

## Constantine I the Great

Constantine I, “the Great,” is one of the most important figures in history, but he is also one of the most enigmatic. He continued most of the policies of his predecessor Diocletian, while also breaking radically with his legacy. The emperor who legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire, he had a complex relationship with that religion. A brilliant strategist, a tough soldier, and an adept administrator, he was at the same time overwhelmed at points by his chaotic family life. Constantine was a complex man who changed the course of history.

### *Early Life*

Constantine was born in 272 AD into the military elite of the Roman Empire. His father, Constantius Chlorus (his nickname Chlorus means “the Pale”) was an officer in the army of Aurelian as it wrested back control of the Roman Empire from Zenobia and the Gallic Empire. Under Diocletian, he was made the Praetorian Prefect in Gaul under Diocletian’s colleague Maximian, the Augustus of the West. Thus, when Diocletian established the Tetrarchy, Constantius was chosen as Maximian’s Caesar and designated successor. Constantine’s mother, Helena, was of low social status, and it is uncertain whether she was officially married to Constantius or was simply his common-law wife or concubine. Nonetheless, she was a strong-willed woman, and she would have a great impact on the life of her son. Constantius left her once he rose to political significance, and married the daughter of Maximian in order to cement his ties to the reigning Augustus.

As a young man, Constantine went to the court of Diocletian at Nicomedia, where he received a formal education and lived a comfortable life, though he was at the same time something of a hostage (the fact that Constantius’s eldest son was in the hands of Diocletian was probably meant to dissuade him from ever using his armies to rebel). Constantine was in Nicomedia when Diocletian began his persecution of the Christians in earnest. Constantine later went to live in nearby Byzantium with his mother, a place that would have great significance later in his life.

When Diocletian retired in 305 AD, he made his Caesar Galerius the new Augustus of the East, while Maximian retired and made Constantius the new Augustus in the West. Diocletian, who had no sons, expected the Tetrarchy to work on merit, perhaps having seen how great emperors could be followed by disastrous sons (such as Marcus Aurelius, who was succeeded by his insane son Commodus). Thus, the new Augusti were supposed to pick Caesars from outside their families. Constantius made a man named Severus his Caesar, while Galerius made Maximinus Daia his successor. However, this angered both Constantine and Maximian’s son Maxentius, both of whom felt that they should follow their fathers.

### *The Rise of Constantine*

Constantine left the East to join his father in a campaign against the Picts, who had attacked Roman Britain. After some successes, Constantius became ill in 306 and

suddenly died in Eboracum (modern-day York). This precipitated a crisis that would also bring down the Tetrarchy. Constantius's soldiers, who knew and respected Constantine, proclaimed him Augustus. Constantine asserted that he was replacing his father as Augustus, and that Severus, the Caesar of the West, would remain Caesar, as his father had not yet planned to raise Severus to the position of Augustus. Galerius, as the senior Augustus, rejected this, arguing that Constantine could not simply replace his father as Augustus. Plan or not, Galerius said, Severus ought to be promoted from Caesar to Augustus, as the Tetrarchy was designed. The two men came to a compromise: Constantine retained control of his father's army and territories (Britain, Gaul, and Spain) while Severus became Augustus. Constantine took the lower title of Caesar, becoming Severus's heir and junior partner.

Constantine left Britain and took up residence in Trier. When an army of Franks invaded the empire, Constantine defeated them, captured their kings, and then had these kings fed to the beasts in Trier's amphitheater. In the meantime, Constantine's power grab had inspired Maxentius, the son of Maximian, who had also felt excluded when he was not given a place in the Tetrarchy. He raised a rebellion in Rome. He invited his father out of retirement in order to lend himself more legitimacy. Galerius ordered Severus, who was at his capital of Mediolanum (Milan) in northern Italy, to march south and crush this rebellion. But as usual, the troops preferred to support the sons of their emperors rather than a new and unknown leader. Severus's troops went over to Maxentius, and Severus was captured and imprisoned.

