

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

Born on February 27 or 28 in either 272 or 273 A.D. at Naissus in present-day Serbia to Constantius, one of the four *Caesars* or subemperors of the Roman Empire at the time, and to the much more humble Helena, Flavius Valerius Constantinus became Constantine the Great by a fluke. He was in the right place at the right time.

Constantine was not brought up at his father's court in Trier (in present-day Germany), but rather at the court of the senior *Caesar*, Diocletian (based principally at Nicodemia in present-day Turkey) so that he would be suitably trained to be an imperial heir. Thus, when Diocletian abdicated and went into retirement in 305, his blood father Constantius summoned Constantine to participate in his military campaign to defeat the Picts in the northernmost Roman province of Britannia.

On the sudden death of Constantius, Constantine was proclaimed his father's successor and emperor by his loyal troops on July 25, 306, in York, then the provincial capital known as *Eboracum*. There is no evidence as to where in York this proclamation took place, but most likely it was in the imperial residence, on the site of the present-day Minster.

For Constantine, who modeled himself on Augustus and Alexander the Great, July 25 became his "day of power" (*dies imperii*), his accession day, and he celebrated it annually, although with special pomp and magnificence on important anniversaries, the opening and closing of the 5th, 10th, 20th and 30th years of his reign (the longest since Augustus). On each occasion there were great processions of the emperor and his family, speeches, chariot races, and the dedications of buildings, statues, and monuments. The Arch of Constantine was dedicated in 315 during his visit to Rome for the start of his 10th-year celebrations.

CONSTANTINE THE GREAT: YORK'S ROMAN EMPEROR



A marble bust of Constantine the Great, the Roman Emperor who made Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire

To celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the proclamation, York Museums Trust has organized a major loan exhibition – 270 items from 36 different museums and private collections across the UK and Europe – at the Yorkshire Museum until October 29.

The exhibition illustrates the story of Constantine and his legacy to Europe, the Mediterranean and ultimately to the rest of the world. It brings together rare historical writings and allows the visitor to explore the history and richness of the Late Roman World through exhibits of important sculptures, silver plate, gold, jewelry, mosaics, textiles, coins, weapons, games, paintings, and furniture. The third and fourth of the exhibit's five sections concern religious tolerance under Constantine; the fifth the spread of Christianity during the 5th and 6th centuries.

Highlights of "Constantine the Great: York's Roman Emperor" include:

— A magnificent marble sculpture of Constantine's head. Found in York, this head was certainly part of a statue of Constantine which probably stood in a prominent place in the Roman fortress of York. It may be his earliest portrait, perhaps carved shortly after he was proclaimed emperor.

— Rarely loaned by the British Museum, the central piece or "roundel" of the mid-4th century Hinton St. Mary Mosaic, discovered in Dorset, contains the only head of Christ on a mosaic from the Roman Empire.

— Also on loan from the British Museum, the mid-to-late-4th century Water Newton Silverware Hoard, which consists of one gold and 27 silver objects including vessels which are probably the earliest surviving liturgical plates from the early Church anywhere in the Roman Empire. The plaques of this hoard are clearly part of the same tradition as plaques dedicated to gods at pagan shrines, but instead carry Christian symbols and dedications. This demonstrates how early Christians adapted pagan practices to express devotion to their own God.

— Found in Traprain Law, near Edinburgh, the Traprain Law Treasure includes 152 pieces of silver, among them objects inscribed with Christian scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

Six years after the troops' proclamation in York, Constantine is said to have converted to Christianity, thereby becoming the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire and the most influential figure in the growth of the early Church. Constantine's influence on Christian history arose out of conflict – the several struggles he won over his rivals for total control of the empire:

Maximian, Severus, Galerius, and in particular Maxentius.

According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine was inspired by a vision in the sky of a flaming cross, the *Chi Rho* (the Christian symbol which combined the Greek letters which look like our X and P) inscribed with the words, "In this sign thou shalt conquer" on the eve of the battle at the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber, just outside Rome to the north, in 312 A.D. So, when he defeated his persistent rival Maxentius, who was routed and killed, Constantine dedicated his victory to Christ and is said to have ordered his soldiers to mark their shields with the *Chi Rho* monogram.

In a letter to the Palestinians, dated to 324 (this papyrus is certainly the star item of the exhibit), soon after he'd become sole emperor, Constantine describes his emotions behind this decision:

"I, beginning from the sea beside the Britons and the parts where it is appointed by a superior constraint that the sun should set, have repelled and scattered the horrors that held everything in subjection, so that on the one hand the human race, taught by my obedient service, might restore the religion of the most dread Law, while at the same time the most blessed faith might grow under the guidance of the Supreme."

