Constantine I
Roman emperor
Also known as: Constantine the Great, Flavius Valerius Const(Show More)

Constantine I (born February 27, after 280 ce?, Naissus, Moesia [now Niš, Serbia]—died May 22, 337, Ancyrona, near Nicomedia, Bithynia [now İzmit, Turkey]) was the first Roman emperor to profess Christianity. He not only initiated the evolution of the empire into a Christian state but also provided the impulse for a distinctively Christian culture that prepared the way for the growth of Byzantine and Western medieval culture.

Constantine was born probably in the later 280s ce. A typical product of the military governing class of the later 3rd century, he was the son of Flavius Valerius Constantius, an army officer, and his wife (or concubine) Helena. In 293 ce his father was raised to the rank of Caesar, or deputy emperor (as Constantius I Chlorus), and was sent to serve under Augustus (emperor) Maximian in the West. In 289 Constantius had separated from Helena in order to marry a stepdaughter of Maximian, and Constantine was brought up in the Eastern Empire at the court of the senior emperor Diocletian at Nicomedia (modern İzmit, Turkey). Constantine was seen as a youth by his future panegyrist, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, passing with Diocletian through Palestine on the way to a war in Egypt.

Career and conversion
Constantine's experience as a member of the imperial court—a Latin-speaking institution—in the Eastern provinces left a lasting imprint on him. Educated to less than the highest literary standards of the day, he was always more at home in Latin than in Greek: later in life he had the habit of delivering edifying sermons, which he would compose in Latin and pronounce in Greek from professional translations. Christianity he encountered in court circles as well as in the cities of the East; and from 303, during the great persecution of the Christians that began at the court of Diocletian at Nicomedia and was enforced with particular intensity in the eastern parts of the empire, Christianity was a major issue of public policy. It is even possible that members of Constantine's family were Christians.

In 305 the two emperors, Diocletian and Maximian, abdicated, to be succeeded by their respective deputy emperors, Galerius and Constantius. The latter were replaced by Galerius Valerius Maximinus in the East and Flavius Valerius Severus in the West, Constantine being passed over. Constantius requested his son's presence from Galerius, and Constantine made his way through the territories of the hostile Severus to join his father at Gesoriacum (modern Boulogne, France). They crossed together to Britain and fought a campaign in the north before Constantius's death at Eboracum (modern York) in 306. Immediately acclaimed emperor by the army, Constantine then threw himself into a complex series of civil wars in which Maxentius, the son of Maximian, rebelled at Rome; with his father's help, Maxentius suppressed Severus, who had been proclaimed Western emperor by Galerius and who was then replaced by Licinius. When Maximian was rejected by his son, he joined Constantine in Gaul, only to betray Constantine and to be murdered or forced to commit suicide (310). Constantine, who in 307 had

married Maximian's daughter Fausta as his second wife, invaded Italy in 312 and after a lightning campaign defeated his brother-in-law Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge near Rome. He then confirmed an alliance that he had already entered into with Licinius (Galerius having died in 311): Constantine became Western emperor and Licinius shared the East with his rival Maximinus. Licinius defeated Maximinus and became the sole Eastern emperor but lost territory in the Balkans to Constantine in 316. After a further period of tension, Constantine attacked Licinius in 324, routing him at Adrianople and Chrysopolis (respectively, modern Edirne and Üsküdar, Turkey) and becoming sole emperor of East and West.

Throughout his life, Constantine ascribed his success to his conversion to Christianity and the support of the Christian God. The triumphal arch erected in his honour at Rome after the defeat of Maxentius ascribed the victory to the "inspiration of the Divinity" as well as to Constantine's own genius. A statue set up at the same time showed Constantine himself holding aloft a cross and the legend "By this saving sign I have delivered your city from the tyrant and restored liberty to the Senate and people of Rome." After his victory over Licinius in 324, Constantine wrote that he had come from the farthest shores of Britain as God's chosen instrument for the suppression of impiety, and in a letter to the Persian king Shāpūr II he proclaimed that, aided by the divine power of God, he had come to bring peace and prosperity to all lands.