Maxentius was eager to secure his position, knowing that Galerius would only be enraged by the defeat of Severus, and Constantine presented a natural ally. Though Constantine had a wife, Minervina, with whom he had his son Crispus, she had either died or he had divorced her. Maxentius therefore married his sister, the daughter of Maximian, Fausta, to Constantine to form a marriage alliance. Constantine recognized Maxentius as the new Augustus of the West, and in exchange Maxentius's father, the former Augustus Maximian, travelled to Trier to give away his daughter and name Constantine co-Augustus. Constantine finally had the title of Augustus, which he had been seeking.

In the fall of 307 Galerius invaded Italy to oust Maxentius. Unfortunately for him, Maxentius was too well entrenched and Galerius could not take Rome. He was forced to beat a hasty retreat out of Italy and back to the East. Constantine had remained neutral in this fight. But when Maximian left Constantine's court at Trier to return to Rome, he fell out with his son over the government. He pulled the purple robe off of Maxentius and insisted that he was the rightful emperor. The troops were not receptive to their old commander, and instead stuck behind Maxentius after his recent victory. Maximian fled back to Constantine, having made an enemy of his own son and catching Constantine in the middle.

### *The Congress at Carnuntum and the Collapse of the Tetrarchy*

Diocletian had not properly considered the problem of the sons of his tetrarchs, and now his whole political system was collapsing. Galerius, having failed to crush Maxentius and at a loss as to what he should do, called Diocletian out of retirement. He

begged Diocletian to return to power in order to bring an end to the chaos, but Diocletian refused. Instead, he held a conference in 308 AD between all the contending claimants to imperial power. Diocletian prescribed harsh medicine for the conflict. He ordered his former co-emperor Maximian to return to retirement. He declared invalid all of Maximian's acts since he came out of retirement, including his elevation of Constantine and Maxentius to the position of Augustus. He demoted Constantine back to Caesar, and stripped Maxentius of all position. Since he could not restore Severus as Augustus (Maxentius had recently put Severus to death), he made a new man, Licinius, the new Augustus of the West. This could only have angered Constantine and Maxentius—not only had they lost their claims to be Augusti, but Licinius was stepping in to the position of Augustus without ever having been Caesar. They both refused to give up the title of Augustus. In response, in 310 Maximinus Daia, the Caesar of the East and the only remaining Caesar, also declared himself Augustus after seeing everyone else doing the same.

Maximian also could not abide retirement. He remained in Gaul with Constantine, but in 310, while Constantine was off campaigning against the Franks, he convinced some of the troops to declare him Augustus. Still, most of the troops remained loyal to Constantine, and Maximian was forced to flee to Massilia. Constantine hurried back to deal with the rebellion, and the residents of the city opened the gates to Constantine. He stripped Maximian of the title of Augustus, the third time in Maximian's life. Although it is uncertain, it seems that Constantine forced Maximian to commit suicide.

In 311, Galerius died of a terrible wasting illness, perhaps cancer. Christian writers attributed this illness to divine wrath for his persecution of the Christians, and he might have believed it, for his last act as emperor was to issue an edict of toleration toward Christianity. With Galerius's death, the last remnants of the Tetrarchy fell apart. Licinius, who was unable to take up his position in the West, instead split the eastern territories with Maximinus Daia. Licinius took control of the European provinces of the East, while Maximinus Daia took the Asian provinces. In the meantime, Maxentius declared war on Constantine, claiming to seek vengeance for the death of his father.

### *The Battle of the Milvian Bridge*

Constantine and Licinius declared an alliance, and in response Maximinus Daia allied with Maxentius. With the breakout of hostilities, the Roman Empire was on edge. Travel was not possible, and troops were being readied for war everywhere. Constantine had the difficult task of defeating his former ally, Maxentius. Severus and Galerius had both been surprised by Maxentius when they had tried to take Rome from him, and Constantine must have known that Maxentius would be difficult to defeat. Maxentius commanded a huge army of his father's veterans, and had the support of Rome's Praetorian Guard.

But Maxentius had grown unpopular in Rome. Back in 308 he had demanded that Domitius Alexander, the governor of North Africa, send him his son as a hostage to ensure his loyalty. Domitius Alexander refused, and instead proclaimed himself Augustus. This cut off Africa's grain supply from Rome. The city of Rome suffered

starvation. Maxentius was forced to send troops to North Africa, where they defeated and killed Domitius Alexander and regained control of Africa's grain. The lack of food had not helped Maxentius's popularity, and when he was forced to raise taxes to pay his army, riots broke out against him. Under these circumstances, Constantine styled himself as a liberator, coming to Rome to free it from a tyrant.

