

Constantine's protection of christian rights



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Reunified Rome

Constantine is remembered as the first Roman emperor to openly accept and encourage Christianity in the Empire and even converted to Christianity on his deathbed in 337. Although there are questions about how much Constantine actually knew about what he was converting to, he is still primarily remembered for the role he played in helping Christianity to flourish in the Roman Empire. I will not be focusing on the role that Constantine played in Christianity's expansion, rather on the expansion of the Roman Empire by Constantine himself. Throughout Constantine's life he had the dual burden of reuniting Rome internally and also campaigning along the Empire's borders in order to expand them outward.

Constantine was born around the year 272 in Naissus, which was located in modern-day Serbia [1]. Constantine's father, Constantius, was a Roman military officer and served as one of Emperor Aurelian's Imperial guard. Not much is known about Constantine's mother, but it is widely held that she was a Bithynian without any royal origins. In 288 Constantius was chosen by Maximian to serve as his praetor in Gaul where he remarried Maximian's stepdaughter. In 293 the Empire was divided by Diocletian which led to Constantius being appointed as Caesar alongside another man named Galerius, this became known as the tetrarchy [Week 11, Lecture 2]. Constantine was now one of the most likely candidates to one day become Caesar after his father.

Once in line to become Caesar Constantine began his education in the court of Diocletian. He learned things like Latin, Greek, and philosophy. Although

he was free to do most of what he pleased, he was still held as a sort of prisoner by Diocletian as a way to maintain power over Constantius. Despite the less than favorable circumstances Constantine thrived under Diocletian in Nicomedia and even fought for him abroad, marking the first time that Constantine would turn toward the Roman frontier.

Constantine fought for Diocletian and Galerius in the Eastern Empire. Little is known about Constantine's military service under Diocletian, but it is said that he campaigned against barbarians on the Danube in 296 and fought against the Persians in 297 [2]. Constantine himself mentions he saw the ruins of Babylon and Memphis on these campaigns while delivering "his speech to the Assembly of the Saints in Nicomedia in 325" [3]. Constantine's early campaigns would have given him a better world view and understanding of frontier peoples. This would have been a contributing factor as to why he was more tolerant than many rulers before him when it came to other people's cultures. It is also known that Constantine went to Egypt around 302 which makes his claim that he saw Memphis reasonable, but there are still doubts surrounding whether or not he saw the ruins of Babylon [3].

During Constantine's time fighting in the Roman army, Galerius "made repeated attempts to get Constantine killed by exposing him to excessive danger in battle against the Sarmatians, but through remarkable deeds of valor he slaughtered many Sarmatians" [3] according to the *Origo Constantini Imperatoris*. Although the truth regarding Constantine's heroic feats may have been stretched over the last two thousand years, the fact still remains that Constantine fought as a soldier for Rome in his youth. His

early years working to expand the Roman Empire would influence him as he continued to expand Rome for years to come.

Constantine returned to Nicomedia where he lived through The Great Persecution. This was a massive persecution against Christians ordered into place by Diocletian and to some extent Galerius. There is no evidence that Constantine participated in the persecution but there is also little evidence to show that he did anything meaningful to try to prevent it from happening. By 305 Constantine had reached the rank of tribune. It was also in 305 that Diocletian resigned and Maximian quickly followed. Constantius was chosen to serve as Augustus of the West while Galerius replaced Diocletian as Augustus of the East [Week 11, Lecture 2]. In a very surprising decision Constantine and Maximian's son Maxentius were both passed over in favor of Severus and Maximinius Daia who was Galerius' nephew.

It was at this point that Galerius again tried to kill Constantine. He first "forced Constantine to fight wild animals in an arena— but his human prey emerged from the contest in better condition than the wild beasts" [4]. After this he sent Constantine to lead an army through a swamp on the Danube to attack the Sarmatians, a task that would almost certainly lead to Constantine's demise. It is here the Constantine once again fought on the Roman frontier and found success on the boundaries of the Empire. Galerius sent Constantine to fight " Along the Danube frontier, he ordered Constantine to lead a cavalry charge through a swamp against Sarmatians— yet the brave tribune succeeded not only in leading his men to victory in rough terrain, but also in grabbing a ferocious barbarian by the hair and dragging him back to the feet of the startled emperor" [4]. Constantine had <https://assignbuster.com/constantines-protection-of-christian-rights/>

once again proven his ability at the frontier. He now needed to get out of the dangerous court of Galerius, for even he could only survive so many close calls.

