



What did Constantine see as he marched from Gaul to Rome for what was to be a decisive victory in battle? Was it a cross, or was it some other symbol? The accounts vary. Was the injunction “By this (sign) conquer” given to him in Greek or in Latin? Artist Greg Harlin provides one plausible option. In the end, however, what mattered was that a defining moment in world history had occurred. The future emperor was on his way to becoming a believer—a Christian.

The sign in the sky that changed history

A wild horseback ride across Europe ushered in the era of Constantine, whose march to victory laid the foundations of the Christian empire

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he tale is not only romantic, but probably true. The year is 306. A young man arises in the dead of a late spring night in the imperial palace at Nicomedia in Asia Minor. He slips down to the emperor’s stables and commandeers the palace horses. He is thirty-two years old, and by all reports quite handsome. He has been a hostage. Now he is making his escape and seeking to delay pursuit.

His name is Constantine, and he is the son of Constantius Chlorus, the Roman emperor in the West. The man from whom he is escaping is Galerius, emperor in the East. As the guest of Galerius, but also his captive, Constantine’s life would be forfeited if his father became a little too ambitious and tried to seize the imperial crown of the East, in order to become sole ruler of the empire.

Right now, however, Constantine’s captor Galerius is asleep, likely drunk and sated in the imperial bedchamber after a lavish banquet that Constantine had arranged to keep him well-sedated during the getaway. With good reason, Galerius was as suspicious of Constantine as he was of his father, and he had already planned to have the younger man arrested as soon as he got up the next day. If Galerius or anyone close to him had awakened that night and caught wind of what Constantine was doing in the stables, the young man’s fate would almost certainly have been instant death.

Kept hostage in Nicomedia by his father's rival Galerius, the young Constantine orchestrated an extraordinary horseback escape. It took him across the breadth of Europe and much of the empire he would one day rule.



Galerius's thick shield of armed bodyguards seemed not to have been on high alert, however, for they neither saw the horses—their well-combed manes glistening under the moon—nor heard their hooves clack along the stones of the palace courtyard as Constantine led them to the gates.

All very improbable of course. It's far more likely that some of the guards had been paid off, or that they simply chose not to sound the alarm. For who had already distinguished himself as one of the top commanders, had a reputation for energy, courage, and initiative, and he was highly popular with the imperial army. Among the imperial guard he undoubtedly had friends and allies who were willing to look the other way.

Thus Constantine and his carefully chosen accomplices were able to unlatch the mighty chains of the palace gates undetected, and to slide back the heavy crossbar—quietly, quietly—and open them—inch by inch—so as not to make a creak. Then they led the horses outside the palace gates and down the narrow cobbled streets until they reached the outskirts of Nicomedia. The fields, white in the moonlight, lay before them. At last Constantine was free.

Constantine mounted one of the horses, already tacked for that purpose, loosened the reins, squeezed the beast's flanks sharply on the thighs, and no doubt with a few trusted companions, off on the high road at full gallop, the rest of the riderless ring after him. The horses were likely the empire's finest: Iberian animals with manes as long as women's hair, the

breed from which Bucephalus, the legendary horse of Alexander the Great, was said to have sprung. Like Alexander, the young Constantine wore his hair long, and it must have flown in the night like the horses' manes as they sped westward through the darkened villages, his soldier's cloak billowing behind him.

His escape would become the longest continuous ride on horseback ever recorded in the ancient world—more than sixteen hundred miles from Nicomedia, across the Straits of Bosphorus, through the northern Balkans, the Danube frontier lands and the Alpine passes of Austria and Germany, all the way west to Boulogne on the northeast coast of France.

Constantine's dramatic journey with the palace horses, reported by one of his biographers, Lactantius, illustrated his intelligence, ambition and decisiveness. He fully understood that Galerius hated and feared him and was determined to keep him on a short leash indefinitely at the palace. Indeed, Constantine had been living at the court at Nicomedia for at least ten years, serving first under Galerius's predecessor, Diocletian, who also held him as a hostage for his father's good behavior. When Diocletian's retirement in 305 catapulted Galerius to the top position in the East, Constantine's father formally requested that his son be allowed to join him in his campaign against the Picts. According to Lactantius, Galerius outwardly consented, but connived to make it impossible for Constantine to leave.

So Constantine engineered his flight, Lactantius reports, on the very night before he was to have been hauled into Galerius's presence to become a more explicit kind of prisoner. When Galerius awoke at noon the next day and learned from his servants that Constantine was long gone, he burst into tears.

