

CONSTANTINE AND THE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE

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PREFACE

During a summer vacation at Yellowstone National Park after the completion of my minor fields in Ancient History and before the start of my major field in Medieval History for a doctorate from the University of California, I spent the evenings reading the classic work of Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and became fascinated with the person and legacy of the first Christian emperor of the late Roman world, Constantine the Great (AD 306–37). Over the next few years, I did some extensive reading in the Greek and Latin texts of the fourth- and fifth-century Church Fathers with my mentors at UCSD, and some intensive field work in Constantinian numismatics with museum curators in Europe. While teaching ancient and medieval history and classical and patristic Latin at Boise State University, and offering conference papers and publishing articles on Constantine in subsequent years, I noticed that many scholars in the field seemed to be arguing from the same old texts without having much knowledge of the geographic locations and the material culture of the Constantinian Era. As Constantine was a man who was constantly traveling across the roads of the Roman Empire from Britain to Syria, fighting significant battles at important sites along those routes, meeting with Catholic bishops for Church councils at key sites, filling the great cities of the empire with Christian basilicas, and minting coins which circulated throughout and beyond the empire, I came to the conclusion that the only authentic way to truly understand Constantine and his times was to travel with him. Therefore, I have spent the last thirty years following his itineraries across Europe and the Near East—reconnoitering the sites of his key battles at Turin, Verona, the Mulvian Bridge, Hadrianople, Byzantium and Chrysopolis; examining the remains of his building projects in York, Trier, Autun and Arles, Rome, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Mamre, and, of course, Constantinople; and analyzing coins and artifacts from his period in the great museum collections from Dumbarton Oaks in Washington to the Istanbul Archaeological Museum below the Bosphorus. I have utilized two sabbaticals, have taken leaves of absence to teach at European universities, have employed private vacations, and served as a tour guide in Britain, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Israel in order to carry out these travels. Along the way, I have mastered the disciplines of topographical archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy, art history (and how to survive in east European and Near Eastern war zones), and worked with the top experts in these fields to gain the knowledge (as well as thousands of slides, coins, and artifacts) necessary to teach and write about Constantine and the fourth-century Roman world with authority. Because of my academic training and field work over several traditional historical eras, I have been able to teach about Constantine in college upper division ancient Roman, early Christian, Byzantine imperial, and medieval European history courses; in patristic Latin classes; in special senior and graduate seminars on Constantine and the Late Roman Empire; and, over the past decade, out in the field in tricennial “Classical and Christian Study Tour-Seminars” on Constantine held in Rome, Thessalonica, Nicaea, and Istanbul.

This book on *Constantine and the Christian Empire* is the result of my extensive research, travel and teaching on Constantine. It is a detailed biographical narrative which reveals how this important emperor transformed Christianity from a persecuted minority cult into an established majority religion, and changed the pagan state of classical Rome into the Christian empire of the Byzantine Era. I have used all of the ancient literary sources traditionally employed by scholars writing on this subject, but have integrated them with the material sources of the era to give a deeper and fuller portrait of the emperor and his achievements than has heretofore been attempted. I truly believe that a book about someone as important as Constantine should be written in such a manner that it is both interesting and intelligible to the educated public as well as useful and challenging to fellow scholars. Thus, I have attempted to make the book as “reader friendly” as possible. The text of the work contains twelve chapters for all readers. There is an initial chapter on the subject and the ancient sources relevant to it, and a final chapter on the legacy and modern interpretations about it. In between are ten chapters which tell the story of the late Roman world and Constantine’s place in it from *ca.* 235 to 395. These twelve chapters have hopefully been written in a lucid and understandable style, and not littered with the arcane debates of scholars. Curious and intelligent people who just want a “good read” and some knowledge about their cultural heritage may stop here. The scholarly apparatus at the back of the book contains notes, a bibliography, and an index supporting the text. I have used the notes to cite the ancient sources of my information, and to refer to modern scholarship useful on particular topics; and have dealt with problems of interpretation and scholarly disputes therein. The bibliography offers listings of both the more important ancient sources and modern scholarship relevant to the book. The index, of course, lists the pages of particular topics. Students and scholars who wish to go deeper into the subject may avail themselves of the scholarly apparatus at the back of the book. Throughout the book, readers will find a total of 92 illustrations and 8 maps, which provide a visual tour of the more important Constantinian sites, monuments, and artifacts.

My research and field work in Constantinian studies has been helped by the knowledge and kindness of many scholars whom I would like to thank here: Professors Stanley Chodorow and Alden Mosshammer at UCSD for my initial studies in Constantinian texts and Church history; Dr. Irene Vaslef at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., Professeur Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Mme. Marine Sibille at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Dr. Victor Saxer at the Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, and Patricia Weaver and Antonella Bucci at the American Academy in Rome, Mr. Marcel Sigrit at the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française in Jerusalem, and Mr. Aykut Ozet at the Istanbul Archaeological Museum in Istanbul for archival research; curators Philip Grierson at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, R.A.G. Carson and J.P.C. Kent at the British Museum in London, Anne Robertson at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, Scotland, Amandre Michel at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Wolfgang Hess at the Staatliche Münzsammlung in Munich, and Dr. Nekriman Olcay at the Istanbul Archaeological Museum for numismatic research; Professor Bruno Apollonj Ghetti in Rome, Professor Jerome Murphy-O’Connor in Jerusalem, and Professor Erdem Yücel in Istanbul for archaeological research. My far-flung travels have been facilitated and made pleasant by the following people and institutions: by the professors in the Northwest Interinstitutional Council for Studies Abroad who have twice selected me to

teach at Bath College of Higher Education in England and at the University of Avignon in France; by Ric Delgado of Air France in Los Angeles, Penny Keys of Trans Globe Tours in Sherman Oaks, and Bob Harmon and Linda Aymon of Harmon Travel in Boise who have employed me to design and guide study tours in Europe and the Near East a half dozen times; by Walter Catini and the staff of the Columbus Hotel in Rome, and by Saim Celbeker, Remzi Erbaş and Ugur Duymayan and the staff of the Hotel And in Istanbul who have made my many sojourns at their hotels for private research trips and public tour-seminars delightful with wonderful rooms, food and services; and by Linda, Suzy, Sandra, and Charlynn Anne who have enlightened seven of my trips with their charms. Several Constantinian scholars have shared their scholarship with me and offered encouragement for my work over the past two decades, and I recognize them with gratitude: Ramsay MacMullen, Timothy Barnes, Hal Drake, Oliver Nicholson, Hans Pohlsander, Mark Smith, Judith Evans Grubbs, Maureen Tilley, Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, David Woods, and Klaus Girardet.

A number of my dear colleagues and students at Boise State University aided me in various ways while I was researching and writing this book, and I am most grateful for their kind assistance: Deans William Keppler, Robert Sims, and Warren Vinz for travel grants and released time; Department Chairs Errol Jones and Peter Buhler for departmental funds for the illustrations in the text; Charles Scheer and John Kelly of the Simplot-Micron Technology Center for photographing my Constantinian coin collection, and making prints out of my slide collection for the illustrations in the book; students Patricia Chaloupka, Jody Mabe, Teresa Huff, Dorothea Huff, Jerry Wilson, Kevin Cole, Margaret Sankey, Brandon Lambert, Diane Boleyn, Aaron Christensen, Chris Ogden, Marilyn Wylde, Joshua Jaynes, Aaron Campbell, Larry Stamps, and Kasey Reed for doing research related to my work and/or proofreading the typescript of the book. Finally, I offer my deepest thanks to three fine scholars: to Mark Smith of Albertson College of Idaho, who has done much work on Eusebius and Constantius I, for reading the first half of my typescript and making useful observations; to Hans A. Pohlsander of the State University of New York in Albany, who has done much work on Helena and the family of Constantine, for reading the whole 900-plus-page typescript and offering many valuable suggestions; and to Richard Stoneman, an excellent scholar of ancient history and the publisher of the classics titles at Routledge, for requesting me to write this book, for coming to Boise and encouraging me during its progress, and for waiting patiently for me to finish it.

Charles Matson Odahl
Beside the river in Boise

VI RELIGIOUS CONCERNS AND APOSTOLIC ROME

Constantine the Augustus at the request of Sylvester the Bishop constructed the Basilica for the Blessed Peter the Apostle.

Liber Pontificalis 34. 16

Constantine remained in northern Italy into the spring of 313 until he was sure that Licinius had gained ascendancy over Maximin in Thrace. While his ally pushed the persecutor back into Asia, overcame their foe, and liberated Christians in the east, Constantine moved up into Gaul, defeated Franks on the Rhine, and returned to Trier in triumph in the west. Although he believed that power from the great Deity of the Christians had aided him in winning victory over his enemies and in gaining supremacy in the empire, Constantine as yet knew little about the beliefs and practices of Christianity. Over the next few years, his study of Christian doctrines and his involvement in Church disputes would strengthen his knowledge of his new religion, and stir within him a sense of mission. When he returned to Rome for the celebration of the *Decennalia* of his accession, he became convinced that he was the divinely appointed agent of the omnipotent Christian Divinity, and began a building program which would transform the city from a pagan capital into the Apostolic See.¹

Constantine made only a short stop in Trier after his return to Gaul in late spring of 313. A large confederation of Franks was attempting to take advantage of his absence in Italy, and was massing along the Rhine River for an invasion into Roman territory. Constantine swiftly advanced to the frontier, frightened the barbarians and halted their attack. However, the emperor wanted to punish their temerity and discourage future invasions. So, in the summer he pretended to travel south to campaign in Upper Germany while leaving only limited forces in the north to protect Lower Germany. The Franks returned to the frontier and started crossing the river. Constantine had concealed troops along the Rhine, and they hindered the crossing. Then, the emperor unexpectedly appeared with a fleet, and attacked the deceived barbarians. He chased them back into their forests, devastated their lands, and killed or captured masses of their soldiers. The Rhine frontier would be safe for many years to come.²

With his internal enemies overcome and the barbarians on the run, Constantine was finally able to return to Trier for a festive celebration of his victories in August 313. An imperial *adventus* was always an important occasion, but this one especially so since Constantine had accomplished so much during his absence. The victory over Maxentius and his recovery of Italy and Africa for the legitimate imperial college, his promotion to senior emperor by the Senate and the strengthened alliance with Licinius, and the defeat

of the Franks and his personal presence in Gaul again all made his northern subjects feel proud of their emperor and more secure in his rule. Thus, in the days following the arrival of Constantine, a number of festive activities were held to celebrate his triumphs and to vent the joy of his subjects. Among these were a triumphal procession through the streets, chariot races in the circus, beast fights in the arena, and a panegyric oration in the palace audience hall.³

A pagan rhetorician who had spoken before Constantine on previous occasions delivered the public oration. He had no trouble in lauding the personal *virtutes* and heroic *gesta* which the emperor had displayed during his victorious battles in Italy and on the Rhine. Court officers provided him with the historical details needed to recount the campaigns, and a classical education equipped him with the rhetorical techniques necessary to perform a panegyric. Through the course of the oration he vividly recounted the strategic brilliance and martial courage of Constantine in storming fortified strongholds, in conducting field battles, and in defeating barbarian hordes; and he favorably compared the recent accomplishments of his imperial subject with the fabled deeds of the great Alexander and the renowned Caesar. However, he faced a major problem in describing the source of divine *instinctus* and celestial *potestas* which had aided the emperor in overcoming his enemies. The altered religious position of Constantine and the increased Christian presence at court meant that traditional pagan formulations would no longer be acceptable in panegyric orations for this ruler. The rhetor realized that associating Constantine with pagan deities would anger the emperor and displease the Christians in his entourage. Yet, he felt that mentioning Christ as the divine patron of the emperor would be a betrayal of his own religious beliefs and discomfort the pagans in the audience. He solved his problem by following imperial religious policy and by employing syncretistic religious terminology. Both Constantine and Licinius had invoked the “Highest Divinity” for aid in their victorious military campaigns over the past year, and had placed themselves and their subjects under the protection of this *Divinitas* in the “Edict of Milan.” Thus, the Trier panegyrist adopted the same religiously neutral and studiously vague terminology when describing the “God” who had inspired Constantine on his campaigns and would aid him in his reign. Early in the oration, when comparing the greater military forces which Maxentius had been able to amass against him, the panegyrist rhetorically asked the emperor: “What God then (*Quisnam... Deus*), what Presiding Majesty (*Praesens... Maiestas*) so encouraged you, that [against the odds]...you yourself determined that the time had come for Rome to be liberated through your efforts.” He answered his own question by stating: “Truly Constantine, you have some secret communion with the Divine Mind itself (*illa Mens Divina*), which having delegated our care to the lesser gods, deigns to reveal himself to you alone.” Through the course of the address, the speaker informed the audience that their great emperor had been counseled by “divine will” (*divinum numen*) and “guided by divine inspiration” (*divino monitus instinctu*) in planning and winning his victories. In the peroration, where a prayer to the patron deities of the emperor was traditional, the orator addressed the Divinity directly, calling him “the Greatest Creator of the universe” (*Summe rerum Sator*), who has...“as many names as there are languages of mankind,” and then characterized him as either: “A Certain Force and Divine Mind which is infused into the whole world and mixed with all the elements” (*Quaedam Vis Mensque Divina...quae toto infusa mundo*), or “Some Power above all the heavens who looks

down upon this work of his from the higher citadel of nature” (*Aliqua supra caelum Potestas...quae...ex altiore naturae arce despicias*). The speaker affirmed that it was to this Divinity that he and the audience prayed, and offered a worthy petition: as he had “the highest goodness and power in himself” (*summa bonitas et potestas*), and both wished for and had the power to make just things happen, he should “preserve Constantine for all ages.”⁴

