

Constantine the Great

Constantine the Great (Latin: Flavius Valerius Constantinus; 27 February c. 272 – 22 May 337), also known as Constantine I, was a Roman emperor from AD 306 to 337. Born in Naissus, Dacia Mediterranea (now Niš, Serbia), he was the son of Flavius Constantius, an Illyrian army officer who became one of the four emperors of the Tetrarchy. His mother, Helena, was Greek and of low birth. Constantine served with distinction under emperors Diocletian and Galerius campaigning in the eastern provinces against barbarians and the Persians, before being recalled west in 305 to fight under his father in Britain. After his father's death in 306, Constantine was acclaimed as emperor by the army at Eboracum (York). He emerged victorious in the civil wars against emperors Maxentius and Licinius to become sole ruler of the Roman Empire by 324.

As emperor, Constantine enacted administrative, financial, social and military reforms to strengthen the empire. He restructured the government, separating civil and military authorities. To combat inflation he introduced the solidus, a new gold coin that became the standard for Byzantine and European currencies for more than a thousand years. The Roman army was reorganized to consist of mobile units, and garrison troops capable of countering internal threats and barbarian invasions. Constantine pursued successful campaigns against the tribes on the Roman frontiers—the Franks, the Alamanni, the Goths and the Sarmatians—even resettling territories abandoned by his predecessors during the Crisis of the Third Century.

Constantine was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Although he lived much of his life as a pagan, and later as a catechumen, he joined the Christian religion on his deathbed, being baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia. He played an influential role in the proclamation of the Edict of Milan in 313, which declared tolerance for Christianity in the Roman Empire. He convoked the First Council of Nicaea in 325, which produced the statement of Christian belief known as the Nicene Creed. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built on his orders at the purported site of Jesus' tomb in Jerusalem and became the holiest place in Christendom. He has historically been referred to as the "First Christian Emperor" and he did favor the Christian Church. While some modern scholars debate his beliefs and even his comprehension of Christianity, he is venerated as a saint in Eastern Christianity.

The age of Constantine marked a distinct epoch in the history of the Roman Empire. He built a new imperial residence at Byzantium and renamed the city Constantinople (now Istanbul) after himself (the laudatory epithet of "New Rome" emerged in his time, and was never an official title). It subsequently became the capital of the Empire for more than a thousand years, the later Eastern Roman Empire being referred to as the Byzantine Empire by modern historians. His more immediate political legacy was that he replaced Diocletian's Tetrarchy with the de facto principle of dynastic succession, by leaving the empire to his sons and other members of the Constantinian dynasty. His reputation flourished during the lifetime of his children and for centuries after his reign. The medieval church held him up as a paragon of virtue, while secular

rulers invoked him as a prototype, a point of reference and the symbol of imperial legitimacy and identity.

Foundation of Constantinople

Licinius' defeat came to represent the defeat of a rival center of pagan and Greek-speaking political activity in the East, as opposed to the Christian and Latin-speaking Rome, and it was proposed that a new Eastern capital should represent the integration of the East into the Roman Empire as a whole, as a center of learning, prosperity, and cultural preservation for the whole of the Eastern Roman Empire. Among the various locations proposed for this alternative capital, Constantine appears to have toyed earlier with Serdica (present-day Sofia), as he was reported saying that "Serdica is my Rome". Sirmium and Thessalonica were also considered. Eventually, however, Constantine decided to work on the Greek city of Byzantium, which offered the advantage of having already been extensively rebuilt on Roman patterns of urbanism, during the preceding century, by Septimius Severus and Caracalla, who had already acknowledged its strategic importance. The city was thus founded in 324, dedicated on 11 May 330 and renamed Constantinopolis ("Constantine's City" or Constantinople in English). Special commemorative coins were issued in 330 to honor the event. The new city was protected by the relics of the True Cross, the Rod of Moses and other holy relics, though a cameo now at the Hermitage Museum also represented Constantine crowned by the tyche of the new city. The figures of old gods were either replaced or assimilated into a framework of Christian symbolism. Constantine built the new Church of the Holy Apostles on the site of a temple to Aphrodite.