Constantine had taken all the palace horses with him for a reason: so that his pursuers would not have mounts with which to follow him. What's more, none of the individual horses that galloped boldly with Constantine in the moonlight along the high road out of Nicomedia made it even as far as the Bosphorus, says Lactantius. That was because at each stable where Constantine stopped to change mounts, he ordered every horse on the premises except his party's own fresh ones to be hamstrung, bloodily crippling the animal. Thus no one from Galerius's court could pursue Constantine without first having to scare up second-rate horses from somewhere. Only when Constantine finally reached the Illyrian border, the dividing line between the Eastern and Western empires, could he relax his frantic pace. In the empire of the West, it was his father's writ that ran, not Galerius's.

At the port of Boulogne (in Latin, Bononia), Constantine met up with his father. Constantius was waiting to cross the English Channel to Roman Britain in order to fight the Picts, the fierce Scottish barbarians who were harrying the empire from the North. Although Constantine probably did not know this, Constantius was already dying when he summoned his son to join him in Boulogne. Just two months later, the old man died in the north of Britain, at York, then called Eboracum. Before he expired, however, his last deed would change the history of Europe and the world. He declared Constantine his heir as

augustus of the West. In the coming eighteen years Constantine would eventually become sole Roman emperor, overcoming six powerful rivals one by one, against what must have seemed impossible odds.

When he burst out of Nicomedia in 306, Christianity was still a despised and mercilessly persecuted religious sect, at which most people of his high social standing looked down their noses. Within his lifetime and at his specific direction, Christianity would become the dominant cultural force in the Western world. Indeed, Constantine would inaugurate the process by which would arise “Christendom” (see sidebar page 178). For this, some Christians would go so far as to regard him as a saint. Others would see him as crippling Christianity for centuries by disastrously fusing it to the powers of what Christians call “this world.”

Constantine could only assess things as they looked to him in the early fourth century, when the imperial system called for two emperors instead of one. His was not the old Rome of Augustus, which sixteen centuries later would endear itself to Hollywood—with helmeted legions marching on marble avenues toward

When Constantine burst out of Nicomedia, most people looked down their noses at Christianity. Within his lifetime it would become the dominant cultural force in the Western world.

the Capitoline Hill, shouting “Hail, Caesar!” in unison as they passed an emperor splendid in his purple toga, flanked by the vestal virgins in shimmering veils. That Rome was now three hundred years in the past. And even when it lived, the military might, the marble and the poetry of the Augustan Age had masked deep flaws that led to the city’s gradual decline as a center of power.

The most glaring flaw was economic. Rome’s economy was essentially built on plunder. During the three centuries before Christ, and for a century or so afterwards, the city that had begun as a tiny village, perched on its seven hills above the swamplands of the Tiber, developed military commanders with a genius for organization and strategy, as well as civic leaders who gave it an elaborate system of laws. They built first a republic, then an empire that spread from the Atlantic to the Euphrates, and from Britain to the Sahara, its conquering armies carrying back shiploads of treasure and tens of thousands of slaves to enrich the imperial treasury, serve the gentry and adorn the city.

But Rome created little wealth on its own, and behind its luxurious facade there lurked a deepening squalor. Much of its lower-class populace was unemployed, subsisting in crowded, filthy tenements on free bread handed out by the authorities. The world’s real wealth all lay in the bustling, thickly populated, Greek-speaking East, most of it territory long claimed by the ancient empire of Persia. By contrast, western Europe was always poor and thinly settled, harried by barbarian hordes that Rome could check but never control. So, with Persia blocking expansion in the East, and with little to loot in the West, Rome, cut off from its lifeblood of booty, began a long, slow decline.

By Constantine’s time, the city of Rome was recognized as an inhospitable place, so noxiously hot and malarial during the summer that few Romans of means and cultivation wanted to stay there any longer than they had to. The administrative center of the western Roman Empire was not Rome, but Milan, strategically located on the main road through the relatively cool, agriculturally fertile plains of northern Italy. The emperor’s household, the courts, and the imperial bureaucracy were largely centered in Milan, not Rome.

