

OF BOOKS, ART AND PEOPLE

Stylios Stavrakis, *The Holy Constantine and the Vision of the Cross*,
tempera on wood, 1746

© Byzantine & Christian Museum, Athens
Below, publicity poster for the three Constantine
exhibitions in Trier. It shows the head of
the colossal statue of the emperor
now in Rome's
Capitoline Museums.



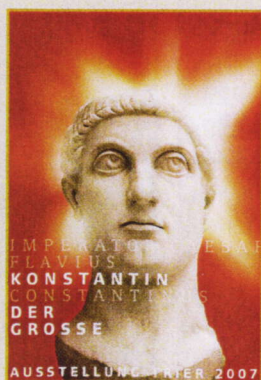
CONSTANTINE IN TRIER

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

In 2006, to celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of Constantine's proclamation as emperor by his troops in York, England, York (recently voted Europe's Top City Destination for 2006), hosted the major exhibition, "Constantine the Great: York's Roman Emperor," the subject of my "Of Books, Art, and People" in August 2006. This year, in a major highlight in the calendar of the European Capital of Culture, the areas of Luxembourg, Lorraine, the Saarland, Wallonia, and the Rhineland-Palatinate are joining forces with the bishopric and the city of Trier, the only ancient imperial residence outside Rome in the Western Roman Empire, to stage a three-venue exhibition, on until November 4, about the first Christian emperor.

Trier was founded in 16 BC as *Augusta Treverorum*, supposedly by the Emperor Augustus himself. During the 4th century, with Carthage and Alexandria, it was among the biggest cities in the world and

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AND GODS**



was known as "*Roma Secunda*." Constantine lived here from late 306 to 316. Here he also married Fausta, the daughter of the Emperor Maximian, and from here secured the western part of the empire against Germanic tribes before going to Rome. He returned only once, in the year 328, to spend the winter and celebrate Christmas.

In 2007, the concept of the European Capital of Culture will take on a new dimension. For the first time, it will not be focused on just one city, but on an entire region, and thus the peripatetic Constantine, born in Naissus (today Nis in Serbia and Montenegro), raised in Nicodemia in present-day Turkey, proclaimed emperor by his troops in York, and then again in Trier, ruler in Rome first of the Western Empire and then of the Roman Empire, and last but not least the founder of Constantinople (today's Istanbul), is an appropriate subject. This is the first time ever that Germany has hosted a major exhibition devoted to Constantine.

With 1,400 showpieces from 160 internationally renowned museums such as the Louvre, the Capitoline Museums, the Vatican

Museums and Secret Archives, and the British Museum, as well as with new archeological finds from ancient Trier seen for the first time by the public, Trier's "Constantine the Great" documents the emperor's life and his pivotal role in the history of Europe.

His reign marked the point in time when Europe moved from pagan antiquity to the Christian Middle Ages. In granting the Tolerance Edict of Milan (313 AD), Constantine guaranteed Christians and believers of all other faiths the freedom to practice their religions. He was also the first Roman emperor to be baptized — on his deathbed — in the imperial villa of Ankyroma near Nicodemia in 337; introduced Sunday as a weekly holiday; and is to this day celebrated as a saint in the Eastern Church.

On display in "Master of the Roman Empire," on view in the *Rheinisches Landesmuseum* (The Rhine State Museum), are impressive marble portraits (in particular the only two remaining ones of his father Constantius Chlorus on loan from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek in Copenhagen and the National Museums of Berlin, that of his brother-in-law and rival Maxentius on loan from Dresden, and of his wife from the Louvre), sculptures (including the famous sitting statue of his mother Helena from the Capitoline Museums in Rome), valuable pieces of jewelry (including three famous amethyst cameos with Constantine's portrait from London, Berlin, and Leipzig, which are being exhibited together for the first time) and antique helmets, the most special being ceremonial ruby-encrusted ones from Berkasovo, which are in Novi Sad today.

