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## The Second Roman Revolution: A Study in Religious Policy from 250-325 C.E.

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“THE SECOND ROMAN REVOLUTION: A STUDY IN RELIGIOUS POLICY FROM  
250-325 C.E.”

by

DANIEL DIAMOND

(Under the Direction of Timothy Teeter)

ABSTRACT

The late third century and the early fourth century in the Roman Empire was a period of profound change. The Romans struggled with several internal crises as well as constant harassment from foreign enemies. Because of this downturn, several emperors attempted to consolidate more control over several areas, including economics, the military, bureaucracy, and religion. While these episodes in political and social change are regarded among scholars as a watershed moment in history, most historians refuse to acknowledge this era as a revolutionary period. This paper focuses on one aspect of change that occurred during this period, religion. Using a carefully constructed definition of revolution, this re-examination of the religious changes within the empire attempts to demonstrate that an evolution in the religious policies of men such as Decius, Valerian, and finally Diocletian and the Tetrarchy allowed Constantine to initiate a Christian Revolution that forever altered the future of the Roman Empire and molded the future of individual European kingdoms. Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian’s religious policies altered the idea of what religion meant for the empire in two ways. First, their attempt to persecute non-traditional religious cults evolved religion from typically local institutions to giving religion a greater role throughout the state. Secondly, all three emperors

attempted to use religion as a means of social control both to attempt to deal with the serious crises plaguing the empire and also to instill unity and consolidate power. Both of these changes allowed Constantine in 312 to begin to instill the Christian religion throughout the empire as he eliminated his rivals and became sole emperor.

**INDEX WORDS:** Roman history, Christian history, Religion, Constantine, Diocletian and the Tetrarchy, Late Antiquity

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Diocletian and Constantine were remarkable leaders who ushered in a watershed epoch for the Roman Empire as it moved into Late Antiquity. Diocletian and his imperial college experimented with new and dramatically different forms of government in response to generations of turmoil. Constantine then evolved as a political leader, using his predecessor's reforms as a template to restore order while simultaneously beginning a Christian Empire. The dire situation, created by economic decline and military threats from internal and external enemies, threatened the future of the Roman Empire. However, through political reform these men saved Rome and initiated programs that altered the makeup of the government.

This change became most evident in the evolution of religion during this era. The impact of Christianity on Roman society directed imperial policy from the persecution, the toleration, and finally the dominance of the Christian Church. Through a consideration of the primary sources available and through a carefully constructed definition of the term revolution, this thesis will discuss the imperial reforms regarding religion primarily focusing on the Tetrarchy and Constantine and attempt to answer the question, was there a Second Roman Revolution?

The evidence will show that there was indeed a religious revolution. This revolution began with the persecution of Christians under Decius in 250<sup>1</sup> and came to fruition once Constantine made Christianity legal and became its champion. This revolution occurred in three phases, each of which was a revolutionary experience of its own. The persecution under Decius refocused religion from having a typically local role to having a wider role in terms of the state and legislation. Next, the trends set by Decius, Valerian, and eventually Diocletian and the Tetrarchy to persecute Christians in favor of imperial religious unity became the second phase of this revolution. Finally, Constantine's adoption of the religion and his gradual repression of pagan practices completed this revolution, forever altering the course of western history.

### *On Revolutions*

When discussing any revolutionary event, or in this case attempting to determine the validity of calling an event a revolution, it is essential to establish a working definition of the term revolution. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a revolution as a sudden, radical, or complete change. More importantly it is defined as a fundamental change in political organization; or the activity of movement designed to affect

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<sup>1</sup> All the dates in this thesis are C.E, unless otherwise referenced.

fundamental changes in the socioeconomic situation.<sup>2</sup> However, one must ask if this definition of revolution encompasses all historically revolutionary events.

Many of the ideas expressed in this thesis regarding revolutions came through a close consideration of Crane Brinton's *The Anatomy of Revolution*. Brinton's book attempts to determine a typical definition of revolution and allows for a growth in dialogue concerning specific events and the validity of naming them a revolution. The opening line of Brinton's work is helpful in creating a definition of revolution: stating, "Revolution is among one of the looser words." This allows historians to call a wide variety of events revolutionary, from the violent changes brought by the American and French revolutions to the dramatic changes brought by the Industrial Revolution. Therefore, for Brinton, revolution can become simply a synonym for words such as change, progress, or improvement.<sup>3</sup>

For Brinton, the idea of a society's attempt to achieve and maintain "equilibrium," which he describes as either a state in society in which every citizen has everything he desires, or a state in society in which every citizen responds to specific stimuli in the

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<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster Online s.v. "Revolution," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revolution> (accessed March 26, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1965), 3-7. Brinton also makes the comparison between natural science and social science in that that neither can be truly exact or absolute, there is always room for some debate.

same manner. Each citizen maintains the same inputs and outputs and the socioeconomic situation within that society becomes void of civil strife and external threat.<sup>4</sup> Societies throughout history try to achieve this equilibrium. These efforts do, however, for varying reasons, often turn into a revolution, whether through the desire for self governance or the desire to eliminate social differences. In the case of Diocletian's Tetrarchy and subsequently Constantine, it was the desire to eliminate harsh economic conditions and the threat of foreign invasion, ending a long age of crisis and recreating the grandeur of the empire at its height. In addition, Constantine also attempted to end religious controversy and change the religious make-up of Roman society.

Brinton compares this desire for equilibrium to a fever, demonstrating the contagious characteristic of revolution.<sup>5</sup> This indicates that the call for revolutionary change is not limited to specific niches within society; it is neither exclusive nor necessarily fully inclusive. The revolutionary fever may infect peoples within a precise area, or it may become a plague and affect all members of society; some may become immune to certain strands of revolution, other may become delusional and chase

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<sup>4</sup> Brinton, 15-18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 16 and 21. While Brinton's monograph focuses on four clearly left-winged revolutions, he does indicate that these events do not necessarily belong solely to the masses; there are specific events that can be considered right-winged revolutions, using the events of 411 B.C.E. in Athens as his primary example.

revolutions that do not truly exist. Thus revolutions may originate from the masses, from small groups of people, or from the highest positions of society.

There are two debates in regards to calling an event revolutionary. Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* adequately sums up the first argument. Arendt claims we can look back on specific events that occurred in Ancient Greece or Rome and know that while they instituted dramatic change, they were not revolutions because they did not alter the inevitable historical outcome.<sup>6</sup> Simply put, these civilizations inevitably failed and any attempts at social or political reform are not revolutions because of this failure. This is a dangerous use of hindsight because no contemporary action could possibly know its outcome and affect on future events; no event has a guarantee of success or failure. Using Arendt's strategy, can historians argue that the events of 1917 Russia were not a true revolution because we now know that the Soviet Union failed? The long-term outcome of historical events should not define those events' impact on contemporary society.

The second aspect of this debate considers the revolutionary men themselves and their awareness of the world around them. Bill Leadbetter's monograph *Galerius and the Will of Diocletian* focuses on the events of Galerius' life to determine the validity of claims made by ancient authors regarding the reforms of the Tetrarchy. In this monograph, Leadbetter makes a striking comparison between Diocletian and Napoleon Bonaparte, since both men ushered in new eras of civilization. Diocletian's reforms brought about political changes that ushered in the era known as Late Antiquity.

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), 13-14.

Likewise, Napoleon's actions rang in the modern age of Europe. These two are even more similar in the eyes of Leadbetter in that neither man truly understood the impact that his actions had on society. This idea allows Leadbetter to refute any claims that Diocletian and, in turn, Napoleon were ever revolutionaries.<sup>7</sup> However, this is too narrow. How can one claim that Diocletian and Napoleon were not revolutionaries simply because they did not know what impact their actions had on future events? Are we to assume that American, French, and Russian revolutionaries had some mystical power that allowed them to know the outcome of their particular revolutionary event? If not, however, that means that applying "revolution" to historical events should not depend on the knowledge of political figures.

We return to the question, must changes be sudden to be considered a revolution? The Soviet historian, Sheila Fitzpatrick tackles this question in her monograph *The Russian Revolution*, in which she attempts to demonstrate that the Russian Revolution has a historically accepted origin but lacks a conclusive end. In her introduction she argues that revolutionary historians find difficulty in agreeing on when to place the final stage of the political changes in Russia. Through the remainder of the book, Fitzpatrick presents evidence to suggest that the revolution, which began in 1917, did not come to complete fruition until the end of the Stalin era of the early 1950s. Therefore, we can neither excuse the imperial reforms of the late third and early fourth century from starting a revolution, nor can we dismiss Diocletian and Constantine as revolutionaries simply

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Leadbetter, *Galerius and the Will of Diocletian* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.

because their attempts at political change took place across four decades. Also, Fitzpatrick indicates in her introduction that there are several aspects of an event that historians address when discussing a revolution, the causes, aims, impact on society, political outcome, and time span. These aspects of revolution in late third and early fourth imperial reform are discussed in this thesis.<sup>8</sup>

Another problem when defining revolutions is something Hannah Arendt refers to as “The Social Question.” Must the people initiate changes for an event to be considered a revolution? Arendt certainly believes this to be true; however we must consider her topics of study in determining the validity of her claim. Her work is limited to the three notoriously liberal revolutions that occurred in America, France, and Russia.<sup>9</sup> In fact, most historical debates regarding revolution state that these three events are the typical revolutionary movements. They are popular, liberal movements that occurred simultaneously with a violent uprising. They occurred in a relatively short time-frame, and in that span established wholly different forms of government and socioeconomic

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<sup>8</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2. It should be noted that Fitzpatrick is one of many Soviet historians, many of which hold differing opinions on when the revolution should officially end.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, 56.

patterns.<sup>10</sup> However, Brinton argued that these three oft-mentioned events are not typical examples of revolution; but exceptions to the rule. These events took place within three of the world's most powerful (or in America's case soon to be powerful) nations, and influenced the future of international relations. However, the majority of revolutions occur in smaller regions and many fail to achieve their initial goals.<sup>11</sup> While Hannah Arendt's limitation of her thesis to these three revolutions may in turn limit its utility, the limitation does play a role in confirming the idea that the term revolution can be loosely defined and variously used.

The most important work in confirming this loose definition of revolution is Ronald Syme's *The Roman Revolution*. This work's subject is the transformation of state and society that occurred as a republic became an empire; something Syme labels the Roman Revolution. This revolution occurred because of the violent struggle between

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<sup>10</sup> While economic patterns remained relatively similar in America prior and post revolution, the generation after the war witnessed some of the best opportunities for upward social mobility. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1993) is perhaps the best source considering the American Revolution's impact on society.

<sup>11</sup> Brinton, 7.



extraordinary commanders and political factions which became an oligarchy.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the revolutions of America, France, and Russia, the Roman Revolution was not an attempt by an oppressed people to overthrow a political autocracy in favor of new regimes. Instead, the Roman Revolution created an authoritative office with near-absolute power. It was a century long struggle between powerful political figures that desired more and more authority. Moreover, Augustus' creation of the Principate was an attempt to achieve lasting peace for a generation that had not known it. In doing so, Augustus ushered in an epoch of change that shaped Roman politics until the age of the Tetrarchs in 285.

Syme's work indicates that revolutions do not follow any typical script. Revolutions need not originate from the people or for the people, as modern movements would have us believe.<sup>13</sup> Revolutions can, in fact, be movements originated by powerful members in government in an attempt to seize more authority and eliminate opposition. The evidence put forth regarding Constantine and his religious reforms will fit this mold as a second Roman Revolution.

Historians often begin their monographs on revolutionary events with a passage expressing an over-arching statement on the impact their particular topic of study had on

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), vii-viii.

<sup>13</sup> Although there are some who believe that the Gracchi began the Roman Revolution and did so for the people.

future events. Russian historians stress the importance of the Soviet Revolution on events of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, scholars of the American and French Revolutions laud the efforts of revolutionaries who ushered in the modern era of the West. Syme's *Roman Revolution* asserted that the creation of the Roman Empire was among the most important changes in history.

With all this in mind, we can determine that revolutionary events dramatically change the world around them, but also play a particularly striking role on the evolution of future events. This is no different for the changes made by Diocletian's Tetrarchy and Constantine. The utility of calling this event revolutionary is under dispute, however, many do see the impact of these political reforms played on the future of the empire. Simon Corcoran states that this event dramatically altered the pattern of the previous three hundred years of imperial rule, and paved the way for the next three hundred years.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ix-xi. It may be vital to note that Wade is one of the mentioned historians who differs from Fitzpatrick regarding the span the Russian Revolution encompassed. For him the revolution ends when the civil war begins, in the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Simon Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchy* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2000), 1.

The above mentioned criteria open the possibility of calling the reign of the Tetrarchy and then of Constantine a revolution. However, simply stating that these imperial rulers dramatically altered the face of the Roman government is not sufficient to label this event a historical revolution. T.D. Barnes states that a revolution occurs when the gains of the winners significantly outweigh the losses and protests of the losers.<sup>16</sup> A close consideration of the momentous changes occurring under the Tetrarchy and Constantine will demonstrate such a difference between those who gained more political authority and those who lost prestige, all of which ushered in a new epoch. The remainder of this thesis will examine specific imperial reforms of the late third century and early fourth century, with a focus primarily on the religious change in the empire from 250 to 325. It becomes evident that by definition created in this summary, a revolution occurred. This reexamination will place these events in their proper historical context and also draw parallels among other traditionally accepted revolutionary events in an attempt to demonstrate that there was indeed a “Second Roman Revolution.”

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<sup>16</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 245.

### *Sources*

The era of the Tetrarchy and Constantine boasts a large amount of literary sources that allow scholars to grasp the events of their reigns.<sup>17</sup> Individually the sources are not comprehensive. Considered together, however, they allow historians to weave together a coherent narrative and justify analytical claims.<sup>18</sup> Sources from the period include Christian and non-Christian authors, such as Eusebius, Lactantius, and Aurelius Victor. Also archeological discoveries such as papyri, inscriptions, and other sources are central for our understanding.

When piecing together the historical events of this era, scholars typically rely on the surviving Latin and Greek authors. However, these sources become points of dispute because of questions of bias and intent. Specifically, to what degree do Christian authors embellish the acts of martyrs and other Christian leaders in an attempt to glorify the actions of godly citizens? Conversely, do pagan authors downplay these actions to undercut the importance of the ideals of the Christian sacrifice? These issues are evident

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<sup>17</sup> Some historians state that there is enough evidence to create accurate accounts, such as Raymond Van Dam, while others claim that the evidence is still lacking, such as Barnes. T.D. Barnes, "Review Article: Was There a Constantinian Revolution?" *The Journal of Late Antiquity* 2, no.2 (fall 2009): 337.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Rees, *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2004), 3-5.

when considering hagiographies, pagan responses to hagiography, as well as all other writings of the era.

Eusebius of Caesarea is one of the best literary sources for considering the Tetrarchy and especially Constantine. He was the first author to write a history of the Christian Church, inventing the subject of ecclesiastical history. Eusebius wrote a multi-volume history entitled *Ecclesiastical History*, which details the chronology and the evolution of the Christian Church, including a reconstructed list of bishops and other clergymen as well as a portion mentioning prominent Christian authors. Most importantly, his history is perhaps the most vivid narrative of the Great Persecution of Christians under the Tetrarchy.

