

# CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

On 25 July, 306, in the city of York, a period of Roman history began which was to shape the future of Europe for centuries to come. When Constantine the Great was proclaimed as Emperor on that day, it signalled the start of a period which saw Christianity adopted as the main religion of Europe, the unification of the western and eastern halves of the Empire and the creation of a new city which would become Constantinople, now Istanbul.



The Roman emperor, Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus, or Constantine I, was born at Naissus, in Upper Moesia. He was the eldest son of Constantinus Chlorus and Helena, and first distinguished himself as a soldier in Diocletian's Egyptian expedition (296), and then under Galerius in the Persian war. In 305 the two emperors Diocletian and Maximian abdicated, and were succeeded by Constantine Chlorus and Galerius. Constantine joined his father, who ruled in the west, at Boulogne on the expedition against the Picts, and before Constantinus died (306) he proclaimed his son his successor. Galerius did not wish to quarrel with Constantine, yet he granted him the title of Caesar only, refusing that of Augustus. Political complications now increased, until in 308 there were actually no less than six emperors at once - Galerius, Licinius and Maximin in the east, and Maximian, Maxentius his son, and Constantine in the west. Maxentius drove his father from Rome and Maximian committed suicide (309). Maxentius threatened Gaul with a large army. Constantine, crossing the Alps by Mont Cénis, defeated Maxentius, who was drowned after the last great victory at the Milvian Bridge near Rome (312).

Before the battle, a flaming cross inscribed "In this conquer" was said to have caused Constantine's conversion to Christianity. In 313, the edict of Milan, issued conjointly with Licinius, gave civil rights and toleration to Christians throughout the empire. Constantine was now sole emperor of the west; and by the death of Galerius in 311 and of Maximin in 313, Licinius became sole emperor of the east. After a war (314) between the two rulers, Licinius had to cede Illyricum, Pannonia and Greece, and Constantine for the next nine years devoted himself to the correction of abuses, the strengthening of his frontiers and the chastising of the barbarians.

In 324 A.D., after a long and bloody battle, Roman Emperor Constantine the Great defeated his final rival Licinius in the hills near Byzantium (Istanbul). Being a noble-hearted conqueror, Constantine spared the treacherous Licinius's life. This victory had repercussions that were to affect the city's development enormously. First, Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. Second, he chose the ancient Greek city of Byzantium as his new Christian capital and he gave it the name of Constantinople, which means the City of Constantine. Although, there is scholarly

debate on how "Christian" Constantine's rule actually was, as some scholars believe that he continued to pay heed to mythological divinities and pagan ceremonies. This was a major shift, as the former capital of the Roman Empire had been Rome, the centre of Pagan worship.

The city was officially dedicated as "New Rome" in 330 AD; it soon was unofficially christened Constantinople. The emperor shocked his courtiers by marking much greater boundaries than they expected around what had been the rather provincial Byzantine, so that soon it had quadrupled in size. Asked why he did so, he responded that he was following an invisible, presumably angelic guide.

With his typical energy, Constantine not only enlarged but also strengthened and beautified the city. For the next ten years, he looked toward the moral, political, and economic welfare of the citizens of his Empire and designated his sons as future rulers. When he was about to march against the Persian army in May of 337, he suddenly became ill and died, shortly after being baptized.

Constantine certainly earned the "Great" after his name. The history of the world was set on a new course when he made Christianity - which until that time had suffered bloody persecution - the state religion. This was hardly an imperative move since Christians were by far the minority at the time. Thus Constantine's decision depended less on general conditions at the time than on his own personal consideration. In 325 he assembled and attended the Council at Nicea where the Nicene Creed was formulated. It remains one of the basics of Christianity. Constantine was not only the first Christian Emperor, but he was the greatest of all Roman Emperors.

His great city and Empire lasted until 1453 when it was conquered by the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II.

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