Then there was the problem of maintaining the huge standing army that the empire needed to protect its thousands of miles of frontiers, an army that could no longer be paid cheaply with conquered land and plunder. It had become a crushing liability, driving taxes to oppressive levels in a stagnant economy. While Constantine was growing to maturity, the whole empire was plagued by rocketing inflation, decreased agricultural production, abandoned farmland, crumbling buildings and monuments, and a seemingly inexorable decline in population. Diocletian’s attempts to stabilize the currency and the supply of skilled labor had been heroic, but they did not address the underlying causes of Rome’s economic and cultural spiral downward.

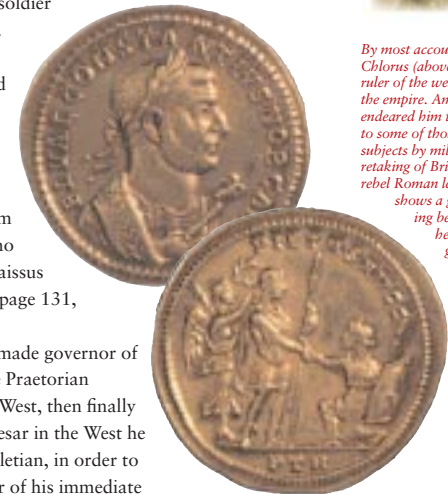
Not surprisingly, the empire’s center of gravity had slowly shifted eastward. The climate was better and that’s where the money was. That was also why Diocletian preferred his palace at Nicomedia, on the sunny Sea of Marmara southwest of the Bosphorus—the palace that Galerius was later to occupy and Constantine to flee.

Constantine’s father, Constantius, was a career military man, born in Dardania, in what is southern Serbia today. Although Constantius was later said to have sprung from the Dardanian nobility, he was probably as lowborn as Diocletian and the twenty-eight other soldier emperors who preceded him had been. How Constantius acquired the nickname “Chlorus,” from the Greek word for “pale green,” is not known, but may derive from a sickly complexion. Early in life, he married a woman named Helena (see sidebar, page 247), a barmaid or innkeeper’s daughter from the town of Depranum in Bithynia, who in 274 or thereabouts gave birth, in Naissus (modern-day Nish, in Serbia, see map page 131, D3), to Constantine.

Constantius rose quickly—he was made governor of Dalmatia, then probably prefect of the Praetorian Guard, then Diocletian’s caesar in the West, then finally augustus in the West. While he was caesar in the West he divorced Helena, at the behest of Diocletian, in order to marry Theodora. She was the daughter of his immediate



By most accounts, Constantius Chlorus (above) was an effective ruler of the western-most parts of the empire. Among exploits that endeared him to Romans, and even to some of those who were made his subjects by military force, was his retaking of Britain after it fell to rebel Roman leaders. The coin shows a grateful Britain kneeling before Constantius as he is crowned by the goddess Victory.



superior Maximian, who was then the western augustus, and all this was part of Diocletian's plan to end, through dynastic marriage and adoption, the mayhem of murder that had claimed the lives of twenty-two of Diocletian's twenty-eight predecessors. Constantius proceeded to have six more children, Constantine's half-siblings, by his new royal wife.

When Diocletian retired in 305, Maximian reluctantly retired as well. Under Diocletian's plan, Galerius and Constantius automatically became the augusti, and were each to name the caesars who would succeed them. But Galerius had a better idea. As the augustus of the much more powerful and prosperous East, he arbitrarily selected both new caesars himself, not only his own but also Constantius's. Severus, an army officer from Pannonia and definitely a Galerian loyalist, was to serve as Constantius's caesar; and the brutal Maximinus Daia, Galerius's nephew, as Galerius's caesar. About this whole arrangement, needless to say, Constantius was not consulted.

The jurisdictions within the new tetrarchy were likewise mapped out by Galerius. Constantius's territory included Gaul, Britain, and Spain; his caesar Severus got Italy, northern Africa and Pannonia. Galerius and Daia split the East between them, with Daia taking eastern Europe and Galerius retaining Asia Minor and points east, including Diocletian's beloved palace at Nicomedia.

There was little love lost between Constantius and Galerius, but the really

odd man out was young Constantine. Both he and Maximian's son, Maxentius, who was married to Galerius's daughter, had been passed over for appointment as caesars. Furthermore, Constantine was being held as a veritable prisoner in Nicomedia, and it would be only a matter of time before Galerius—or Severus or Daia—solved the problem of his existence by executing him. Thus Constantine's horseback escape.

