

Document 15: Excerpt from “Who Was Constantine the Great?”

Background

N.S. Gill has a B.A. in Latin and an M.A. in linguistics from the University of Minnesota. She has also done graduate level coursework on classics at the University of Minnesota, writing two master's level papers, one on the misdating of an Oxyrhynchus papyrus and the other on Ovid as part of the program. She is a freelance writer for ThoughtCo, a premier reference site focusing on expert-created education content. The following is an excerpt from an article she wrote on Constantine and the Byzantine Empire.

The Fight to Become Emperor

Upon his father's death on July 25, 306 A.D., Constantine's troops proclaimed him Caesar. Constantine wasn't the only claimant. In 285, Emperor Diocletian had established the [Tetrarchy](#), which gave four men rule over a quadrant each of the Roman Empire, with two senior emperors and two non-hereditary juniors. Constantius had been one of the senior emperors. Constantine's most powerful rivals for his father's position were Maximian and his son, Maxentius, who had assumed power in Italy, controlling Africa, Sardinia, and Corsica as well.

Constantine raised an army from Britain that included Germans and Celts, which the Byzantine historian Zosimus said included 90,000 foot soldiers and 8,000 cavalry. Maxentius raised an army of 170,000 foot soldiers and 18,000 horsemen.

On October 28, 312, Constantine marched on Rome and met Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge. The story goes that Constantine had a vision of the words *in hoc signo vinces* ("in this sign you will conquer") upon a cross, and he swore that, should he triumph against great odds, he would pledge himself to Christianity. (Constantine actually resisted baptism until he was on his deathbed.) Wearing a sign of a cross, Constantine won, and the following year he made Christianity legal throughout the Empire with the Edict of Milan.

After Maxentius' defeat, Constantine and his brother-in-law, Licinius, split the empire between them. Constantine ruled the West, Licinius the East. The two remained rivals over a decade of uneasy truces before their animosity culminated in the Battle of Chrysopolis, in 324. Licinius was routed and Constantine became sole Emperor of Rome.

To celebrate his victory, Constantine created Constantinople on the site of Byzantium, which had been Licinius' stronghold. He enlarged the city, adding fortifications, a vast hippodrome for chariot racing, and a number of temples. He also established a second Senate. When Rome fell, Constantinople became the de facto seat of the empire.

Death of Constantine

By 336, Constantine the Great had reclaimed most of the province of Dacia, lost to Rome in 271. He planned a great campaign against the Sassanid rulers of Persia but fell ill in 337. Unable to complete his dream of being baptized in the Jordan River, as was Jesus, he was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia on his deathbed. He had ruled for 31 years, longer than any emperor since Augustus.

Constantine and Christianity

Much controversy exists over the relationship between **Constantine and Christianity**. Some historians argue that he was never a Christian, but rather an opportunist; others maintain that he was a Christian before the death of his father. But his work for the faith of Jesus was enduring. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was built on his orders and became the holiest site in Christendom. For centuries, Catholic popes traced their power to a decree called the Donation of Constantine (later proved a forgery). Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, and Byzantine Catholics venerate him as a saint. His convocation of the First Council at Nicea produced the Nicene Creed, an article of faith among Christians worldwide.