In 312 Constantine crossed the Alps into Italy with a small but mobile army. The first city he encountered refused to admit him, but he quickly captured it. Then he defeated a force of Maxentius's cavalry in a pitched battle. With these quick victories, the other cities of northern Italy opened their gates to him. Still, Maxentius was in a strong position, as Rome was protected by its strong Aurelian walls and filled with troops and African grain, meaning that it would be difficult to starve out and nearly impossible to storm. Maxentius destroyed the bridges around the city to make Constantine's attack even more difficult. So Constantine advanced slowly, allowing Maxentius's unpopularity to weaken him. The people of Rome continued to riot, and made clear that they preferred Constantine to Maxentius. Now, Maxentius was eager to destroy Constantine and to regain popularity with a decisive victory. He prepared to face Constantine in the field, giving up the advantage of Rome's fortifications.

With the bridges destroyed, Maxentius had a temporary bridge built at the site of the Milvian Bridge so that he could meet Constantine's approaching forces. Maxentius's troops outnumbered those of Constantine, but Constantine's forces were eager for battle. They were fighting under a new sign, the labarum (☩), a Christian symbol that stood for the first two letters in Christ's name, which Constantine had ordered them to paint on their shields. In the ensuing battle, Constantine's troops forced Maxentius's army to flee. In the confusion, his forces streamed over the rickety temporary bridge, which collapsed while Maxentius was retreating over it. He tumbled into the Tiber and drowned. Constantine entered Rome unopposed and was hailed as victor. Constantine had a triumphal arch erected to celebrate his victory as well as a colossal statue of himself holding a cross with an inscription reading: "By this saving sign I have delivered your city from the tyrant and restored liberty to the Senate and people of Rome."

### *The Edict of Milan*

To reaffirm their alliance, Constantine and Licinius met in Milan. There, Constantine married his sister to Licinius, cementing their partnership. Next, they made joint rulings concerning Christianity. They called an end to the persecution of the Christians, and returned all property confiscated from the church during the persecution. Most importantly, they issued a statement of religious toleration known as the Edict of Milan. This document lifted all restrictions on Christian worship and put a permanent end to persecution. In fact, the edict proclaimed freedom of worship for all Roman citizens, no matter their religion. While this document was an important first step in the Christianization of the Roman Empire, its proclamation of universal toleration did not long survive, and eventually the power of the state was turned against non-Christians. While the Edict of Milan was not the first statement of toleration of Christianity—Galerius had issued one two years earlier—it was the most important, because it was never

reversed and it was backed up by Constantine's public support for Christianity. Licinius hurried away from Milan when he heard that Maximinus Daia had attacked his territories. Licinius defeated Maximinus Daia in a decisive battle. Now, there were only two emperors remaining: Constantine and Licinius.

### *Constantine's Christianity*

The meaning of Christianity to Constantine has long been a matter of debate. When did he first come into contact with the religion, and when did he become a Christian? And what did Christianity mean to Constantine? Was he a true believer, or did he exploit the faith for political advantage. It is not even quite certain what happened at the Milvian Bridge. What inspired him to make his army fight under a Christian symbol? Did he have a dream, or did he and his army see a cross in the sky?

According to the most famous account, by bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in his biography of Constantine, the emperor and his army saw a cross in the sky shortly before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge marked with the words "In this sign you shall conquer." Then Constantine had a dream in which God instructed him make that sign his standard. But this was written twenty-seven years after the battle, in order to glorify Constantine after he was dead, and Eusebius does not mention the vision in his description of the battle in his earlier *Ecclesiastic History*. Writing not long after Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge, the Christian author Lactantius was first to report the story that Constantine had a dream before the battle and then ordered his troops to paint a labarum on their shields. Lactantius never mentions any vision seen by the army. Nor was this was not the first time Constantine had a divine vision. A speech by a pagan orator mentions that Constantine claimed Apollo visited him in a vision, or a dream, while he was in Gaul. The earliest coinage from Constantine after his troops proclaimed him emperor associated him with the god Mars. Later coinage replaced Mars with Apollo, and he also used the image of Hercules (associated with Maxentius) until Maxentius's rebellion and forced suicide. After this, Christ and the sun god Sol Invictus (depicted like Apollo) became common on his coins.