Equally relevant is his *Martyrs of Palestine*, which also preserves the testimony of Christians in the eastern empire under persecution. *Martyrs of Palestine* was a written remembrance of Eusebius' friends and acquaintances who became martyrs in the east.<sup>19</sup> However, Eusebius' propensity to focus upon ecclesiastical affairs leaves much to be desired in terms of the economic and administrative history essential to understanding this era.<sup>20</sup> There is also his bias towards Christianity. This can be seen not only in the negative portrayals of those who were involved in persecutions, but also in his conscious effort to glorify Christianity through emphasizing events that reinforce their heavenly

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.

favor.<sup>21</sup> There is also evidence of different editions of the *Ecclesiastical History*, which vary in some specific details. However, historians such as Barnes do not consider these discrepancies to be serious, nor do they diminish the value of Eusebius' work.<sup>22</sup>

Eusebius' seminal work is his *Life of Constantine*, a biography of the emperor, written more like a long panegyric, rather than a general history of his life. It is clear from his writings that Eusebius was an admirer of Constantine and Christian his influence. Evidence suggests that Eusebius met Constantine only a few times in his life, leading some historians to question the overall value of this work.<sup>23</sup> Eusebius' biography should be viewed with some skepticism but also valued for his understanding of Constantine's ecclesiastical opinions and a general consensus among other Church leaders.

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<sup>21</sup>T.D. Barnes, "From Toleration to Repression: The Evolution of Constantine's Religious Policies," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 21 (2002), 198. T.D. Barnes in "From Toleration to Repression" states that Eusebius gloated over the purging of persecuting administrators. However, Barnes also indicates that we would not know of these purges if not for Eusebius' comment.

<sup>22</sup> T.D. Barnes "Some Inconsistencies in Eusebius", in *From Eusebius to Augustine: Selected Papers 1982-1993* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1994), 472-475.

<sup>23</sup> Grant, 6.

Lactantius is another invaluable source in constructing the narrative of the persecutions. Lactantius was writing in 315, while under the rule of the eastern emperor Licinius. In *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, Lactantius clearly wished to demonstrate the glory of Christians who defended their faith through martyrdom. Scholarship indicates that Lactantius' writing is laced heavily with rhetoric, obviously due to his background as an educator in the subject under Diocletian.<sup>24</sup> He attributes the violent deaths of persecutors to their mistreatment of Christians. While his rhetoric should suggest a deep commitment to historical accuracy, it is Scriptural influence and an attempt to demonstrate divine intervention that indicates Lactantius' agenda.<sup>25</sup> However, T.D. Barnes argues for Lactantius as a legitimate historical source. Barnes does not believe Lactantius to be merely a propagandist for Constantine. He, therefore, accepts

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<sup>24</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 115. For an introduction to the life and career of Lactantius, see Creed's introduction to *De Mortibus Persecutorum*. Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, translated by J.L. Creed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xxv-xxix.

<sup>25</sup> Barnes, *Hagiography*, 115-116. This scriptural influence is primarily from the second book of the Maccabees, which focuses on divine salvation and punishment as a common occurrence.

Lactantius' words as truth.<sup>26</sup> Any discrepancy in Lactantius' work is outweighed by its utility.<sup>27</sup> The events of the persecution simply would not be known today if not for the *Deaths of the Persecutors*.<sup>28</sup>

Certain aspects of these authors should be thought of as accurate, regardless of their blatant propensity to be pro-Christian. For example, in 311, Galerius issued the so called Edict of Serdica, which ended the Christian persecution under his rule.<sup>29</sup> Both Eusebius and Lactantius preserved this edict and both authors mirror one another. This

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<sup>26</sup> T.D. Barnes, "The Conversion of Constantine", in *From Eusebius to Augustine: Selected Papers 1982-1993* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1994), 379.

<sup>27</sup> P.S. Davies, "The Origin and the Purpose of the Persecution of AD 303" *Journal of Theological Studies* 40 (1989): 66-94. This article delves into Lactantius' sources and accuracy.

<sup>28</sup> Barnes, "Conversion", 118.

<sup>29</sup> Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, translated by Annabel Bedini (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 129.



indicates that they had independent access to the edict either through copies or word of mouth.<sup>30</sup>

Another source from this era is the later Christian writings regarding martyrdoms, or the *acta* of the holy members of the Church, and hagiographies, biographical works on prominent members of Church history. These writings have become seminal in the history of the Church and the promulgation of the religion throughout the world. These hagiographical writings are particularly important when dealing with the Great Persecution, because these *acta* breathe literary life into the myth of those Christians who died during this tumultuous era. A challenge in using hagiographies and the *acta* of martyrdoms in studying Roman history is pinpointing the earliest mentions of martyrs in the historical accounts. An issue arises in determining their validity in their historical context. For example, the crucifixion of Saint Peter is significant in the consideration of the accuracy of such records.<sup>31</sup> Ramsay MacMullen makes an excellent contrarian point regarding the degree to which hagiographies should be trusted. Christian texts survive in greater numbers than those of pagan authors, such as Cicero, because they are held in

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<sup>30</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 8.17 and Lactantius, *DMP*, 34. This edict will be discussed in subsequent sections.

<sup>31</sup> Barnes indicates that mentioning of an inverted crucifixion is not found until the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century in Tertullian, *Praescr. Haer.* 36.3; also by Origen in his lost commentaries as quoted by Eusebius, *HE* 3.1.2.

higher regard than the traditional Roman authors. This allows for the misrepresentation of the period.<sup>32</sup>

These *acta* are documents expressing the brave actions of pious Christians who made the ultimate sacrifice in the name of their faith. The *acta* were the means by which Christian leaders could spread the knowledge of events in their communities throughout the empire.<sup>33</sup> These writings could also be used as a measure of control within the Christian communities. The spread of these *acta* allowed Christian leaders to instill ideals and social norms, and teach how to respond to questionings and harassment from persecutors. This type of control allowed for stability and uniformity for a Christian community suffering under oppressive political authority.<sup>34</sup> We come back to the aforementioned question regarding the unusual and possibly fabricated crucifixion of St. Peter. Did these authors intend to create a more saintly death for a key member of

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<sup>32</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>33</sup> Maurine A. Tilley, "Scripture as an Element of Social Control: Two Martyrs Stories of Christian North Africa," *The Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1990): 383.

<sup>34</sup> Tilley, 383-384.

Christian society, rather than have him executed in the same manner as the masses?

Unfortunately, the actual intent of these authors will likely remain shrouded in mystery.

Perhaps the best sources are the archeological evidence, including papyri and inscriptions, coins, architecture, and art. The primary uses of these artifacts were expressing imperial edicts and rescripts for the masses,<sup>35</sup> and also cataloguing daily business receipts and court records.<sup>36</sup> These sources are superior to the writings of authors, such as Eusebius and Lactantius, because they were written in a way that allowed for quick production and promulgation throughout the empire. Because these edicts and rescripts needed to reach the farthest corners of the empire quickly, they were typically shorter and succinct. This eliminated some of the bias found in long-winded histories. These documents allow us to understand the political and religious stances of the highest members of the Roman government. For some scholars, these remains are the

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<sup>35</sup> An edict spreads imperial laws through the empire, rescripts are imperial responses to individual and group petitions.

<sup>36</sup> These remains allow us to preserve imperial commandments such as Diocletian's edict on maximum prices, his edict against the Manichaeans, and several others.

single most important type of sources through which we understand Roman history.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, coins and other artistic expressions function as imperial propaganda, demonstrating the accomplishments of the emperors, at times in grandiose style. Perhaps the best example is the arch dedicated to Constantine by the Roman Senate in 312. The designs engraved into the archway represent a Constantine coming to the aid of Rome against the evil tyrant, Maxentius. This allows scholars to grasp a general understanding of the Senate's official reaction to Constantine's victory over Maxentius. The arch also offers a look into the success of a Christian emperor in appeasing a pagan city.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Historiography*

Various analyses attempt to address questions of revolutions and revolutionaries. Should Diocletian and Constantine be considered revolutionaries? Was the transition from the Principate to the Dominate a Roman Revolution of sorts? Are there other aspects, such as religious policy, that can be considered revolutionary? There is a strong consensus among the major players in the field that the answer is no. However, there are those who deem these two emperors and the period as a revolutionary experience. This

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<sup>37</sup> This sentiment is most evident in Simon Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs*. This monograph focuses on various remains dealing with the economic, religious, and administrative reforms of Diocletian to Constantine.

<sup>38</sup> Barnes, *Eusebius and Constantine*, 47.

revolution brought about dramatic alterations in methods of rule and legislation that shaped the future of the empire.

It is impossible to discuss the historiography of Diocletian to Constantine without mentioning T.D. Barnes. Barnes has become the most prolific and influential fourth century Roman historian over the last century. His articles and monographs rely heavily on primary sources.<sup>39</sup> His primary focus centers upon the religious aspects of Constantine's rise to power, demonstrating the growth of Christianity's influence in an evolving Roman Empire, a line one can follow into the development of European kingdoms. Generally speaking, Barnes would likely state that Diocletian and Constantine were not particularly revolutionary, often pointing to the imperial precedents as evidence. However, it is clear in Barnes' writing that he believes there were unprecedented changes occurring throughout the empire, culminating in the creation of a Christian Empire. This idea of unprecedented change is not lost upon the majority of scholars studying this era. This statement adequately sums up the general consensus among the most prominent of historians. The political reforms of the late third and early fourth centuries have become synonymous with dramatic change.

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<sup>39</sup> T.D. Barnes' most important works are his monographs *Constantine and Eusebius* and *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, both of which focus on the ever changing political scene within the Roman Empire using a strict focus on determining the truth using primary documentation.

There are also a plethora of biographies specifically covering Constantine as he has become one of the most popular characters in Roman history, ranking with Augustus and Julius Caesar.<sup>40</sup> The Tetrarchy is typically covered in unison with little work is done regarding individual members of the imperial college aside from Diocletian. This is primarily because there is a lack in evidence to justify such an attempt. As Bill Leadbetter states in his monograph covering the reign of Galerius, it is difficult enough to piece together a general narrative of the era itself. Without more literary sources, it is nearly impossible to draw definitive conclusions about these men leading to more assumptions and speculations than quality history.<sup>41</sup>

In 1931, historian G.P. Baker made an astute observation, comparing the events around which Constantine created a Christian empire to that of the prominent historical revolutions as epochs of momentous change. Baker, however, commits some fallacies that require address. Baker says that Constantine created a Christian revolution, using violence to champion the up-start religious community.<sup>42</sup> However, when looking at the most basic evidence, it becomes quite clear that Constantine's affinity for Christianity

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Grant's *Constantine* is highly recommendable because it is easy to read, well researched, and covers most aspects of the emperor's life and rule.

<sup>41</sup> Leadbetter, 1.

<sup>42</sup> G.P. Baker, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Revolution* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), v-vii.

and his internal military campaigns are more an act of coincidental timing than a conscious attempt to violently enforce a religious movement. For example, while it is true that by the Battle of the Milvian Bridge Constantine had already voiced his support for Christianity; the battle itself was inevitable due to political ends rather than religious convictions.

The second misconception put forth by Baker is that Christianity's response to the Great Persecution was a revolution to seize power, using Constantine as their imperial voice and hand of action. However, it is likely that Constantine was already sympathetic toward Christianity before his legendary conversion in 312. The religion was an attractive and potentially useful tool in increasing political authority over his imperial colleagues and gaining new constituents. It is more accurate to claim that Constantine used Christianity to initiate a revolution, rather than that Christianity used the emperor to seize political control.

That said, those interested in this era are not at a loss for secondary sources. It is quite clear to scholars that this is one of the greatest turning points in Roman, European, and World history. The Tetrarchy and Constantine established economic and religious policies that developed into the policies of the emerging European kingdoms. This important detail is never lost upon individual scholars, justifying the extensive bibliography regarding this period. As Simon Corcoran states, the Tetrarchy and

Constantine created a new “imperial matrix,” and as Augustus stood on the precipice of the Principate, so too did these men stand on the precipice of the Dominate.<sup>43</sup>

G.P. Baker was correct in stating that Constantine initiated a Christian Revolution. However, it was not brought on by the Christian community but by Constantine himself. The rise of Christianity did not occur through a series of violent movements, but through a series of legislation instituted by a pro-Christian emperor. The Christian revolution is the product of religious evolution that took place over nearly a century, due to a changing imperial policy.

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<sup>43</sup> Simon Corcoran, “Before Constantine,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 40.



*CHAPTER 2*  
*THE THIRD-CENTURY CRISIS*

By the middle of the third century, the Roman Empire found itself in serious economic and military emergencies. The *Pax Romana* promised by Augustus' Principate and the grandeur of the high empire facilitated by the Five Good Emperors was now an afterthought. Usurpation and challengers to the throne became common from the reign of Maximinus Thrax in 235 until Diocletian seized power in 284. In fact, while Diocletian attempted to repair the dramatic decline of the empire, he too faced several challenges. During this era of imperial challenge, emperors typically ruled for less than two years. This amount of overturn at the highest levels of political authority caused obvious damage to the ability to rule as well as to the people's confidence in the imperial office. During this era, little could protect the emperors from a sudden removal from imperial control and death.<sup>44</sup>

While emperors struggled with internal attacks on their authority, they also combated external enemies bearing down upon the empire's borders. German barbarians threatened the territory around the Rhine and Danube Rivers, compromising the northern

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<sup>44</sup> Simon Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 39.

borders of the empire, an area that had been a point of contention for generations.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, a new order of rule had arisen in the longtime Roman enemy, Persia. The Sassanids overtook the Parthians in the year 226, and promoted a renewal of hostilities with the Roman Empire. These, of course, were the two major external threats of this era, but military crisis was not limited to these areas. Rebellions in Africa, Italy, and the northern provinces along the frontier added to the armed crises, and further pressured a crumbling imperial order. While a constant barrage of attacks from multiple enemies and multiple frontiers was clearly a burden with which most leaders struggled, a failure by the military to sustain any lasting success also played a large role in the overall decline of the empire's military status. Many authors place the blame for this military crisis on Emperor Severus who failed to cope with foreign wars. After his death, the constant struggle for succession caused civil strife and invited further foreign invasions.<sup>46</sup> There was a cycle of failures to respond to internal and external pressures that plagued the empire.

Constant attempts to overthrow emperors and perpetual military action required a greater priority in funding the military. These military issues, in turn, led to an economic crisis that remained unsolved for over half a century. The economic decline in essence

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<sup>45</sup> Diana Bowder, *The Age of Constantine and Julian* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Government's Response to Crisis, 235-337* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 1.

was two-fold. First, these emperors were desperate to internal rebellions and attempts to seize control as well as end the dismal trend of defeats in battle against external enemies. There was a dramatic increase in the payments made to members of the military and in spending on military campaigns and defense. However, because the military was typically ineffectual against foreign advance, much of value was lost along the frontiers. On top of all this, the established tax system was either also unproductive in terms of enforcement from province to province or too harsh on an already economically struggling population.

Rather than attempt to reform economic policies, the empire continued to pump funds into the military. The decision to devalue the *denarius*, a silver-based coin, by casting it in bronze and covering the coin with a thin silver coat further led to the steady decline of the economy. The emperors turned to a tax system based on an in-kind procurement of goods from the Roman population and given to the army. These goods fed, clothed, and armed the soldiers, but did not satisfy their desire for monetary wealth and the emperors continued to pour *denarii* into their possession, making the value of the coins worthless. This vicious cycle demonstrates not only the feeble economic strategies that plagued the third century, but also highlights the inability of the emperors to properly cope with the onslaught of crises. The devaluation of money and the rise of in-kind taxation placed heavier and heavier burdens upon the Roman people. This led to a

growing dissent among the population, and general skepticism in the imperial institution, many questioning the government's ability to protect their lives and economic interests.<sup>47</sup>

While Decius and Valerian attempted promising reforms to quell social dissent, their reigns were as riddled with failures as those of their predecessors, primarily through the persecution of Christians.<sup>48</sup> Their political rule is not solely important because of this persecution, but also for the perpetuation of the same crises that haunted the emperors from years prior. Their military failures became the best evidence regarding the overall miserable trend of losing battles, because Decius and Valerian were themselves in the center of the military defeats. Decius died in a battle against the Goths in the year 251, reigning for two years- the average for the era.<sup>49</sup>

The greatest military failure, however, occurred under Emperor Valerian; his reign typically considered the climax of crisis. During his reign, the Persians increased troops along the border indicating an inevitable return to conflict. Famine ravaged the

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<sup>47</sup> Bowder, 1-9. This portion of Bowder's monograph offers a very succinct and well-written synopsis of the military and economic crises that befuddled the third century.