The emperor probably smiled at the final petition and enjoyed the panegyric oration. As a sincere believer in the Christian Deity, he would have appreciated the lack of references to the pagan gods. Yet, as the supreme ruler of a largely pagan populace, he would have tolerated the lack of references to Christ. Constantine was an astute politician, and realized that “a religiously neutral description of the divine foundations of [his] imperial position” was useful in the current religious climate. By defining the *Deus* of the emperor as the “Highest Creator of the universe,” a “Divine Mind infused through the world,” some “Power above all the heavens,” and the “highest goodness and power,” the Trier panegyrist united devotees of pagan poetry, philosophical pantheism, Solar syncretism, and Christian monotheism around Constantine and reflected his inclusive religious policy.⁵

A gradual change would occur in this religious policy, however, as Constantine learned more about his patron Deity. The arrival of his mother Helena, his son Crispus, and the Christian scholar Lactantius at Trier in the autumn of 313 helped accelerate the religious education of the emperor.

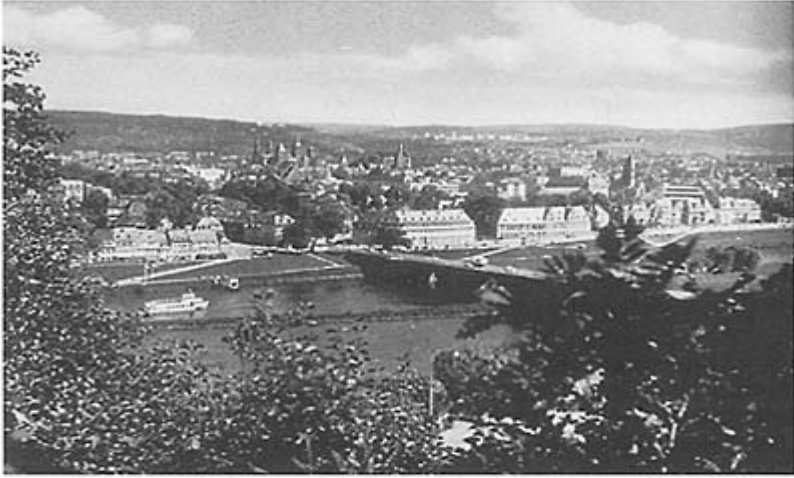
When Constantine had escaped from the court of Galerius in the east and hastened to the side of Constantius in the west in 305, he surely had been forced to leave behind his mother Helena and his son Crispus—probably at Nicomedia. His adverse relationship with Galerius and the civil wars of the emperors from 305 to 313 would have made it very difficult for him to arrange a passage for his mother and son through the Roman Empire during those years. Since there is neither literary nor material evidence which clearly attests their residence at Trier in the era of the Second Tetrarchy, it is probable that they had been detained as honored “hostages” in the east for several years. Yet, once Licinius had taken Nicomedia and defeated Maximin, the way was finally open for a family reunion between Constantine and his mother and son. Licinius probably arranged safe passage for them along the imperial road and transport system in the summer of 313.⁶

Constantine was surely pleased to be reunited with his beloved mother and young son again. He must have arranged a special reception to welcome them to his court, and provided sumptuous facilities for their residence in the palace. Even though Fausta could understand the joy of her husband, she may not have been quite so sanguine with the new arrivals. The fact that her older sister Theodora had displaced Helena as the wife of Constantine’s father may have added an extra burden to the usual strains of a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. Constantine seems to have sent Theodora and her children away from Trier about this time in order to shield his mother from reminders of her earlier humiliation, and to stress her special status in his heart. The fact that Helena was not only the grandmother, but also the surrogate mother of Constantine’s son, may have elevated her position at court, and reminded Fausta of her failure so far to give her husband other children. Fausta appears to have been one of those women who have trouble conceiving, or carrying to term, a first child; but, after giving birth successfully,

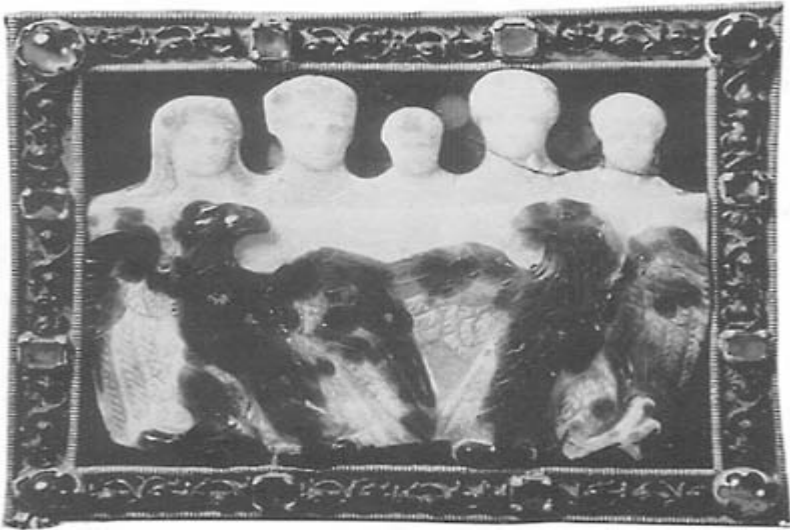
become very prolific and produce many children subsequently. Her embarrassment would finally come to an end after nine years of marriage when she gave birth to Constantine II in the summer of 316. A beautiful sardonyx cameo, carved a few months later, depicted the imperial family at that time. It ultimately became the centerpiece on the cover of an eighth-century Carolingian manuscript of the Gospels produced at Aachen under Charlemagne, and is known as the Ada Cameo. It displayed two eagles with spread wings at the bottom, and depicted five imperial busts rising above a balustrade in the top part of the design. From the left to the right, the figures seem to represent Helena, Constantine the Great, the new baby Constantine II, Fausta, and the older son Crispus. It is interesting to note that the heads of Constantine and Fausta are of equal stature, and rise above those of Helena and her two grandsons. This was appropriate since Fausta was the daughter, sister, and wife of emperors, and—with her first son—the mother of an imperial heir as well. However, until she had given birth to her first child, she must have felt overshadowed by her mother-in-law, and her influence upon Constantine and Crispus. Nevertheless, Helena surely appreciated that Fausta had been loyal to her son against Maximian and Maxentius; and Fausta surely appreciated that Helena supported her desire to provide more dynastic heirs. Whatever tensions existed between them during this period, the imperial ladies appear to have tolerated each other out of love for Constantine and in the interests of the dynasty. Thus, while residing in the domestic quarters of the palace at Trier over the next few years, they both converted to the religion of the Christian emperor, and they both cooperated in the raising of his son Crispus (Ils. 32 and 33).⁷

As Constantine was now a believer in the Christian God, he wanted the finest scholar of the western Church to serve as a Latin tutor at his court, especially for his only son whom he wished to be educated properly. Thus, he seems to have invited Lactantius to return to the west at this time, and take up the position of *magister* at the court in Trier. St. Jerome, who studied in Trier a few decades later, seems to have preserved reliable traditions when he wrote in his *Chronicon* that “Lactantius, the most eloquent man of his own time, educated Crispus in Latin letters”; and also in his *De Viris Illustribus* that “in extreme old age, this man was the master of Caesar Crispus, the son of Constantine, in Gaul.” The period which best fits the statements of Jerome was that between the years 313 and 316, when Crispus was residing at the court in Trier, was mature enough to appreciate the teaching of the great Latin scholar, and was in training to become a Caesar under his father; and also when Lactantius was living out the last decade of his long and productive life. It is even possible that Lactantius may have accompanied Helena and Crispus on their journey from the east to Trier, or, at the very least, have arrived there at about the same time.⁸

With the recovery of political, military, and cultural stability across the empire resulting from the alliance and victories of Constantine and Licinius, the senior Augustus was afforded the luxury of staying in residence at his court in Trier for many months at a time over the next two years—from mid-autumn through late spring during both 313–14,



Ill. 32 A view of Trier with the domestic quarters of the Constantinian Palace near the Cathedral to the left center.



Ill. 33 The Ada Cameo depicting from the left Helena, Constantine, Constantine II, Fausta, and Crispus, (ca. 316).

and 314–15. When not occupied with the heavy duties of a Roman emperor—selecting civilian officials and choosing military officers, designing public policies and proffering executive orders, issuing Roman laws and answering judicial appeals, etc.—he was able to renew his filial bond with his mother, to enjoy his conjugal rights with his wife, and to exhibit his paternal concern for his son. He charged Lactantius with training Crispus in the fundamental elements of classical erudition and in the essential tenets of Christian teaching. However, as his own education had been minimal, Constantine probably looked in on the lessons of his son, and found such occasions convenient for sharpening his own literary skills and for increasing his Christian knowledge in conversations with the old master, and through readings in his works.⁹

By the time Lactantius reached Trier, he had completed the *Divinae Institutiones*, and added an effusive dedication at the end of the text for the newly converted emperor.¹⁰

The dedication not only complimented the personal virtue of Constantine but also described the divine sanction for his imperial rule. In part, it reads:

Most holy Emperor...the Highest God has raised you up for the restoration of the house of justice, and for the protection of the human race; for while you rule the Roman state, we worshipers of God are no more regarded as accursed and impious.... The providence of the Supreme Divinity has lifted you to the imperial dignity in order that you might be able with true piety to rescind the injurious decrees of others, to correct faults, to provide with a father's clemency for the safety of humanity—in short, to remove the wicked from the state, whom... God has delivered into your hands that it might be evident to all in what true majesty consists.

Truly they who wished to take away the worship of the heavenly and matchless God, that they might defend impious superstitions, lie in ruin. But you who defend and love His name, excelling in virtue and prosperity, enjoy your immortal glories with the greatest joy.... The powerful right hand of God protects you from all dangers.... *And not undeservedly has the Lord and Ruler of the world chosen you in preference to all others to renew His holy religion....* For you, both by the innate sanctity of your character, and by the acknowledgment of the truth and of God in every action, do fully perform works of righteousness. *Therefore, it was fitting that in arranging the condition of the human race, the Divinity should make use of your authority and service.* We supplicate Him with daily prayers that He may especially guard you whom he has wished to be the guardian of the world....