Constantine's adherence to Christianity was closely associated with his rise to power. He fought the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in the name of the Christian God, having received instructions in a dream to paint the Christian monogram (Chi-Rho, known as the sacred monogram, is formed by the conjunction of the first two Greek letters of the word Christ.) on his troops' shields. This is the account given by the Christian apologist Lactantius. A somewhat different version, offered by Eusebius, tells of a vision seen by Constantine during the campaign against Maxentius, in which the Christian sign appeared in the sky with the legend "In this sign, conquer." Despite the emperor's own authority for the account, given late in life to Eusebius, it is in general more problematic than the other, but a religious experience on the march from Gaul is suggested also by a pagan orator, who in a speech of 310 referred to a vision of Apollo received by Constantine at a shrine in Gaul.

Yet to suggest that Constantine's conversion was "politically motivated" means little in an age in which every Greek or Roman expected that political success followed from religious piety. The civil war itself fostered religious competition, each side enlisting its divine support, and it would be thought in no way unusual that Constantine should have sought divine help for his claim for power and divine justification for his acquisition of it. What is remarkable is Constantine's subsequent development of his new religious allegiance to a strong personal commitment.

Commitment to Christianity of Constantine I

Shortly after the defeat of Maxentius, Constantine met Licinius at Mediolanum (modern Milan) to confirm a number of political and dynastic arrangements. A product of this meeting has become

known as the Edict of Milan, which extended toleration to the Christians and restored any personal and corporate property that had been confiscated during the persecution. The extant copies of this decree are actually those posted by Licinius in the eastern parts of the empire. But Constantine went far beyond the joint policy agreed upon at Mediolanum. By 313 he had already donated to the bishop of Rome the imperial property of the Lateran, where a new cathedral, the Basilica Constantiniana (now San Giovanni in Laterano), soon rose. The church of St. Sebastian was also probably begun at this time, and it was in these early years of his reign that Constantine began issuing laws conveying upon the church and its clergy fiscal and legal privileges and immunities from civic burdens. As he said in a letter of 313 to the proconsul of Africa, the Christian clergy should not be distracted by secular offices from their religious duties "…for when they are free to render supreme service to the Divinity, it is evident that they confer great benefit upon the affairs of state." In another such letter, directed to the bishop of Carthage, Constantine mentioned the Spanish bishop Hosius, who was important later in the reign as his adviser and possibly—since he may well have been with Constantine in Gaul before the campaign against Maxentius—instrumental in the conversion of the emperor.

Constantine's personal "theology" emerges with particular clarity from a remarkable series of letters, extending from 313 to the early 320s, concerning the Donatist schism in North Africa. The Donatists maintained that those priests and bishops who had once lapsed from the Christian faith could not be readmitted to the church. Constantine's chief concern was that a divided church would offend the Christian God and so bring divine vengeance upon the Roman Empire and Constantine himself. Schism, in Constantine's view, was inspired by Satan. Its partisans were acting in defiance of the clemency of Christ, for which they might expect eternal damnation at the Last Judgment. Meanwhile, it was for the righteous members of the Christian community to show patience and long-suffering. In so doing they would be imitating Christ, and their patience would be rewarded in lieu of martyrdom—for actual martyrdom was no longer open to Christians in a time of peace for the church. Throughout, Constantine had no doubt that to remove error and to propagate the true religion were both his personal duty and a proper use of the imperial position. His claim to be "bishop of those outside the church" may be construed in this light. Other such pronouncements, expressed in letters to imperial officials and to Christian clergy, demonstrate that Constantine's commitment to Christianity was firmer and less ambiguous than some have suggested. Eusebius confirmed what Constantine himself believed: that he had a special and personal relationship with the Christian God.

First Council of Nicaea

First Council of NicaeaCouncil of Nicaea in 325, depicted in a Byzantine fresco in the basilica of St. Nicholas in Demre, Turkey.

Constantine's second involvement in an ecclesiastical issue followed the defeat of Licinius, but the controversy over Arianism, with its intricate explorations of the precise nature of the Trinity that were couched in difficult Greek, was as remote from Constantine's educational background as it was from his impatient, urgent temperament. The Council of Nicaea, which opened in the early summer of 325 with an address by the emperor, had already been preceded by a letter to the chief protagonist, Arius of Alexandria, in which Constantine stated his opinion that the dispute was fostered only by excessive leisure and academic contention, that the point at issue

was trivial and could be resolved without difficulty. His optimism was not justified: neither this letter nor the Council of Nicaea itself nor the second letter, in which Constantine urged acceptance of its conclusions, was adequate to solve a dispute in which the participants were as intransigent as the theological issues were subtle. Indeed, for more than 40 years after the death of Constantine, Arianism was actually the official orthodoxy of the Eastern Empire.