Indeed, it was not uncommon for emperors to associate themselves with gods. The emperor Diocletian had associated himself with Jupiter and his imperial partner Maximian with Hercules. This may have been imperial propaganda, but it also had religious meaning. Even Rome's first emperor, Augustus, had stressed his familial connection with the goddess Venus and considered her a personal protector. Later emperors continued to look for divine protectors. By Constantine's time it must have seemed like most of those gods had failed, as the emperors who had called upon them had met defeat and death. He considered Mars and then Apollo, but Christ presented an unlikely, yet untried, path to divine protection. He probably knew only a little about Christianity before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, but when his appeal to Christ's aid worked he may have become convinced of Christ's legitimacy. Alternatively, if Constantine is interpreted less as a sincere believer and more as a ruthless pragmatist, he may have deemed Christianity an effective means of subverting the loyalty of the Christians living under his imperial rivals, and may have seen its belief in one supreme God as fitting well with his ambition of eliminating the other emperors of the Tetrarchy

and ruling as the sole emperor. Whatever the case, while Constantine is usually said to have converted to Christianity at the Milvian Bridge, his adoption of the Christian faith is probably better understood as a slow process, in which whatever occurred outside Rome in 312 AD was a single, though no doubt very important, step.

The extent of Constantine's Christianity is also a recurring question. By 313 he had already begun to build churches in his realm. After he took Rome from Maxentius, he donated the imperial property of the Lateran to the bishop of Rome, where the Constantinian Basilica (modern-day San Giovanni in Laterano) was constructed. Constantine went on to sponsor many new churches, promote Christians to high offices in the government, and give special rights and exemptions to the Christian clergy, but he never divorced himself or his government completely from pagan imagery. Some of the most important bishops of the day—Lactantius, Hosius, and Eusebius of Caesarea—were friends and important fixtures in the court of Constantinople, but so was the pagan Platonic philosopher Sopater of Apamea. Constantine issued coins with images of Sol Invictus, and the magnificent statue he commissioned of himself in Constantinople depicted him as Sol Invictus. Constantine, especially at first, does not seem to have seen a conflict between worshiping Christ and also worshipping other gods. To someone brought up in the world of traditional Roman religion, Christ could be seen as part of the wider pantheon of gods, or the Christian god could even be considered the supreme God, while the other gods would still have been worshipped as lesser gods. Nonetheless, it seems that as time went on, and perhaps with the influence of many of the Christian bishops at his court, Constantine took a gradually stricter view that there was but one God, the Christian God.

### *Constantine versus Licinius*

With the defeat of their rivals, Constantine and Licinius recognized each other's rule of the western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire, respectively. But it was clear that the ambitions of both men would soon lead to conflict. Constantine attempted to create a buffer region—between the East and West—ruled by Bassianus, who Constantine married to his daughter and planned to elevate to the rank of Caesar. However, a plot by Bassianus to murder Constantine was uncovered. Constantine executed Bassianus, but not before he implicated his brother Senecio in the plot. Senecio was a high official in Licinius's government. Thus Licinius appeared to be behind the plot, even more so when he refused to hand over Senecio to Constantine. Constantine attacked, invading Licinius's domains in retribution. Despite a resounding victory in battle against Licinius's larger army, Constantine agreed to a favorable peace: he gained control of Illyria and Macedonia from Licinius, and both men elevated their sons as Caesars.

An uneasy peace between Constantine and Licinius lasted for over six years, but then hostilities broke out between them again. The contemporary histories that have survived, which are all very friendly to Constantine, blame the renewed war on Licinius's persecution of Christians, but Licinius had displayed sympathy toward Christianity, and so this might just be Constantine's propaganda. In reality, it seems the war was caused by Constantine crossing into Licinius's territories with an army. Though Constantine

claimed he was only there to fight invading barbarians, Licinius interpreted it as a hostile move and attacked. Constantine counterattacked, and he put his son Crispus in charge of a powerful fleet. Constantine defeated Licinius's troops outside Adrianople, while Crispus won a decisive naval victory in the Bosphorus near Byzantium. Licinius and his army retreated to the Asia side of the Bosphorus, but Crispus's fleet was able to ferry Constantine's forces around Licinius, and outflanking him, defeated him again at the Battle of Chrysopolis. Licinius surrendered and Constantine spared the life of his brother-in-law for the time being, sending him off to live in Greece as a private citizen (Constantine would later have Licinius and his son murdered). Constantine now was the sole emperor of the Roman Empire.