These words fulfilled predictions which Lactantius had made earlier in the text, and confirmed events which Constantine had experienced in his career. The Christian apologist had warned the pagan emperors that their power came from God, and that if they abused this trust, divine vengeance would result. As Constantine had risen to power during the decade of the “Great Persecution,” he had witnessed each of the persecuting emperors come to ruin. Only he and his eastern colleague Licinius, who were protecting Christians in their domains, still remained in power and ruled in prosperity.¹¹

The *Institutiones* offered a lengthy curriculum for the Christian education of Constantine. At the start, Lactantius invoked the “one God...who both created all things and governs them with the same power by which he created them.” He described the Christian Deity as the “eternal mind” of the cosmos, and characterized him as a heavenly “general” maintaining balance in the universe as a supreme commander keeps order on the battlefield—an analogy the Christian soldier emperor could appreciate.¹² The first three books offered a detailed critique of the false beliefs and cultic practices of pagan religion and philosophy, while the next three books provided a long exposition of the true theology and ethical standards of Christian religion and learning. At the end, Lactantius covered the second coming of Christ and the immortality of the soul. Constantine certainly studied this considerable tome over the years, and much of his later understanding of Christian doctrines, and many of his public writings on Christian topics can be traced to its pages.¹³

While in residence at Trier, Lactantius composed two other important tracts of much shorter length which seem to have caught the immediate attention of the imperial convert. Probably in the early months of 314, Lactantius completed a little book entitled *De Ira Dei* (*On the Wrath of God*). In an early section of the work he stated that there were three steps to ultimate truth: (1) recognize the fallacy of pagan religions and reject their impious worship of man-made gods; (2) perceive with the mind that there is but one Supreme God, whose power and providence made the world in the beginning and govern it still; and (3) come to know God’s Servant and messenger, who was sent as his ambassador to the earth, and by whose teaching humanity is freed from error and discerns righteousness.¹⁴ Constantine had already reached the second step of this ascent to the truth and was diligently striving toward the third through his studies. Herein he learned that the Christian Deity loved good and hated evil; and through kind benevolence rewarded the pious who worshiped correctly and lived justly, but out of righteous anger punished the impious who rejected the true religion and just conduct.¹⁵

The other little work Lactantius was writing at this time was the famous tract entitled *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (*On the Deaths of the Persecutors*). He probably completed it in 315 and offered it as an historical proof for the theses he had outlined in the *Institutiones* and the *De Ira Dei*. It chronicled the divine vengeance inflicted upon the imperial persecutors of the Church, and the divine favor extended to the imperial protectors of the Christians. The awful deaths of Galerius and Maximin were contrasted with the wonderful successes of Constantine and Licinius, and reinforced the theory that earthly power is a gift from the Christian God and that those who misuse it should expect divine wrath.¹⁶ The emperor seems to have contributed historical data to the writer of this work, and was later to employ themes from it in his own writings.¹⁷

From his readings in the Bible, his conversations with Church leaders, and especially his studies with Lactantius, Constantine was swiftly gaining detailed knowledge about his new divine protector and his new religious society. He was learning that the Christian Deity was not just the “Highest Divinity,” but “the one and only God”; and that the Catholic Church was not just another religious cult, but the ultimate “fountain of truth, abode of faith, and temple of God.”¹⁸ He was discerning that God had communicated his will to humans indirectly and partially through the writings of the Jewish prophets and the pagan philosophers, but directly and fully through the teachings of Jesus the Christ and his Apostolic followers.¹⁹ From recent events and personal revelations, he knew that

the Almighty could intervene in human history, and sensed that he had himself received a special commission to be an earthly agent of the divine dispensation. He concluded that if he were to be worthy of the power which the Divinity had given him, he would have to protect the Christian people and promote the Catholic Church in the Roman Empire.²⁰

This conclusion is amply illustrated by the words and actions of Constantine in dealing with the *Donatist Schism*. In the course of establishing legal privileges, distributing monetary grants and building new basilicas for the Christian Church over the winter and spring of 312–13, he had found that an hierarchical schism had broken out in the churches of North Africa as a result of the “Great Persecution.” As imperial officials had applied the persecution edicts with varying levels of severity, so too had Christians reacted to them with differing kinds of fidelity. Rigorists had opposed any kind of cooperation with the persecuting authorities, carried food to the confessors in prison, and venerated the martyrs who gave their lives for the faith. Moderates had allowed the handing over of heretical writings in place of the real Scriptures, thought it best not to openly provoke imperial officials, and tried to lie low until the storm passed. *Traditores* had given up the Scriptures, sacrificed to the pagan gods, or offered the names of their brethren to imperial authorities. After the persecutions, factions had arisen in some churches over the election of new leaders and the question of repentant “traitors.” Such was the situation at Carthage in 313, but power politics, personality clashes, and class conflicts had created a serious schism there.²¹

During the darkest days of the “Great Persecution” in 303–5, a moderate named Mensurius had been the Bishop of Carthage and metropolitan of Africa while a rigorist named Secundus had served as the Bishop of Tigisis and primate of Numidia. The former had gone into hiding with the Scriptures and had left some heretical treatises behind, which imperial officials confiscated and burned. The latter had resisted imperial authorities, refused to surrender any books, and been jailed. An acrimonious correspondence had ensued between the two bishops in which Mensurius defended his position and criticized some confessors as scoundrels who deliberately provoked officials in order to get imprisoned or martyred as a means of evading debts and gaining fame, while Secundus praised the confessors of his area and lauded open defiance of the authorities. Mensurius, however, was no coward; and when officials had sought one of his deacons who had written a bitter tract against a persecuting emperor, he had hidden him and refused to give him up. Mensurius had been sent to Rome to answer for his conduct. He seems to have acquitted himself well; but he had died on the return voyage. By then, Maxentius had seized power in Italy and Africa, and ended the persecution to gain Christian favor for his usurpation. Early in the year 307, the Christians at Carthage had thus been free to select a successor to Mensurius. The clergy and people of the city had decided it was best to act swiftly in this situation, scheduled an election, and invited only a few bishops from the nearby towns of proconsular Africa for the consecration—ignoring the Numidian bishops who recently had participated in this important event. The archdeacon of the church and a protégé of Mensurius, Caecilian, and two of the presbyters of the see, Botrus and Celestius, stood up as candidates in the episcopal election. The great majority of the Carthaginian clergy and people sided with Caecilian; and he was consecrated as the new Bishop of Carthage by Felix of Aptungi and two other neighboring prelates. Not everyone in North Africa was satisfied with this process and its result. Lucilla, a proud and wealthy widow of the congregation, had been in the habit of

carrying around the bone of a martyr, and fondling and kissing it during worship services. She had once been publicly rebuked by Caecilian for her disruptive behavior. She had never forgiven him for this “insult,” and was willing to use her resources to stir up a schism against him. The defeated candidates Botrus and Celestius had been entrusted with the gold and silver ornaments of the church by Mensurius for safekeeping during his absence in Italy. On the news of his demise, they had secretly sold some items of the communal treasures to enrich themselves. Unbeknownst to them, Mensurius had left a complete inventory with an old woman of the congregation who had been instructed to give it to his successor should he not return home. When Caecilian had examined the inventory and discovered the peculation of the presbyters, he had demanded that they make restitution. Embarrassed by their deed and desirous of keeping the booty, they had chosen to withdraw from communion with Caecilian rather than to make restitution to the Church. A rigorist presbyter named Donatus and some of the poorer members of the church at Carthage held views more in keeping with the rigorist Numidians and their rural followers than with the moderate Caecilian and his urban congregants. They had not approved of the harsh treatment Caecilian had shown some of the confessors during the persecution, nor did they like the light penances he had imposed upon the traditores afterwards. Backed by the money and influence of Lucilla, the dissident presbyters and their lower-class followers appealed to the Numidian bishops to visit Carthage and overturn the election of Caecilian. Secundus of Tigisis and the other rigorist Numidian clergy had been upset that they had been left out of the process, and had been unhappy that a moderate and a protégé of Mensurius had been selected Bishop of Carthage. The Numidians also had the usual prejudices and antipathies that people from small towns and rural areas exhibit against the citizens of large cities and urban centers. Thus, they had been more than willing to accept an invitation from the dissident minority to intervene in the episcopal election. When Secundus and his clergy had arrived in Carthage later that year, they had been largely ignored by the Catholic majority, but treated generously by the dissident faction. Caecilian had offered to allow them to consecrate him again to his episcopal office; but that was not what they and their allies had wanted. Failing to find any disqualifying fault in Caecilian, they had declared that his chief consecrator, Felix of Aptungi, had been guilty of *traditio* in the recent persecution, and thereby had not been qualified to preside over an episcopal consecration. They had announced that the earlier ceremony had been invalid, and that Caecilian had not been properly installed as bishop. Secundus had presided over a new election in which Majorinus, a *lector* (reader) and a dependent of Lucilla, was selected and consecrated as the new Bishop of Carthage. As Optatus later wrote, “altar was raised against altar,” and two men thereafter claimed to be the metropolitan bishop of North Africa. The Numidians had then returned home, leaving behind a divided church.²²

Over the next few years while Constantine had risen to power upon the ruins of the Second Tetrarchy, the divisions in Carthage had developed into a schism across North Africa. The majority of the Christians of Carthage and in the other urban centers of the proconsular province had remained loyal to Caecilian. However, most of the Christians of Numidia and in the rural areas of the other provinces had sided with his opponent Majorinus. Dissident churches had emerged in many cities, and civil disturbances had occurred in many regions. Both factions had appealed to bishops outside of Africa for support, and Caecilian had received recognition from Ossius and the Hispanic churches

and from Miltiades and the Italic churches. When the emperor had initiated his new program of imperial patronage for the Christian cult during the winter of 312–13, he had been informed of the schism in the North African churches by his Christian advisors. He had reacted by commanding Patricius, the Vicar of the African Diocese, and Anullinus, the Proconsul of Africa, “to give careful attention” to this matter; and by restricting his monetary grants to Caecilian and “to ministers of the legitimate and most holy Catholic religion” named in a list by Ossius. Yet before Constantine had been able to leave Italy, he had become entangled in the dispute by an appeal from Africa.²³

Shortly after Anullinus had announced the new imperial policy of monetary subventions and *munera* exemptions which Constantine had ordered him to extend to the Catholic clergy of Africa in early 313, members of the dissident faction of Majorinus approached the governor with a judicial appeal to the emperor. They gave Anullinus a sealed packet containing charges against Caecilian, and an open petition requesting Constantine to appoint judges from Gaul to hear their case. They claimed that they were the representatives of the true Catholic Church which deserved the imperial benefactions, and that bishops from Gaul who had not suffered the violent persecutions experienced in Africa should be able to judge their case fairly. Appealing to secular authorities was not the normal practice of Christians since the Scriptures urged the brethren to solve their disputes in the Church, and the emperors were usually hostile to their cult. But the arrival of a ruler willing to propagate the faith and subsidize the Church lessened the reticence of Christians to approach the throne. In mid-April, Anullinus composed a short missive explaining the situation in Africa, and sent it as a cover letter along with the two documents from the dissidents to Constantine who was still in Milan. The emperor responded swiftly in hopes of ending the schism in Africa quickly.²⁴

As the *Pontifex Maximus* or “Chief Priest” of all cults in the empire, Constantine had a right to accept a judicial appeal in a religious matter; but as a *fidelis* or “believer” in the Christian God, he desired to handle the appeal in a manner which was in conformance with Church tradition. His response is preserved in an official letter which he wrote in June 313 to Miltiades, the Bishop of Rome, and Mark, an official of the Roman church:

Constantine Augustus to Miltiades, Bishop of the Romans, and to Marcus.