Religious policy

Constantine was the first emperor to stop the persecution of Christians and to legalize Christianity, along with all other religions/cults in the Roman Empire. In February 313, he met with Licinius in Milan and developed the Edict of Milan, which stated that Christians should be allowed to follow their faith without oppression.[220][page needed] This removed penalties for professing Christianity, under which many had been martyred previously, and it returned confiscated Church property. The edict protected all religions from persecution, not only Christianity, allowing anyone to worship any deity that they chose. A similar edict had been issued in 311 by Galerius, senior emperor of the Tetrarchy, which granted Christians the right to practice their religion but did not restore any property to them. The Edict of Milan included several clauses which stated that all confiscated churches would be returned, as well as other provisions for previously persecuted Christians. Scholars debate whether Constantine adopted his mother Helena's Christianity in his youth, or whether he adopted it gradually over the course of his life.

Constantine possibly retained the title of pontifex maximus which emperors bore as heads of the ancient Roman religion until Gratian renounced the title. According to Christian writers, Constantine was over 40 when he finally declared himself a Christian, making it clear that he owed his successes to the protection of the Christian High God alone. Despite these declarations of being a Christian, he waited to be baptized on his deathbed, believing that the

baptism would release him of any sins he committed in the course of carrying out his policies while emperor. He supported the Church financially, built basilicas, granted privileges to clergy (such as exemption from certain taxes), promoted Christians to high office, and returned property confiscated during the long period of persecution. His most famous building projects include the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Old Saint Peter's Basilica. In constructing the Old Saint Peter's Basilica, Constantine went to great lengths to erect the basilica on top of St. Peter's resting place, so much so that it even affected the design of the basilica, including the challenge of erecting it on the hill where St. Peter rested, making its complete construction time over 30 years from the date Constantine ordered it to be built.

Constantine might not have patronized Christianity alone. He built a triumphal arch in 315 to celebrate his victory in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312) which was decorated with images of the goddess Victoria, and sacrifices were made to pagan gods at its dedication, including Apollo, Diana, and Hercules. Absent from the Arch are any depictions of Christian symbolism. However, the Arch was commissioned by the Senate, so the absence of Christian symbols may reflect the role of the Curia at the time as a pagan redoubt.

In 321, he legislated that the venerable Sunday should be a day of rest for all citizens. In 323, he issued a decree banning Christians from participating in state sacrifices. After the pagan gods had disappeared from his coinage, Christian symbols appeared as Constantine's attributes, the chi rho between his hands or on his labarum, as well on the coin itself.

The reign of Constantine established a precedent for the emperor to have great influence and authority in the early Christian councils, most notably the dispute over Arianism. Constantine disliked the risks to societal stability that religious disputes and controversies brought with them, preferring to establish an orthodoxy. His influence over the Church councils was to enforce doctrine, root out heresy, and uphold ecclesiastical unity; the Church's role was to determine proper worship, doctrines, and dogma.

North African bishops struggled with Christian bishops who had been ordained by Donatus in opposition to Caecilian from 313 to 316. The African bishops could not come to terms, and the Donatists asked Constantine to act as a judge in the dispute. Three regional Church councils and another trial before Constantine all ruled against Donatus and the Donatism movement in North Africa. In 317, Constantine issued an edict to confiscate Donatist church property and to send Donatist clergy into exile.

More significantly, in 325 he summoned the First Council of Nicaea, most known for its dealing with Arianism and for instituting the Nicene Creed. He enforced the council's prohibition against celebrating the Lord's Supper on the day before the Jewish Passover, which marked a definite break of Christianity from the Judaic tradition. From then on, the solar Julian Calendar was given precedence over the lunisolar Hebrew Calendar among the Christian churches of the Roman Empire.[

Constantine made some new laws regarding the Jews; some of them were unfavorable towards Jews, although they were not harsher than those of his predecessors. It was made illegal for Jews to seek converts or to attack other Jews who had converted to Christianity. They were forbidden to own Christian slaves or to circumcise their slaves. On the other hand, Jewish clergy were given the same exemptions as Christian clergy.

Administrative reforms

Beginning in the mid-3rd century, the emperors began to favor members of the equestrian order over senators, who had a monopoly on the most important offices of the state. Senators were stripped of the command of legions and most provincial governorships, as it was felt that they lacked the specialized military upbringing needed in an age of acute defense needs; such posts were given to equestrians by Diocletian and his colleagues, following a practice enforced piecemeal by their predecessors. The emperors, however, still needed the talents and the help of the very rich, who were relied on to maintain social order and cohesion by means of a web of powerful influence and contacts at all levels. Exclusion of the old senatorial aristocracy threatened this arrangement.