These many objects not only depict Constantine the

Top, *Statue of Helena*, marble, 4th century. Musei Capitolini, Rome
Below, *Konstantin und Helena mit dem wahren Kreuz (Constantine and Helen with the True Cross)*, oil painting on wood, c. 1660
(© Ikonenmuseum Ichenhausen, Schloß Autenried)
(Photo: Schnellbach GmbH)



Emperor, the politician, and the man, but also give an indication of the social and philosophical changes: growing prosperity and its leisure time entertainments, such as chariot races and gladiatorial competitions, and religious tolerance, that took place during his 31-year reign — the longest since the first Roman Emperor Augustus.

Here for the first time, the world-famous giant portrait head of the colossal statue of the seated emperor, which was once 12 meters tall, from Rome's Capitoline Museums, is being exhibited abroad in the form of a full-scale replica made in Berlin by Yadegar Asisi, a German of Persian ancestry.

"The Emperor and the Christians," on view in the *Bischöfliches Dom- und Diözesanmuseum* (The Bishopric Cathedral and Diocesan Museum), concerns the evolution of the emperor's relationship with Christianity, his enthusiastic church-building program, and the merging of paganism and Christianity.

Here the displays include jewelry, early Christian sarcophagi, grave inscriptions from the Vatican Museums, clay lamps from Rome's early catacombs, Constantine ceiling paintings from Trier's first cathedral, and scale models of all the churches built by Constantine: the old St. Peter's, St. John Lateran, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and St. Peter's Cathedral of Trier. Constantine wanted these churches to stand out as visible symbols of his support for Christianity, but they also indicate the growing number of Christian communities and thus their needs for new buildings for worship. For example, during recent excavations in Trier Cathedral, the

CONSTANTINE AS GUARANTOR OF PAPAL AUTHORITY

Vatican City owes its existence to the so-called *Donation of Constantine*. The authenticity of this donation is a matter of some dispute. Since the Renaissance, the donation has been regarded by most scholars as one of the most important forgeries of the Middle Ages, drawn up between 750 and 850 in defense of papal interests. However, some scholars now argue that Constantine actually did make such a donation of territory to the Popes. According to the text of the medieval document (*Constitutum Con-*

stantini), Constantine granted the successors of St. Peter temporal power over the eastern heads of the Church and secular authority over the city of Rome and the western regions of the empire. Thus the foundation of Vatican City dates back to this document. The *Simeonstift* exhibits numerous handwritten copies of the Donation of Constantine, including a splendid example from the secret archives of the Vatican Museums. This handwritten copy from the 16th century was probably intended to be given to Charles V.



remains of a Roman house with elaborate decorations and statues, on display for the first time ever, were found under the floors of Constantine's early Christian church.

Other highlights of "The Emperor and the Christians" are the only remaining antique replica of the Holy Sepulcher from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which today is in Narbonne, and the so-called "polychrome fragments," parts of early Christian sarcophagi which still have remnants of their original paint.

"Tradition and Myth" in the *Stadtmuseum Simeonstift* (Simeonstift City Museum), is devoted to Constantine's influence and his legacy from antiquity to today. For example, not only does the Eastern Church celebrate him as a saint, probably because of the role his mother Helena played in the

discovery of the True Cross in the Holy Land, but every year Sardinia hosts an important festival in his honor at Sedilo near Cagliari. Here he is revered as the protector against illness and traffic accidents.

Over the ages, many artists, including Piero della Francesca, Raphael, Rubens, and Johannes Lingelbach, have painted his portrait or episodes from his life, not to mention that he has been an inspiration to many rulers, in particular Charlemagne, who was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in 800 AD in Rome's St. Peter's Basilica by Pope Leo III, and Mussolini. For more information, see www.luxembourg2007.com. ●

Lucy Gordan is the culture and arts editor of *Inside the Vatican*.



Top, a parade helmet from Berkasovo, made of sheet silver and gilt, 4th century (© Museum of Vojvodina, Novi Sad.)
Bottom, an ivory plaque showing a relic procession, from the Trier Cathedral treasury, 5th century (© Amt für kirchliche Denkmalpflege Trier) (Photo: Ann Münchow)