In 305 Constantius requested that Constantine join him to assist in campaigning in Britain and because “ he had not seen him for such a long time” [5]. It was this request to join his father on the Roman frontier which likely saved Constantine’s life. Galerius did not wish to grant his request but since he had no real excuse not to send Constantine back to his father who was technically the senior emperor in the new tetrarchy he did as Constantius wished. It is said that “ After a long evening in his cups, Galerius finally relented, and gave Constantine his imperial seal and told the prince he might depart the next morning with formal travel orders” [5]. Constantine fearful that Galerius may revoke his decision left that very night and rode quickly across Europe “ Displaying the dazzling celerity and tactical agility which marked many of his later actions” [5]. After a journey impressive enough to have its own paper written about it, Constantine reached his father in the summer of 305.

The year spent with his father was likely the first time that Constantine pushed past the borders of the Roman Empire while leading an army of his own. Although his father was the Augustus, due to his illness it is likely that Constantine served an important leadership role in the army as they fought against the Picts who were barbarians living in Northern Britain and modern-day Scotland. Constantine also worked on fortifications and military projects along Hadrian’s wall and the “ multangular towers of York’s legionary

fortress reveal work from this period” [6] which furthered Constantine’s success in fortifying the Roman frontier.

In 306 Constantine gained imperial power after his father passed away. Before he died, he handed the symbols of Imperial power to Constantine and made it clear that he wished for Constantine to be his successor. Constantine alerted Galerius with a portrait of himself dressed as the Augustus of the West. Upon seeing this Galerius was furious but eventually agreed to make Constantine Caesar and gave the title of Augustus to Severus. Constantine ruled over Britain, Gaul, modern-day Spain, and parts of modern-day Germany and commanded one of the largest Roman armies which was stationed along the Rhine.

During his reign in the Northwest region of Rome Constantine would find himself constantly at the Roman frontier. During this time Constantine took up much of the work that was unfinished by his father and focused on securing the Rhine [7]. He also was tasked with putting a stop to multiple uprisings that had begun to encroach along the Roman frontier, some which made their way deep into Roman territory in Gaul. Franks had begun to move into Gaul and were raiding and pillaging Roman cities. Constantine was able to defeat the Franks who had entered Gaul and drove most of them back across the Rhine. Constantine even managed to capture two Frankish kings Ascarius and Megpgaisus. Constantine would go on to feed them to “beasts in the amphitheater” [8]. This showed that Constantine was completely intolerant of anyone who dared to try to cross the frontier and challenge Rome or himself.

Constantine initially remained neutral towards the conflict which had come about between Galerius and Maxentius and instead of participating in a civil war he focused his armies against Germanic tribes who were positioned along the Rhine. Constantine found great success campaigning along the Rhine border. After successfully raiding territory ruled by the Bructeri, a northern Germanic tribe, he built a bridge across the Rhine in 308 at Cologne. Constantine had now enabled Rome to push her frontier past the Rhine which was an incredibly impressive and skillful feat. Constantine did not stop here, he continued campaigning and in 310 fought the Franks along the northern Rhine achieving some small victories [9].

It was during Constantine's campaigns against the Franks in 310 that Maximian chose to rebel against Constantine. Constantine abandoned his campaign and quickly moved to capture Maximian. Although Maximian was granted clemency, it is said that Constantine strongly encouraged Maximian's suicide which he committed shortly thereafter. Despite an earlier falling out with his father, Maxentius seized this moment to move against Constantine. Constantine responded by giving a speech in which he says he was related to Claudius II which gave him the right to rule Rome [10]. Galerius soon fell ill leaving Constantine, Maxentius, Maximinus and Licinius as rulers of Rome. Constantine formed an alliance with Licinius and Maxentius with Maximinus.

