# A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY: CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

There appears to be no precise record of the date of birth of Constantine the Great. It is estimated that he was born some time between the year 271 and no later than 280. His birthplace is believed to be Naissus, today's Nis in Serbia. His father was Constantius Chlorus a native of that vicinity and famous as a general under the Emperor Diocletian. His mother was Helen, the daughter of a humble innkeeper, whom Constantius had met during his military sojourn in that area. Constantine, born out of wedlock, had grown to school age before he and his mother were united with Constantius, now governor of Dalmatia, to live as a family at the mansion in Salonae on the Adriatic coast. It was there that the young Constantine received the attention of his parents, his basic education, and an early exposure to a military environment. His father's mild and tolerant disposition toward his subjects, his soldiers, and even his defeated opponents, may explain Constantine's own forthcoming attitude in favor of free religious expression.

Constantius may have had Christian leanings since the early years. He had ascended to the position of power through the military ranks. Later, based on Emperor Diocletian's arranged conditions, he advanced by divorcing Helen and marrying Emperor Maximian's daughter, Theodora. Another arrangement was that his son, Constantine, would serve in Diocletian's imperial court. It was in 293 that Diocletian and Maximian appointed their own Caesars under their charge to bolster the administration of their respective jurisdictions. Diocletian took Galerius as his Caesar and Maximian took Constantius. Galerius was the instigator of the mandated Christian persecution. Constantine followed Diocletian to the imperial city of Nicomedia in Asia Minor, while Helen, now divorced, took up residence in Drepanum, a small town near Nicomedia, in order to be near her son. The period of service at the court and in the field under Diocletian, provided the opportunity for Constantine to distinguish himself as a soldier, and proved to be very valuable to him later in his role as an administrator. He also served under Galerius, when the latter replaced Diocletian at the helm. In this case, however, Constantine became a virtual hostage to his superior who held on to the young centurion as an assurance against any aggression on the part of Constantius. In time, Constantine made his move and in a very swift escape rejoined his father atEboracum—today's York in Britain.

Constantius died on July 25, 306 and the young and popular Constantine was proclaimed Augustus by his troops. Galerius, as senior, consented only to the title of Caesar in order to preserve the integrity of the Tetrarchy. The event marked the beginning of Constantine's climb to the top. Diocletian and Maximian resigned as emperors, in keeping with Diocletian's plan for the Empire to be ruled by a Tetrarchy or a four-headed governing consortium. In the aftermath of much intrigue and other significant changes, the eventual setting became that Constantine shared the governance of the

Empire together with three other men: (a) The ruler at Rome, Maxentius, son of Maximian and the brother of Constantine's wife, Fausta; (b) at Sirmium, today's Mitrovica just southwest of Nis, the ruler, Licinius, who was married to Constantine's half-sister, Constantia; and (c) at Nicomedia, Maximin Daia, who like his predecessor, Galerius, was a harsh persecutor of Christians.

In York, Constantine consolidated his position and upon amassing his forces, he descended on the continent preparing for further action. He conquered the northern portion of Italy and on October 28, 312 he attacked and conquered Rome as a liberator. It is reported that at a time prior to the battle, he had experienced a vision of the monogram of Christ, inspiring him to march on to victory under its power. He adopted the symbol, which became a permanent part of his life, the sign of his troops and of the Empire. In the course of the aforementioned battle, Maxentius drowned in the River Tiber at the Milvian Bridge in an attempt to retreat behind the city walls. Later, in a territorial dispute between Licinius and Maximin Daia, the latter was defeated in battle, and while in retreat in Tarsus, he died of a severe illness. Subsequent intrigues for territorial gain ended in war between Constantine and Licinius. The former was victorious at Chrysopolis (323) on the Asiatic side of the straights at Byzantium. Licinius was imprisoned in Thessalonica, and one year later was executed on Constantine's orders. Constantine became the sole ruler of the Empire in the year 323.