### *Constantine and the Church*

After the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine was eager to ascribe his victories to the intervention of the Christian God. After his victory over Licinius, he wrote that he had "come from the farthest shores of Britain as God's chosen instrument for the suppression of impiety." Constantine by this point was coming to have a clearer view of Christianity and his place within it. With the Christian holy land now under Constantine's rule, his mother Helena, a convinced Christian, traveled to Jerusalem, where she built churches and supposedly found the site of Christ's crucifixion and the wood of his cross.

The most pressing issue Constantine found in the Christian community, however, was that it was far from unified. Christianity had been suppressed and underground for centuries, and with Christian communities from one region to another having little ability to communicate with each other, many had developed very different beliefs. In addition, Diocletian's persecution had caused chaos and dislocation in the church. The first Christian crisis Constantine had to deal with was the Donatist controversy. This arose in North Africa after many bishops had given in to Diocletian's persecution and had handed over their scriptures to be burned. In response, some congregations had refused to recognize the authority of these "traitorous" bishops anymore. This caused a split in the church. When the new bishop of Carthage Caecilian was ordained by such a "traitor", many refused to accept him and instead declared a man named Donatus to be the true bishop of Carthage. The result was two parallel churches, one governed by Caecilian and the other by Donatus. When a meeting of bishops in Rome declared Donatus and his followers illegitimate, the Donatists appealed to Constantine for help. This was the first time Christian officials appealed to a Roman emperor. Constantine called a church council in 314 AD in the city of Arles, which again ruled against the Donatists and excommunicated Donatus. Constantine supported the decision, and saw two separate churches as an affront to the universal church he had supported. He tried to ban the Donatist church entirely. Nonetheless, the Donatists did not go away and continued to be a source of conflict and controversy for centuries to come.

While the Donatist controversy was restricted to North Africa, of greater concern was the Arian controversy, which was debated throughout the empire. At issue was the nature of Christ. Some clergymen, led by an Egyptian priest named Arius, held that Christ was of similar but different nature than God the Father, and that Christ the Son

was created by God the Father. The opponents of this view, led by Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria (and later and more importantly, by his successor Athanasius), held that Christ and God were of the same nature, and that Christ was not a creation but actually God. This may seem like a trivial theological issue, but it was a major question for what the newly ascendant Church was to believe and in what direction it would move. The Arians accused their opponents of remaining too close to the polytheism of the pagan past by holding that the Son and the Father are both God, while their opponents accused the Arians of remaining too close to the church's Jewish past by denying the complete divinity of Christ. This controversy was especially heated in the eastern, Greek-speaking parts of the empire, where riots broke out in some cities over the issue. When Constantine conquered these regions from Licinius, he was forced to deal with it.

Constantine, eager as ever to impose unity on the church, convened another council of bishops in 325 AD, the Council of Nicaea. This was considered the first ecumenical (worldwide) council; that is, it was not just a meeting of local bishops but all bishops of the church were invited (though only a fraction actually attended) and it was supposed to represent a church-wide decision. Constantine attended the council, though he acted only as an observer. In the end, the Council of Nicaea voted that the Arian position was wrong and heretical, that Christ and God were of the same substance and both eternal, and promulgated a creed that outlined the orthodox, or correct position. That creed became known as the Nicene Creed. Still, like Donatism, the Arian controversy did not go away and remained an important issue for centuries.

At the Council of Nicaea, Constantine had referred to himself as the "bishop of those outside the church." The status of a Roman emperor had always been both religious and secular, and Constantine simply continued this within a Christian framework. Constantine was also coming to take a stricter view of Christianity. When he visited Rome the year after the Council of Nicaea, he refused to take part in a pagan ritual, offending the people of Rome and resulting in mutual anger.