And when the dying Constantius named his firstborn son to succeed him instead of Severus, Constantine knew that this act doomed Diocletian's plans for an orderly succession. The Diocletian tetrarchy was smashed and dead before Diocletian himself died. Diocletian was still puttering about in retirement at his estate at Split in his native Dalmatia.

Furthermore, on the very day that Constantius died—July 25, 306—his soldiers proclaimed Constantine the new augustus. As Constantine well knew, this amounted to a declaration of war against the other three tetrarchs—against Severus, the western caesar whom Galerius had foisted on his father; against Daia, the caesar Galerius had appointed in the East and against Galerius himself. Severus, Daia and Galerius were for Constantine three powerful enemies whose domains spanned the Roman Empire.

Constantine realized that he had no place to hide. He was alone and he had to act quickly. He had to seize it all—absolute power over the entire empire, East and West—or be killed ignominiously like the pathetic series of soldier emperors before Diocletian. Constantine was determined not to join them.

But the competition grew even worse. Constantine soon had three other formidable enemies to take into account, each of them with ambitions to rule everything. One of these was Maximian, Diocletian's fellow augustus who had been forced into retirement when Diocletian retired. Now, from his home at Lucania in southern Italy, Maximian had begun reasserting his claim to greater power. Leagued with him was a fifth foe, Maximian's son Maxentius, who lived at Rome and had strong support in the Roman Senate. Finally, from up on the Danube, came a sixth military claimant: Licinius, an old friend of Galerius. Diocletian was persuaded to come briefly out of retirement, affirming by his presence at the ceremony the naming of Licinius as a third augustus.

In other words, the old system of succession by civil war and murder was back. For all seven contenders, it was a case of everything or nothing. To survive at all, Constantine had to overcome the six most powerful men in the Roman world, most of whom commanded armies far more formidable than his.

The immediate enemy was Severus, the man Galerius had named caesar of the West. Had the Diocletian formula been followed, Severus would have automatically become augustus of the West when Constantine's father died, but Constantine now held that title instead. To avoid immediate civil war between Severus and Constantine, Galerius stepped in. He worked out a compromise with Constantine: Severus would remain the augustus and Constantine would be named the new caesar. Constantine saw a benefit for himself in this arrangement. He was already having trouble with his new territories,

The magnitude of the forces opposing Constantine, and his rise to power nevertheless, were astonishing: He faced and overcame six rivals to his imperial claims—three men in each of the empire's two parts.



for although Britain and Gaul had accepted him as the augustus, Spain was balking. He therefore accepted Galerius's offer—for the time being.

Severus, meanwhile, had already made two missteps that would rapidly take him out of the contest. One of his first acts on becoming caesar had been to conduct a tax census, unheard of in the city of Rome, whose residents had lived tax-free for centuries and were infuriated by the idea. Worse yet, he tried to disband the Praetorian Guard. The outraged Guard promptly mutinied, and on October 28, 306, it proclaimed Maxentius, Maximian's son, as the new emperor, although it did not give him the title augustus.

Maximian, the father, bolted north, not only to aid his son's cause but also to reclaim his old title; he was the true augustus of the West, he said. Father and son then united against Severus, first driving him from Rome, and then forcing him to surrender at Ravenna in the spring of 307. That was the end of Severus. Maximian either had him executed or forced him to commit suicide. For Constantine, one rival had been eliminated. But five still remained.

Galerius, furious at old Maximian's effort to return from retirement, marched his powerful army west against the father-and-son challengers at

The homicidal system was back. To survive, Constantine must vanquish the six most powerful men in the world, most commanding far more formidable armies.

Rome. He declared Maximian's comeback illegal, and said his son's occupation of Rome amounted to usurpation. He knew that if he could crush the father and son, he could then turn his army's attention on Constantine.

Old Maximian made his move next. Since Galerius threatened everybody in the West, Maximian made his way to Constantine's camp. If Constantine combined forces with him against Galerius, he said, he would share the title of augustus with him. As evidence of good faith, he offered Constantine the hand of his daughter, Fausta, in marriage.

Constantine, like his father before him, had taken a commoner for his wife when he was offered a more profitable marriage. His first wife's name was Minervina, and she was the mother of his son, Crispus. No matter—following his father's example, he promptly divorced Minervina, and in September of 307, he married Fausta in a dazzling ceremony at Trier, on the Mosel River. After that, at least for a time, he was careful to accord his new father-in-law honor and a show of support, without allowing him to enjoy any real power. After all, Maximian, underneath his surface display of loving kinship, was still one of the five remaining contenders for the rule of the whole empire.