<sup>48</sup> The primary attempt to end dissent was the edicts against Christians and other novel religions, all of which will be discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>49</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 36.

empire, further shaking the people's faith in the ability of the government, and reiterating the government's response through a promotion of imperial unity. Lastly, a series of natural disasters, mainly floods and earthquakes, struck throughout the empire.<sup>50</sup> While Valerian's reign survived much longer than was typical for this era of crisis, his legacy is nevertheless sullied by his defeat and capture at the hands of the Persians in 260; an embarrassment for the Romans, left unavenged until Galerius defeated the Persians four decades later. The Persian ruler forced Valerian to grovel and complete petty services until his death. A silver lining, however, did exist in this momentous defeat. While the empire witnessed its greatest loss on the battlefield, it was Valerian's successor Gallienus who began the legislative push towards recovery from a crisis that culminated in the success of the Tetrarchy and Constantine.

#### *Diocletian, the Tetrarchy, and Recovery*

The recovery from the crisis of the third century is mostly attributed to the legislative reforms of Diocletian and the Tetrarchy. However, Diocletian's predecessors, specifically Gallienus, initiated several reforms that influenced Diocletian and hastened the return to normalcy. Gallienus, whom some label the last great emperor hailing from

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<sup>50</sup> Christopher J. Haas, "Imperial Religious Policy and Valerian's Persecution of the Church, A.D. 257-260" *Church History* 52, no. 2 (June 1983): 136.

the aristocracy,<sup>51</sup> contributed two aspects of his reign to the recovery. First, he began a reorganization of the army, including the creation of a mobile reserve unit composed mostly of cavalry. These units were composed of new recruits, limiting the strain placed upon older units. The second aspect of his reign that should be noted is the peace given to the Christians. There is no direct evidence indicating that Gallienus possessed any particular affinity for the religion. Perhaps this peace is best explained as an attempt to limit internal violence and focus priorities on external enemies.

As novel as Gallienus' reform is to the overall recovery of the empire, it was truly Diocletian's career that brought the Roman state out of the dismal trends of the third century. Ironically, Diocletian himself was a man who usurped political authority upon the death of an emperor. In 284, the emperor, Carus, died shortly after the celebration of victory over the Persians. Before Carus' son, Numerian, could consolidate power and join his brother in Rome, he too died under mysterious circumstances. It was rumored that Aper, a praetorian prefect, had murdered the emperor, although, the sources are unclear. Regardless, upon the death of Numerian, the army proclaimed Diocletian their emperor. Diocletian's first action as ruler was the execution of Aper, eliminating any claim against the validity of his imperial seat.<sup>52</sup> Shortly after, Diocletian marched on the

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<sup>51</sup> Marcelle Le Glay, Jean-Louis Voisin, and Yann Le Bohec, *A History of Rome* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 428.

<sup>52</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 39.

remaining claimant to the throne, Carus' last son, Carinus. Diocletian defeated him in the Battle of Margus.<sup>53</sup>

Diocletian's legacy in imperial rule is important for shaping trends of leadership and legislation that lasted well past his reign and those that failed still influenced future emperors. Diocletian immediately separated himself from the imperial traditions of his predecessors, effectually eliminating the Principate in favor of what became the Dominate. The crisis of the third century became the final proof needed to rid the empire of the now incompatible Principate originated by Augustus three hundred years prior. The notion that the emperor cooperated with the Roman Senate was no longer needed.<sup>54</sup> Instead there was a focus on more authoritarian leadership. This change in political authority accompanied a change in physical appearance as the emperor began the tradition of donning the imperial color of purple, adorning himself in ornate jewels, including a diadem, ordering subjects to prostrate themselves in his presence, and finally insisting on the more autocratic title of *Dominus*, lord or master, as opposed to the

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<sup>53</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 4-5. Here, Barnes provides an excellent summary of Diocletian's rise to power.

<sup>54</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 37.

traditional *Princeps*, first among equals. These changes affected the relationship between Diocletian and his subjects as well between the emperor and his court.<sup>55</sup>

Diocletian's responded to the long standing military crisis with the creation of the Tetrarchy, four members who shared authority throughout the empire. The creation of an imperial college allowed for the settlement of military emergencies without overstressing the ability of one man; the emperor could not be in two places at once. There is a lively debate among scholars regarding the idea of shared authority. Evidence suggests that there was a true split of power, and each member maintained his own absolute authority within his provinces. There is also evidence that suggests there was a hierarchy of authority with Diocletian as the senior member. The literature is full of scholars who side with either argument.<sup>56</sup> The college split the empire into four sections, each controlled by a member of the Tetrarchy. Two emperors took power in the East and in the West, with a senior member, *Augustus*, presiding over a junior member, known as a *Caesar*.

The creation of the Tetrarchy was a progressive response to the crisis of the third century. The empire had traditionally been an elective monarchy; however, there had never been an emperor with solid control of his own authority who did not appoint a son

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>56</sup> For the arguments see Leadbetter's *Galerius and the Will of Diocletian*, Rees' *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy*, and Corcoran's *The Empire of the Tetrarchs*.



as his heir.<sup>57</sup> Diocletian was, perhaps, aware that this bias towards hereditary rule played as much a role in the current state of the empire as the constant civil wars and foreign threats. Thus, he created a system of succession that emphasized merit to correct the failures of the imperial seat as well as restore popular support for the government

The creation of the Tetrarchy stems from the military threat that existed on several frontiers. In response to simultaneous conflicts with Persia and Gaul, Diocletian promoted Maximian to the position of *Caesar* in 285 and then to *Augustus* a year later. The two emperors then adopted deities to represent the two imperial positions. Henceforth, Diocletian's line was associated with Jupiter, and Maximian's with Hercules. These choices of sigils were deliberate to indicate a senior member's place above his junior.<sup>58</sup> Religious policy under Diocletian played a role in selecting these sigils for the imperial positions. Jupiter and Hercules were prominent members of the Roman pantheon. Diocletian's desire to promote imperial unity through religious restoration, therefore, played a prominent role in selecting these gods. It appears that this strategy was quite clear to the Christian author Lactantius. His *Divine Institutions* contained several diatribes against traditional paganism, and specifically mentioned Jupiter and

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<sup>57</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 40.

Hercules as reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire.<sup>59</sup> These sigils were a means by which the members of the Tetrarchy could emphasize their roles as the chosen instruments of the gods.<sup>60</sup>

While the appointment of Maximian was a short term success, a rise in military emergencies indicated the need in additional members in the imperial college. In March of 293, the senior members of the imperial college appointed Constantius and Galerius as their *Caesars*, completing the Tetrarchy. Each member took control of strategic portions of the empire, tasked with eliminating any internal and external threat, successfully, in the majority of cases.<sup>61</sup> However, Diocletian's reforms were not limited to the imperial college.

Increasing the number of imperial seats did not suffice in quelling the military crises wrought throughout the empire for so many decades. Dramatic increases occurred among the ranks of the military, vastly increasing the number of soldiers under each Tetrarch's command. According to Lactantius, Diocletian multiplied the army in

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<sup>59</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutions*, book I.

<sup>60</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 41. Details regarding specific campaigns can be found in any number of monographs from the historiography regarding Diocletian and the Tetrarchy

response to each Tetrarch's desire to hold as many men as a singular emperor had during eras of sole rule.<sup>62</sup> Diocletian also emphasized a growing change in military strategy. The typical strategy prior to 250 revolved around the Hadrianic idea of fixed lines, or *limes*, Hadrian's Wall being the prime example. This strategy was quite inadequate for threats upon the frontier and multiple troop movements. Over the course of the recovery, up to the reign of Diocletian and the Tetrarchy, the typical strategy evolved into a more fluid and mobile style of defense, commonly known among scholars as "Defense-in-Depth."<sup>63</sup> In short, this new strategy involved placing heavy units along strategic military posts, and allowing for smaller, more mobile defense units to roam designated portions of a region. This allowed the army to bolster defensive numbers at the point of an enemy's attack, rather than await an attack in hopes that their numbers matched their enemy's. Most importantly, the frontier provinces became the primary area of operation, rather than in enemy territory.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 7.2.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 91-102. See this chapter of Williams' book for an excellent synopsis of the strategy, its evolution, and its execution.

<sup>64</sup> For a succinct summary of Roman defensive strategy see, Edward Luttwak, "Defense-in-Depth: The Great Crisis of the Third Century and the New Strategies," in

Diocletian instituted a major overhaul in provincial organization, both in restructuring provinces into new groups known as dioceses as well as dividing provinces, increasing their numbers. All the provinces were grouped into these new dioceses, totaling twelve, each of which were governed by a *vicarius*. The purpose of the *vicarius* was much like that of the Tetrarchy itself. These government officials added extra layers of bureaucratic control over areas of the empire, and were tasked to maintain civil order, economic policies, and security.<sup>65</sup> This was an attempt by the emperor to increase political control over the security and economy of individual provinces, placing much more authoritative control into the imperial office.

Diocletian also made several strides in controlling and correcting the financial failures of the empire. He did this with two economic reforms. First he attempted to regulate taxation, primarily the tax in-kind program, or *annona*.<sup>66</sup> This had become one of the primary sources of imperial and military wealth during the financial crisis. However, more and more requisitions were becoming burdensome upon the civilian population. Often, soldiers used intimidation and violence to procure more goods from

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*The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

<sup>65</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 46.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

an individual than required.<sup>67</sup> Diocletian established a new tax system that mirrored the newly established provincial make-up, known as the *comitatus*. Members of this new tax committee worked along diocesan and provincial levels using a new five year census, later changed to fifteen years to determine an accurate account of individual requirements for taxes.<sup>68</sup> This became known as the indiction system. While indiction survived well into the Byzantine era, the tax reform was not met with great enthusiasm by some of Diocletian's greatest Christian critics. Lactantius called Diocletian a man of great greed, whom always sought a means by which he could increase the surplus of wealth in the imperial treasury.<sup>69</sup>

The second and more ambitious economic reform was the infamous Edict on Maximum Prices.<sup>70</sup> This edict was an attempt by Diocletian's eastern government to enforce the maximum price by merchants could charge for goods. The edict regulated

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<sup>67</sup> MacMullen, *Roman Government's Response to Crisis*, 130-131.

<sup>68</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 49.

<sup>69</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 7.5.

<sup>70</sup> Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs*, 205. Corcoran states that the edict was perhaps Diocletian's greatest legislative reform, so much so that he emphasized the need to dedicate an entire chapter to the edict.

prices across several categories<sup>71</sup> and, according to Lactantius, it was not only an attempt by Diocletian to fix financial issues occurring because of his greed, but the edict itself was surrounded by much bloodshed.<sup>72</sup> This indicates that there was staunch resistance by merchants and other citizens who provided goods or services. Evidence indicates that the edict was not enforced by Maximian and Constantius in the western portion of the empire, but forty versions of the edict have been discovered throughout various areas of the eastern empire.<sup>73</sup> This not only raises again the debate among historians regarding the authority of each Tetrarch and the hierarchy of the imperial college, but also indicates the overall lack of success of Diocletian's attempt to regulate and control the empire's economy. Overall, this reform was an over-zealous attempt by Diocletian's government to enforce regular prices, as well as eliminate competition. Ideas sounding more modern than other fourth century reforms. This reform was grandiose in its desire, but largely

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<sup>71</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 50.

<sup>72</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 7.6.

<sup>73</sup> T.D. Barnes, "From Toleration to Repression," 190. This article spends some effort in examining the debate using various legislations as examples.

failed, because it did not properly respond to the dire situation of the economic crisis.<sup>74</sup> While the edict was not as successful as other Tetrarchic reforms, it does shed some light onto the overall imperial strategy of rule. Diocletian and his Tetrarchy clearly desired to increase imperial authority, and control government processes all the way down to the provincial level. When it comes to this type of imperial control, all of the Tetrarchy's legislation pales in comparison to the type of control attempted through the imperial persecution of the Christians.

Diocletian's greatest innovation during his tenure as emperor was the decision to abdicate the throne. In May of 305, Diocletian and his senior partner, Maximian, jointly announced their decision to retire from the imperial college. It was understood that each *Caesar* would then be promoted to *Augustus*; therefore, Galerius and Constantius became the senior members of their own Tetrarchy. There remains much debate about this momentous decision by Diocletian and Maximian. For example, many scholars question the circumstances surrounding Diocletian's initial decision. According to Lactantius, Diocletian had become ill during the early months of 305.<sup>75</sup> While Diocletian's failing

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<sup>74</sup> MacMullen, *Roman Government's Response to Crisis*, 124. It is widely believed that Constantine's advent of the solidus, or gold standard, did successfully battle the growing economic crisis, and it is odd that MacMullen does not indicate this within the text.

<sup>75</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 17.3.

health possibly played a role in his decision to retire, it is more likely that his junior, Galerius, played a much larger role in pushing the senior emperor out of office.

Galerius' political momentum is unquestionable, especially after his victory over Rome's perpetual rival, the Persians. Galerius' rise in political prominence was certainly not lost upon himself. After his successes against the Persians he famously asked, "How much longer am I just to be Caesar!"<sup>76</sup> Scholars point also to Lactantius' account regarding a private meeting between Diocletian and Galerius as evidence that the junior member played his strong political hand not only in convincing Diocletian to abdicate the throne with Maximian, but to promote Galerius' candidates to the newly vacated *Caesar* positions. Indeed, Galerius' men did in fact receive the promotions over the more popular son of Constantius, Constantine. Maximin Daia and Severus took their titles upon the retirement of Diocletian and Maximian.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 9.8-9.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 18.1-15.



### *The Rise of Constantine*

A short time after becoming *Augustus*, Constantius became ill.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps understanding that his life was coming to an end, he summoned his family to Britain, where he had been campaigning. He also desired the presence of Constantine, who had been a member of the eastern court, naturally as a house prisoner of Galerius. Upon his death bed, Constantius expressed his plans for Constantine to inherit his position of authority and continue his campaign in Britain.<sup>79</sup> Once Constantius passed away, his army immediately declared Constantine his heir and proclaimed him as their *Augustus*. Eusebius' claim regarding Constantius' bequeathing his imperial seat to his son should be reviewed with some skepticism, primarily because this attempt at hereditary succession strayed away from the previous method of imperial promotion imposed after the

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<sup>78</sup> This narrative regarding Constantine begins with his inheritance of his father's army and ascension into the imperial college. For information regarding his youth and early military and political career see one of the many Constantinian biographies, such as Michael Grant's *Constantine the Great: the Man and His Times* or Timothy Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius*.

<sup>79</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1.21.

abdication of Diocletian and Maximian.<sup>80</sup> The Tetrarchy's existence not only allowed for simultaneous imperial authority at multiple points of the empire, but also allowed for a strict rule of succession based on merit and not birth. Likewise, there was no consultation with Galerius and the surviving members of the Tetrarchy. Mark Humphries has considered these issues regarding Constantine coming to power. He made an astute observation as to why Constantius, Constantine, and the army in the north might have forsaken imperial policy in proclaiming Constantine as emperor. In summary, the son of Constantius was the simplest solution to filling the void from the army losing its commander. Constantine was an able commander, educated in the art of military strategy while in the eastern provinces. Like his father, he was liked among the soldiers, but most importantly, his greatest attribute was that he was on hand. The army was amidst a campaign along the farthest of the northern borders, and simply could not wait for the imperial college to promote a new commander and send him to the battlefield.<sup>81</sup> However, Constantine would not have likely passed up the opportunity for political control.