### *Upheaval in Constantine's Family*

The incident in Rome was not the only negative consequence to come out of Constantine's visit to the west in 326 AD. A major family crisis broke out, about which we only have the sketchiest details. Constantine had one son by his first wife named Crispus, who had won the brilliant naval victory over Licinius and was extremely well liked and popular among both the people and the army. He was Constantine's presumed successor. But Constantine had three other sons with his second wife, Fausta. Fausta seems to have wanted to ensure that her own sons inherited the empire, and so when Constantine returned from his trip she made some accusation against Crispus, possibly claiming that he raped her. Constantine flew into a rage and had his son executed. Months later Fausta was found dead, suffocated in her bath. Again, the circumstances of her death are unclear, but some historians of the time suspected that Constantine found out she had lied to him—possibly having been informed by his mother Helena—and had her murdered. Whatever the case, the names of both Crispus and Fausta were wiped out of the public record, and Constantine's



official historian, Eusebius, deleted them from his narrative. Some pagan writers claim that Constantine's conversion to Christianity was nothing more than an attempt to assuage his guilt over the murder of his wife and son, though Constantine embraced Christianity much earlier.

### *Constantinople and Constantine's Reforms*

In 330, Constantine refounded the city of Byzantium as New Rome, or Constantinople. After his poor reception at Rome in 326 and his growing realization that the heart of the Roman Empire was now the East, he decided to make this city, where he had spent his youth with his mother, his new capital. The city of Rome had long since ceased to be anything more than a ceremonial capital, and Diocletian had made his own headquarters at Nicomedia, just across the Bosphorus from Byzantium on the Asia side. Constantine supposedly considered founding his new capital on the nearby site of Troy, connecting the Roman Empire back to its legendary homeland (according to Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Latin people were founded by Aeneas, an exiled Trojan prince who had fled to Italy), but he realized that Byzantium was a much better position, protected from attack on three sides by the waters of the Bosphorus. He brought craftsmen to build churches, palaces, and a new senate house, and gave incentives for citizens to move to the new city. Constantine had statues and art from all of Greece taken to decorate the city, and though many of these celebrated the pagan gods, Constantinople was intended as a Christian capital for the new Christian Roman Empire. With the exception of his legalization of Christianity, the creation of Constantinople was perhaps Constantine's most important reform. Constantinople would quickly grow into the most important city of the empire and of the world, and would remain the capital of the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and much later the Ottoman Empire. Though it is now called Istanbul, it remains one of the great cities of the world.

Though Constantine moved away from the legacy of Diocletian by ending Diocletian's persecution of Christianity, in most of his government policies Constantine continued the reforms that Diocletian had begun. He completed the separation of military and civilian offices. He stripped the Praetorian Prefects of all their military power, and made them civilian administrators. He kept Diocletian's division of the empire into regions called *dioceses*, and raised four Praetorian Prefects and made them the civilian administrators of three dioceses each. Below the Praetorian Prefects he made vicars, who oversaw one diocese each and reported to the Praetorian Prefect. Constantine's reorganization of the empire lasted until the fall of the Western Roman Empire, and survives today in some form in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Constantine continued Diocletian's increase in the size of the imperial bureaucracy, but he put it under the command of a *magister officiorum*, "master of offices," who coordinated the different officials and reported directly to the emperor.

Constantine also continued Diocletian's policy of creating a strong, mobile field army. He completed Diocletian's reorganization of the army, with the *limitani* stationed on the borders to guard against incursions, and the elite *comitatenses* legions of the field army ready to move from a central position to deal with crises. He put most of the

comitatenses under his own command as the Praesental Army, the army in the emperor's presence, but he also created the offices of Magister Peditum and Magister Equitum, to command the other infantry and cavalry of the field army, respectively. Constantine abolished the Praetorian Guard, which had supported Maxentius, and formed a new imperial bodyguard called the *schola*.

Constantine also made a very important economic reform. Diocletian had attempted to curb the excessive inflation of the Roman currency by introducing money of pure metal, instead of the debased currency that had caused the problem. Diocletian had focused on issuing silver coins, though he also introduced a gold coin called the *solidus*. Still, Diocletian's efforts had not fixed the problem. Constantine focused on minting the gold *solidii*, each made of 1/72 pound of gold, which soon became the standard currency of the empire. The *solidus* was not debased and has become known as the "dollar of the middle ages," since for the next seven hundred years it was struck at the same weight and purity and became the coin of trade throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. Thanks to Constantine, Rome's currency was restored.