In 326, Constantine reversed this pro-equestrian trend, raising many administrative positions to senatorial rank and thus opening these offices to the old aristocracy; at the same time, he elevated the rank of existing equestrian office-holders to senator, degrading the equestrian order in the process (at least as a bureaucratic rank). The title of perfectissimus was granted only to mid- or low-level officials by the end of the 4th century.

By the new Constantinian arrangement, one could become a senator by being elected praetor or by fulfilling a function of senatorial rank. From then on, holding actual power and social status were melded together into a joint imperial hierarchy. Constantine gained the support of the old nobility with this, as the Senate was allowed itself to elect praetors and quaestors, in place of the usual practice of the emperors directly creating new magistrates. An inscription in honor of city prefect (336–337) Ceionius Rufus Albinus states that Constantine had restored the Senate "the auctoritas it had lost at Caesar's time".

The Senate as a body remained devoid of any significant power; nevertheless, the senators had been marginalized as potential holders of imperial functions during the 3rd century but could now dispute such positions alongside more upstart bureaucrats. Some modern historians see in those administrative reforms an attempt by Constantine at reintegrating the senatorial order into the imperial administrative elite to counter the possibility of alienating pagan senators from a Christianized imperial rule; however, such an interpretation remains conjectural, given the fact that we do not have the precise numbers about pre-Constantine conversions to Christianity in the old senatorial milieu. Some historians suggest that early conversions among the old aristocracy were more numerous than previously supposed.

Constantine's reforms had to do only with the civilian administration. The military chiefs had risen from the ranks since the Crisis of the Third Century but remained outside the senate, in which they were included only by Constantine's children.

Monetary reforms

The third century saw runaway inflation associated with the production of fiat money to pay for public expenses, and Diocletian tried unsuccessfully to re-establish trustworthy minting of silver and billon coins. The failure resided in the fact that the silver currency was overvalued in terms of its actual metal content, and therefore could only circulate at much discounted rates.

Constantine stopped minting the Diocletianic "pure" silver argenteus soon after 305, while the billon currency continued to be used until the 360s. From the early 300s on, Constantine

forsook any attempts at restoring the silver currency, preferring instead to concentrate on minting large quantities of the gold solidus, 72 of which made a pound of gold. New and highly debased silver pieces continued to be issued during his later reign and after his death, in a continuous process of re-tariffing, until this bullion minting ceased in 367, and the silver piece was continued by various denominations of bronze coins, the most important being the centenionalis. These bronze pieces continued to be devalued, assuring the possibility of keeping fiduciary minting alongside a gold standard. The author of *De Rebus Bellicis* held that the rift widened between classes because of this monetary policy; the rich benefited from the stability in purchasing power of the gold piece, while the poor had to cope with ever-degrading bronze pieces.

Constantine's monetary policies were closely associated with his religious policies; increased minting was associated with the confiscation of all gold, silver, and bronze statues from pagan temples between 331 and 336 which were declared to be imperial property. Two imperial commissioners for each province had the task of getting the statues and melting them for immediate minting, with the exception of a number of bronze statues that were used as public monuments in Constantinople.

Executions of Crispus and Fausta

Constantine had his eldest son Crispus seized and put to death by "cold poison" at Pola (Pula, Croatia) sometime between 15 May and 17 June 326. In July, he had his wife Empress Fausta (stepmother of Crispus) killed in an overheated bath. Their names were wiped from the face of many inscriptions, references to their lives were eradicated from the literary record, and the memory of both was condemned. Eusebius, for example, edited out any praise of Crispus from later copies of *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and his *Vita Constantini* contains no mention of Fausta or Crispus at all. At the time of the executions, it was commonly believed that Empress Fausta was either in an illicit relationship with Crispus or was spreading rumors to that effect.

Although Constantine created his apparent heirs "Caesars", following a pattern established by Diocletian, he gave his creations a hereditary character, alien to the tetrarchic system: Constantine's Caesars were to be kept in the hope of ascending to Empire, and entirely subordinated to their Augustus, as long as he was alive. Therefore, an alternative explanation for the execution of Crispus was, perhaps, Constantine's desire to keep a firm grip on his prospective heirs, this—and Fausta's desire for having her sons inheriting instead of their half-brother—being reason enough for killing Crispus; the subsequent execution of Fausta, however, was probably meant as a reminder to her children that Constantine would not hesitate in "killing his own relatives when he felt this was necessary".