Since several dispatches have been sent to me by Anullinus, the most illustrious Proconsul of Africa, in which it is recorded that Caecilian, Bishop of the Carthaginians, is accused on many counts by some of his colleagues in Africa; and *since it seems to me to be a very serious matter that in those provinces, which the Divine Providence has freely entrusted to my Majesty, ...the multitude is found following the baser course, and dividing, as it were, into factions, and the bishops are at variance*; it has seemed good to me that Caecilian himself, with ten of the bishops who appear to accuse him, and with ten others whom he may consider necessary for his case, should without delay sail to Rome, and that there in the presence of yourselves, and of Reticius, Maternus and Marinus, your colleagues, whom I have commanded to hasten to Rome for this matter, he may be heard as you understand in accordance with the most august law. In order that you may have the fullest knowledge about all these matters, I have attached to my letter copies of the documents sent to me

by Anullinus, and have also sent them to your above-mentioned colleagues. When your Constancy has read them, you will consider in what way the aforesaid case may be most carefully examined and justly decided. For it does not escape your Diligence that *I have such great reverence for the legitimate Catholic Church that I wish you not to have schism or discord in any place. May the Divinity of the Great God preserve you for many years, Most Honored One.*²⁵

The language employed in this letter reveals several things concerning the knowledge Constantine had gained about Christianity only a few months after his conversion. He had learned that the Bishop of Rome was the leading prelate in the ecclesiastical hierarchy; and therefore, he referred the African schism to Miltiades for adjudication, and addressed him with titles of great respect. However, as emperor, he retained the right to establish an appellate tribunal in a manner which he felt was fair; and so, he acquiesced to the request of the dissidents that Gallic bishops play a role on the arbitration panel. He had also begun to comprehend the Christian political theory that temporal power is bestowed upon earthly rulers by the “Great God” of Heaven; and thus, he believed that he had a duty to use the power he had been given by Divine Providence to protect the Catholic Church.²⁶

While Constantine was enjoying his return to Trier and reunion with his family, Miltiades convened a synod at Rome in the Lateran Palace from 30 September to 2 October 313. Besides welcoming the imperial appointees—bishops Reticus of Autun, Maternus of Cologne, and Marinus of Arles—to the capital, Miltiades invited fifteen Italian bishops to sit with him and the Gallic clergy in the Lateran, converting the conclave from a judicial tribunal into a Church council. This was more in conformance with ecclesiastical tradition, and Constantine accepted the alteration and employed it as a precedent for dealing with future disputes in the Church. By the time the synod met, Majorinus had died; and the rigorist Donatus had succeeded him. He would lead the dissidents for four decades and give his name to their movement—Donatism. Caecilian and Donatus each brought ten supporters to plead their cases before the nineteen bishops at the Roman Synod. The intransigence of Donatus did not impress the members of the synod; while the willingness of Caecilian to relinquish the African practice of rebaptizing the lapsed and adopt the Roman practice of welcoming back the repentant by the laying on of hands pleased the episcopal judges. Thus, Miltiades ruled that Caecilian be recognized as the legitimate Bishop of Carthage, and that Donatus be condemned for arousing an ecclesiastical schism and for performing second baptisms. As a concession to the dissidents, however, Miltiades proposed that in cities where there were two bishops as a result of the schism, the first one consecrated should be confirmed in his see, and the second one should be given another flock.²⁷

Although these decisions were decreed by the Bishop of Rome and backed by the unanimous support of several western prelates, Donatus and his followers were unwilling to accept them. Complaining that they had not received a fair hearing, they appealed over the heads of Miltiades and the bishops at Rome to the emperor. Constantine was not pleased with this development; but he responded in a manner which he thought would be beneficial to both the Christian Church and the Roman Empire—he summoned bishops and other clergy from the major sees of the west to come together in the city of Arles for a full council of the western Church in August 314. Arles was an ideal place for such an

important gathering. It was located at the mouth of the Rhône River, which connected the north-western provinces to the Mediterranean Sea; and on the Roman road system, which linked Italy to Gaul and Spain. It was situated midway between the original northern domains and the recently acquired southern provinces of Constantine. Its importance as an economic center was increased through



Ill. 34 Aerial view over Roman Arles in southern Gaul where Constantine convened a Church council in August 314.

the transference of the Ostia mint to Arles in 313; and its reputation for urban amenities was augmented by the building of a new *thermae* (bathhouse) complex along the river side of the city about the same time. Constantine must have seen the Council of Arles as an excellent opportunity to meet the leaders of the western Church, to assist them in solving the Donatist Schism, and to increase their support for his reign and policies (Ills. 34 and 35).²⁸

The emperor oversaw preparations for the council during the spring of 314. He dispatched imperial letters from Trier to the Christian bishops of his domains whose attendance he requested at the meeting; and to the civilian vicars of his dioceses whose assistance he commanded for travel services. Two of these letters are extant—the “Epistle of Constantine the Augustus to Chrestus, Bishop of Syracuse,” preserved in a Greek version by Eusebius; and the “Epistle of Constantine the Augustus to Aelafius, Vicar of Africa,” recorded in the original Latin by Optatus.²⁹ In both, the emperor stated his dismay about the ecclesiastical schism in Africa, reviewed his attempt to end it through adjudication by the episcopal commission at Rome, and expressed his disappointment at the continuing contentions in the Church which would allow the

pagans an opportunity to disparage the Christian religion. He stressed his hope that a council of many might be able to accomplish what a synod of the few had failed to do—settle the dissension in the Church and restore harmony among the faithful. In the



Ill. 35 Ruins of the Constantinian thermae at Arles with the *caldarium* (“hot bath room”) inside the apse at the left.

epistle to the bishop, Constantine told Chrestus to come to Arles by 1 August, to bring two of his presbyters and three servants with him, and to avail himself of the imperial transport system—naming the governor of Sicily from whom he could obtain official help. In the epistle to his vicar, he ordered Aelafius to assist the parties of Caecilian and Donatus, and the bishops and clergy from other African provinces, in employing the Roman transport system to travel across North Africa and through Spain so that they could reach the conference on time. The vicarial letter is particularly interesting since it has survived in the original Latin of the emperor, and contains a personal confession at the end which reads as follows:

For since I am sure that you too are a worshiper of the Highest God, I confess to your Dignity that I think that it is not at all right that contentions and altercations of this kind be ignored by us, by which perhaps *the Highest Divinity may be moved to wrath* not only against the human race but even *against me myself, to whose care by his celestial will he has committed the management of all earthly affairs*, and having been angered, might determine things other than heretofore. *For then truly and most fully shall I be able to be secure and always to hope for the most*

prosperous and best things from the very prompt benevolence of the Most Powerful God, when I shall have perceived that all people are venerating the Most Holy God by means of the proper cult of the Catholic religion with harmonious brotherhood of worship. Amen.

This personal confession shows that Constantine's study of biblical texts and Lactantian works was having an effect upon his political thinking—he had already come to believe the New Testament teaching that the Christian God institutes earthly powers, and the Lactantian theory that acceptance of power from the Divinity required duties in return and that failure to perform such duties could result in divine anger. The feeling that he was a recipient of divine benevolence from the Christian Deity and the fear that he could lose divine favor by failing to protect the Catholic Church would be essential elements of the religious thinking and imperial policies of Constantine for the rest of his reign.³⁰

By 1 August 314, the preparations for the Council of Arles had been completed, and thirty-three bishops together with numerous lesser clergy from the Dioceses of Britanniae, Galliae, Viennensis, Hispaniae, Africa, and Italia descended upon the city along the Rhône. Marinus, the Bishop of Arles, served as the official host and nominal head of the council. Constantine—as Eusebius remarked—“like some general bishop constituted by God... did not disdain to be present and sit with them in their assembly, but even bore a share in their deliberations, working in every way for the peace of God.”³¹ Caecilian with his Catholic supporters and Donatus with his schismatic followers presented their cases to the gathering. Since the former appeared qualified for his episcopal office and impressed the bishops with his dignity, while the latter offered no documentary evidence against his opponent and offended the delegates with his obstinacy, the Council of Arles ratified the Roman decision and ruled again in favor of accepting Caecilian as the legitimate Bishop of Carthage. In accord with Church tradition and with the approval of the emperor, the clergy at Arles enacted twenty-two canons or “rules” concerning ecclesiastical order and discipline. Some were fairly traditional, such as 1, which declared that the Christian Pasch (Easter) should be celebrated on the same day throughout the world, and that the day for that festival should be designated by the Bishop of Rome; 2 and 21, which stated that clergy should serve in the places where they had been ordained rather than transfer to different sees; and 4 and 5, which ruled that charioteers and actors were to be debarred from communion as long as they were active in their professions. A few were relevant to the African schism, such as 14, 15, and 20, which regulated accusations against the clergy, and the consecration of bishops. Others were novel, and seem to have been enacted to strengthen the partnership which was emerging between the emperor and the bishops, and the Roman Empire and the Christian Church. Earlier Church canons and patristic writings had disapproved of, or even excommunicated, *fideles* who accepted magisterial positions or military service under the pagan emperors. However, since Constantine had exempted the clergy from public *munera*, and was removing idolatry from civic duties and camp rituals, it now seemed reasonable to allow the laity to serve the state.

Canons 7 and 8 allowed Christian laymen to serve as governors (*praesides*) of provinces, and in other government positions, provided that they carried ecclesiastical communion letters from their own bishops to the bishops of the regions wherein they were serving so that the latter might watch to see that they conducted their duties in

accord with Christian ethics (*disciplina*). Canon 3 went so far as to threaten believers with excommunication “who threw down their arms in time of peace,” and thus offered the first ecclesiastical sanction for Christian military service in the Roman imperial army. The latter did leave open the possibility for conscientious objection on the issue of homicide in time of war. Yet, as Constantine was promoting Christian practices and symbolism in the military, and was employing his troops to overthrow tyrants and persecutors, most of the Christians in the army would stay and fight *in bello* as well as serve *in pace* for their “God-beloved emperor.” At the end of the council, the bishops drafted an epistle to Sylvester, the Bishop of Rome (314–35), who, following the death of Miltiades earlier in of the year, had ascended the papal throne. Sylvester had not been able to travel to Arles, but had been represented at the council by two presbyters and two deacons from Rome. The bishops indicated that it was the desire of the emperor that the decisions of the council be communicated to him, and that they be disseminated to the Church at large by him. The Apostolic tombs at the city of Rome, the long tradition of the primacy of Peter, and the imperial respect for order in the Church were combining to enhance the status of the Roman Bishop, who was addressed in this letter with the honorific title *Papa* (“Pope”), rather than merely as *frater* (“brother”). The bishops informed Sylvester that they had condemned the Donatists, whom they described as “troublesome men of undisciplined mind,” who had insulted the authority of God, the tradition of the Church, and the rule of truth through the unreasonableness of their arguments and the immoderation of their actions. They expressed disappointment that he had not been able to sit with them and pass a more severe judgment against the schismatics. And they testified that with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the support of the emperor they had passed a number of canons to deal with the “present state of tranquillity” (*de quiete praesenti*). They listed eight of these at the end of the letter, and appended all twenty-two in a separate document signed by the bishops and other clergy present at the Council of Arles.³²

Constantine must have been initially pleased with the results of this gathering. He had gotten to converse with and gain the confidence of many important Catholic bishops in his domains. They had supported the decision of the Roman Synod to accept the election of Caecilian, and to reject the position of the Donatists. They had also enacted canons to unify Church practices, and to make it easier for Christian laity to serve the state. Unfortunately, the satisfaction of the emperor was soon disturbed by yet another appeal from the African dissidents. Constantine dismissed the council, ordered the Catholic bishops to return home, and drafted an epistle praising the upright judgment of the Catholics, and condemning the raging madness of the schismatics. The words in this letter reveal a great deal about the progression of the emperor in the Christian religion:

Constantine the Augustus to the Catholic bishops, greetings dearest brothers! The eternal, holy, and incomprehensible compassion of our God does not at all permit human nature to wander in the darkness for too long, nor does it permit the odious wills of certain ones to become overweening. ... I have indeed learned this from many examples, [and] I judge these same matters out of my own experience. For there were in me formerly things which seemed to lack righteousness, and I did not think that the supernal power saw any of the things which I carried in the secret

recesses of my heart. Indeed, what fortune...ought these things to have brought? Surely one full of all evils. *Yet the Almighty God residing in the watchtower of heaven has bestowed what I do not deserve: truly now the things which out of his own celestial benevolence have been granted to me, his servant, can neither be named nor numbered.*

Most holy priests of Christ the Savior, dearest brothers! I truly rejoice ...that at last, after a most equitable examination has been held, you have recalled to a better hope and fortune those whom the malignity of the devil seemed to have turned away from *the clearest light of the Catholic law...*!

Yet an upright judgment has done no good among them, and the *gracious Divinity* has not dwelt within their senses; for truly and deservedly the *clemency of Christ* has departed far away from these men... What a great madness persists in them, when with incredible arrogance they are persuaded about things of which it is neither right to be spoken nor to be heard, {and} revolting from a judgment rightly given,... I have found [afterwards] that they demand my judgment! *What a force of wickedness persists in the hearts of these men.... They demand my judgment, when I myself await Christ's judgment. For I say, and this is the truth, that the judgment of priests ought to be regarded just the same as if the Lord himself were presiding in judgment.* For it is not permitted to them to think otherwise or to judge otherwise than in *the way which they were taught by the instruction of Christ....* While seeking after worldly things, they abandon the heavenly; O what a raging audacity of madness! Just as is accustomed to happen in the cases of the pagans, they introduce an appeal...