Constantine made his way South moving from town to town with multiple victories on his path to face Maxentius at the famed battle of the Milvian Bridge. It is before this battle that Constantine received a sign from the Christian god which is said to have assisted in his defeat of Maxentius. This

<https://assignbuster.com/constantines-protection-of-christian-rights/>

defeat resulted in Constantine becoming the Western Augustus and ruling all of the Western Roman Empire.

It wouldn't be long until Constantine's alliance with The Augustus of the East was broken and the two men went to war with one another. Eventually Licinius reneged on the Edict of Milan which they had signed in 313 and he persecuted Christians once again. This led to multiple battles in 324 in which Constantine and his army assisted by the Franks fought and won against Licinius and his Goth allies. With his defeat of Licinius Constantine became the sole ruler of a Rome that was finally reunified under one emperor [Week 11, Lecture 2]. Constantine would go on to rebuild the city of Byzantium, naming it New Rome. It would eventually become known simply as Constantinople, a name which it would bear for over a thousand years.

Although Constantinople was not a frontier when Constantine made it "New Rome", it is worth mentioning the importance of the city and what it would mean for Rome over the next thousand years. Constantinople would become one of the most geographically important points over the next millennium as it replaced Rome as the new center of the Empire. As the Empire expanded and contracted from emperor to emperor, one of the few places that was always significant was Constantinople. It anchored Rome and was the place from which Justinian begun his conquests to take back much of the Western Empire and also the last part of Rome standing against the Ottoman Empire when what was once known as the Roman Empire finally collapsed in 1453. Although Constantinople wasn't a frontier at the time, the city which Constantine was so integral in establishing became the last frontier of the once great Roman Empire.

<https://assignbuster.com/constantines-protection-of-christian-rights/>

After having already accomplished so much Constantine could have quietly spent the last years of his reign in Constantinople taking in all that he had done for the Roman Empire. Constantine chose to do the opposite.

Constantine once again set out to defend the Roman limes and even to further expand the Empire. In 328 Constantine campaigned along the Rhine fighting back the Alemanni to keep them from invading Gaul [Week 11, Lecture 2].

It was also this year that Constantine constructed another bridge, this time across the Danube. He completed the construction of a stone bridge at Sucidava in order to allow him to more easily take the fight to the other side of the Danube [11]. Constantine also repaired the Road from Romula to Sucidava allowing for better accessibility into Dacia and established a stronghold in the form of a fort at Dafne [12]. Instead of just fighting to keep Roman territory safe, Constantine was now able to once again push the boundaries of the Roman Empire outward. This was the first step in taking back Dacia, which had been lost under Aurelian.

Constantine went on a run of successes for the next eight years. In 332 Constantine led a massive defeat of the Goths alongside his Caesar Constantine II. After a call for help from the Sarmatians Constantine marched with his army to fight the Goths where they bested them North of the Danube. Constantine continued this fight which ended in the loss of a 100,000 Gothic lives [13]. After this defeat the Goths asked for peace and signed a treaty with Rome in which the Goths would protect the Roman frontier in exchange for Roman aid in the form of food and supplies. Constantine received the title of Gothicus Maximus for his successful defeat of the Goths.

<https://assignbuster.com/constantines-protection-of-christian-rights/>

Two short years later in 334 Constantine was once again tasked with defeating barbarians on the Roman border. This time it was the Sarmatians who Constantine had come to the aid of against the Goths two years earlier. Internal conflicts between the Sarmatian people required Constantine to step in to stabilize the region South of the Tisza [14]. Constantine was then tasked with taking in hundreds of thousands of Sarmatian refugees which he spread throughout the Roman Empire. Constantine received the title of Sarmaticus Maximus for his success against the Sarmatians.

In 336 Constantine had secured almost all of Dacia which the Roman Empire had lost over fifty years prior under Aurelian. Constantine had campaigned north of the Danube repeatedly throughout his life which gave him the experience necessary to expand the Roman frontier in this direction. Little is known about specific details relating to Constantine retaking Dacia.