The Council of Nicaea coincided almost exactly with the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the reign of Constantine, at which, returning the compliment paid by the emperor's attendance at their council, the bishops were honoured participants. But Constantine's visit to the West in 326, to repeat the celebrations at Rome, brought the greatest political crisis of the reign. During his absence from the East, and for reasons that remain obscure, Constantine had his eldest son, the deputy emperor Crispus, and his own wife Fausta, Crispus's stepmother, slain. Nor was the visit to Rome a success. Constantine's refusal to take part in a pagan procession offended the Romans, and, when he left after a short visit, it was never to return.

These events set the course of the last phase of the reign of Constantine. After his defeat of Licinius he had renamed Byzantium as Constantinople, and immediately upon his return from the West he began to rebuild the city on a greatly enlarged pattern as his permanent capital and the "second Rome." The dedication of Constantinople (May 330) confirmed the divorce, which had been in the making for more than a century, between the emperors and Rome. Rome had long been unsuited to the strategic needs of the empire. It was now to be left in splendid isolation, as an enormously wealthy and prestigious city—still the emotional focus of the empire—but of limited political importance.

It was perhaps in some sense to atone for the family catastrophe of 326 that Constantine's mother, Helena, embarked on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Her journey was attended by almsgiving and pious works and was distinguished by her church foundations at Jerusalem and at Bethlehem. By the initiative of Eutropia, Constantine's mother-in-law, a church was also built at Mamre, where, according to an interpretation of the Book of Genesis shared by Constantine and Eusebius, Christ had first shown himself to humanity in God's appearance to the Hebrew patriarch Abraham, but the most famous of these foundations followed the sensational discovery of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. The discovery was taken up with enthusiasm by Constantine, who instigated the building of a great new basilica at the spot, offering unlimited help with labour and materials and suggestions as to design and decoration.

Constantine's interest in church building was expressed also at Constantinople, particularly in churches of the Holy Wisdom (the original Hagia Sophia) and of the Apostles. At Rome, the great church of St. Peter was begun in the later 320s and lavishly endowed by Constantine with plate and property. Meanwhile, churches at Trier, Aquileia, Cirta in Numidia, Nicomedia, Antioch, Gaza, Alexandria, and elsewhere owed their development, directly or indirectly, to Constantine's interest.

The emperor was an earnest student of his religion. Even before the defeat of Licinius, he had summoned to Trier the theologian and polemicist Lactantius to be the tutor of Crispus. In later

years he commissioned new copies of the Bible for the growing congregations at Constantinople. He composed a special prayer for his troops and went on campaigns with a mobile chapel in a tent. He issued numerous laws relating to Christian practice and susceptibilities: for instance, abolishing the penalty of crucifixion and the practice of branding certain criminals; enjoining the observance of Sunday and saints' days; and extending privileges to the clergy while suppressing at least some offensive pagan practices.

Constantine had hoped to be baptized in the Jordan River, but perhaps because of the lack of opportunity to do so—together possibly with the reflection that his office necessarily involved responsibility for actions hardly compatible with the baptized state—he delayed the ceremony until the end of his life. It was while preparing for a campaign against Persia that he fell ill at Helenopolis. When treatment failed, he made to return to Constantinople but was forced to take to his bed near Nicomedia. There, Constantine received baptism, putting off the imperial purple for the white robes of a neophyte; and he died in 337. He was buried at Constantinople in his church of the Apostles, whose memorials, six on each side, flanked his tomb. Yet this was less an expression of religious megalomania than of Constantine's literal conviction that he was the successor of the evangelists, having devoted his life and office to the spreading of Christianity.

Legacy of Constantine I

The reign of Constantine must be interpreted against the background of his personal commitment to Christianity. His public actions and policies, however, were not entirely without ambiguity. Roman opinion expected of its emperors not innovation but the preservation of traditional ways; Roman propaganda and political communication were conditioned, by statement, allusion, and symbol, to express these expectations. It is significant, for instance, not that the pagan gods and their legends survived for a few years on Constantine's coinage but that they disappeared so quickly: the last of them, the relatively inoffensive "Unconquered Sun," was eliminated just over a decade after the defeat of Maxentius.

