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The Dedication of Constantinople

Constantine the Great Establishes his Capital at Byzantium

'Alone of all the emperors...Constantine was initiated by rebirth in the mysteries of Christ – when the ceremonies were complete he put on bright imperial clothes which shone like light.'

Eusebius (c.260-c.339) describes Constantine's baptism

It was the day on which the Emperor Constantine's new city was to be dedicated to the Virgin Mary at a High Mass celebrated at the church of Saint Eirene. But the classical past could not be avoided even on this most Christian of days. Invocations to Tyche (or Fortune), a goddess associated with the city, merged with the sound of Christian prayers. A statue of the emperor with the figure of Tyche in his outstretched hand was probably paraded in procession through the city which established an annual ritual. On every Founder's Day a statue of Tyche would be paraded with the Christian cross attached to her forehead. As Constantine processed through the city named after him, which would now be the capital of the Roman empire, he could admire the statues and works of art plundered from cities and temples right across Europe and Asia. Four hundred and twenty-seven statues had been brought into the city just in order to stand before the church of Santa Sophia. The most important object of plunder was a relic. At the heart of the city, and at the centre of the imperial vision, was the piece of wood which his aged mother Helena discovered after she set out for Jerusalem in 327. This was acclaimed as the True Cross on which Christ had died. It was now set on top of a cupola supported by four triumphal arches on a building called the Milion or First Milestone and from it were measured all the distances within the empire.

Other places showed the same mixture of pagan allusions set within a Christian dimension. The church of St Eirene itself was built on the site of an ancient shrine to Aphrodite. To the west of the Milion ran a large street called the Mese and it was by the side of this thoroughfare that Constantine had built an oval-shaped forum paved with marble where a one hundred foot column of porphyry from Heliopolis in Egypt had been raised. It now stood on a marble plinth which contained, so these new Byzantine Romans were told, the remains of the loaves used by Christ at the feeding of the five thousand as well as a figure of Athene brought back by Aeneas from Troy. At the top of the column was a statue whose body was a statue of Apollo sculpted by Phidias – the greatest of Athenian sculptors. But the head was a newly sculpted representation of Constantine and above it there was a metal halo. In the statue's right hand was a sceptre, the symbol of his earthly power, but the orb grasped by the left hand contained a fragment cut from that same True Cross, whose arrival here in the new Rome showed that this emperor ruled by divine permission and favour which enabled him to crush his enemies in battle. Evidence of piety mingled with sumptuous effects attended Constantine in this year of 330 AD which was also, happily, his silver jubilee as ruler.

Four years earlier Constantine had held a ceremony to mark the foundation of his new city and had laid the first stone of the western wall which protected this east-facing city on its landward side. Like the older Rome this *Roma Nova* too was built on seven hills – but much more quickly. And, since the new buildings and streets needed to be populated and inhabited, colonists were imported into the city on so massive a scale that the grain fleets of the eastern Mediterranean had to be redirected in order to feed them.

Constantine had chosen to build on the site of the little city of Byzantium because it was so well protected. To the south was the sea of Marmara and Byzantium was on the tip of a triangular promontory which stretched out from the Greek mainland. To the

north-west was the deep inlet called the Golden Horn and to the east were the straits of the Bosphorus leading up to the Black Sea. The coast of Asia was visible opposite.

The background to Constantine's reign was one of division within an over-stretched empire. Ever since Diocletian became emperor in 284 the idea had gained ground that the empire was too big and that it needed to be divided up into separate administrative regions. Diocletian based himself at Nicomedia in Bithynia while his colleague Maximian controlled the western territories. In 293 there followed a formal, four-fold, division of the empire into its separate constituent parts, but Diocletian's decision to abdicate in 305 initiated a prolonged period of uncertainty as rival rulers within the empire claimed the throne. Constantine was the son of Constantius I – himself a co-emperor – and both father and son had based themselves in Britain during this period of seemingly imminent imperial dissolution. When Constantius died in York in 306, Constantine was declared emperor by the legions but confined his claim to Britain and Gaul. In the same year Maxentius, Constantine's rival, was declared emperor by the praetorian guard in Rome. In 311 Constantine decided to march on Rome and confront Maxentius. The battle of the Milvian bridge on the Via Flaminia in Rome in 312 was a decisive victory for Constantine who now became undisputed and sole ruler of the Roman empire in the west. But there was another event which was recorded as taking place at the Via Flaminia a few miles to the north-east of Rome either just before or during the battle. Constantine claimed to have been granted a vision. At midday, according to Eusebius (Constantine's official historian), he saw, just above the sun, a cross of light bearing the inscription *in hoc signo vinces* (by this sign you will conquer). The victor undoubtedly fought his battle as a Christian warrior and the consequences were momentous. He would be a Christian ruler and Christianity, having been persecuted as a matter of state policy under Diocletian, would become an official and established religion.