Constantine's desire for political authority explains why he so willingly accepted the Tetrarchy's later decision to demote him to *Caesar*, allowing for Severus to take his

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<sup>80</sup> Mark Humphries, "From Usurper to Emperor: The Politics of Legitimation in the Age of Constantine" *The Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no.1 (spring 2008): 83-84.

<sup>81</sup> Humphries, 83.

rightful position as *Augustus*.<sup>82</sup> Constantine dutifully completed his father's campaigns and suppressed the barbarians in Britain.<sup>83</sup> Galerius' Tetrarchy, it appeared, found unity and harmony within its ranks. However, a rising political figure in Rome threatened that political unity. Constantine's hereditary succession from his father and the approval of Galerius created a precedent to allow Maxentius, the son of Maximian, to seize control of Rome.<sup>84</sup> Using the discontent of powerful families within Rome, who feared the decline of their positions, Maxentius gained a fair amount of popularity. This support increased after the usurper amplified monetary funding for the restoration of prominent buildings within the city itself. Regardless of the popularity among the people, Maxentius failed to garner any support from the Tetrarchy. Galerius sent Severus to negotiate surrender with Maxentius, who quickly beguiled Severus and took him hostage and subsequently murdered him.

Maxentius' actions led to an inevitable struggle between and the senior member of the Tetrarchy, Galerius. Like the citizens of Rome, Galerius' soldiers turned on their

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<sup>82</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 25.5.

<sup>83</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1.25.

<sup>84</sup> Noel Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine," in *The Age of Constantine*, 62. A description of Maxentius as feeling slighted is a common description of the son of Maximian and son-in-law to Galerius.

emperor in favor of the generous monetary spending of Maxentius.<sup>85</sup> Such a loss in numbers limited Galerius' ability to wage a pitched battle or siege Rome, thus Galerius retreated to the north carrying the embarrassing sting of military defeat.

While Severus and Galerius struggled with Maxentius in Rome, Constantine solidified his imperial position through a series of successful campaigns on the northern borders, as well as through a marriage alliance with Maximian. This political move requires some consideration. For example, why would Constantine risk political unity with his fellow Tetrarchs on a marriage alliance connecting himself to the father of a usurper? The most likely explanation is that Maximian still commanded respect from the imperial college. Likewise, it could be argued that Constantine's marrying Fausta aligned him with the former *Augustus*, but not necessarily with the usurping Maxentius. The obvious omission of Maxentius from Constantine's panegyric to Maximian in 307 also indicates that Constantine desired to distance himself from the usurper.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, Constantine's political and military actions during the early years of his reign increased his popularity among his soldiers and adherents, as well as solidified his claim to authority and succession. With the death of Severus and the political backing from Maximian, Constantine looked to regain the title of *Augustus* that had eluded him the prior year, a title which Maximian gladly granted to Constantine.

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<sup>85</sup> Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine," 63.

<sup>86</sup> *Pan. Lat.* 7.

With the Tetrarchic harmony in clear disarray, Galerius attempted to regain political unity in November of 308 at Carnuntum. The senior member of the Tetrarchy invited Diocletian to attend the conference and issue a final verdict on political positions. To the chagrin of Constantine, Diocletian judged that Licinius, a military commander, should become the eastern *Augustus*, and Constantine remain his *Caesar*. Seeing that his marriage alliance with Maximian did not bear the fruit of his desire, Constantine began to alienate himself from the former emperor. This schism in their relationship culminated in 310, following an attempt by Maximian to once again seize power and eliminate Constantine. However, Constantine's growing popularity hindered Maximian's political movement and the former emperor committed suicide at the behest of Constantine.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, in 311, the final member of the original Tetrarchy, Galerius, passed away.

Constantine's elimination of Maximian severed any potential thread between and Maxentius.<sup>88</sup> The ever bold military commander pushed south into Italy.<sup>89</sup> His military march engaged in battle against the usurper, Maxentius. This battle immediately altered the fate of the Tetrarchic experiment and initiated a dramatic change in Roman society that altered the political and religious make-up of the empire.

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<sup>87</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 30. 1-6.

<sup>88</sup> This time Constantine married off his sister to Licinius.

<sup>89</sup> Lenski, 68.

*CHAPTER 3*  
*EARLY PERSECUTION, 250-284*

This thesis now turns from considering general political narratives and their commentaries to taking a closer look at the evolution in imperial policy towards religion, specifically Christianity. This examination will highlight turning points in the imperial treatment of the Christian community and other novel religions throughout the empire.<sup>90</sup> With this evidence, it will become clear that an overall revolution in the religious experience occurred, culminating under the reign of Constantine and the rise of Christianity as the dominant religion.

The persecution of Christians has an important place in the historical record leading into the early fourth century and the Great Persecution. Evidence from several generations of authors agrees that early Christians witnessed violent persecutions under the rule of many emperors. Nero, a mere decade and a half after the reported death of Jesus Christ, initiated the first instance of massive persecution against the Christian community;<sup>91</sup> the infamous response by Nero to a fire in Rome, which he blamed on the Christian population. The truth surrounding this reported fire and Nero's response

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<sup>90</sup> Mainly the Manichaeans, which will be discussed in the chapter on the Great Persecution.

<sup>91</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44 and Lactantius, *DMP*, 2.9.

remains under scrutiny;<sup>92</sup> however, this violent response ushered in wavering epochs in which the Christian population witnessed violent persecution and contrarian periods of relative peace.<sup>93</sup>

Nero's persecution against the Christians was limited to Rome, maintaining a localized tradition of religious practices existent throughout the history of the Roman Empire. Much of the religious experience remained within a local context with individual towns focusing on different members of the Roman pantheon. Nero's attention focused solely on the Christians living in Rome and he never issued any imperial legislation calling for persecution throughout the empire. Nero's actions did vilify the emperor in later Christian writings; as did his other political actions vilify him in other sources.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, Nero's persecutions become a benchmark example of sporadic events, both in terms of geography and chronology, which became the theme of Christian and Roman relations until the later persecutions of the third and fourth centuries.

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<sup>92</sup> Sordi, 30

<sup>93</sup> Nero's persecution is described by Lactantius in the earliest sections of *DMP*, 2.5-9.

<sup>94</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 2.9. Lactantius claims that as prophets heralded the coming of Christ, *eodem modo etiam Neronem venturum*, so did Nero also herald the coming of Satan.

Modern scholarship's greatest source for early imperial policy towards Christianity is the dialogue between Emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger. Pliny's letters to the emperor, written whilst serving as the governor of Bithynia, are undoubtedly an iconic *de facto* source for the second century and allows for an understanding of the Christian community's social and political position. The letters regarding Christianity are quite explicit. Pliny expressed to Trajan his desire to understand the imperial policy towards citizens who profess the Christian faith and have abandoned the traditional religious practices, primarily the refusal to sacrifice.<sup>95</sup> Trajan responded that Christians should not be actively sought after for punishment and those who were held should simply be compelled to make sacrifice and abandon their Christian beliefs. Pliny admitted ignorance regarding the Christian faith and imperial policy. This may indicate a lack of conformity throughout the empire in dealing with Christians and further demonstrates the religious trend of localization. Nevertheless, this became the imperial policy towards Christians until Decius in 250 issued an imperial edict calling for forced sacrifice and a general persecution of Christians throughout the empire.<sup>96</sup> In similar fashion to Nero, Trajan's imperial policy never became an official edict enforced throughout the empire.

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<sup>95</sup> Pliny, *EP.*, 10.96.

<sup>96</sup> Sordi, 59.



Many Christians accepted Trajan's opportunity to maintain their lives and freedoms in exchange for an abandonment of Christianity. This caused a split among members of the Christian community regarding those who sacrificed during persecutions, known as the lapsed, and whether they should be accepted back into the Church during periods of peace. This debate divided the community and threatened their unity. This split dramatically altered Constantine's plans for the religion once he became their champion, causing a momentous change in the relationship between church and the state.

Trajan's policy became the typical stance of the state towards the Christian community. While levels of persecution and legislation against Christians increased under Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus, their actions and legislation never contradicted the guiding principle laid down by Trajan. The rise of Montanism, a Christian movement later deemed heretical, led to an increase of suspicion towards the Christian community. The nature of this new Christian sect called for a further separation of the community from the governments of the world, emphasizing the strangers in a foreign land idea regarding a Christian's time spent on Earth. This sudden attempt by the Montanists to challenge Roman imperial rule led to the passing of several laws that further stripped the Christian community's freedoms, such as laws allowing the government the right to search a suspected Christian's property.<sup>97</sup> These trends continued until Emperor Decius issued his edicts on religion.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 71-73.

### *The Decian Persecution*

In 249, Emperor Decius issued an edict calling for all members of the empire to make sacrifice to the gods. Not only was this the first imperial edict against Christians, it was also the first empire-wide attempt to regulate religious practice. It is commonly believed that this edict was the imperial justification for later persecution edicts issued by Valerian and then Diocletian and the Tetrarchy. The Roman landscape during Decius' reign was befuddled with dire issues surrounding the military, political administration, and the economy. Wars in the east against the Persians and in the north along the frontier plagued the empire and brought uncertainty and distrust in the effectiveness of the imperial government. Traditional evidence from surviving authors such as Eusebius and Lactantius lumps Decius' action against Christians among those of the other persecuting emperors.<sup>98</sup> This is most important when considering Diocletian and his originality as a legislator and overall imperial ruler. Legal precedent suggests that Diocletian was not wholly original in issuing edicts against Christians, but an imperial ruler who continued a tradition of persecution for the sake of unity. However, the historical connection of Decius and Diocletian's edicts has come under scrutiny in regards to their similarities, and differences.

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<sup>98</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 4.1-3 and Eusebius, *EH*, 6.31.1-5. The opinion of the Christian community regarding Decius is quite clear as Lactantius introduces him as *execrabile animal*, an accursed animal.

Modern discovery suggests that Decius' edict did not target Christians alone, as traditionally stated by Christian authors.<sup>99</sup> Other religious groups that did not regularly practice traditional Roman beliefs also became targets of this edict to sacrifice; excluding only the Jewish population, whom were typically considered harmless in terms of political harmony. This belief is primarily based on evidence suggesting that a member of a cult to the god Petesouchos received orders to return to the traditional ways of religious practice, which directly demonstrates that Christians were not the only members of the empire whom found difficulty in performing their ritualistic traditions.<sup>100</sup> The edict may not have directly implicated Christians but the legislation's essential nature targeted the foundations of Christian beliefs. It was commonly known throughout the empire that Christians did not make sacrifice and held a strict monotheistic outlook on religion. Since Trajan, sacrifice was the traditional litmus test for adherence to Roman practices.<sup>101</sup> Certainly Decius and his top advisors knew this when writing out the terms of his edict. Christians did resist and many lost their lives; therefore, while the edict may

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<sup>99</sup> Sordi, 101.

<sup>100</sup> J.B. Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999): 140. Rives indicates in this article that while there is no evidence directly confirming that Jews were excluded in this edict, the lack of Jewish authors complaining about forced sacrifice likely suggests they were in fact excluded.

<sup>101</sup> Sordi, 101.

not have specifically target Christians, it did initiate a persecution throughout the empire.<sup>102</sup> The edict garnered much disdain from Christian authors, highlighted by Eusebius' claim that Decius himself was a hater of the Christian religion.<sup>103</sup> Eusebius also dedicates a portion of his *Ecclesiastical History* to those martyred under Decius. This indicates that while the persecution lasted only a year, Christians did establish a tradition of resistance during the earliest stages of mass persecution and many met certain death.<sup>104</sup>

Decius' edict influenced the edicts issued by Valerian and Diocletian and the Tetrarchy but the any other significant similarities are limited. Specifically, Decius' edicts did not single out Christians, while Valerian and Diocletian's legislation did, calling for the arrest of Christian clergy and the destruction of local churches.<sup>105</sup> Likewise, the lack of specification under Decius may suggest an overall attempt by the emperor to return the empire back to Roman traditions, rather than a crusade against

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<sup>102</sup> Simon Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 36.

<sup>103</sup> Eusebius, *The Oration of Constantine*, XXIV.

<sup>104</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 6.42.

<sup>105</sup> Rives, 142. Although Decius did not specify Christians, he did have Clergymen arrested as demonstrated by Sordi, 101.

Christianity itself. Many believed that the Romans needed the protection of the gods in order to escape the crises of the third century. Decius saw himself as the man who both fulfilled and enhanced Trajan's religious policy, adopting the name *Traianus* to celebrate their unity.<sup>106</sup> Where Decius differed from Trajan is his active attempt to root out Christianity, arresting clergymen in Rome and attempting to eradicate the religion by targeting its leaders rather than solely targeting the adherents.<sup>107</sup> However, sporadic enforcement throughout the provinces did not allow for a wide success in attacking Christian leaders while targeting individuals only caused death.

What scholars must take from Decius' edict is that his actions against the Christians had as much effect on traditional Roman cults as it did on those targeted by the legislation. The pagan religion of the Greeks and Romans had a long standing custom of more localized significance. With a new emphasis in imperial regulation of religion, practices came to the forefront of imperial thought. Secondly, this edict altered an individual's obligation to become actively involved in cult practices. No longer did pagan cults build their foundation upon the deity's relationship with the community; individuals and their relationship with a deity grew more personal, a practice traditional

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<sup>106</sup> Sordi, 101

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 104.

to Christian worship.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, Decius emphasized what he believed to be stark definitions regarding what was Roman and Christianity did not fit into that definition. Later persecutions under Valerian and Diocletian's Tetrarchy followed Decius' lead.<sup>109</sup>

Decius' contribution to a general trend in Roman religion and the eventual rise in Christian influence remains evident. The decision by Decius to persecute Christianity ushered in the first phase of the religious revolution. To summarize Marta Sordi, Decius' religious policy in essence placed the entire Roman Empire on trial and citizens throughout made conscious efforts to prove their innocence or accept their own guilt.<sup>110</sup> His actions not only allowed legal precedent for future persecutions,<sup>111</sup> but it also brought religion to the forefront of social and political thought, allowing for the Tetrarchy's

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<sup>108</sup> Rives, 144-147.

<sup>109</sup> MacMullen, *Roman Government's Response to Crisis*, 40. MacMullen claims the emperors did this in an attempt to have non-Christians identify the community as alien and hostile.

<sup>110</sup> Sordi, 101.

<sup>111</sup> Rives does put forth evidence for Decius' edict as well. This further emphasizes the long tradition of imperial precedent. Rives, 147.

attempt to regulate religion, and Constantine's success in doing so.<sup>112</sup> Religion was now an institution seeking universal usage. Ironically, Christianity's foundation in society stemmed from it being heralded as *the* universal religion, barring any hereditary or monetary pre-requisites for membership. Decius' edict, therefore, granted Constantine the ability to unify his adherents through religion, in an attempt to justify his political position above those who had equal or better claims to authority. No longer was religion primarily localized occurrences as imperial mandates gave broader context to religious experiences and responsibilities.<sup>113</sup> Religion became an experience for Roman society that could be shared throughout the empire.

Decius' actions also initiated the second phase of this revolutionary religious experience, using the institution as a tool for social control to promote imperial unity. This was an attempt by emperors throughout the end of the third century to reconstruct the grandeur of the Roman Empire through divine appeasement and regaining the *pax deorum*. The crisis of the third century led many to believe that the disunity of religious practice played a large role in the steady decline of the empire. Therefore, many blamed Christians, who refused to participate in pagan traditions for the gods' anger towards the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>113</sup> Haas, "Valerian's Persecution," 134. Here, Haas indicates that after Decius' death religious persecution reverts temporarily back towards localized events; and that it would not become fully state-wide until Valerian.