Dearest brothers...nevertheless may you, who follow the way of the Lord the Savior, exhibit patience with the option still given to them, which they think must be chosen.... Depart and return to your own sees, *and be mindful of me, that our Savior may always be merciful to me.* As for those others, I have directed my men to conduct those abominable deceivers of religion straightway to my court, that they may spend some time there, and survey for themselves something worse than death.... *May the Almighty God keep you safe by my and your prayers through the ages, dearest brothers.*³³

Constantine's study with Catholic scholars and society with Church leaders in the two years since his conversion had so increased his comprehension of Christian beliefs and practices that by the Council of Arles he could communicate with the bishops using terminology specific to Christianity. As a recently converted soldier emperor, he still thought of his divine patron as the great commander in the sky, but he expressed this belief in a phrase with near poetic cadence: *Deus Omnipotens in caeli specula residens* ("the Almighty God residing in the watchtower of heaven"), and he went on to identify his Divinity with the God of the Christian bishops, calling him *Deus noster* ("our God"), the *Divinitas propitia* ("the gracious Divinity"). He wrote of Christ as his *Dominus* ("the Lord"), and called him *Salvator noster* ("our Savior") as Christians had long been

accustomed to do. He exhibited his acquaintance with the *lex Catholica* (“Catholic law”) and the *magisterium Christi* (“the instruction of Christ”) which admonished believers to settle disputes through the *iudicium sacerdotum* (“the judgment of priests”) rather than through appeals to secular courts. Throughout the letter, he called the bishops *his fratres carissimi* (“dearest brothers”), and named himself *the famulus Dei* (“the servant of God”), very clearly identifying himself with the cause of the faithful. Much of this terminology was common to the New Testament and to Christian society. The personal confession of Constantine that God does not allow humanity to wander for too long in the darkness, and that the supernal power can see into the secret recesses of the human heart, echoes Lactantian ideas and phrases. Though he still employed neutral religious language in dealing with general audiences, the emperor now was able to use specific Christian language in communicating with Church leaders. The terminology in his episcopal letter shows that by the Council of Arles Constantine was advancing swiftly in comprehending the doctrines of Christianity.³⁴

As mentioned in his episcopal letter, Constantine had the Donatist leaders taken to his imperial court at Trier in an effort to distance them from their followers and convince them of their folly. His intentions were impeded somewhat in the autumn of 314 when a document arrived from Africa which seemed to prove that Felix of Aptungi had been a *traditor* after all. It was a letter seemingly written by the *duovir*, the city official, who had been charged with executing the first edict of persecution at Aptungi in 303; it described how he had fulfilled his duties, and contained a suspicious postscript which implicated Felix with the surrender of the Scriptures. This development gave the emperor pause, and he resolved to order a judicial investigation in Africa to make sure that the decisions against the Donatists had been just. The investigation was carried out over the following winter by Aelianus, the Proconsul at Carthage. He discovered clear evidence that the postscript had been added by a Donatist forger, and gave a formal judgment in mid-February 315 that Felix was innocent of *traditio*, “betraying the Scriptures.” A transcript of the proconsular investigation and judgment reached Constantine in late April 315, and gave him hope that he finally might be able to solve the African schism. He ordered Probianus, the next Proconsul of Africa, to send the forger Ingentius to Rome where he was planning to go for the celebration of his Decennalia during the summer of 315. The emperor apparently planned to reveal the guilt of the forger to the faction leaders, proving that the Donatists did not have a legitimate case against the Catholics, and that Caecilian should be accepted as the Bishop of Carthage. However, when Caecilian failed to appear before Constantine in Rome, the emperor temporarily altered his tactics, and sent two bishops to Carthage in an attempt to mediate the schism on the scene and to appoint a compromise candidate. Since this just caused local riots, Constantine ordered that Caecilian and Donatus be brought to him for final judgment. The parties appeared at the imperial court in Milan during late October 315. The emperor reviewed the evidence, and upheld the decisions of the Synod of Rome and the Council of Arles, rendering judgment that Caecilian was the legitimate Bishop of Carthage and that the Donatists had not presented a valid case against him. Caecilian returned to North Africa with the support of the government; but many of the Donatist partisans refused to accept him and continued to cause riots in the cities. In a letter written in the winter of 315–16 to the Vicar Celsus, Constantine threatened to go to Africa to deal with the discord personally and to

“demonstrate most clearly to all...what kind of veneration must be given to the Highest Divinity.” He ended this missive by asking

What more ought to be done by me in accord with my purpose and my duty as a prince than that after errors have been dispersed and all rashness has been removed, I may cause all people to proffer true religion and harmonious simplicity and merited worship to the Almighty God?

Political problems in Italy, the birth of a son in Gaul, and his first war with Licinius prevented Constantine from carrying out his threat. Finally, in November 316, he wrote to Eumelius, the next Vicar of Africa, that Caecilian should be supported as the Bishop of Carthage, that only the Catholic clergy should receive his public benefactions, and that the communal property of the Donatists should be confiscated for the imperial fisc. The interventions of the emperor in the Donatist schism did not bring an end to the dissent in the African church; however, they did reveal that Constantine was becoming a committed Christian and was developing a sense of mission to serve the God whom he believed had given him supreme temporal power.³⁵

The growing sense of missionary zeal which Constantine was developing for the Christian faith was displayed in more public and material ways during his *Decennalia* festival in the summer of 315. Since he had been acclaimed emperor nine years earlier, the beginning of the tenth year of his reign was scheduled to be noted with special celebrations in Rome on 25 July. Constantine traveled to Italy with many of his family members and court officials in order to visit the old capital for the festival. The imperial entourage appears to have reached Rome by 21 July and to have remained there until 27 September 315.³⁶

After the formal *adventus* parade, the official greeting ceremony, and the settlement of the emperor and his retinue in the various imperial palaces around the city, magnificent public games and lavish ceremonial banquets were held during the course of the festival. A notable event in the midst of these activities was the dedication of the arch of triumph commemorating the victory of Constantine over Maxentius. The Senate had commissioned this monument as part of the honors it voted the victor in the aftermath of the campaign of 312. The *Arch of Constantine* had been constructed in the two and a half years since the last visit of the emperor to Rome. It was positioned in the very heart of the city—in the valley between the Palatine, Caelian, and Esquiline Hills where the great roads of the capital converge at the Colosseum and the start of the Via Sacra leading into the ancient Roman Forum. Standing about 80 feet in width and 65 feet in height, and composed of old columns and sculptures taken off monuments of the “good emperors” of the second century and new relief panels and inscriptions made for this structure, it was one of the greatest triumphal monuments of the Roman Empire, and presented the pagan senatorial view of the first Christian emperor. Statues and relief sculptures of captives from the Dacian campaigns of Trajan decorated the pedestals above and below the Corinthian columns framing the arches on both faces of the monument; relief sculptures of scenes from the Marcomannic wars of Marcus Aurelius embellished the top panels beside the central inscription of the structure; and relief sculptures depicting animal hunts and sacrifices from the reign of Hadrian were presented in four pairs of round medallions or *tondi* placed above the lower arches on both sides of the monument. The heads of

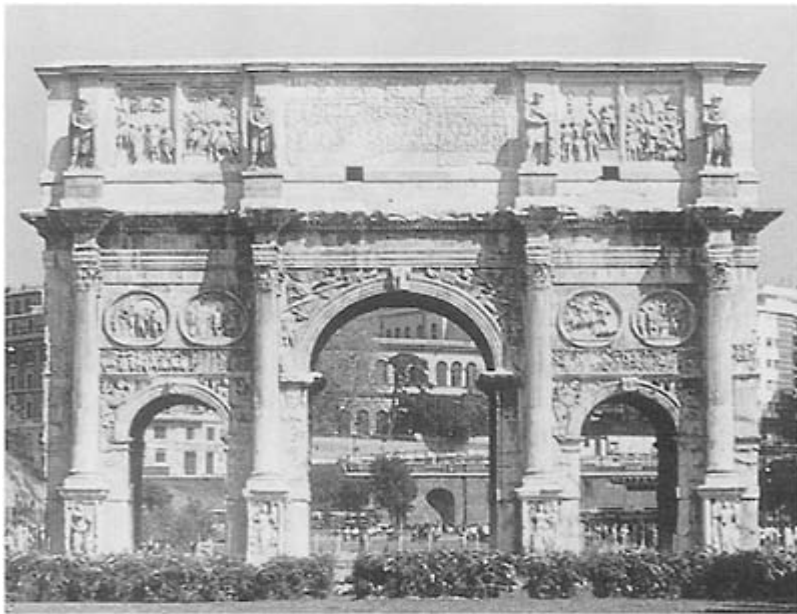
Hadrian in the latter motifs appear to have been recut to depict Constantine and Licinius hunting a lion, a bear, and boars, which symbolize the wild forces in nature and society which they had tamed. Beautiful Traianic reliefs of the emperor also decorated the inner sides of the central arch, and presented Constantine as the LIBERATOR URBIS (“Liberator of the City”) and as the FUNDATOR QUIETIS (“Founder of Peace”). Just as they had done on the special S P Q R OPTIMO PRINCIPI coins minted for his victory in 312, the senators were deliberately comparing Constantine to Trajan and the “good emperors” of past times. Two new tondi and six relief panels were specially made to portray the victorious campaign and joyful *adventus* of 312. They started midway up the west end of the arch, ran around the south face above the two lower side arches, circled the middle of the east end, and finished on the north face above its lower side arches. The relief panel on the western end depicted the *profectio*, the “march” of Constantine and his forces out of the Alps and into Italy. Above this panel was a new tondo showing the Moon goddess *Luna* descending in her two-horse chariot as a symbol of the darkness covering Italy under the rule of Maxentius. On the south face were panels depicting the most important battles by which Constantine had defeated the forces of the tyrant and liberated Italy—the *obsidio*, the “siege” of Verona on the left, and the *proelium*, the “battle” of the Mulvian Bridge on the right. The relief panel on the eastern end depicted the *adventus*, the “arrival” of Constantine and his troops into Rome. Above this panel was another new tondo showing the Sun deity *Sol* rising in his four-horse chariot as a symbol of the radiance enlightening Rome through the coming of Constantine. On the north face were panels depicting important events during the stay of Constantine in Rome—the *oratio*, the “speech” of the emperor to the Senate and people in the Forum Romanum on the left, and the *liberalitas*, the “distribution of money” by the emperor to the citizens in the Forum Julii on the right. On the southern and northern faces of the monument above the central arch, an inscription stated:

To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine, the greatest, pious and happy Augustus, the Senate and People of Rome have dedicated this arch as a symbol of triumphs, because through the inspiration of the Divinity (INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS) and the greatness of his mind, with his own army he avenged the republic against both the tyrant and all his faction with just arms at one time.

The Arch of Constantine has often been interpreted as “a fitting monument of an age of transition.” With the old motifs from the second century in a free and organic style, it reflected the principatial order of the classical past. With the new motifs of the fourth century in a static and regimented style, it depicted the dominatial order of the Byzantine future. By failing to portray either the offering of a pagan sacrifice to Capitoline Jupiter or the marking of Christian signs on Constantinian arms in the relief panels, the Roman Senate recognized the Christian conversion of the emperor without betraying its own pagan beliefs. By invoking the inspiration of “the Divinity” in the central dedication, the Senate followed the official policy of the emperors as recorded in the Milan agreement and reflected in the Trier panegyric of 313 which allowed their subjects to worship the *Summa Divinitas* in whichever way they felt most comfortable. The Senate knew that Constantine now identified the “Highest Divinity” with the Christian Deity; but it also

saw that he was still allowing Sol to appear as his “companion” on the imperial coinage. Constantine seems to have realized that Sol could serve as a bridge over which his subjects could follow him from pagan polytheism through Solar syncretism to Christian monotheism. The owners of the Julii chamber in the Vatican cemetery had foreshadowed this imperial policy when they commissioned an artist to place a radiate Christ in the chariot of the Sun god on a ceiling mosaic decorating their family tomb not long before this time. Whereas the Senate and the pagan populace might still see the “Highest God” as *Sol Invictus*, the emperor and the Christian faithful could recognize him as the *Sun of Righteousness*. Therefore, the Arch of Constantine with its invocation of “the Divinity” in the dedicatory inscription and the image of Sol in a rising quadriga above the adventus relief perfectly represented the religious environment of the years from 312 to 315 in which the edges of syncretistic paganism blended with the edges of Christian monotheism (Ills. 36–38).³⁷

Constantine certainly must have been pleased with such a magnificent monument, and the manner in which it honored him. However, by the time