Later campaigns



The northern and eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire in the time of Constantine, with the territories acquired in the course of the thirty years of military campaigns between 306 and 337.

Constantine considered Constantinople his capital and permanent residence. He lived there for a good portion of his later life. In 328 construction was completed on Constantine's Bridge at Sucidava, (today Celei in Romania) in hopes of reconquering Dacia, a province that had been abandoned under Aurelian. In the late winter of 332, Constantine campaigned with the Sarmatians against the Goths. The weather and lack of food cost the Goths dearly: reportedly, nearly one hundred thousand died before they submitted to Rome. In 334, after Sarmatian commoners had overthrown their leaders, Constantine led a campaign against the tribe. He won a victory in the war and extended his control over the region, as remains of camps and fortifications in the region indicate. Constantine resettled some Sarmatian exiles as farmers in Illyrian and Roman districts, and conscripted the rest into the army.

In the last years of his life, Constantine made plans for a campaign against Persia. In a letter written to the king of Persia, Shapur, Constantine had asserted his patronage over Persia's Christian subjects and urged Shapur to treat them well. The letter is undatable. In response to border raids, Constantine sent Constantius to guard the eastern frontier in 335. In 336, Prince Narseh invaded Armenia (a Christian kingdom since 301) and installed a Persian client on the throne. Constantine then resolved to campaign against Persia himself. He treated the war as a Christian crusade, calling for bishops to accompany the army and commissioning a tent in the shape of a church to follow him everywhere. Constantine planned to be baptized in the Jordan River before crossing into Persia. Persian diplomats came to Constantinople over the winter of 336–337, seeking peace, but Constantine turned them away. The campaign was called off, however, when Constantine became sick in the spring of 337.

Sickness and death

Constantine knew death would soon come. Within the Church of the Holy Apostles, Constantine had secretly prepared a final resting-place for himself.[269] It came sooner than he had expected. Soon after the Feast of Easter 337, Constantine fell seriously ill.[270] He left Constantinople for the hot baths near his mother's city of Helenopolis, on the southern shores of the Gulf of Nicomedia (present-day Gulf of İzmit). There, in a church his mother built in honor of Lucian the Apostle, he prayed, and there he realized that he was dying. Seeking

purification, he became a catechumen, and attempted a return to Constantinople, making it only as far as a suburb of Nicomedia. He summoned the bishops, and told them of his hope to be baptized in the River Jordan, where Christ was written to have been baptized. He requested the baptism right away, promising to live a more Christian life should he live through his illness. The bishops, Eusebius records, "performed the sacred ceremonies according to custom". He chose the Arianizing bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, bishop of the city where he lay dying, as his baptizer. In postponing his baptism, he followed one custom at the time which postponed baptism until after infancy. It has been thought that Constantine put off baptism as long as he did so as to be absolved from as much of his sin as possible. Constantine died soon after at a suburban villa called Achyron, on the last day of the fifty-day festival of Pentecost directly following Pascha (or Easter), on 22 May 337.

Following his death, his body was transferred to Constantinople and buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles, in a porphyry sarcophagus. His body survived the plundering of the city during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, but was destroyed at some point afterwards. Constantine was succeeded by his three sons born of Fausta, Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans. A number of relatives were killed by followers of Constantius, notably Constantine's nephews Dalmatius (who held the rank of Caesar) and Hannibalianus, presumably to eliminate possible contenders to an already complicated succession. He also had two daughters, Constantina and Helena, wife of Emperor Julian.

Legacy

Constantine gained his honorific of "the Great" from Christian historians long after he had died, but he could have claimed the title on his military achievements and victories alone. He reunited the Empire under one emperor, and he won major victories over the Franks and Alamanni in 306–308, the Franks again in 313–314, the Goths in 332, and the Sarmatians in 334. By 336, he had reoccupied most of the long-lost province of Dacia which Aurelian had been forced to abandon in 271. At the time of his death, he was planning a great expedition to end raids on the eastern provinces from the Persian Empire. He served for almost 31 years (combining his years as co-ruler and sole ruler), the second longest-serving emperor behind Augustus.