Roman state. This set of circumstances allows for a logical conclusion to ban practices that did not adhere to the *mos maiorum*. Decius' example directly leads to attempts by future emperors, primarily Valerian and Diocletian's Tetrarchy, to likewise use religious mandates to control the population and force imperial unity through religion.

Furthermore, Constantine will also use Christianity as a form of social control, promoting a universally accepting religion to a status of imperial favor.

Decius' legacy is a result of his overall failures as an imperial military leader and the failure of his attempts to unify Roman under a singular religious banner. His death on the battlefield only solidified his failures as a leader and the failure of his legislation to properly meet the demands wrought throughout the empire by the crisis. However, his failure did not convince his successors to end persecution and allowing free religion, but caused them to stray further away from the policy set forth by Trajan. While Decius fancied himself as the man who fulfilled Trajan's religious desires, the truth remains evident that the former ruined the legacy of the latter.<sup>114</sup>

#### *The Valerian Persecution*

Following the death of Decius and the succession of Gallus, the Christian Church witnessed a brief two year period in which they enjoyed relative peace. During this time the Church recovered from the Decian persecutions and attempted to re-establish local

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<sup>114</sup> Sordi, 105.



authority in several important pockets of Christians.<sup>115</sup> After those two years under Gallus, Valerian and his son Gallienus took power by overthrowing the emperor. Eusebius praises the initial amicable relationship Valerian had with the Christian community, stating the he was among the friendliest of emperors towards the Church.<sup>116</sup> This general peace stemmed from Valerian's desire to promote peace throughout the empire after a period of tumultuous bloodshed within and beyond the borders.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps the sudden persecution by Valerian hit the Christian community harder than the onslaught of violence under Decius, because the formers peaceable attitude caused many to become lax in their preparations against persecution. Like Decius before, Valerian's persecution was one of two general attempts to eradicate the empire of the Christian faith.<sup>118</sup> A series of natural disasters during the earlier years of Valerian's reign caused his change in attitude towards the Christians, perpetuating the idea that Valerian's reign was the climax

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<sup>115</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 7.5 and Haas, 135.

<sup>116</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 7. 10. 3.

<sup>117</sup> Haas, 135.

<sup>118</sup> G.E.M de Ste. Croix, "Aspects of the 'Great' Persecution," *The Harvard Theological Review* 47, no. 2 (April 1954), 104.

of the third-century crisis.<sup>119</sup> Valerian also used religion to emphasize his own authority and garner a stronger relationship with government officials, particularly the Roman Senate. Families of ancient hereditary origin populated the senate house and thus the political body was traditional hostile towards Christians. A policy of political persecution strengthened the bond between emperor and senate through a common enemy.<sup>120</sup> However, unity may not have been Valerian's sole purpose for persecuting the Christians. Hailing from Etruria, Valerian ascribed to a type of paganism with origins dating back much further than any Roman tradition. Some scholars believed that Valerian genuinely feared the rise of a Roman Empire governed by a Christian political class. This strict adherence to the traditional pagan belief system created a fear of Christianity destroying Rome.<sup>121</sup> Apparently this fear was shared by many in the empire, allowing for Valerian to relate the Christian belief with disloyalty to the imperial institution, allowing for a general acceptance of persecution.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Haas, 137.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>121</sup> Sordi, 109.

<sup>122</sup> Haas, 138. Here Haas summarizes popular scholarly interpretations of Valerian's reasoning for persecution.

Where the two emperors differ is that Valerian's edict specifically targeted Christians by name, whereas Decius' edict called for a general sacrifice. Eusebius dedicated a portion of his history to discussing those who became martyrs under this second wave of state wide persecution, indicating that Valerian's persecution mirrored Decius' in its violent nature. Valerian's edicts both followed Trajan's example and also established new patterns of imperial religious policy. Like Decius before, Valerian used the Christian refusal to sacrifice as a tool to single out the community.<sup>123</sup> Citizens enjoying higher political ranks lost their privileges and members of the Christian Church suffered a loss in communal importance. However, a return to apostasy did not allow for a return to normalcy for those stripped of their class and rank, as those branded a Christian forever lost their privileges. Furthermore, Christians lost basic freedoms such as the right to assemble at their own cemeteries. Valerian attempted to root out members of the Church and established a political policy attempting to hinder the religion from ever returning. His attacks on the clergy achieved greater success than his predecessors, resulting in the death of the Pope and four deacons.<sup>124</sup>

Eusebius' transcription of a letter exchanged between Dionysius, the Bishop of Alexandria, and the vice-prefect of Egypt, Aemilian, clearly demonstrates the overall purpose behind Valerian's persecutions. In this letter, the vice-prefect directs Dionysius

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>124</sup> Sordi, 111 and Haas, 136.

to accept the clemency the rulers had bestowed upon the Christian community and return to the worship of the traditional Roman gods. Aemilian indicates that the persecutory measure were in place to promote imperial unity under a religious banner; an attempt to restore divine favor in exchange for religious obligation. Dionysius responded that man should have the right to worship the god of his choosing and he also expressed a general prayer made by many Christians asking for the success of imperial rulers, using Valerian and Gallienus as his example.<sup>125</sup> Clearly, Valerian maintained the notion that religious unity was the key to solving the crisis of the third century. However, even under the threat of violence, the Christian communities remained vigil and unified, creating a reputation for their unity from community to community and throughout the empire. This was an aspect of the religion that attracted a man such as Constantine who sought a means to both promote imperial unity and instill control.

This exchange also reinforces a common theory regarding Christianity's relationship with the empire. While New Testament scripture states that Christians are not among the remaining population, calling them aliens in a foreign country,<sup>126</sup> it is clear that the Christian community needed the empire to remain prosperous. Although

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<sup>125</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 7. 11. 7-11.

<sup>126</sup> A Key aspect of St. Augustine's *The City of God*. Not to be confused with the ideals of the Montanism, which took this strangers in an alien land to a much greater anti-political system.

Christians did witness sporadic periods of persecution under various emperors, they had survived for nearly three centuries. However, there was no guarantee of survival if the Germans or Persians took control of the empire. Christians constantly accepted the status quo, clearly skeptical of the possible alternatives.

Valerian's persecution, albeit a violent attempt to eradicate the Christian religion, allowed for the growth of the Christian community and allowed for Constantine to use Christianity as a tool to enforce his authority over the empire. Valerian's actions against the Christian community allowed the Church to evolve from a cult with no official recognition to an institution deserving of imperial recognition through legislation. These legislative actions had varying effects on the community, from allowing the greatest attempts at persecution under Diocletian as well as allowing legalization under Constantine.<sup>127</sup>

The crises in the third century allowed for the persecution of Christians. It gave emperors the justification to promote unity and express suspicion of those refusing to adhere to the traditional Roman religion. Furthermore, the crises allowed for a general support from the remainder of the population, looking for any scapegoat to instill blame.<sup>128</sup> Valerian perpetuated the revolutionary changes made to religion by Decius. Religion continued to gain a broader state-wide role under Valerian, now specifically

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<sup>127</sup> Sordi, 108.

<sup>128</sup> Haas, 138.

bringing Christianity to the forefront. Likewise, his desire to use traditional paganism as a means of imperial unity caused future rulers to consider religion in that same context. Valerian in essence allowed Constantine to seek out Christianity as a means of unifying the empire under the Christian banner, acting as its champion.

### *The Peace under Gallienus*

Since the first persecution of Christians under Nero, the community had witnessed periods of persecution and sporadic periods of peace. This is confirmed by Eusebius describing relatively peaceful eras prior to the persecutions by Decius and Valerian. Likewise, following the embarrassing defeat to the Persians and eventual capture of his father Valerian, the Christians witnessed a period of peace and official recognition from the imperial legislation of Gallienus.<sup>129</sup> First and foremost, Gallienus' edicts repealed the persecutory legislation issued by his father. The edict also returned confiscated property to the bishops and gave official recognition to the Christian community.<sup>130</sup> In terms of confiscated property, Gallienus specifically addressed the issues with cemeteries and the rights of Christians to that land. By restoring the bishops' rights to this land, Gallienus

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<sup>129</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 7.13. Ironically, Lactantius does not mention Gallienus by name although he does mention that after the fall of Valerian, no one dared to repeat his offense and act against God, Lactantius, *DMP*, 6.3.

<sup>130</sup> Sordi, 116.

allowed the Church both legal recognition and the right to implement this recognition in legal disputes. There is also evidence demonstrated by multiple scholars indicating that this newly acquired legal standing came into play under Aurelian, whom settled a land dispute in favor of the Church of Antioch.<sup>131</sup> Marta Sordi uses Gallienus' letter to Dionysius found in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* to validate this postulation.<sup>132</sup> Lactantius neither mentions Gallienus by name, nor the terms of his peace. This is unusual because the theme of *De Mortibus Persecutorum* centers on the demise of the evil and the uplifting of the righteous. However, Lactantius merely suggests that because of Valerian's failures, none after him attempted to battle God.<sup>133</sup>

The peace afforded to the Christian community by Gallienus lasted for forty years. Like similar periods of peace the Christian Church used this break from harassment to strengthen their unity and further develop their hierarchy. Furthermore, this peace and newly found legalization allowed the Christian Church to bolster their population as well as gain members from populations previously unattainable to conversion. These new recruits hailed from several classes of educated elites such as

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<sup>131</sup> Sordi., 117

<sup>132</sup> The actual edict has never been recovered, its only known mention is Gallienus' rescript to Dionysus in *Ecclesiastical History*.

<sup>133</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 6.3.

doctors and lawyers. The greatest example of this is the conversion of Lactantius, which occurred in the years leading up to the Great Persecution under Diocletian. Members of the Christian community penetrated the army as well as the imperial courts, gaining both ecumenical and political influences throughout the empire.<sup>134</sup>

Most importantly, the peace under Gallienus created the imperial precedent for Galerius' toleration edict in 311 and the Edict of Milan in 312 which both perpetuated the inevitable end of persecution against the Christians for good.<sup>135</sup> However, as the Christians of the early fourth century soon discovered, the peace of Gallienus did not last. Hostilities against the Christians arose from the Illyrian emperors of the Tetrarchy. The Christian community once again witnessed violence on unprecedented levels.

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<sup>134</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 52.

<sup>135</sup> Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 95.



CHAPTER 4  
THE GREAT PERSECUTION

The Christian peace under Gallienus allowed the community advantages not previously available to them. Christians grew in population among members of the army and imperial courts. This allowed the Christians a growth in unprecedented political participation and influence. However, non-Christians surrounding Diocletian saw this religious cult as a danger to imperial unity.<sup>136</sup> None were more influential and vocal regarding this danger than the eastern *Caesar*, Galerius. This introduces two debates concerning the origins of the Great Persecution and an overall shift in imperial religious policy. First, there is the debate regarding the reasoning behind the shift from toleration to persecution. How did the imperial college view Christians? Were they seen as a threat to the empire or was this transition to violence due to religious differences? Secondly, there has been a constant dialogue among historians concerning the willingness of each emperor in initiating violence towards the Christians. To what degree did Diocletian truly desire to persecute the Christian community; and how much influence did Galerius have in perpetuating violence?

These questions are as vital to understanding the Great Persecution as the edicts and acts of violence themselves. An examination of the evidence suggests that

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<sup>136</sup> Simon Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 52.

Diocletian's religious policy perpetuated the evolution of the religious experience initiated by Decius in 250. His attempt to eradicate the Christian community from the empire was the penultimate event that allowed Constantine to create a religious based empire due to an ever rising emphasis on state-wide religion. Likewise, it evidence suggests that Diocletian desired to reattempt the policy instated by Decius, using religion as a source of imperial control to promote unity.

*Origins, Sol Invictus, and Tetrarchic Conservatism*

The sudden rise in the Christian population was not the only point of religious contention for Diocletian and his colleagues. The empire witnessed a period in which monotheistic tendencies rose in practice and practicality. The key aspect of this change towards monotheism was the rise of *Sol Invictus*, the most supreme sun-god. For so long, the image of the sun represented religious toleration and unity. The religious peace during the last decades of the third century allowed for the development of a supreme deity in which the empire could seek protection from during times of need.<sup>137</sup> Naturally, the sun became that deity. However, there was no sudden jump from polytheism to monotheism, nor was there a sudden monotheistic revolution. There was no desire to rid

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<sup>137</sup> Sordi, 122.

the empire of long-standing members of the pantheon; simply put, it was the desire to elevate one deity over the religious hierarchy.<sup>138</sup>

Of course, the most influential proponent of promoting *Sol Invictus* was Emperor Aurelian. Under Aurelian, *Sol Invictus* became the supreme deity of the pantheon and the emperor had several temples built in Rome in honor of the sun-god.<sup>139</sup> In fact, Aurelian often claimed to be the incarnation of *Sol Invictus* himself.<sup>140</sup> Proclaiming deification was not uncommon in imperial history. However, under Diocletian this practice witnessed a dramatic alteration, straying away from self-proclaimed deification in exchange for taking a role as the gods' representatives on Earth.

Some consider Diocletian to be a religious conservative. In fact, Simon Corcoran claims that Diocletian found comfort and security in maintaining the Roman traditions. His religious convictions centered on a restoration of the *mos maiorum* in order to gain confidence in not only the imperial government but also restoring confidence in the Roman gods as a whole. His legislation focused on promoting morality customary to the Roman past. For example, in 295 Diocletian issued an edict against incest, an act

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<sup>138</sup> M.L. West, "Towards Monotheism" in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* eds. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 24.

<sup>139</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 51.

<sup>140</sup> Williams, 58.

typically frowned upon in Roman history.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, Diocletian's adoption of Jupiter and Hercules to represent the imperial positions was a response to both the aforementioned rise in monotheism among traditional pagans as well as a response a rise in other novel religions during the religious peace.<sup>142</sup>

Certainly acts under Diocletian indicate a desire to return to the traditions of Rome. However, it remains unclear if his actions to suppress religious groups were an attempt to promote imperial unity and social control or strictly due to his own religious convictions. Scholars fall on either side of the spectrum. Marta Sordi makes claims that the persecution against the Christian community was always a religious matter with little to no political implications. For Sordi, two factors play into her argument. First, Christians had always considered themselves as good Roman citizens, returning to the idea that Christians often prayed for the prosperity of the empire in fear of any alternative. Second, the Roman government, since the time of earlier persecutions under Decius, never considered the Christians to be particularly threatening to the empire.<sup>143</sup> She also claims that Diocletian was prepared to show toleration to the Christians as had

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<sup>141</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 51.

<sup>142</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 8.1. Lactantius holding off the mentioning of splitting imperial authority until after he covered other changes in Diocletian's government indicates the broader importance in appointing Maximian as a partner.

<sup>143</sup> Sordi, 4.

become typical since the reign of Gallienus. However, after goading from close advisors and his *Caesar*, Galerius, Diocletian became readily apt for persecutions.<sup>144</sup> Sordi's disposition relies heavily on the narrative put forth by Lactantius. Lactantius never gives Diocletian any redeeming qualities or indicates that he was willing to tolerate the Christians; however, it is evident that Lactantius believed it was Galerius who pressured Diocletian into issuing the violent edicts. For Lactantius, the origin of persecution stemmed from Galerius' mother and her deep-seeded hatred towards Christianity.<sup>145</sup> Other reputable historians agree that Galerius played a strong role in initiating the persecution of Christians which is both an evidence of imperial opinions regarding the community and an indication of Galerius' growing political influence.<sup>146</sup> Scholars claim that the imperial leaders hailing from the Balkans were generally more pious towards the

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 123. Also see Williams, 173-174.

<sup>145</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 11.2. Galerius' mother was of some local religious importance and held regular sacrificial banquets. When Christians refused to attend she became ill-willed towards the religion and convinced Galerius to rid them from Roman society. 11.3-8 describes a conversation between the two emperors regarding persecution, which considered with some skepticism.