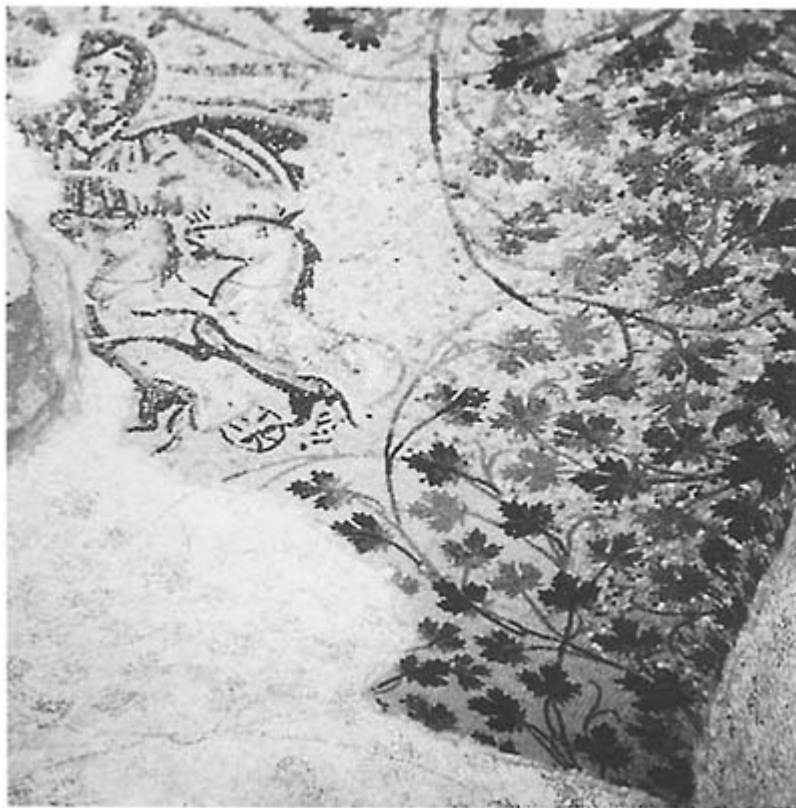


Ill. 36 South face of the Arch of Constantine in Rome, with the relief panels of the Verona Siege and the Mulvian Bridge Battle above the lower arches, and the inscription with the *INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS* phrase above the central arch (315).



Ill. 37 East end of the Arch of Constantine in Rome, with the tondo of Sol in his *quadriga* above the adventus relief.

his triumphal arch was dedicated, the emperor had already advanced beyond the kind of neutral religious syncretism which it represented in his personal religious beliefs. He thus began to proffer less ambiguous expressions of his private faith in the public arena. He had arranged for the minting of special silver medallions at the Ticinum mint in northern Italy, and he had these brought to Rome for distribution as donatives to important personages during the Decennalia. These beautiful commemorative coins were larger and heavier than the standard silver argenteus of the First Tetrarchy, averaging about 6.5 gm. in weight and coming close to the American 50-cent piece in width. The reverse motif honored the horse soldiers who had played decisive roles in the battles of the Italian campaign three years earlier. It showed the emperor on a rostrum addressing his cavalry, who were gathered around him with their mounts, and carried the inscription SALUS REIPUBLICAE (“the Safety of the State”). The more important obverse motif illustrated his religious convictions for the first time on the imperial coinage. Within the inscription IMP CONSTANTINUS P F AUG, the emperor was depicted in a rare frontal portrait wearing a high-crested war helmet, and holding his horse with one hand and a shield and scepter in the other. At the top front of the helmet was a badge marked with the Christogram symbol (☩)—the first two letters from the Greek word for Christ intersected to make a monogram. Protruding above the shield was a Christian cross topped with a globe. The monogram was the sacred sign of the *nomen Christi*, which



III. 38 The Solar Christ (Christ Helios) mosaic on the ceiling of the Julii Tomb beneath San Pietro in Vaticano.

Constantine had employed since his conversion to invoke the salutary power of the Christian Deity to aid his endeavors.³⁸ The globular cross scepter was a novel symbol devised by the emperor and his advisors to illustrate artistically the new political theory of Christian imperial theocracy which was emerging at court. The pagan emperors had frequently been shown on coins receiving a globe (often topped with a Victory figure) as a symbol of earthly power from a patron god—e.g., the common antoniniani of Diocletian and Maximian. Since Constantine no longer worshipped the pagan gods, they would soon disappear from his coinage; but a globe as symbolic of the earth which the true Deity had created could remain. A motif combining a terrestrial globe and Christian symbols perfectly portrayed the Christian political theory which the new convert and his ecclesiastical advisors were developing. By allowing himself to be depicted wearing a Christ monogram on his helmet, and



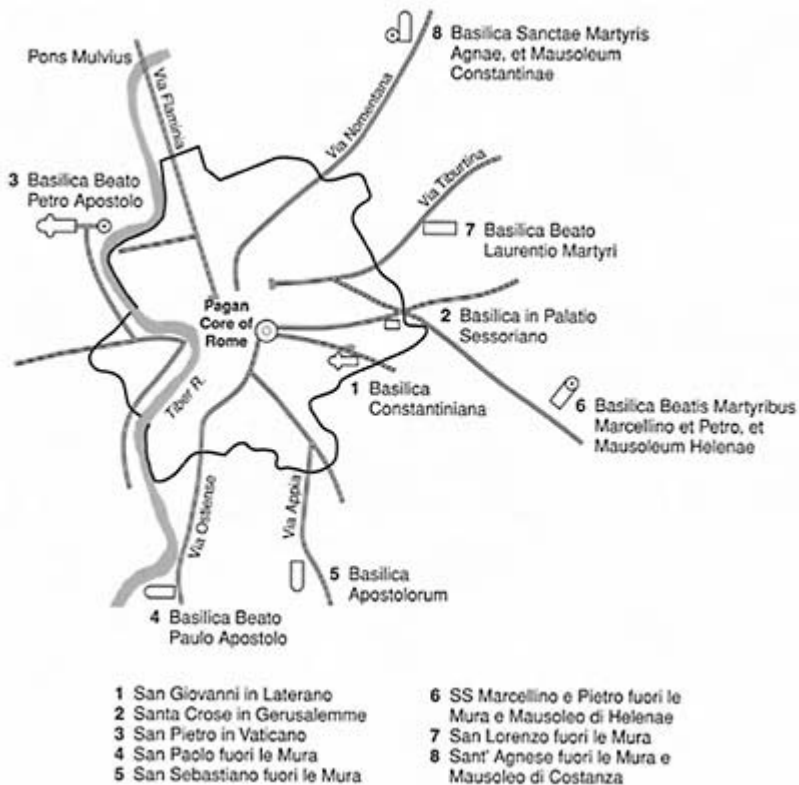
Ill. 39 The Ticinum silver medallion for the Decennalia of Constantine, depicting the emperor with a Christogram badge on his helmet and cross scepter in his hand on the obverse, and addressing his horse soldiers on the reverse (315).

holding a globular cross scepter in his hand, Constantine was showing in art what he was writing in words—that the Christian Divinity was the creator of the terrestrial world and the bestower of imperial power, and that the Christian emperor served as the divinely sanctioned imperial agent of the Almighty God on earth (Ill. 39).³⁹

The devotion of Constantine to the God of Christianity became even more evident when he declined to participate in the sacrificial rituals at the pagan temples. In his short chapter on the Decennalia, Eusebius noted that the emperor instead “offered prayers of thanksgiving to God, the King of all, as sacrifices without flame or smoke.”⁴⁰ Having become more aware of the exclusive teachings of Christian theology, he wished to avoid the traditional rites of pagan idolatry. This note in the *Vita Constantini*, several references in the *Liber Pontificalis*, and abundant evidence from artistic and archaeological sources, seem to prove that while Constantine was in Rome for his Decennalia he participated in Christian worship services, and commissioned the building of numerous Christian basilicas at important locations around the city.

In 312, the emperor had ceded the Lateran Palace to Bishop Miltiades, and commissioned the building of a large edifice for Christian worship beside it at the east end of Rome just inside the Aurelian Wall. Constantine appears to have had two major concerns in mind when he constructed that and other Roman churches: the first was not to alienate the pagans of the city, who had greeted him as joyously as had the Christians at his *adventus* and whose support he wished to retain; the second was to patronize the Christian Church as generously as possible by building magnificent edifices for public worship, and by giving Christianity an impressive public presence. These concerns determined *where* and *how* the emperor constructed churches in and around the old capital.

Constantine may have caused discomfort to some pagans—especially those of the senatorial class—when he had set up his colossal statue holding a standard marked with Christian signs in the Basilica Nova in 312. Such a blatant display of his new religious orientation may have aroused the religious conservatism of the pagan nobility who revered the ancestral traditions of the state and the historic temples of the gods which adorned the ceremonial heart of the city. Constructing Christian churches in that area would not have been politic. Therefore, when choosing sites for the episcopal cathedral and the other churches which he decided to build at Rome, he avoided the pagan core of the city, and employed imperial estates at the edges of the capital which were part of the private purse of the emperor, or Christian cemeteries beyond the walls which the Church owned as a legal corporation. In these locations, Constantine would not so directly confront the pagan majority, but could still fully meet the needs of the Christian community (Map 4).⁴¹



Map 4 The Christian basilicas of Constantinian Rome—their locations and ancient Latin names are shown on the map, and their modern Italian names given below the map.

Since Christianity had existed as an illicit cult and persecuted religion through much of its history, the Church had not been able to establish much of a tradition of public architecture in the cities of the empire. The faithful had long congregated in the private homes of fellow believers—the *domus ecclesiae* of the first and second centuries. Only after the “Peace of Gallienus” had some of the more wealthy Christian communities begun to erect bigger assembly halls—the *aulae ecclesiae* of the late third century. However, most of these had been destroyed in the tetrarchic persecutions. Constantine, his Christian advisors, and imperial architects were thus given the chance to create the normative forms of Christian church architecture. They realized that employing pagan temples as models would not be appropriate. These structures were not suited for the needs of a Christian community, and they were polluted with the stains of pagan idolatry. A secular structure was instead adopted as the model for public church architecture. The primary literary source for the Roman churches of Constantine refers to all of them by the Latin term *basilica*. This word designated a generic type of architecture which was used for assembly rooms, court houses, and imperial audience halls. It had a few variants in design, but often included a longitudinal hall with a high, flat, coffered ceiling, and a triangular shaped timber or tiled roof. The long central hall was called a nave, and it was usually terminated by a semi-circular apse at one end, and was often flanked with lower side aisles separated from the central hall by colonnades. The nave colonnades, either trabeated or arcaded, carried marble revetments which offered space for decoration and supported clerestory windows which provided sources of light. Well-preserved examples of these structures are the imperial audience hall basilicas of Diocletian at Split, and of Constantine at Trier. With less idolatrous contamination and more focused interior space than the pagan temples, the secular basilica could more easily be adapted to the needs of Christian congregations. A large body of believers could gather together in the central hall, and the longitudinal axis of the structure would focus them on the raised dias at the apsidal end. There a bishop or a priest, standing at an altar under the glorification arch where an imperial throne or judgment chair had been located in the secular model, could lead the assembly in communal services. Such edifices could also be employed as covered cemeteries focused upon the tombs of famous Christian martyrs. The faithful could be buried in the floors of the side aisles, and commemorative services could be held in the central hall. Whether built originally for liturgical or cemeterial use, the Christian basilicas of Constantine would be constructed swiftly, they would be of impressive size on the exterior, and they would be ornately decorated on the interior. They would suitably fulfill his goals of supporting the Catholic Church with massive material resources and propagating the Christian faith with impressive public edifices. Most of the great Constantinian basilicas of anti-quity have been rebuilt since the Renaissance; yet, ancient literary descriptions, early illustrations, and salvaged materials can be employed to resurrect the original structures.⁴²