### *Later Life, Death, and Succession*

Some of Constantine's critics accuse him of becoming too lavish and frivolous in his later life. Nonetheless, he remained a military man and waged successful wars against the Persians, Sarmatians, and Goths. In 337, while planning fresh campaigns against the Persians, Constantine fell ill. He still was not baptized as a Christian (since baptism was believed to wash away all sins, it was common for Christians in this period to wait until late in life to be baptized), and he wanted to be baptized in the Jordan River, where Jesus had been baptized. But Constantine proved too ill to make the journey. He was baptized in Nicomedia by the city bishop (who also happened to be a prominent supporter of Arianism), and is said to have then put off the purple cloak of an emperor and put on the white clothes of a baptized Christian, seeing the two as incompatible. He died in Nicomedia on May 22, 337. After his death, he was buried at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, his tomb surrounded by depictions of the twelve apostles, with him in the center as the Thirteenth Apostle.

Constantine left the empire to his three sons by Fausta—Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans—and his nephew Dalmatius, dividing it along the same lines as the Tetrarchy. It is surprising, based on his experience in his earlier years, that Constantine thought this would work. He perhaps should have realized that ambition and the desire for power would lead to fighting. Perhaps he thought that, unlike Diocletian's Tetrarchy, this settlement would work because it kept power in the same family. Whatever the case, soon after his death, violence and civil war erupted once again, as his successors vied with each other for control of the whole empire. Most of his family was killed in the ensuing warfare, though the Constantinian Dynasty would rule the empire until 363 AD.

Constantine was one of the most important of all Roman emperors, and his reforms helped stabilize the empire, completing the work of Diocletian. He destroyed Diocletian's Tetrarchy, but at the same time he unified the empire under one strong

ruler. He repeatedly defeated barbarian invasions. He gave the empire an improved military, a stabilized economy, and more effective, if larger, central government. But he is best remembered for the foundation of Constantinople and the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire. He sponsored some of the greatest churches of the Roman period and is venerated as a saint in the Greek Orthodox Church. By legalizing and sponsoring Christianity, Constantine may well have changed the course of world history and allowed the formation of a Christian Europe.

### *Summary*

- Constantine was born in 272 AD to Helena and Constantius Chlorus, who became Caesar and then eventually Augustus of the western half of the Roman Empire.
- When Constantius Chlorus died, Constantine tried to take his place, upsetting the system of succession established by the Tetrarchy of Diocletian.
- In a series of civil wars from 306 to 325 AD, Constantine defeated his rivals in order to become sole ruler of the Roman Empire.
- In 312 AD, after supposedly having a dream or vision, Constantine had his soldiers paint the labarum, a symbol for Christ, on their shields. They won the battle, and Constantine emerged as a supporter of the previously persecuted Christian faith.
- In 313 Constantine and his ally Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity and granted freedom of religion to the citizens of the Roman Empire.
- Constantine returned property confiscated from the church during Diocletian's persecution and sponsored the building of Christian churches.
- Though Constantine showed support for Christianity from 312 AD, he did not abandon traditional pagan piety, and only gradually came to see Christianity as more exclusive.
- Constantine dealt with some of the most significant theological controversies of his time, namely Donatism and Arianism. He called the first ecumenical church council at Nicaea in 325 AD, at which Arianism was declared a heresy.
- Despite his legalization of Christianity and dismantling of the Tetrarchy, Constantine continued many of Diocletian's policies. He continued the expansion of the bureaucracy, the division of military and civilian powers, and the creation of a mobile field army.
- Constantine reformed and stabilized the Roman currency, making the gold *solidus* the standard unit. This ended the hyperinflation that had wreaked havoc in the third century.
- Constantine refounded the city of Byzantium as Constantinople in 330 AD. He made this the new capital of the Roman Empire and a great Christian city.
- Constantine died in 337 AD. He was baptized on his deathbed and buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles as the Thirteenth Apostle. He left the empire to his three surviving sons (and his nephew, who was soon killed by his sons), who fought over it.

- Constantine earned a legacy as one of the most important emperors, and because of his legalization and encouragement of Christianity, one of the most influential people in history.