Indeed, the Milvian Bridge battle is universally regarded as the turning point for Christianity. In 313, Constantine initiated the building of a Christian basilica at the Lateran (completed in 318), the first Christian church in Rome. That same year he and his fellow emperor of the eastern empire, Licinius, issued the Edict of Milan, which stated that Christianity would be no longer be persecuted but rather tolerated throughout the empire. The edict, in effect, made Christianity legal, but not the official state religion. Constantine continued to tolerate paganism and even to encourage the imperial cult.

At the same time, he endeavored to strengthen Christianity through financial subsidies and action: the Synod of Arles in 314 and in 325 at the First Council of Nicea (now Iznik in Turkey). He personally convened the latter and then presided over it, determined to solve the problems of Arianism. With 300 bishops from across the empire in attendance for more than a month, Nicea can be considered the first ecumenical council. The words of the Nicene Creed, still repeated today with very little change, were agreed upon there as were a formula for the relation of the Son to the Father and the date for Easter.



Hinton St. Mary Mosaic:
The "roundel" of the Hinton
St. Mary Mosaic, now in the British
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Christ on a mosaic



Constantine also began the building of the first St. Peter's Basilica and *San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura* in Rome; the first *Hagia Sophia*, of which nothing remains, in Constantinople, his "New Rome"; and the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. According to legend, his mother Helena (now a saint) found the True Cross on her visit to Palestine in 327.

Historians and most recently the controversial thriller author Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* differ greatly as to Constantine's motives and the depth of his Christian conviction. Early Christian writers like Eusebius and Lactantius portray him as a devout convert, although they have difficulty justifying his execution in 320 (on adultery charges) of Crispus, his son by his first wife, and of Fausta, his wife.

Some later historians and Dan Brown see him as a political genius, much more interested in civil order than in religious truth, expediently using Christianity to unify his empire. Since Constantine's private diaries have not survived and he wasn't baptized until he was on his deathbed in 337, we do not have all the facts to make a sound judgment, but the truth is probably somewhere in between: Constantine was a pagan, who continued all his life to venerate the



Roman sun god, *Sol Invictus*, and only gradually converted to Christianity, using his new belief for personal ends much as his predecessors had used the imperial cult.

Dr. Christopher Kelly, a history professor at Cambridge University and a leading expert on the Late Roman Empire, makes the following defense of Constantine's Christian faith. Besides the emperor's open self-confession — "My whole soul and whatever breath I draw, and whatever goes on in the depths of the mind, I am firmly convinced, is owed by us wholly to the greatest God," Constantine once said — he notes that Constantine legislated to promote Sunday as the day of rest, banned gladiatorial games, promoted Christians to high office, and was the first Roman emperor to be buried rather than cremated.

Kelly also points out that Constantine's deathbed baptism is not really evidence of his failure to embrace Christianity fully. In the fourth century many upper-class Christians delayed baptism because they believed that it washed away all sin, so they preferred to be baptized as late as possible so as not to sin again before death.

Putting aside Constantine's personal beliefs, his conversion

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Water Newton Silverware Hoard: Some of these silver objects are probably the earliest liturgical vessels in existence. Below: A modern statue of Constantine placed directly above the site in the ancient Roman city where his troops proclaimed him emperor.

had a dramatic effect on the lives of the Christians, an estimated 10% of the Empire's population in 312 AD. They were no longer persecuted. Christianity was suddenly very public. Christian churches were built with state funds; the Christian Church and its clergy received substantial tax breaks. "Almost all major cities in the Roman Empire had Christian churches built within 15 years of Constantine's conversion," Dr. Kelly told *Inside the Vatican*. "The Christian Church was suddenly transformed from a persecuted minority into a privileged institution."

Although the Roman Empire did not become Christian overnight, Constantine was responsible for changing the course of history. Without Constantine's initial active support and commitment, it seems unlikely that Christianity would ever have become the majority religion of the Empire.

A visit to York would be incomplete without a visit to the Cathedral of St. Peter's known as York Minster, the largest medieval Gothic cathedral in northern Europe, more than 500 feet in length, 100 feet wide, and with a central tower 200 feet high. It houses some of England's oldest and finest stained glass and is rich in artifacts dating back to the Roman age which began



in 71 AD. The first mention of a Christian bishop here dates to 314, only two years after Constantine's "conversion" to Christianity, and in the 7th century St. Paulinus, the first archbishop, was consecrated.

Next stop "in the footsteps of Constantine" will be Trier, the capital of Roman Germany, where Constantine lived from 306 to 312, where there will be three different exhibitions about Constantine the Great from June 2 through November 4, 2007.

The displays of "Master of the Roman Empire," at the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, will concern life at Constantine's court in Trier. "Tradition and Myth," at the Städtisches Museum Simeonstift, will concern Constantine's legacy in art from antiquity to today. Of particular interest to *Inside the Vatican* readers will be "The Emperor and the Christians," at the Bishöfliches Dom-Diözesanmuseum,

which will focus on the changing relationship between the emperor and the Christians, Constantine's enthusiastic church-building program and how elements of antiquity and Christianity came together. ●

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