By the time Constantine returned to Rome in the summer of 315, the cathedral church he had commissioned beside the Lateran Palace was partially completed. He certainly would have wanted to inspect it, and surely would have wished to meet the new Bishop of Rome, Sylvester, who was beginning to offer liturgical worship within it. The *Liber Pontificalis* simply calls this first Constantinian Christian church the *Basilica Constantiniana*; but ca. 600 it was renamed for John the Baptist and John the Apostle,

and thus is known today as *San Giovanni in Laterano*. The ancient edifice survived with minor renovations into the Baroque Era when it was rebuilt. An aerial view toward the east front of the present church illustrates its location just inside the eastern edge of the Aurelian Wall. The eighteenth-century neo-classical facade of Galilei dominates the eastern entry, but a fourth-century statue of Constantine stands at the left end of the narthex commemorating the builder of the old basilica. Inside the antique bronze doors of the nave, the seventeenth-century reconstruction of the interior by Borromini still uses the longitudinal axis and coffered ceiling of the Constantinian model, but now has massive Baroque arcades along the central hall. In between these imposing arches are sculptural niches for the Apostles flanked with green-speckled marble columns saved from the side aisles of Constantine's church and used as decorative embellishments in Borromini's nave (Ills. 40 and 41). Modern archaeological investigations have revealed that portions of the side walls of the ancient church are still standing to a height of 8.5 meters above ground; and that the foundations of the original apse and nave aisles reached a depth of 7.5 meters underground. Digging under the western end of the modern structure indicates that the Constantinian basilica had wings probably used as sacristies extending out at the junction of the aisles and the apse—a modification of the secular basilica that would evolve into the transept element which gave Christian churches a symbolic cruciform floor plan. A drawing of the exterior of the old basilica by Marten van Heemskerck in 1535, and a fresco of the interior of the old church by Filippo Gagliardi in 1650 convey some idea of the Constantinian basilica in decline. The latter fresco shows the small speckled columns of the side aisles which were reused in the niches of Borromini's nave, and the great plain columns of the central hall which were employed as buttresses in the walls of the modern church. Yet, such material conveys little of the internal beauty and ornate decoration of the fourth-century basilica. One has to turn to the biography of Sylvester in the *Liber Pontificalis* for this. It tells of a vaulted altar canopy of hammered silver fronted by silver statues of Christ and the Apostles in the apse, of numerous gold chandeliers and silver lamps hanging in the central nave and side aisles of the church, and of magnificent service bowls and chalices available for the eucharist. Constructed over a six-year period from 312 to 318 through the generosity of the first Christian emperor, the Lateran Basilica of Constantine was a great longitudinal hall, with a high central nave terminating in an apse, with lower double side aisles, and with sacristies projecting out like transeptal arms at the end of the side aisles. About 100 meters in length, it was an impressive public edifice where Pope Sylvester could meet with several thousand of his flock for liturgical worship (Ills. 42 and 43).⁴³

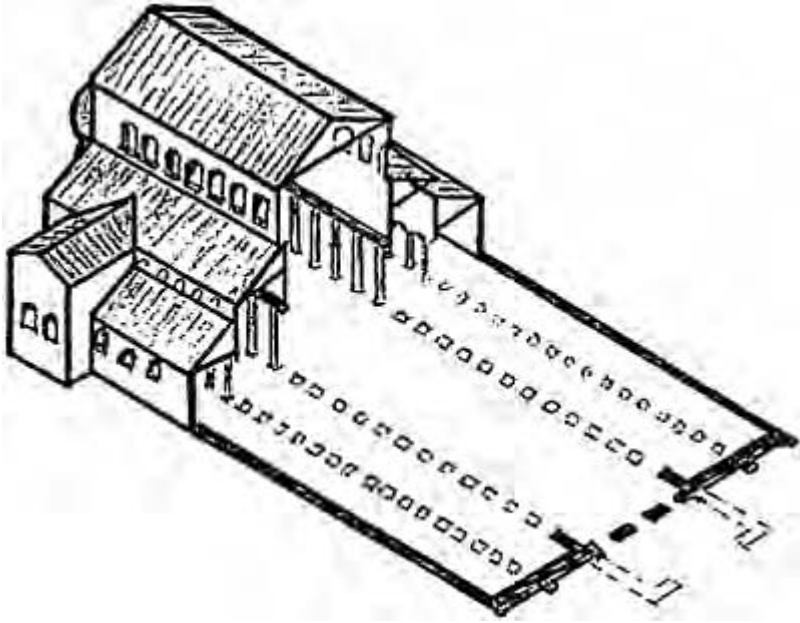
The imperial women of Constantine's family were also participants in the emperor's church-building programs. The Lateran Palace which Constantine had ceded to the papacy had been a part of the dowry of his wife Fausta; and the Lateran Basilica next to it was built over the demolished barracks of the Imperial Horse Guards who had fought for Maxentius. Fausta no longer needed a separate palace since she lived with her husband.



Ill. 40 A view over the Aurelian Wall to the eastern facade of the Basilica Constantianiana, now San Giovanni in Laterano.

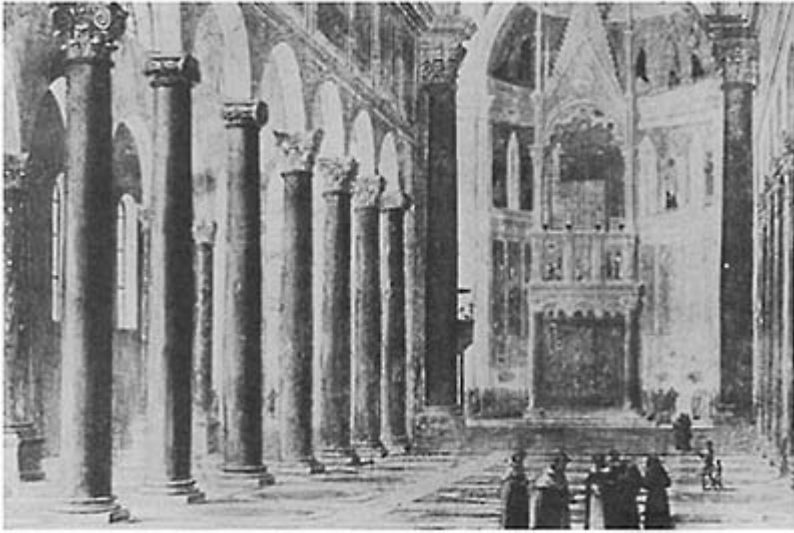


Ill. 41 Interior of the reconstructed nave of San Giovanni, but with ancient aisle columns reused in sculptural niches.



Ill. 42 An isometric reconstruction of the floor plan and structural elements of the Lateran Basilica Constantiniana.

However, her mother Eutropia was allowed to keep a palace on imperial property for her residence in Rome. She had supported her son-in-law in the aftermath of the Italian campaign, publicly announcing that Maxentius was a bastard rather than the legitimate heir of Maximian; and thus augmenting the claims of Constantine to western rule. Sometime in this period she converted to Christianity, and eventually made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and patronized a church at Mamre. Constantine seems to have always treated her with great respect.⁴⁴ While in Rome for the Decennalia, he saw to it that his own mother was elevated to a position of equality with his mother-in-law. He gave Helena a palace in which she could reside with the splendor of an empress mother on the Sessorian estate a few hundred yards above the Lateran complex at the eastern edge of the city. Ancient inscriptions found near here indicate that Helena sponsored the building of an aquaduct (*Aqua Augustea*) and restored a bathhouse (*Thermae Helенаe*) between her *Palatium Sessorianum* and the Porta Maggiore sometime during the next decade when she made visits to Rome and lived in this region. Under the influence of her son, Helena also converted to Christianity, and became a pious benefactor of the faith. In Rome, she had a large hall inside her palace transformed into a basilican chapel for the worship of the imperial court. It seems that an imperial architect added an apse at the rear of the room as a focus for worship, and installed two arcades across the hall dividing it into three separate bays for worshipers—presumably one each for the imperial family, court officers, and palace workers. The *Liber Pontificalis* recorded that its original



Ill. 43 A fresco by Gagliardi of the interior of the old Lateran Basilica, showing the green speckled side aisle columns reused in niches of the Baroque church (1650).

designation was the *Basilica in Palatio Sessoriano*; however, because of her later pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and the deposition of supposed relics of the crucifixion in this sanctuary, it was renamed *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme*. After the death of Helena, it was ceded to the papacy and was employed for public worship. By the twelfth century, a bell tower and a columned porch had been added to its west front, and monastic buildings attached to its south flank; finally in the eighteenth century, Gregorini redesigned the west facade and inner nave in a grand neo-classical style. Little remains from the old basilica of Helena today except some of the palace walls into which the chapel was built on the exterior of the north flank, and a few ancient columns reused on the inside of the nave of the modern church.⁴⁵

While Constantine was inspecting the Lateran Basilica and socializing with Catholic clergy in the summer of 315, he made the acquaintance of Pope Sylvester, who would serve as the Bishop of Rome during most of the years he reigned as the first Christian emperor. The ancient biography of this prelate seems to indicate that it was about this time that “the Augustus Constantine at the request of Sylvester the Bishop constructed the Basilica for the Blessed Peter the Apostle.” Since the episcopal primacy of the Roman bishop was based on his claim of succession from Peter, Sylvester no doubt would have encouraged the newly zealous Christian emperor to expend his generosity in this manner.⁴⁶ The chief Apostle of Christ had been martyred in the first century at a racing arena across the Tiber River out beyond the western end of Rome. Christians had buried Peter in a garden between this circus and the *Mons Vaticanus*, which rose steeply above the area. A Roman bishop of the second century had erected an aedicule with two

columns, a projecting slab and a gabled niche over the apostolic tomb that came to be known as the “Trophy of St. Peter.” By the fourth century, a cemetery of pagan and Christian tombs had superseded the racing arena. Constantine seems to have given families who owned tombs in the Vatican cemetery about four years to remove loved ones. During the next few years, imperial architects moved tons of earth down from Vatican Hill to fill in all the tombs of the necropolis except that of Peter, and created a level surface to serve as the foundation for a martyrial basilica in honor of the Apostle. Then they enclosed the Petrine Trophy in a beautiful shrine, and built a monumental church focused upon the apostolic shrine set in a transept in front of the rear apse. The *Liber Pontificalis* recorded that the ancient Latin name for this edifice was the *Basilica Beato Petro Apostolo*. The old Constantinian church lasted with minor modifications until Renaissance popes had it dismantled and reconstructed as the modern *San Pietro in Vaticano* between 1506 and 1626. An aerial view toward the eastern front of the modern church shows its position between the Tiber River and Vatican Hill. The seventeenth-century classical style facade of Maderno frames the eastern portals; but at the bottom of the papal staircase to the right of the narthex stands the dramatic Baroque statue by Bernini which commemorates the “Vision of Constantine,” with the emperor on his horse gazing up to the celestial revelation by which he was converted to belief in the Christian Deity before the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge. As in the rebuilt Lateran nave of Borromini, Baroque arcades replaced classical colonnades in the redesigned Vatican nave of Maderno; yet, just as old columns from the ancient church were reused in the former, so too were old columns reused in the latter. Embedded within the four pillars supporting the dome of



Ill. 44 A view of the eastern facade of the Basilica Beato Petro Apostolo, now San Pietro in Vaticano, located between the Tiber River and the Vatican Hill at the west end of Rome.