Some of the ambiguities in Constantine's public policies were therefore exacted by the respect due to established practice and by the difficulties of expressing, as well as of making, total changes suddenly. The suppression of paganism, by law and by the sporadic destruction of pagan shrines, is balanced by particular acts of deference. A town in Asia Minor mentioned the unanimous Christianity of its inhabitants in support of a petition to the emperor; while, on the other hand, one in Italy was allowed to hold a local festival incorporating gladiatorial games and to found a shrine of the imperial dynasty—although direct religious observance there was firmly forbidden. In an early law of Constantine, priests and public soothsayers of Rome were prohibited entry to private houses; but another law, of 320 or 321, calls for their recital of prayer "in the manner of ancient observance" if the imperial palace or any other public building were struck by lightning. Traditional country magic was tolerated by Constantine. Classical culture and education, which were intimately linked with paganism, continued to enjoy enormous prestige and influence; provincial priesthoods, which were as intimately linked with civic life, long survived the reign of Constantine. Constantinople itself was predominantly a Christian city,

its dedication celebrated by Christian services; yet its foundation was also attended by a well-known pagan seer, Sopatros.

An objective assessment of Constantine's secular achievements is not easy—partly because of the predominantly religious significance with which the emperor himself invested his reign, partly because the restlessly innovatory character that dissenting contemporaries saw in his religious policy was also applied by them to the interpretation of his secular achievement. Some of Constantine's contributions can, in fact, be argued to have been already implicit in the trends of the last half century. So may be judged the further development, taking place in his reign, of the administrative court hierarchy and an increasing reliance upon a mobile field army, to what was considered the detriment of frontier garrisons. The establishment by Constantine of a new gold coin, the solidus, which was to survive for centuries as the basic unit of Byzantine currency, could hardly have been achieved without the work of his predecessors in restoring political and military stability after the anarchy of the 3rd century. Perhaps more directly linked with Constantine's own political and dynastic policies was the emergence of regional praetorian prefectures with supreme authority over civil financial administration but with no direct control over military affairs; this they yielded to new magistri, or "masters," of the cavalry and infantry forces. The reduction of the prefects' powers was seen by some as excessively innovatory, but the principle of the division of military and civil power had already been established by Diocletian. A real innovation, from which Constantine could expect little popularity, was his institution of a new tax, the collatio lustralis. It was levied every five years upon trade and business and seems to have become genuinely oppressive.

A lavish spender, Constantine was notoriously openhanded to his supporters and was accused of promoting beyond their deserts men of inferior social status. More to the point is the accusation that his generosity was only made possible by his looting of the treasures of the pagan temples as well as by his confiscations and new taxes; and there is no doubt that some of his more prominent supporters owed their success, at least partly, to their timely adoption of the emperor's religion.

The foundation of Constantinople, an act of crucial long-term importance, was Constantine's personal achievement. Yet it, too, had been foreshadowed; Diocletian enhanced Nicomedia to an extent that was considered to challenge Rome. The city itself exemplified the "religious rapacity" of the emperor, being filled with the artistic spoils of the Greek temples, while some of its public buildings and some of the mansions erected for Constantine's supporters soon showed signs of their hasty construction. Its Senate, created to match that of Rome, long lacked the aristocratic pedigree and prestige of its counterpart.

In military policy Constantine enjoyed unbroken success, with triumphs over the Franks, Sarmatians, and Goths to add to his victories in the civil wars; the latter, in particular, show a bold and imaginative mastery of strategy. Constantine was totally ruthless toward his political enemies, while his legislation, apart from its concessions to Christianity, is notable mainly for a brutality that became characteristic of late Roman enforcement of law. Politically, Constantine's

main contribution was perhaps that, in leaving the empire to his three sons, he reestablished a dynastic succession, but it was secured only by a sequence of political murders after his death.

Answer Key

#	Answer

1 Solidus
2 Maximian
3 Milvian
4 Helena
5 Constantinople
6 Constantius
7 Christ
8 Nicaea
9 Maximian
10 Collatio lustralis
11 Nicomedia
12 Eusebius
13 Licinius
14 303
15 Crispus
16 Toleration
17 Constantius
18 Maxentius
19 330
20 Lactantius
21 God
22 Arianism
23 Eboracum (York)
24 Lateran
25 Readmitted
26 Eutropia
27 Second
28 Troops
29 Chrysopolis
30 Diocletian
31 Maximian
32 Crucifixion
33 Sepulchre
34 Conquer
35 Byzantium
36 Goths
37 Hosius
38 Baptized
39 Dynastic
40 337