Constantine's marriage to Fausta, daughter of Maximian and Eutropia, paralleled Constantius' marriage to Theodora, stepdaughter of Maximian by Eutropia's former marriage. Fausta was, of course, much younger than her stepsister, Theodora. Like his father before him, Constantine had a previous wife, Minervina, who bore him a son, Crispus. He divorced her to marry Fausta for the same reason Constantius had divorced Helen. By this arrangement, both men had established firm ties within the imperial family circle. The marriage with Fausta gave Constantine five more children: three sons and two daughters. Fausta was bent on securing the imperial rights for her own offspring, apprehensive of the popularity and seniority of Crispus. An atmosphere of intrigue and conspiracy developed, when Constantine took the family to Rome to celebrate his twentieth anniversary as emperor and the tenth anniversary of the elevation to Caesars of his sons, Crispus and Constantine.

An event that was intended as a celebration ended up in tragedy, due to the intrigues that seem to have been instigated by Fausta. Constantine ordered his son, Crispus, imprisoned in the Illyrian peninsula and soon afterwards executed. Fausta's fate was the same while taking a steam bath. Thereafter, Constantine's attention turned away from Rome—the city on seven hills—and he returned to the East to found a new city on seven hills as well, and which became known by the name of Anthousa (or Flora), New Rome, Second Rome, Constantinople, Byzantium, and by popular Greek usage, even to this day, the Polis (City).

A common misconception exists that the word Istanbul is Turkish. It is, in literal fact, a phonetic derivative and mispronunciation of the Greek phrase ees-teen-Pohleen. The English translation is to-the-City, meaning that all attention was directed to-the-Polis. The dedication of the new city, four years in preparation, took place in May 330. It became the seat of the Empire and lasted until 1453, when it fell to the Asiatic onslaught it had always resisted. Constantine's city, prior to its fall, had also survived the invasion and plundering of its wealth by its Western counterpart on the pretext of the Crusades. Constantine had envisioned the importance of the location in terms of its strategic and commercial advantage. He began by expanding the ancient walls in defense of the site that was surrounded by water on three sides. He built various public buildings as well as many Christian Churches that were in keeping with the needs and ideals of the religion he had chosen to favor.

His administrative system was structured in a vertical fashion by means of a centralized power at the top and with an expanding descent of categories and subcategories. In this way, he maintained ultimate control by dealing with the minimum number of officials. He separated civil authority from military authority in order to enhance that control. The system, of course, became monarchic. He restructured the military by maintaining a centralized army in readiness rather than to depend on the available manpower of the frontiers.

On the subject of religion, he showed a marked preference for Christianity. Early in his governance, he initiated a policy of religious freedom and invited Licinius to join him. They formulated the language of tolerance by means of a joint statement known as the Edict of Milan in 313. Christianity was not singled out as the sole beneficiary. The Christian religion early in Constantine's rule took on the appearance of an official institution only because of his overt and unreserved personal support. There were too many non-Christian and unwilling subjects in the Empire for Constantine to attempt to force the issue by imperial mandate. With regard to the Christian population of that period, as well as Constantine's interest to promote Christianity, Baynes (1972, p. 4) claims that there existed no implication that it was the duty of a Roman Emperor . . . to adopt the faith professed by perhaps one-tenth of his subjects.

Constantine did work with interest to resolve disputes among the clergy and did defer to them. As a seasoned and accustomed military figure, however, he was known to have ordered (Kousoulas, 1997, p. 299) the clergy to obey certain of his wishes when he lost patience with their disputes and questionable behavior. The clergy was politicized due to the organizational interest of Constantine to see the Church and the Empire prosper. From the various historical accounts, he shows strong signs of belief in and submission to Christian teaching.

The time of his conversion is a matter of speculation.  It appears to have been gradual rather than spontaneous, beginning in his youth under his father's crypto-Christian influence.  This tempered development seems to be the case, given his sporadic resort to non-Christian convictions and rituals.  The latter, as time progressed, however, may have been due to political expediency.  Contrary to his own declared policy of tolerance in religion—Edict of Milan—he also countenanced harsh treatment against those who practiced non-Christian rituals.  It is difficult to imagine that his task was light in attempting a balance between his personal preferences and the demands of his office.  He convoked the Council at Nicaea (July 3, 325), in the hope of reconciling the clergy.  It is not reasonable to blame the host for the irreconcilability of those attending.  He commissioned an expedition for the discovery of the True Cross, led by his mother, Saint Helen, who is alleged was drawn to the task by a series of dreams. Constantine's works are the best indicator of who he was.  He died on May 22, 337 outside of Nicomedia, while embarking on a Persian campaign.

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