<sup>146</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 18-19.

traditional Roman religion and abstained from any support towards Christianity.<sup>147</sup>

Therefore, accept Lactantius' narrative regarding the origin of the Great Persecution as plausible.

Some did believe that the Christians and other novel cults did pose a threat to the overall unity of the empire. These religious communities were often looked upon as a fifth column movement seeking to overthrow the empire from within.<sup>148</sup> Diocletian's mentioned conservative stance on religion could reflect an overall conservative stance in all his political platforms. It is likely that Diocletian issued edicts regarding religion using imperial precedent from Decius and Valerian. More specifically, Diocletian issued his edicts against Christians in an attempt to promote imperial unity and institute social control using this emphasis on Roman traditions. The groundwork allowing such a political stance on religion had already been set forth by previous emperors, and Diocletian took advantage of it. Religion's growing imperial role established by Decius and Valerian reached new heights thanks to the promotion of *Sol Invictus* by Aurelian and a general trend towards monotheism by Roman society. Using religion to promote unity and instill a new form of control had also become common place among emperors.

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<sup>147</sup> Rives, 142-143. While Rives does admit that the evidence to definitively prove Decius' excelled piety, he is likely guilty by association and through his actions.

<sup>148</sup> Corcoran, "Before Constantine," 51.

With this in mind, it becomes more apparent that Diocletian's reiteration and return to traditional pagan practices and persecution of other religions has a greater political role than religious disagreement.<sup>149</sup>

One glaring example emphasizing religious persecution as a political play focuses on Diocletian's edict against the Manichaeans. Manichaeism was a dualistic religion with influences from Christianity, Judaism, and various Persian religious traditions. Worst of all, for the purposes of those against the cult, it hailed from Persia. The evidence available to modern scholars suggests the issue began after the Proconsul of Africa, Julianus, addressed the growth of Manichaeism in Alexandria.<sup>150</sup> The official opinion regarding the spread of Manichaeism believed this novel religion's growth stemmed from an overall excess of religious freedom. This freedom allowed men, such as Mani, to spread religious falsities as truth.<sup>151</sup>

The imperial response indicates that he believed the cult should be punished for three reasons; that the cult originated from Persia, it corrupted the ancient traditions of

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<sup>149</sup> Williams, 174.

<sup>150</sup> Iain Gardner and Samuel N.C. Lieu eds., *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 116 and Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 20.

<sup>151</sup> Gardner and Lieu, 1.

Rome, and it corrupted the virtues of the Roman people. Diocletian ordered the burning of all sacred texts, the stripping of class and ranks of the adherents, and death to those who resisted.<sup>152</sup> This language became familiar to Christians suffering persecutions of their own a year later. Since the emperors believed the sect to be a subversive fifth column, the edict meant not only to limit their influence but also to eliminate them from Roman society.<sup>153</sup>

The government used propaganda to reinforce the idea that the emperors were preserving the traditional ideals of Roman society and religion. What the edict on the Manichaeans and Christians show is that these men attempted to centralize religious practice. The reasons why Diocletian and the Tetrarchy attempted to centralize and enforce religious practice, however, remain a mystery. Were the imperial colleagues truly pious men, who saw the religious movement away from the *mos maiorum* and issued these edicts as personal crusades against foreign religious practices? Should we look at these edicts as an attempt to enforce uniformity throughout the empire during a time of dire emergencies? The language of the edict against the Manichaeans suggests that it was the latter. Wars with the Persians plagued the Roman Empire, especially in the mid to late third century. Fears of Persian subterfuge through religious missions could very well have been a serious and legitimate concern of the imperial administration. Christian authors did agree with the imperial government regarding the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 117

<sup>153</sup> Corcoran, 'Before Constantine,' 51.



dangers and falsehoods of the Manichaeans. In Eusebius' sections of the *Ecclesiastical History* that address the peace of Gallienus, Eusebius reports on the growth of the Manichaeans which he likely attributed to the peace itself.

The persecution under Galerius after Diocletian's retirement also attempted to restore and reform pagan worship.<sup>154</sup> This idea of reformation and restoration in pagan worship traced its roots to the period of persecution under Decius in the middle of the third century.<sup>155</sup> This confirms that the Tetrarchy attempted to eliminate these foreign cults in an attempt to restore religious tradition. However, a particular emphasis on eastern persecution and allowing Constantius and Maximian in the west to lackadaisically persecute reinforces the idea that these repressions were an attempt to create unity and eliminate the potential threats from the east. It is clear among many scholars that persecution against the Manichaeans and Christians stemmed from the refusal to adhere to the *vetus religio*, or ancient religions.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 378.

<sup>155</sup> Sordi, 100-105.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

### *The Great Persecution*

As obscure as the origins of the persecution remain, the specific details regarding the law of the edicts and the promulgation of that law is widely accepted. Diocletian's sudden persecution of the Christians followed an attempt to sacrifice cattle for the purpose of the *haurpices*. Lactantius claims that sacrificial events were induced by demonic spirits. This belief in the demonic taint of sacrifice was a common thought among Christians, and those in attendance of Diocletian's sacrificial alter made the sign of the cross to protect themselves.<sup>157</sup> This angered Diocletian greatly because he believed that the sign of the cross confused the auspices and he ordered everyone in the imperial palace and all military personnel to make sacrifice. Any who refused were beaten severely and any soldier who refused was immediately discharged from service.<sup>158</sup>

This began the purging of Christians from the army. It is here in his narrative that Eusebius established his long tradition of holy martyrs.<sup>159</sup> Soldiers were easy targets for persecution. Logistically speaking it would be far too difficult to target civilian Christians because they were widespread, secretive, and have the ability to move from

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<sup>157</sup>Lactantius, *DMP*, 10.2.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.4.

<sup>159</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 7.4.1.

place to place. However, soldiers are confined to small areas, such as camps. Their schedule is rigid and closely monitored; therefore it is easier to determine if individuals or small groups of soldiers are participating in Christian practices, or better yet, refusing to take part in pagan traditions. Soldiers could choose between Christianity and maintaining the rights and privileges afforded to their ranks within the army. Some chose the latter, but it is clear from Eusebius that there were many who did not deny Christ and were discharged and often times executed.<sup>160</sup> If believe that Diocletian intended to follow the standards set forth by Decius and Valerian, using religious policy as a source of control and unification, then the Roman army was a natural starting point for persecution.

On February 23, 303 during the festival of the *Terminalia*, Diocletian and his *Caesar* instituted the first general persecution against the Christian community itself.<sup>161</sup> The *Terminalia* was a deliberate choice by Diocletian to initiate his persecution. This is due to the fact that the *Terminalia* is a day of important auspices and other traditional pagan practices.<sup>162</sup> Prefects and other Roman officials forcibly entered the sacred house in Nicomedia and burned the scriptures while allowing those involved to seize any items

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 7.4.2.

<sup>161</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 12.1. For arguments regarding the dates of persecution see Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs*, 179-182.

<sup>162</sup> Sordi, 127.

deemed valuable to the Christian Church.<sup>163</sup> The following day, Diocletian issued his edict declaring that any Christian with an official imperial position was stripped of their rank. Likewise, any upper-class citizens likewise were stripped of their rank. All who did not acknowledge traditional Roman gods were subject to torture. The stripping of class rights and political rank meant that no one could claim exemption from violence. According to Lactantius, Christians lost all rights afforded to being a citizen of the Roman Empire.<sup>164</sup> Christians from various locations opposed the edict immediately after its publication. Euethius, whom Eusebius described as a prominent Christian in Nicomedia, destroyed the copy of the edict delivered to his church. His actions led to what is likely the first martyr of the official persecutions of Diocletian.<sup>165</sup> It was at this time that Eusebius believed Christians witnessed their true position in Roman society. The houses of worship were gone, their holy scripture were seized and burnt, and some of those they had trusted with upholding the integrity of the Church ran away or forsook their position.<sup>166</sup> Thus began the Great Persecution, a struggle between Hellenistic society and the Christian Church, taking place throughout the empire.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 12.2.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.1.

<sup>165</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 7.5.1.

Not long after the first edict, additional letters of imperial law against the Christians began to circulate around the empire. The second edict called for the arrest of all clergy. Subsequently, most likely due to overcrowding in many prisons, these Church leaders were tortured and forced to make sacrifice to the Roman gods. These methods of torture included scourging, torture racks, beatings, and other various forms of violence. Those who refused were executed, becoming martyrs for their faith.<sup>168</sup> However, often times these prisoners were forced by soldiers to make sacrifice that, according to Eusebius, would not pass under normal circumstances. This is perhaps the best piece of evidence favoring the Tetrarchy's attempt to promote religious unity throughout the empire, rather than a simple attempt to eradicate Christians because of ill will or malice.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 7.2.

<sup>167</sup> Norman Baynes, "The Great Persecution," in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 12, eds. S.A. Cook et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 647.

<sup>168</sup> Eusebius, *EH*, 3.2-3.

<sup>169</sup> Frend, 365-366.

*The Great Persecution, Success of Failure?*

The swath of surviving sources may perhaps indicate to unwary readers that the Great Persecution was a widely successful political movement against the Christian community. However, the persecution experience's successes and failures varied throughout the empire but was an overall failure. The main culprit in this failure returns to the debate regarding the varying degrees of authority given to the members of the Tetrarchy. According to Eusebius' narrative, Constantius did little to enforce the edicts against the Christian in his portion of the empire; only nominally participating through the destruction of some churches.<sup>170</sup> Later edicts were typically not enforced by Constantius or Maximian after 304.<sup>171</sup>

Once Diocletian and Maximian retired, Galerius seized the opportunity to increase violence alongside his newly appointed *Caesar*, Maximinus Daia. This increase reinforces both that Galerius maintained a more deep-seeded hatred for the Christian community as expressed by Lactantius and that he played a strong role in instigating the

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<sup>170</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 15. 6-7. Lactantius also indicates early in the narrative that he and likely other Christian intellectuals held high esteem for Constantius saying, *quoniam dissimilis ceterorum fuit dignusque qui solus orbem teneret*, that he should have ruled the empire himself.

<sup>171</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 24.

initial persecution under Diocletian. Where Galerius differed from Diocletian was his ferocity and lack of sympathy for those whom he sought to punish. Lactantius claimed that there were no prospects of imprisonment or exile; if one was accused of practicing Christianity it was certain they met a violent death.<sup>172</sup> This is perhaps Lactantius' most striking passages in terms of the details given regarding violence. The description of screams heard throughout the city and children being left to hang as an example to their parents sends a chilling message and clearly indicates that fear and doubt filled this era of the empire.<sup>173</sup> Galerius did not employ any sense of merciful execution. The victims who claimed no rank were lit from their feet and offered cold water to drink so that they wouldn't "breathe their last breath too quickly".<sup>174</sup> In fact, Lactantius claimed the Galerius found pleasure in witnessing his prisoners' sufferings.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 22.2

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.2

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.9.

<sup>175</sup> Lactantius' discussion of Galerius' "pleasures" in 21.5 and then immediately mentioning the act of slowly burning Christians in 21.7-11 indicates that Lactantius believed Galerius thoroughly enjoyed these events.

With Galerius and Maximinus in control of the east, the persecution of Christians reached higher levels of violence.<sup>176</sup> To what degree Diocletian had participated or desired violent persecutions became moot for the Christians of the east in 306. At this point, both members of the imperial college desired to eradicate the members of the Church with a particular emphasis on ferocity and malice.<sup>177</sup> The echoes of suffering throughout the city streets reinforce not only the equal desire for persecution among Galerius and Maximinus, but also set the tone for a continuity of unprecedented violence in the east.<sup>178</sup> It becomes clear that whatever political goals Diocletian desired from enforcing religious uniformity fell to the wayside under Galerius and Maximinus. Any redeeming factor in Diocletian's initiation of persecution becomes tarnished by Galerius tainting of his political legacy.

The year 306, however, was a pivotal year in the persecution of Christians, with the death of Constantius and the ascension of Constantine by his father's army.

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<sup>176</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 21.1-11. As soon as Maximinus took control as *Caesar* he began to uphold the edicts as well as issue various edicts of his own Rees, 66 and Corcoran, 182.

<sup>177</sup> Lactantius tells of Maximinus' propensity to force Christians to face beasts at their death in the twenty-second book of *De Mortibus Persecutorum*.

<sup>178</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 23.2.



Constantine's first edict was the restoration of Christianity as a legal religion in the empire.<sup>179</sup> While this edict ended what little persecution did occur in the western portions of the empire, it also emphasized dissent among the imperial college regarding the treatment of Christians and their roles in the empire. This also established the slow decay of collegial relationships among the second Tetrarchy. Differing opinions and imperial edicts in the east and west proves not only equal power to issue these edicts, but a lack of unity among the emperors in their enforcement.<sup>180</sup> Political events in 306, however, did little to slow the eastern persecutions against Christians.<sup>181</sup>

Once Galerius faced Maxentius in Rome and suffered the sting of defeat. He summoned his colleagues to attend the conference in Caruntum. Afterwards, Galerius returned to the east where his health slowly failed. Seeing perhaps divine poetic justice,

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 24.9. Rees does well to inform his readers that this fact is under debate by some historians. It does fulfill the character of Constantine desired by Eusebius and Lactantius, which opens up debate into its historical validity, Rees, 67. Note that Constantine was proclaimed *Augustus* by his soldiers, but demoted to *Caesar* by Galerius until the death of Severus as expressed in the chapter, "The Third-Century Crisis".

<sup>180</sup> Rees, 67.

<sup>181</sup> The rise of Constantine without imperial favor and the usurpation of Maxentius to name a few of the issues.

Galerius connected his harsh treatment of the Christian community and issued an edict to end persecution against Christians. The so-called Edict of Serdica of 311 comes down to modern scholarship from both Lactantius and Eusebius. In the edict, Galerius stands firm in his opinions against Christians, but maintains that massive violence never completely solved any issues between the Christian community and pagan traditions.<sup>182</sup> While Barnes questions the significance of the edict in actually ending hostilities in the east,<sup>183</sup> the implications of this edict are clear regarding its precedent for the later Edict of Milan.

However, Constantine's rise in the west and Galerius' edict of toleration did not suffice in ending the persecutions against the Christians altogether in the east as Maximinus Daia and later Licinius continued sporadic persecution until their final demise. Upon the death of Galerius, Maximinus annulled his toleration edict and continued violent persecutions against the Christians.<sup>184</sup> In fact, it was several years after Constantine's initial ascension to power before the pro-Christian emperor achieved his goals in championing the Christian Church. New legislation, civil wars, and the repression of pagan traditions were required in order for this to occur. Everything hinged on Constantine's success against Maxentius in their inevitable conflict of 312.

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<sup>182</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 34 and Eusebius, *EH*, 8.17.

<sup>183</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 39

<sup>184</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 36.3.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONSTANTINE AND THE CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION

For fifty years the Roman Empire witnessed periods of dramatic changes in religion. Emperors Decius and Valerian changed religious contexts with a new importance at a wider state level. Likewise, each emperor used this new context to instill religious control and promote imperial unity during times of crisis. Their actions against Christians and other minority cults highlighted this change in religious policy. The crisis of the third century allowed for these emperors to invoke the *pax deorum* as a means to gain popular support; using Christians as their scapegoat. This strategy culminated under Diocletian and the Tetrarchy, which used this religious precedent as one of many tools in their massive legislative reforms. This revolution in religious policy comes to a head through Constantine as he moved the empire into an era of unknown territory. An empire in which Christianity quickly became the dominant religion in terms of ecumenical authority and political influence.

