis, *De Demonstratio Evangelica*, ed. I.A. Heikel, vol. VI (*Eusebius Werke*), Leipzig 1913, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Drei Jahrhunderte, 3.5.77–78, p. 125: “τοὺς θεμοὺς εἶωθεν ἑκκαίειν τῶν ἀρχόντων”.

⁴⁴ Greek text: *Dokumenty soborów powszechnych*, vol. I, eds A. Baron, H. Pietras, Kraków 2001, p. 36.

⁴⁵ ἐπὶ τῆς τυραννίδος Λικινίου.

⁴⁶ Cf. J. Helgeland, *Christians and the Roman Army, A.D. 173–337*, “Church History” 1974, vol. XLIII, no. 2, p. 163.

⁴⁷ According to T.D. Barnes (*op. cit.*, p. 71, note 87), this date is probably incorrect and the document was, in fact, issued earlier, closer to November 11, 323, which was the date of taking power by Licinius.

⁴⁸ *The Theodosian Code and Novels and The Sirmondian Constitutions*, transl., comm., gloss. and bibl. C. Pharr, Princeton, NJ 1952, p. 441. Latin text: *Theodosiani*

not mention the consequences of Christians refusing to offer sacrifice, but it does testify to the intolerance of Licinius.

Conclusions

The presented sources confirm that Christians were persecuted during the reign of emperor Licinius. However, a detailed description of these persecutions can be found only in *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Vita Constantini* by Eusebius of Caesarea, who describes the individual measures taken against Christians by Licinius. As we learn from Eusebius' account, Licinius hindered the functioning and development of the Church in the areas he ruled, and he opposed Christians in the state administration and the army, but without threatening their lives. The bishops, however, were to be killed either at the emperor's initiative or by local officials. These persecutions were therefore limited in scope, not universal, but the reign of Licinius was not free from martyrdom.

Eusebius also shows Licinius in a bad light because of moral issues, his envy of Constantine, and his conspiracy against him. Indeed, this is due to the desire to justify the war between him and Constantine and to emphasize the latter's advantages by contrasting the two rulers. However, it cannot be said that showing Licinius as an enemy of Christians also resulted only from the desire to justify Constantine's deeds. Harold A. Drake believes that the justification of the war between Constantine and Licinius was Eusebius of Caesarea's primary goal when he described the persecution of Christians under the latter⁴⁹. Timothy D. Barnes points out, however, that during the Licinius' reign, Christian bishops died a martyr's death⁵⁰.

Another work by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, confirms that Christians were persecuted under Licinius without providing any details. Other analyzed sources, Canon 11

libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis et Leges novellae ad Theodosianum pertinentes, eds Th. Mommsen, P. Meyer, vol. I, part 2, Berlin 1905, p. 836: "Quoniam conperimus quosdam ecclesiasticos et ceteros catholicae sectae servientes a diversarum religionum hominibus ad lustrorum sacrificia celebranda compelli [...]". Cf. M.R. Salzman, "Superstitio" in the "Codex Theodosianus" and the Persecution of Pagans, "Vigiliae Christianae" 1987, vol. XLI, no. 2, p. 177.

⁴⁹ H.A. Drake, *op. cit.*, pp. 235–237.

⁵⁰ T.D. Barnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–72; cf. P. Keresztes, *Imperial Rome, and the Christians*, vol. II (*From the Severi to Constantine the Great*), Lanham 1989, p. 143.

of the Council of Nicea (325) and the edict issued by Constantine preserved in the *Codex Theodosianus* confirm Licinius' hostile attitude towards Christians.

Lactantius, in his work *Divinae Institutiones*, appealed to Constantine to defend Christians from persecution⁵¹, which, according to Barnes, also confirms that the persecution of Christians took place under Licinius⁵². Lactantius described the situation of Christians, stating that in other parts of the world than the one ruled by Constantine, they were still persecuted: "For the wicked who continue to rage against the righteous in other parts of the world, the later, the more violently the Almighty himself will repay the guilt"⁵³. However, it is difficult to say what this allusion in the work of Lactantius specifically refers to, as it is believed that the appeal to Constantine was added to the *Divinae Institutiones* in 310 or later⁵⁴. Therefore, it may concern the persecution of Christians by Maximinus Daza before Licinius defeated him. It cannot, therefore, be said that this reference proves that Licinius persecuted Christians.

Researchers generally agree that the persecution of Christians during the time of emperor Licinius was limited – it was not universal⁵⁵. They also state that perhaps Licinius feared a lack of loyalty to himself⁵⁶. There is no doubt, however, that Licinius persecuted Christians and hindered the functioning of the Church in his lands, although this was not associated with a death threat for lay people.

⁵¹ L. Caelius Firmianus Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, Fasc. 1, Libri I et II, eds E. Heck, A. Wlosok, Munich–Lipsk 2005, 1.1.16, p. 4.

⁵² T.D. Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁵³ Transation is my own. Latin text: L. Caelius Firmianus Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem...*, 1.1.15, p. 4: "nam malis, qui adhuc aduersus iustos in aliis terrarum partibus saeuunt, quanto serius tanto uehementius idem omnipotens mercedem sceleris exsoluet".

⁵⁴ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, transl. A. Bowen, P. Garnsey, Liverpool 2003, Translated Texts for Historians, vol. XL, p. 3.

⁵⁵ H.A. Drake, *op. cit.*, p. 236; S. Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs. Imperial Pronouncements and Government AD 284–324*, Oxford 1996, p. 195; J. Helgeland, *op. cit.*, p. 810. Cf. R. Van Dam, *Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia*, Philadelphia 2003, p. 133.

⁵⁶ J. Bardill, *op. cit.*, p. 281; N.H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*, London 1929, Proceedings of the British Academy, vol. XV, p. 354.

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