



CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

PROTAGONIST OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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Constantine is undeniably one of the most important figures in **European and Near Eastern history**, in the sense that his personal decisions had an enormous impact on the future, but he is also one of the most ambiguous figures, both morally and in the sense that we have very little reliable information about him. It is possible to imagine different “models” of what Constantine was really like.

Constantine was a reformer of the Roman state, following in the tradition of his predecessor Diocletian (284-305 AD). Diocletian was the Roman emperor who moved the court functions from Rome to the eastern provinces, especially Nikomedeia, south of the Sea of Marmara, in Anatolia. He also promoted **Constantinos Chloros**, the father of Constantine from his first wife **Helena**, to the rank of Caesar in charge of North Europe and the British Isles. Under the auspices of his father, Constantine rose in the ranks distinguishing himself in the battle and in governance. He took over as Caesar upon the death of his father. Once he established himself as the sole emperor, a saga that is most intriguing, Constantine founded an imperial capital in the East, **Constantinople**, which soon became equal in rank to Rome itself and the capital of the **Byzantine** and **Ottoman** empires.

Constantine is the first political ruler to convert to Christianity, an act the consequences of which cannot be calculated.

Of course, it is difficult if not impossible to be a successful emperor in such troubled times and also a saint. **Constantine** was undeniably ambitious, ruthless, and even murderous, executing many relatives and rivals, including in-laws, his valiant son Crispus, his second wife Fausta, and others. He did not allow treaties to get in his way and he waged wars of aggression against other emperors until only he was left (by 324 AD).

On the other hand, he was hard working and capable; he defended the frontiers against marauding barbarians; was concerned with securing justice and prosperity for his subjects, and in all this, he enjoyed considerable success. On balance, most provincials benefited from his rule. For Christian writers of the period, of course, he could do no wrong, but their testimony was influenced by their enthusiasm for having a Christian ruler after so many years of persecution

Eager to maintain unity in the **Church**, which was being torn apart by controversies over theology, Constantine convened in 325 the first **Ecumenical Council** in Nikaia, a town near Nikomedeia and across the sea of Marmara from Constantinople, the future capital of Christendom. The **Nicaean Synod** drafted the **Symbol of Faith** that contains the word **ὁμοούσιος** proposed as a compromise by Constantine himself, i.e., Christ being consubstantial with the Father.



Constantine was clearly a figure who **stood above history** in many ways. He cannot be judged by conventional moral standards. Some of his actions can, however, be put into perspective. He was not the first emperor to create a capital in the East. In fact, the East had gradually become far more important for Roman policy and strategy; by the early third century, more legions were stationed there than in the West. Previous emperors had held court Nikomedeia and Thessalonica. Constantine had used Serdica [*modern Sofia in Bulgaria*] for a while. Constantinople was, however, a far grander version of these prior attempts, and a more successful one.

It was also not **Constantine** who terminated the persecutions against the Christians that had been initiated by Galerius and Diocletian in 303 AD. Constantine began his career in the West, in fact in Britain, where there were almost no Christians. The

persecutions were ended by Maxentius in Rome and by Galerius himself and Licinius in the East. Constantine defeated most of these men in war and killed them, and merely continued and extended their policy of toleration.

Constantine did **convert to Christianity**, but we should not imagine him as a regular Christian. He was not baptized until his death-bed; he did not attend church services; he believed that disputes over theology were a waste of time (*here he obviously disagreed with the Church Fathers*); and he seems to have thought of himself as an apostolic figure.

Despite these peculiarities in his beliefs and personal conduct, he gave **money, power, and legitimacy to the Church**, and so earned its support and praise. We should not be cynical about this: there is no question that his belief was sincere, in its own way. Besides, there were simply not enough Christians around at the time to justify the level of support that he gave them as a cynical political ploy. As always, Constantine remains ambiguous, his motivation shrouded in mystery.

Consider the arrangements that he made for his burial. His mausoleum had twelve columns, one for each of the apostles, with his sarcophagus in the middle. The Church reinterpreted this as meaning that he was the **13th Apostle**, and made him a **saint** in grateful recognition of his service to the **Faith**.

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