Of course an obvious question arises; why Christianity? Where does Constantine's affinity for the religion originate? It is understood from Lactantius and Eusebius that Constantine's father was, at least, sympathetic towards the Christian community; could Constantine's relationship with the Church stem from his father's own relationship with the religious body? We also understand that Constantine spent much of his formidable years under the watch of the eastern emperors, where he received his education. It is likely that he witnessed persecutions through his own eyes. Is it possible that he was drawn to Christianity through the sacrifice and tenacity of Christian martyrs?

Sadly, the available sources leave answers unattainable. There is debate among historians regarding the conversion of Constantine, mainly focused upon the famous legend of his seeing a sign from God prior to his battle with Maxentius in 312.<sup>185</sup> The validity of this legend suffers from its obvious skepticisms. For the purposes of this study, it should be stressed that by the 312 conflict with Maxentius, Constantine had in his own way converted to Christianity and become the champion of the religion.<sup>186</sup> In fact, focusing on the political aspects of the conversion stems directly from the language used by Eusebius in his narrative regarding the conversion story. The introduction to the story indicates a clear political plan for Constantine as Eusebius claims that the emperor understood the importance in using divine favor in political action.<sup>187</sup>

Religious conviction aside, championing Christianity offered various political advantages. As mentioned before, emperors for several decades attempted to unite the

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<sup>185</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1. 27.

<sup>186</sup> For a summary of his conversion event see Noel Lenski's "The Reign of Constantine" in *The Age of Constantine*, 66-68, H.A. Drake, "The Impact of Constantine on Christianity," in *Age of Constantine*, 113-116, Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great*, 139-147, or Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 43.

<sup>187</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1.27.1. See, H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 15 for a modern sources agreement that Constantine's conversion story had serious political overtones.

empire under a singular banner of religion. One aspect of Christianity is its universal characteristics, allowing any man or woman to worship.<sup>188</sup> Likewise, Christianity witnessed a growth in population among educated members of society under the peace of Gallienus. Finally, during an era in which monotheism became a more applicable alternative for non-elites, Christianity became ever more popular among the lowest ranks of society. The outcome of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge dramatically impacted Christianity's political position in the western empire and initiated the promotion of its legality.

### *Becoming Sole Emperor*

Once Constantine cut ties with Maximian he then focused his attention on Rome. The usurper, Maxentius, enjoyed favorable support when he first entered Rome, but this favor had run thin. According to Eusebius, Maxentius conducted various violent and adulterous acts against the Roman citizens that turned much of the population against him.<sup>189</sup> Prior to the battle, Maxentius had all bridges crossing the Tiber weakened or

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<sup>188</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2009), 39-42. See this portion of Stephenson's monograph for sufficient insight into the attractiveness of Christianity for women and the rise of their population within the Christian community.

<sup>189</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1. 34-35.

destroyed to prevent Constantine's army from marching upon the gates of the city.<sup>190</sup> This measure inevitably led to Maxentius' defeat and subsequently his death. According to Lactantius, Maxentius had a much larger army consisting of his own troops, his father's troops, and the troops that had belonged to Severus. While Lactantius does not mention them, it is likely that he still held the forces that had deserted Galerius during his campaign against the usurper of Rome as well.<sup>191</sup> Lactantius continues his narrative saying that Constantine took his forces to the destroyed Milvian Bridge, where Maxentius had constructed a makeshift overpass to meet Constantine's force on the other side of the Tiber River. Whether it was the ferocity of Constantine's men or the commander's reputation is unclear, but Maxentius and his men retreated from battle, scurrying over the makeshift bridge. The bridge collapsed from the pressure, and many men including Maxentius fell into the river and met their end.<sup>192</sup> Constantine called himself the liberator of Rome and triumphed through the city.<sup>193</sup> The senate and people of Rome welcomed

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<sup>190</sup> Grant, 38.

<sup>191</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 44.2.

<sup>192</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 44.6-9 and Eusebius, *VC*, 1.37-1.38.

<sup>193</sup> Grant, 39. Grant uses various coins to demonstrate the propaganda used to create a representation of Constantine as the liberator.

Constantine into the city and declared him the senior *Augustus*, an action that angered Maximinus Daia in the eastern empire.<sup>194</sup>

After the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine desired to complete three specific goals regarding his political conquest of the entire empire. He intended to elevate the Christian Church while simultaneously deconstructing traditional paganism. However, unlike his predecessors, Constantine did not use violent or coercive measures to enforce conversion; rather he instituted several legislative acts that both increased Christianity's image as a viable religious practice, while making paganism either obsolete or economically inferior. Through this measure, Constantine created a new class of Christian elites who slowly replaced the traditional aristocracy.<sup>195</sup> Constantine also elevated his own authority to include absolutism within the empire as well as absolutism within the Church, an institution later labeled *Caesaropapism*. This effort culminated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 where Constantine's actions created a new relationship between the Christian Church and the state.

Finally, Constantine desired sole rule of the Roman Empire. When considering Constantine's political and religious goals on separate planes, his actions present some inconsistencies; however, when considered as a mutual strategy for political control, it

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<sup>194</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 44.12

<sup>195</sup> H.A. Drake, "The Impact of Constantine on Christianity," 111.

becomes clear that above all things, Constantine pushed for political dominance over religious fulfillment. This final goal paints a much more accurate and vivid portrait of the politician we know as Constantine. Instead of a man driven by his religious convictions, we see a man driven by political ambition. As it is most poignantly stated by historian Raymond Van Dam, “Before Constantine was a Christian emperor, he was a typical emperor.”<sup>196</sup> In terms of political strategy, Constantine took a page from his predecessors, using religion as a means to unify the empire. This strategy becomes clearer upon the examination of internal Christian threats and Constantine’s response to those threats. Through his legislative program, Constantine allowed for the entry of Christianity into the realm of politics and economics, while slowly pushing out traditional pagans.<sup>197</sup>

Constantine’s next step in gaining control of the empire was forging an alliance with Licinius and removing Maximinus Daia from the east. After defeating Maxentius and consolidating power in Rome, Constantine made way for Milan where he met Licinius and forged a marriage alliance, giving his sister to his imperial colleague. It is

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<sup>196</sup> Raymond Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>197</sup> George Depeyrot, “Economy and Society,” trans. Noel Lenski, in *The Age of Constantine*, 247.



here that the two men apparently established the infamous Edict of Milan.<sup>198</sup> The edict itself is an historical moment of monumental implications.<sup>199</sup> The most important aspect of the edict was its call for total religious toleration throughout the empire. Constantine and Licinius took the edict issued by Galerius as precedent to create a joint religious policy condemning violence against religious groups. Clearly this was a political play by the two emperors, who like Galerius clearly had strong religious convictions but wholly believed in the political issues surrounding violent persecutions. The peaceful co-existence of religious beliefs was an excellent alternative to violence and civil strife.<sup>200</sup> While Constantine and Licinius claimed their allegiance to the Christian God, they also indicated that they allowed the divine nature of their deity to convince pagans to convert

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<sup>198</sup> The edict is surrounded by controversial debates in the historiography, mainly because the surviving evidence comes from edicts issued in places rather than Milan. For the best discussion of the issues surrounding the edict see Torbern Christiansen, “The So-Called Edict of Milan,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 35 (1984): 129-175.

<sup>199</sup> H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 193-198. See this section of Drake’s monograph for a well-written take on why this was an momentous event in western history.

<sup>200</sup> Drake, “Impact of Constantine on Christianity,” 122.

rather than attempt to convert them through violence. While Maximinus Daia continued to persecute Christians in the east, violence had officially been outlawed in the west.

For all contemporary purposes, it appeared that Licinius and Constantine were unified. However, as mentioned previously, Maximinus Daia's attitude towards his colleagues, his treatment of Christians, and the political goals of Constantine and his brother-in-law created a scenario in which Maximinus became dispensable. Once Maximinus received word of the marriage alliance between Constantine and Licinius, he marched with his army in haste towards the west. It was here that Licinius and Maximinus clashed for rule in the east.<sup>201</sup>

The historical narrative regarding the civil war between Licinius and Maximinus Daia plays little significance in the general context of Constantine's religious revolution. However, there are three pertaining aspects of this conflict which we understand from the primary sources, specifically Lactantius. Like their predecessors, both Licinius and Maximinus invoked deities to represent their campaigns. What we understand from Lactantius is that Licinius chose to side with Christ, while Maximinus sided with the symbol of supreme authority in the empire, Jupiter.<sup>202</sup> Subsequently, Licinius received a vision of a prayer which he then taught to his soldiers. Coupled with hindsight, it becomes evident that Licinius' desire to associate himself with Christianity further reiterates the overall theme of emperors invoking religion for political gain. As

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<sup>201</sup> Lactantius, *DMP*, 45.2-6.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.2-3.

demonstrated later in this section, Licinius' relationship with Christianity was strenuous at best and clearly hinged on his own relationship with the Christian emperor, Constantine. Secondly, Once Licinius' army became the clear favorite to win, he announced the Edict of Milan.<sup>203</sup> This action initiates several questions, the most prevalent being that if Licinius truly was a Christian adherent, why wait until a major military victory to announce legislation for religious toleration? The answer says more about Licinius' political goals than his religious convictions. It was an attempt to garner more support from eastern Christians who finally had the prospect of free worship.

The final aspect lends support to earlier questions regarding the political hierarchy of the Tetrarchy. Several times in Lactantius' narratives he points to Maximinus Daia's reaction to members of the Tetrarchy receiving promotions over him, even though he had been a member of the imperial college for a longer term. Often times Lactantius uses language that suggests extreme jealousy on the part of Maximinus. This indicates that there was some semblance of hierarchy in the Tetrarchy and that members did not have free reign in their respective regions. This evidence furthers the argument regarding political authority and hierarchy as each side of the debate possesses quality points of contention.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 48.1.

<sup>204</sup> An excellent summary of the war between Licinius and Maximinus Daia can be found throughout the historiography of Constantine's career, however it should be

Licinius and his army chased Maximinus Daia until the most senior member of the Tetrarchy met his defeat. Licinius took his place as emperor of the eastern portion of the empire while his brother-in-law continued to consolidate his power in the west. However, the relationship between the two emperors deteriorated over time. Eusebius offers the easy explanation that Licinius began to persecute the Christians in the east, issuing several pieces of legislation that hindered Christian worship.<sup>205</sup> However, it is clear to most historians that the relationship between Licinius and Constantine diminished over much more than religious difference. Licinius' sudden change of attitude towards the Christian community places his earlier actions into their proper context.<sup>206</sup> His joint issuing of the Edict of Milan, allowing for freedom of worship, as well as his adoption of Christ as his sigil prior to battling Maximinus Daia clearly become political plays in Licinius' effort to gain sole power in the east. Many scholars

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noted that Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum* offers a very readable narration of the event.

<sup>205</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1.50-1.57. 2.1 indicates that Licinius allowed violent persecutions, going against the Edict of Milan.

<sup>206</sup> Barnes indicates that his actions present a contradiction, but when focusing on his political scheme his motives become quite clear. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 70.

indicate that Licinius' turn against the Christians was merely a secondary factor to the growing political rivalry with Constantine, citing that Licinius viewed the Christians as the proverbial fifth column that ousted Licinius in favor of Constantine.<sup>207</sup>

Licinius' other actions indicate that the growing rivalry between the two emperors took on serious political implications. Twice, Licinius refused to acknowledge Constantine as a fellow *Augustus*, once in 316 and again in 324.<sup>208</sup> The final straw occurred when Constantine sent Bassianus, another brother-in-law of Constantine, as a candidate to become Licinius' *Caesar*. Licinius then instructed Bassianus to march on Constantine, which prompted Constantine to kill Bassianus. This action determined for Constantine that war was the only possible outcome for him and Licinius.<sup>209</sup> Like the civil war between Licinius and Maximinus Daia, the military strategy and overall narrative of the war between Constantine and Licinius holds little importance in the overall context of religious reform, except for one aspect. Upon the defeat of Licinius, Constantine became the sole emperor of the Roman Empire, the first since Diocletian's short stint as sole emperor thirty-nine years prior. The first Christian emperor now

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<sup>207</sup> Bowder, 31.

<sup>208</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion, and Power in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford: Wiley- Blackwell, 2011), 47.

<sup>209</sup> Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine," 73.

controlled the entirety of the empire, allowing for a growth of the Christian community and also allowing Constantine to institute a massive legislative plan without any hindrance

#### *Pro-Christian Legislation*

Upon becoming emperor by Constantius' army, Constantine began his legislative program to elevate Christianity beyond their current persecuted status. While the sources are unclear regarding the date of his conversion, what is clear regarding his relationship with the community is that he was at least sympathetic to the Christian community. Authors of the historiography constantly attribute Constantine as being a man of calculated political skill.<sup>210</sup> Here it becomes evident that Christianity became a key factor in his political platform. He initiated this legislative program by calling for a return of confiscated property to all Christians in his region. Likewise, Constantine restored members of high society to their rank and privilege, regardless of religious conviction.<sup>211</sup> However, while Constantine remained a mere junior emperor within the Tetrarchy, his attempt to elevate Christianity was limited to his region of rule, specifically Gaul, Britain, and in areas along the German frontier. However, his immediate attempts to showcase

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<sup>210</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 41,

<sup>211</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 28. Barnes cites portions of Lactantius work, primarily *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 24.9 and *Divinae Institutione*, 1.1.13.

his affinity for the Christian community indicated his overall platform for later in his career as he consolidated more and more authority.

The preceding paragraph, however, is not meant to imply that Constantine planned on elevating Christianity, completely ignoring the inevitable consequences from the outcry of the pagan senate and aristocracy. During the rise of Constantine, Christianity was still a minority religious cult.<sup>212</sup> It should be said that those who call Constantine a calculated politician are correct. Consolidating power did not correlate with a sudden persecution of traditional pagan institutions.

Once Constantine defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, he began a much more aggressive pro-Christian legislation program. His waning relationship with paganism became evident immediately upon his entry into Rome. His victory celebration began with relative semblance to so many which preceded his, until he refused to make sacrifice to Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill, a tradition inherent to triumphs since the days of the Republic.<sup>213</sup> While he promulgated several official edicts with positive gains in favor of the Christian community, he never officially outlawed traditional pagan

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<sup>212</sup> The most widely used secondary source regarding the growth of the Christian population remains to be Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997). Mark Edwards, "The Beginning of Christianization," in *The Age of Constantine*, 137. Here Mark Edwards offers a quality counter to Stark's logic.

<sup>213</sup> A.D. Lee, "Traditional Religions," in *The Age of Constantine*, 171 and Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 44.

religions. His refusal to sacrifice adequately defines Constantine's stance towards paganism, an emperor who for political reasons abstained from the traditions but tolerated their existence. Clearly this was a strategic political move by Constantine, by 312 only half of the empire had been heavily introduced to the legality of Christianity and the east remained both underexposed to the religion's political capabilities. Openly oppressing pagan rites in the west would have likely lost support for Constantine in the east; certainly, Constantine did not desire to alienate a large constituent base.<sup>214</sup> Therefore, it is not essential to dwell on his relationship with the pagan community and suffices to say that the Edict of Milan allowed for the legal existence of religions throughout the empire, and made it impossible for Constantine to implement coercion or violence to instill Christianity over paganism.

Constantine's legislative program showered his favoritism on the Christian Church. Just as when he took control of the territories in the north, Constantine issued an edict after defeating Maxentius to restore confiscated property to the Christian community.<sup>215</sup> In 312, Constantine issued an order for a massive building program in Rome, building several churches including St. Peter's Basilica on the Vatican Hill.<sup>216</sup> These reforms also bestowed privileges to the Christian bishops. His actions favoring

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<sup>214</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 50.

<sup>215</sup> Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine," 72.