However, it is known that Constantine celebrated a victory in 336 in Dacia after “ he had defeated the Goths” and “ took the title Dacius Maximus in 336 to mark the triumphant end of his Gothic Campaigns” [15].

Constantine had plans to invade Persia in the defense of the Christians who were living there but would never get the chance. Constantine fell ill in 337 and all ideas of the campaign into Persia were abandoned. He requested that he be baptized while on his deathbed in Nicomedia. Constantine died soon after being baptized, leaving behind a Roman Empire which he had begun ruling thirty-one years earlier.

Constantine is remembered today for protecting the rights of Christians and the role he played in allowing Christianity to spread throughout the Roman

Empire. He is also remembered for reuniting Rome after defeating the other members of the tetrarchy and then successfully serving as the sole Emperor of Rome for 13 years. What is equally as important yet not as well remembered as these two accomplishments is how much Constantine did to secure and expand Rome's borders throughout his life. From a young age he fought on the edges of the Roman Empire to both expand and secure Rome's borders. He spent his time as a soldier, Ceasar, Augustus, and Emperor on the frontiers of the Roman Empire. By the end of his life he had received the titles of " Germanicus Maximus", " Sarmaticus Maximus", " Gothicus Maximus", and " Dacius Maximus" [16]. He even received some of these titles multiple times after successfully completing multiple campaigns. Constantine was a champion of Christianity, the person who reunified Rome, and a man who secured and pushed outward the Roman frontier for his entire life.

Citations

- 1) Bleckmann, B. (2005). Sources for the History of Constantine. In N. Lenski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World, pp. 14-32). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2) Odahl, Charles Matson. *Constantine and the Christian Empire*. Routledge, 2013. pp. 60
- 3) Barnes, Timothy David. *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*. Wiley Blackwell, 2014. pp. 98

- 4) Odahl, Charles Matson. Constantine and the Christian Empire. Routledge, 2013. pp. 63-64
- 5) Odahl, Charles Matson. Constantine and the Christian Empire. Routledge, 2013. pp. 65-66
- 6) Odahl, Charles Matson. Constantine and the Christian Empire. Routledge, 2013. pp. 67
- 7) Pohlsander, Hans A. The Emperor Constantine. Routledge, 2004
- 8) Odahl, Charles Matson. Constantine and the Christian Empire. Routledge, 2013. pp. 69.
- 9) Van Dam, Raymond. The Roman Revolution of Constantine. Pp. II, 36-39, 50-53, 62-72, 77-78, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007
- 10) Nixon and Rodgers (1994), “ XII. Panegyric of Constantine Augustus”
- 11) MacKendrick, Paul Lachlan. The Dacian Stones Speak. Lightning Source, 2012. Pp 165
- 12) Lenski, Noel Emmanuel. Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century A. D. University of California Press, 2014. pp 121
- 13) Kovacs, Peter. Constantine, The Sarmatians, The Goths and Pannonia. Vol. 1, Autoren, 2013 pp. 201-204
- 14) Barnes, T. D. “ The Victories of Constantine.” Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie UndEpigraphik, vol. 20, 1976, pp. 149

15) Barnes, T. D. "The Victories of Constantine." *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik*, vol. 20, 1976, pp. 152

16) Barnes, T. D. "The Victories of Constantine." *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik*, vol. 20, 1976, pp. 153

Used for general knowledge of Constantine

- Bury, J. B., Cook, Stanley Arthur, Charlesworth, M. P, Baynes, Norman Hepburn, Seltman, Charles Theodore, and Adcock, Frank Ezra, Sir. *The Cambridge Ancient History*. Cambridge [Eng.]: U, 1923. Print
- Van Dam, Raymond. *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*. pp. II, 36-39, 50-53, 62-72, 77-78, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007
- Holloway, R. Ross. *Constantine & Rome*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. Print
- Fowden, E. (2005). *Constantine and the Peoples of the Eastern Frontier*. In N. Lenski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World, pp. 377-398). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press doi: 10.1017/CCOL0521818389. 017
- Potter, D. S. *Constantine the Emperor*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print