In 313 Constantine met his fellow emperor Licinius, the ruler of the eastern territories, in Milan and issued the edict of Milan which gave Christianity full legal recognition throughout the empire. If there was just one God, it was also now obvious that there could only be just one emperor as well. Constantine first defeated Licinius in a series of battles and then had him murdered so that he now became sole ruler in both the eastern and western empires. Meanwhile, legislation made the empire more Christian. The law of 319 outlawed the murder of slaves and in 321 it was forbidden to do any work on Sunday. Constantine also abolished crucifixion as a punishment as well as the branding of certain criminals. Saints' days were officially established. Paganism continued and its followers were not persecuted though some practices were suppressed. The hope was that paganism would just wither away. Romans, after all, believed in tradition and there were therefore limits to what an emperor, bent on establishing a new one, could do. Christian heresy was a different matter. Arianism, the belief that Christ was the perfect man but not himself divine, was splitting the Church and Constantine used state power against it. He summoned a universal Council of the Church which met at Nicaea and presided over it himself, dressed in his purple imperial robes. It was Constantine who proposed and imposed the insertion into the Creed of a compromise wording. Christ the Son was *homoousios* or of one substance with God the Father. Arius of Alexandria, the

chief heretic, was condemned and most of his followers accepted the compromise. One Church, one Ruler and One Creed: these were now meant to unite the whole civilized world and the Nicene Creed is Constantine's most important theological legacy. The ruler, who used the title *isapostolos* to signify his equality with the Apostles at the end of his life, was a sincere, if bloody, Christian. When his son, the Caesar Crispus, became too popular he had him murdered. He elevated his mother to the rank of Augusta and when that made his wife jealous he showed his filial devotion by murdering the unfortunate Fausta.

Constantine wanted to make Rome as Christian a city as Constantinople and built the basilica of St Peter on the Vatican Hill. But residual republican sentiment in Rome, as well as loyalty to the pagan gods, meant that the city never took to Constantine nor he to it. The Senate he established in Constantinople was never quite the equal of the one back in Rome in terms of its prestige, yet in other respects Rome was becoming very provincial. The great intellectual centres were in the east, in Alexandria and Antioch with their celebrated libraries and scholars. Economically too, the Italian peninsula was declining, with the increasing threat of malaria, especially in the campagna near Rome, leading to a consequent drop in the birth rate. Strategically also Constantine had to look east because that was where the main threats to the empire came from – Sarmatians around the lower Danube, Ostrogoths who menaced it just north of the Black Sea, and the Sassanian Empire of the Persians.

The emperor did not get the Church unity he wanted and Arianism continued to be a powerful force. His concern with unity imposed from the top merely aggravated subsequent quarrels about theological doctrines with frequently murderous consequences. The greatest minds of Byzantium would be enraptured by over-subtle theology which is why 'Byzantine' remains an adjective for the needlessly complicated. After Constantine's death in 337, the empire returned to conflict when his two sons fought each other, but the legacy of his victory and the legend that attended it had a greater cultural consequence than any short-term political ones. Constantine himself was more at home in Latin than in Greek but the empire he left behind became more and more Hellenic. The idea of a Christian society fused with the Greek inheritance in the east and, as the Byzantine empire, it continued (with many traumas) for over 1100 years. The Constantinian revolution ensured that the legacy of classical civilization would be harnessed to the cause of Christianity and would, as a result, be re-interpreted but also preserved. Constantine saw division as a sin precisely because of the depth of his personal commitment to Christianity. Yet the idea of a secular ruler who was also spiritually authoritative was an inherently despotic one and the religion of an established Church presided over by a Christian emperor encouraged opportunistic conversions. After 330, surrounded by glory, Christianity in Europe entered the mainstream and therefore lost what it had once had – the dissenting edge of an underground movement.