<sup>216</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1.42 and Van Dam, 221.



members of the clergy initiated a change in their political and religious roles that culminated in the creation of new elites within the Roman Empire.<sup>217</sup> Many scholars agree that Constantine exempted bishops from civil duties to ensure their full focus upon their religious duties.<sup>218</sup> However, it is also at this time that Constantine started using bishops as permanent political advisors, many of which remained at his side in his personal entourage.<sup>219</sup> Bishops took on an important political and religious role under Constantine. Through the course of time, they became dynamic members of civil and ecumenical society. Christians began to look to Bishops for guidance in everyday life whether they were religious or not.<sup>220</sup>

As Constantine gained more and more influence in the east, his legislation mirrored that of his laws in the west. Once he became sole emperor he had the opportunity to expand his pro-Christian legislation throughout the empire. Yet while he

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<sup>217</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1.42. From Eusebius we understand that the legislation regarding the bishops came fairly quickly after his victory of Maxentius.

<sup>218</sup> Lenski, "Reign of Constantine," 72. This includes exclusion from the compulsory public services as evidenced in the Theodosian Code.

<sup>219</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 1.42.

<sup>220</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 72.

still attempted to consolidate power among several layers of constituents, he ensured not to openly oppress pagan rites. He established a precedent allowing Christian lands exemption from taxation. Likewise, he further advanced the political position of the bishops. Many became holders of lucrative land tracts and became members of judiciary boards.<sup>221</sup> In fact, Eusebius writes that many members of the ecumenical community actively sought religious positions because of the prospect of political power.<sup>222</sup> This clearly shows that Constantine's actions created a new elite class, a hybrid religious-political entity that had the positioning to garner more and more authority as the population of Christians rose.

Now that Constantine was the sole emperor of the Roman Empire he could implement legislation that didn't so much outlaw paganism, but made it much more difficult to continue to practice the traditional rites. He issued edicts that banned the construction of new temples, shrines, or images of what he claimed were false gods. Likewise he ended the traditional practice of divination prior to official government meetings.<sup>223</sup> Constantine clearly took a page from those who had persecuted the Christians before through legislation. Attacking the very essence of paganism created a

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<sup>221</sup> Grant, 159-160.

<sup>222</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 2.68.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.45.

state in which adhering to the old gods became inconvenient.<sup>224</sup> Finally, Constantine ordered the construction of a new capital in the east, which became Constantinople. Built upon the ancient city of Byzantium along the Bosphorus Strait, this freshly fortified city offered several key advantages for a new capital, primarily in terms of defense and economics.<sup>225</sup> It was clear to Constantine that Rome, the capital city of a pagan Empire, could not function as the capital of a Christian Empire. Constantinople became the first city exclusive to Christianity.<sup>226</sup>

This examination of Constantine's legislative program emphasizes two points. First it is clear that Constantine was truly a man who desired to elevate Christianity, seeing himself as the man destined to Christianize the empire.<sup>227</sup> Constantine maintained his record as a calculated politician, ensuring he never alienated the pagans who still populated powerful pockets of the empire. Constantine emphasized his desire to elevate

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<sup>224</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 211.

<sup>225</sup> Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine." 77-78.

<sup>226</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 212. Although he and other authors do offer evidence to suggest that vestiges of paganism did exist in the city, such as a statue of porphyry.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

Christianity, not oppress the traditional rites. He upheld the Edict of Milan in that he allowed citizens to worship the divinity of their choosing while simultaneously creating a Christian religion that became more and more viable as an alternative to paganism. He did these things to maintain the political unity in which he based the success or failure of his entire reign. However, this is not to say that Constantine did not face threats to his political unity or the unity within the Christian community. Threats arose on several occasions that tested the unity of the Christian Church, and in doing so allow Constantine to construct a Christian Empire with the emperor as a source of supreme political and ecumenical authority.<sup>228</sup>

### *Threats to Unity*

The first threat to Christian unity occurred in the North African Christian community, primarily in the province of Carthage which became known as the Donatist schism. This schism centered on those who had willingly given up sacred scriptures and

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<sup>228</sup> This section only highlights key pieces of legislation, and certainly Constantine issued many more laws. Many of the laws are contained in Eusebius narration in *Vita Constantini*, and one can also find a great summary of the laws in Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius*.

items during the Great Persecution,<sup>229</sup> who became known as *traditores*. Donatus became one of the strongest proponents against the rights of the lapsed Christians, especially clergymen; breaking away from the Catholic Church and creating a separatist church which then took on his name. It was Donatus' belief that the acts of lapsed clergymen, such as consecrations and baptisms were invalid and that all who had received rites from tainted clergymen needed to have those rites reinstated by members of the clergy who had not lapsed.<sup>230</sup>

The major outbreak of controversy occurred after the death of Mensurius, the Bishop of Carthage during the Great Persecution, which occurred in the year 311. Upon his death the Church of Carthage chose Caecilian to succeed the former bishop. This is where the Donatists make their claim of fallacy within the Catholic Church. During the years of the Great Persecution, a Carthaginian deacon named Felix was accused of being

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<sup>229</sup> Mark Edwards, "Introduction" in *Optatus: Against the Donatists* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), xi.

<sup>230</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 213-214

a *traditor*.<sup>231</sup> Since Felix ordained Caecilian, the Donatists claimed that the new Bishop's rites were tainted by a lapsed clergyman and were invalid.<sup>232</sup>

While the details of the religious debate are interesting,<sup>233</sup> the importance of this schism comes into play once Constantine involves himself in the controversy.

Constantine first involved himself in the controversy around the time of his conflict with Maxentius in 312.<sup>234</sup> He sent a letter to Anulinus, the Proconsul of Africa, which detailed several pieces of legislation regarding Christians in the west. The letter instructed that all Donatist churches to be handed over to the Catholic Church.<sup>235</sup> The Donatists controversy, however, maintained momentum primarily due to the nature of Constantine

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<sup>231</sup> Optatus, *AD*, 1.17.

<sup>232</sup> Excellent summaries of the Donatist schism can be found in Barnes' *Constantine and Eusebius* and Drake's *Constantine and the Bishops* just to name a few from the historiography. This includes other possible reasons why the Donatists were against Caecilian.

<sup>233</sup> The debate can found throughout Optatus' *Against the Donatists*.

<sup>234</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 214-215. The term Catholic Church became more popular under the reign of Constantine.

<sup>235</sup> Eusebius, *HE*, 10.5.15-17.

as a ruler. As H.A. Drake demonstrates, Constantine desired to entertain the justice of all his subjects.<sup>236</sup> When the Donatists appealed to the emperor over their situation in North Africa, he was inclined to listen. Constantine ordered that three bishops from Gaul named Maternus, Reticus, and Marinus head a committee under the guidance of the Bishop of Rome, Miltiades.<sup>237</sup> This commission heard the accusations of ten Donatist bishops as well as Caecilian and ten bishops in his defense. The committee determined that the Donatists did not have a strong case against Caecilian and determined that the Bishop of Carthage would remain in that position. Furthermore, the council determined that the very nature of Donatus' argument was invalid and claimed also that rebaptism was illegal.<sup>238</sup>

However, this did not end the Donatist controversy. Continued appeals caused Constantine to call for a council of all western bishops where the issue in North Africa could finally be settled. The Council of Arles met in August of 314, and ultimately

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 217. Also chapter 9 of *Constantine and the Bishops* goes into greater detail regarding Constantine's justice for all policy.

<sup>237</sup> Optatus, *AD*, 1.23 and Eusebius, *EH*, 10.5.19.

<sup>238</sup> Optatus, *AD*, 1.24 and Appx III.

reiterated the decision made in Rome the prior year.<sup>239</sup> Constantine called for Donatists to be exiled but shortly after that decision decided to allow the Donatists to return to North Africa, calling for the two groups to live in harmony.<sup>240</sup> The reason for this sudden change in Constantine's religious policy is curious. Perhaps the most adequate explanation returns us to the Edict of Milan. The Council of Arles in 314 occurred a year after Constantine and Licinius established their edict calling for religious toleration. It is likely that Constantine allowed for a peaceful coexistence in an attempt to uphold this edict. While it is likely that Constantine saw this schism as an obstacle for political unity,<sup>241</sup> he obviously felt that the repercussions of suppressing the Donatists was more of a threat than allowing two types of Christianity to exist within the empire.

This controversy dramatically altered Constantine's own religious policy. This event allowed Constantine precedent for imperial intervention into religious debates. It reinforced the idea among emperor and subjects that it was an imperial duty to ensure

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<sup>239</sup> Optatus, Appx III.

<sup>240</sup> Optatus, Appx VII. Peace and Harmony within the Christian community was also an important point of contention for Optatus against the Donatists. Throughout his work he mentions their threat to peace; see Optatus, *AD*, 1.11 and 1.13 for most poignant mention.

<sup>241</sup> Drake, "The Impact of Constantine on Christianity," 119.



religious harmony.<sup>242</sup> Likewise, it allowed Constantine a precedent to involve himself in Christian politics, forging a new relationship between the Church and the empire. His strong desire to continue a promotion of unity over religious conviction helps modern scholars understand Constantine's priorities. Constantine's decision to uphold the original council's decision only to then to allow the Donatists to coexist in Africa indicates to scholars his changing religious policy.<sup>243</sup> While a schismatic church maintained existence in North Africa alongside the imperially endorsed Catholic Church, it becomes evident that Constantine did not allow religious controversies to threaten his political unity.

From the beginning it becomes quite evident that the Donatist schism and the later Arian controversy were by nature two very different issues. While the Donatists conveyed a matter of difference in Christian discipline, the Arian debates encompassed the very essence of Christian belief.<sup>244</sup> However, both issues highlight Constantine's political priority over theological priority. In both scenarios, Constantine sided with the group that seemed most open to inclusion, the side that ensured religious harmony, and thus political unity. Constantine's handling of the Donatists schism portrays the emperor

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>243</sup> A policy that culminated at the Council of Nicaea.

<sup>244</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 250.

as a man unclear regarding the steps he should take; certainly one could describe his actions as sloppy politics. He scrambled to solve this issue while other political matters held his immediate attention; but his involvement in this schism provided him valuable experience to deal with the Arian controversy a decade later. It proved to him the value of councils in dealing with schismatic issues. This Arian controversy certainly became a watershed moment in Christian theology. The gravity of the situation led to a meeting of Bishops known as the Council of Nicaea in 325; at the time the largest simultaneous gathering of ecumenical leaders. Here the bishops of the Christian Church established a creed that survived into the present day.<sup>245</sup> The council witnessed a momentous change in the relationship between the Church and the empire in which Constantine established a new precedent for imperial intervention in religious affairs. Constantine not only participated actively in determining religious theology, but ensured that the decisions were followed by all Christians in the empire.

As T.D. Barnes indicates, the Arian belief remains only within the writings of those strongly against them, an unfortunate aspect when attempting to construct a workable narrative.<sup>246</sup> Much of what modern scholarship understands regarding the Arian arguments stems from the harsh writings of St. Athanasius, primarily in his

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<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>246</sup> Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 202.

*Oration against the Arians* and *History of the Arians*.<sup>247</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the information left by Eusebius suffices, primarily because of a stronger focus on the political motives behind Constantine's actions. The basic summary of the events are generally agreed upon by scholars. Arius, a presbyter within the church of Alexandria, was charged with spreading heresies regarding the nature of Jesus Christ. In short, his teachings expressed that if there was a father and a son, then the former must have preceded the latter. If this is true then there was a period in time in which the son did not exist. Finally, with terms such as father or son, the logical conclusion is that the father supersedes the son in hierarchy. Therefore, the Arians directly contradicted, at least in the minds of its enemies, the very essence of Christianity, the belief that Christ was completely immortal and completely mortal at the same time.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> The primary source of consultation for this paper in terms of the works of Athanasius was the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* entry; however there are certainly other available versions and translations of Athanasius available. Also a note of importance, the Arian debate was not solved during the life of Constantine, it continued into the reign of Theodosius I when it was finally resolved at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

<sup>248</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the bishops*, 238. Some say that Arianism in a more modern society would be more accepted see, Van Dam, 252.

The Arian debate quickly spread throughout North Africa, and eventually entered discussions in various locations in the remainder of the empire. Upon hearing about this schism in the African church, Constantine quickly denounced the heresy and wrote a letter to Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, and Arius commanding them to make peace. Here it becomes imperative to closely examine Eusebius' coverage of what he called, "a most serious disturbance... in the peace of the Church."<sup>249</sup> Eusebius' narrative portrays Constantine once again as the calculated politician. This is clear in the letters sent to Alexander and Arius in which Constantine equally blames both parties for the initiation of this controversy, stating that Alexander should have never issued such a question and Arius should have never provided an answer. Eusebius' Constantine constantly reminds the two men that their debate was rather trivial in the grand context of both religious and political harmony and that they should not allow such a small matter intervene in the harmony of the Church.<sup>250</sup>

Constantine's emphasis on peace and harmony within the Christian community had two political outcomes the emperor desired to obtain. He first hoped that while consolidating power in the east he could expect to use the peace and unity of the Christians to promote unity to the rest of the population. More so, Constantine

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<sup>249</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 2.59. Most interesting choice of words considering at that a time Eusebius was himself excommunicated and exiled for following Arian beliefs.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.69 and 2.71.

understood that disunity within the Christian ranks could potentially become ammunition for powerful anti-Christian members of society to convince others to avoid conversion in favor of ancient traditions. Evident within the historiography, Constantine is often ridiculed for his downplay of the gravity in which the schism threatened the unity of the Christian community.<sup>251</sup> Regardless of Constantine's understanding of the situation, his letter to the two leaders did not deter the disagreement and Constantine understood that a more direct and drastic approach was necessary.

Constantine called forth a council of all bishops to convene in Nicaea.<sup>252</sup> While Arianism was not the sole issue debated at this meeting, it certainly was the primary concern as it was discussed first and foremost. Once the bishops settled in, Constantine made his grand entrance. We understand through Eusebius that Constantine entered the council chamber donning the imperial purple and ornate jewelry but forsook the use of armed guards.<sup>253</sup> Clearly a political move, Constantine intended to demonstrate his political authority while maintaining his membership within the Christian community. He desired to represent himself as man who truly desired to uplift the truth of the

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<sup>251</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 241, Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213, and Van Dam, 257.

<sup>252</sup> Eusebius, *VC*, 3.7.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.10.

Catholic Church while simultaneously demonstrating his position as emperor. Once Constantine made his entrance and opened the debate with a short speech, the discussion of the issues took place. It is believed that the main enemy of Arianism, Alexander, along with Ossius of Corduba came to the meeting with a definition of their defense already in place. It was their belief that God the father and his son were consubstantial with one another. This belief demonstrated the idea that God and Jesus were of the same substance, which became known as *homoousios*.<sup>254</sup> This definition was accepted by the majority of the council and Constantine himself. This became known as the Nicæan Creed, a tradition still held in modern day Catholicism.

Truly the outcome of this council was a momentous turning point in Christian theology. However, it is also significant because of Constantine's willingness and desire to enforce this belief to promote unity and harmony in the Christian community. His direct involvement ushered in a new era in the relationship between the Church and the emperor in which men following Constantine also emphasized. Constantine persistently pushed for harmony within the Church as evidenced by his involvement in both the Donatist and Arian controversies. As stated in an earlier footnote, the struggle between Catholicism and Arianism surpassed the life and reign of Constantine the Great, for the

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<sup>254</sup> Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.7.

separatist group was wholly embedded in the African communities.<sup>255</sup> Therefore modern scholarship can hardly call Constantine's religious policies a wild success. While he did succeed in uplifting the Catholic Church, he struggled in maintaining its unity.

Fortunately for Constantine, with all his political enemies defeated the disunity within the Christian community posed a much smaller threat than it had a decade prior. As sole emperor, Constantine now had the opportunity to consolidate his authority on all fronts.

The Council of Nicaea and his involvement in the debates allowed him to seize substantial authority within the Church.

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<sup>255</sup> For a summary of Arianism post Nicaea until the death of Constantine see Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 219-222.

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