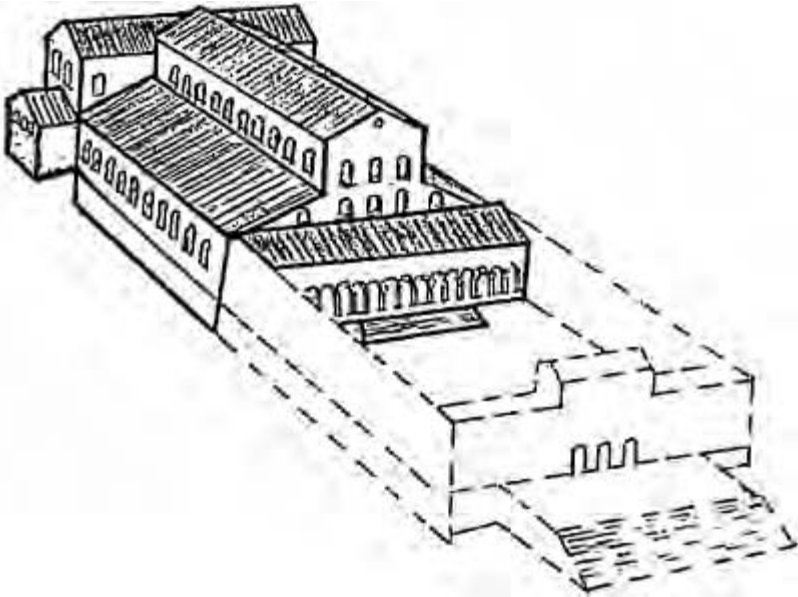
Michelangelo are sculptural niches framed with pairs of undulating spiral columns salvaged from the Constantinian basilica. These delicate marble columns inspired the bronze altar canopy of Bernini which majestically covers the high altar in the Baroque San Pietro (Ills. 44 and 45). Ancient evidence reveals how the old columns were originally used. The *Liber Pontificalis* described how Constantine “enclosed the tomb of Peter all around” with an immovable monument, encircled it with Cyprian bronze, and covered it with an ornate canopy supported by beautiful spiral columns. Modern archaeological work has revealed that the immovable monument was a solid casing of marble blocks in which Constantinian architects enclosed the Petrine Trophy—the western end of this is still visible above the altar in the subterranean Chapel of St. Peter. Found around this monument are portions of a raised pavement into which channels were cut for bronze railings and holes were drilled for column bases. A fifth-century ivory casket carving discovered near Pola depicting the Constantinian Shrine of Peter verifies this information, and permits a hypothetical reconstruction of the west end of the ancient church. With the gleaming gold of the apsidal decorations, the sinuous curves of the spiral columns, the shimmering color of the bronze railings, and the flickering light and aromatic odors of the chandelier oil, the Petrine Shrine of Constantine was a beautiful monument to the saint and an



Ill. 45 Interior of the Baroque San Pietro, but with the ancient spiral marble columns reused in piers for the dome of Michelangelo to the left of the Bernini altar canopy.

enchanting focus for the church dedicated to him. Archaeological work under the floor of the modern church has uncovered significant portions of the foundation walls of the

ancient apse and nave, and found ancient Constantinian columns—giving some idea of the plan and dimensions of the original basilica. An engraving by Antonio Lafréri of 1575, and a drawing by Domenico Tasselli in 1611 of the exterior of the old basilica, show the eastern atrium and high central roof of the original edifice; while a fresco by Gagliardi in 1650 of the old interior illustrates the trabeated colonnade and flat ceiling in the nave of the church. Altogether, the sources reveal a large and impressive form for the original St. Peter's Basilica. Constructed between *ca.* 319 and 329, it had a long central nave flanked with double lower side aisles. A full transept separated the nave from the apse, and gave focus to the Constantinian Shrine for Peter's tomb, which was positioned on the front line of the apse and projected out into the transept on a raised pavement. The full crossing between the nave and apse gave the edifice the symbolic floor plan of a Latin cross. The addition of an atrium in the east front and a mausoleum on the south side later in the century completed the form of the original church. At 119 meters in length, the Basilica for the Blessed Peter the Apostle was the largest of all the Christian basilicas of Constantinian Rome. It would become

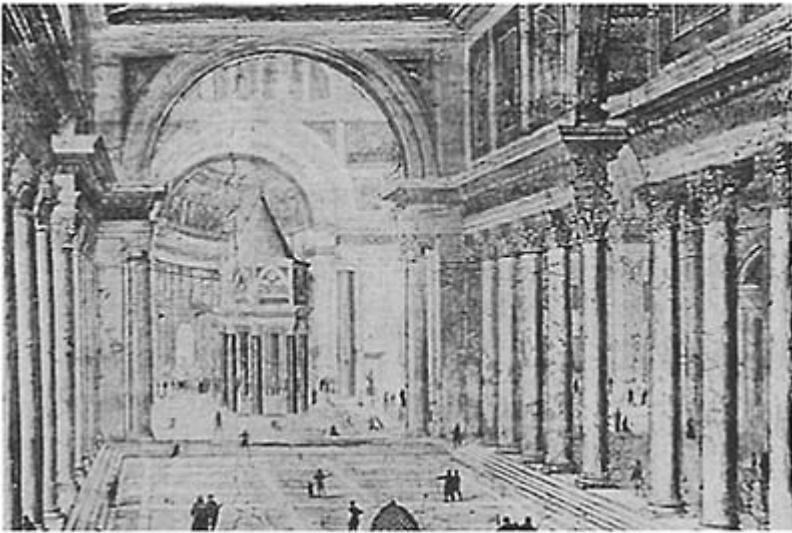


Ill. 46 An isometric reconstruction of the exterior plan and structure of the Vatican Basilica Beato Petro Apostolo.

an important pilgrimage destination and an influential architectural model in Europe (Ills. 46 and 47).⁴⁷

The *Liber Pontificalis* also asserted that it was Pope Sylvester who suggested and Constantine who constructed the *Basilica Beato Paulo Apostolo* south of Rome between the *Via Ostiense* and the Tiber River where St. Paul had been buried after his first-century

martyrdom. This assertion was only partially correct, however, for Constantine merely built a small basilican chapel at the site. It was the papal program of stressing the dual apostolic foundation of the Roman see, and the increasing popularity of the *doctor gentium* among pagan intellectuals that led to the erection of the grand Pauline Basilica along the Ostian Way as the near equal to the great Petrine Basilica at the Vatican site during late antiquity. The emperors Theodosius I, Valentinian II, and Arcadius patronized its construction in the last decades of the fourth century, and Theodosius' daughter Galla Placidia and Pope Leo I provided its magnificent internal decorations in the early fifth century (ca. 380–450). The old church lasted in its original form until severely damaged by fire in 1823. An engraving by Rossini, however, indicates that the rear apse and glorification arch, and parts of the right aisle colonnades survived the disaster. The papacy decided to rebuild it along its ancient lines in the mid-nineteenth century, and thus *San Paolo fuori le Mura* offers an



Ill. 47 A fresco by Gagliardi of the interior of the old Vatican Basilica, showing the trabeated colonnade of the nave and medieval altar canopy over Peter's tomb (1650).

example of what the great Christian basilicas of Constantinian Rome looked like in antiquity. It had an atrium before its front facade like the Petrine Basilica. The nave, however, used the more ornate arcaded colonnades rather than the simpler trabeated ones employed in the Lateran and Vatican churches. Descriptions and illustrations of the original church, and discoveries made during the rebuilding campaign show that the ancient edifice was a grand double-aisled transeptial basilica about 90 meters long. The longitudinal sweep of the central nave with its coffered ceiling, and the lower side aisles

with their colonnades are clearly seen in the modern structure. The ornate canopy rising above the tomb of the Apostle, and the beautiful apse shimmering behind it may reflect what the *Liber Pontificalis* said about the ancient Lateran and Vatican apsidal decorations (Ills. 48 and 49).⁴⁸

The dedication of Constantine to the religion of Christ inspired him to add several martyrial-cemeterial basilicas to the list of churches he and his family built around Rome. On the *Via Appia* to the south of the city, he constructed a church originally known as the *Basilica Apostolorum* because the bones of Peter and Paul had been taken here during the dark days of the Valerian persecution for safe keeping. The relics had been returned to the Vatican and Ostian sites by the time Constantine began his church-building program; yet, this place remained popular because of its association with



Ill. 48 A view of the exterior of the Basilica Beato Paulo Apostolo, now San Paolo fuori le Mura to the south of Rome.



Ill. 49 Interior of the Pauline Basilica reconstructed in the mid-nineteenth century according to its ancient plan.

the Apostles and its location over extensive catacombs. The famous soldier-martyr Sebastian (*ca.* 304) was entombed here, so the basilica was eventually renamed after him, and is now known as *San Sebastiano fuori le Mura*. The original edifice was about 75 meters long, and was constructed in an elongated U-floor plan with a high central nave and one lower side aisle running all the way around the rear end. It was completed fairly early (*ca.* 313–20), and served as the model for the four lesser Constantinian martyrial churches. Behind the seventeenth-century neo-classical facade and nave reconstructions of Vesanzio, significant parts of the side walls and rear apse of the ancient church are still extant.

Out off the *Via Labicana* to the southeast of Rome, the emperor ordered the erection of a *Basilica Beatis Martyribus Marcellino et Petro* for a beloved priest and exorcist of the Roman church killed in the “Great Persecution.” The original church of *SS Marcellino e Pietro fuori le Mura* (*ca.* 315–26) was built along the same lines and dimensions as the Appian basilica, but had an imperial mausoleum attached to its east front. Constantine initially planned to have himself buried here, but later changed his mind and used it for his mother. The old basilica has been replaced by a modern parish church with arcaded columns on the front facade. However, the ruins of the *Mausoleum Helenae* still rise majestically behind it.

Besides the six basilicas which were under construction or being planned by 315, there were two others which would round out the Constantinian church-building program at Rome. A little beyond the northeastern wall of the city and along the *Via Tiburtina*, Constantine later commissioned another martyrial-cemeterial basilica to be erected in honor of St. Lawrence, a famous martyr of the Valerian Persecution, in the Verano

Cemetery. The *Liber Pontificalis* called it the *Basilica Beato Laurentio Martyri* (ca. 326–35). It was built along the same lines as the Appian and Labicana basilicas, but was the largest of these churches, reaching a length of almost 100 meters. It was dismantled in the early Middle Ages, and replaced by a composite church, made up of a late sixth-century chapel and an early thirteenth-century nave, the *San Lorenzo fuori le Mura* of today. Little is left of the old Constantinian basilica, except some underground foundations, and possibly some salvaged columns reused in the chancel of the medieval church.

Toward the end of his life, Constantine assented to the request of his daughter Constantina to construct a church in honor of St. Agnes, a young female martyr of the tetrarchic persecutions (ca. 304), several miles north of the city wall off the *Via Nomentana*. The *Liber Pontificalis* referred to it in Latin as the *Basilica Sanctae Martyris Agnae*, and it was built like the other martyrial-cemeterial basilicas with a high central nave and a single lower side aisle running all the way around its rear end. A small medieval church of the seventh century was constructed close to the old edifice as at the Tiburtina site; yet, here the ancient basilica of *Sant' Agnese fuori le Mura* (ca. 335–50) was not torn down, but just allowed to decay gradually through the centuries. Today its impressive ruins spread down an open field for its original length of 90 meters, and its side walls still rise heavenward to a height of 25 meters—giving a vivid impression of the vast size of Constantinian churches. Even better preserved is the mid-fourth century *Mausoleum Constantinae*, which Constantine's daughter built as a tomb for herself and her beloved aunt Constantia off to the left front side of the basilica. This structure exhibits a 22.5-meter-wide rotunda on its lower level and a drum carrying a dome on its upper story. A series of double columns supporting arches separate an outer ambulatory from the central sanctuary on the inside of the edifice. Lovely fourth- and fifth-century mosaics decorate the ceiling of the ambulatory and the two lateral apses of *Santa Costanza*, with the one on the right side depicting Christ handing St. Peter the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.⁴⁹

The popes as successors of St. Peter were being given more than keys by Constantine. The first Christian emperor and his family were handing over to Pope Sylvester and his episcopal successors a magnificent set of eight Christian basilicas which began the Christianization of the city at its outer edges. Built between 312 and 350, extending from 75 to 119 meters in length, able to hold thousands of the faithful for worship services and funerary banquets, these impressive edifices initiated the transformation of Rome from an ancient pagan capital to the medieval *Apostolica Sedes*. Although Constantine cautiously avoided the pagan core of Rome in his church construction program, nevertheless, he encircled it with so many and such large Christian basilicas that he made it very difficult for travelers entering or leaving the city not to notice these imposing structures. The famous engraving of *Le sette chiese di Roma* by Antonio Lafréri in 1575 depicted the seven great pilgrimage churches of Rome before they were rebuilt in the Baroque Era. In the center is the ancient *San Giovanni*, and to the upper left behind it *Santa Croce*; in the foreground is the ancient *San Pietro*, but with the half-finished dome of Michelangelo rising over it; and counter-clockwise from the upper right are the old *San Paolo*, *San Sebastiano*, and *San Lorenzo*; and below the latter is the fifth century papal basilica of *Santa Maria Maggiore* (Ill. 50). This historical illustration reveals that Constantine constructed six of the seven most important churches of Rome, and thus changed the public topography of the pagan city forever. By the time he left Italy to return to Trier in

the winter of 315–16, his words and actions were making it clear that his commitment to the Christian Deity was affecting his imperial policy.⁵⁰



Ill. 50 An engraving by Lafréri of *Le sette chiese di Roma*, illustrating the pilgrimage churches of medieval Rome: San Giovanni, Santa Croce, and Santa Maria Maggiore within the walls, and counterclockwise from the bottom San Pietro, San Paolo, San Sebastiano, and San Lorenzo outside the walls of the city—with six of them Constantinian in origin (1575).