Maximian's son Maxentius proved harder to evict from Rome than Galerius had anticipated. Frustrated, Galerius retreated, and he tried to bestir the aged Diocletian to come out of retirement again and use his muscle to restore the tetrarchy.

Diocletian declined. However, his deft skill at political connivance was far from lost. Still striving to sustain his tetrarchy model, even if he wouldn't personally fight for it, Diocletian persuaded his old colleague Maximian to betray both his son and his new son-in-law, since they were the two who were disrupting the system. The plan called for Maximian to destroy Constantine, then to retire. His son Maxentius, still holding Rome, would be formally declared a public enemy, and a new augustus, Galerius's old friend Licinius, would unseat Maxentius and become augustus of the West, while Galerius would return to the East.

Maximian, the father, waited two years to make an overt move. In 310, while Constantine was on the Rhine frontier battling the barbarians, Maximian seized Constantine's treasury at Arles in southern Gaul and proclaimed himself augustus once more. Constantine retaliated in a flash, sweeping southward through Gaul. Desperate, the old man tried to induce his daughter Fausta to betray the husband he had given her, but she refused. Instead, Constantine's troops caught Maximian at Marseille, where he was forced to commit suicide.

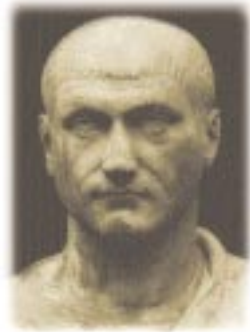
Now there were four rivals. The next year, 311, Galerius, chief persecutor of the Christians, died at Nicomedia after lengthy suffering from an excruciatingly painful disease, as described in the previous chapter.

That left three. All three—Maxentius at Rome, Daia and Licinius in the East—called themselves augustus, and all three had armies to back up their claims. Constantine pondered his options. Licinius and Daia were potentially dangerous, but for now, with Galerius dead, they were locked in murderous rivalry with each other, each claiming the entire empire of the East. Constantine decided to forge a tactical alliance with Licinius, and he arranged in late 311, or early 312, for Licinius to be betrothed to his half-sister Constantia, one of the many children of his father's second wife.

So the remaining immediate problem was Maxentius, his brother-in-law at Rome. Maxentius moved first, ordering that all of Constantine's statues in Italy be knocked down and destroyed. Even though relations between Maxentius and his father had been strained—the old man had lately called his own son a usurper and a public enemy—Maxentius vowed that he must avenge his father's forced suicide at the hands of Constantine. Besides, this same Constantine had now joined up against him with Licinius. To Maxentius, these deeds were unconscionable.

Constantine knew it was time to act. He mounted a preemptive strike against Maxentius, crossing the Alps into Italy in the summer of 312, with a force of at least forty thousand men. Marching south, Constantine stormed, persuaded to surrender, or made allies out of the major cities of northern Italy: Turin, Milan and Verona.

Assaulting Rome itself, however, was a daunting operation. Constantine's forces were outnumbered probably two-to-one by Maxentius's standing troops and cavalry in Rome. Worse, the city was fortified by a twenty-foot-high, twelve-mile-long wall which had been built by the emperor Aurelian in 271 to ward off possible barbarian attacks. Neither Severus nor Galerius had been able to breach that wall, and inside, Maxentius and his huge army waited. It was by now late October.



Maxentius (above), entrenched in Rome, held the symbolic heart of the empire. He openly provoked Constantine by ordering that all statues of Constantine in Italy and Rome be destroyed. For Constantine the next move was obvious: Maxentius had to be toppled.

Constantine so far had only one thing in his favor, but it was considerable: the inhabitants of Rome were completely disenchanted with Maxentius, sick and tired of him. At a series of chariot races organized by Maxentius to celebrate the upcoming anniversary of his accession to power, the crowd taunted him, shouting that Constantine was invincible. Maxentius turned for help to the famous Sibylline Books, with their prophecies on the future of Rome, and there he was told that on his own anniversary date, October 28, the enemy of the Romans would perish. That, thought Maxentius, must surely mean Constantine. He resolved that on that very day he would lead his army out through the city gates and battle his outnumbered rival.

Constantine prepared for battle as well. He was a master strategist whose method was to try to get inside his enemy's mind and anticipate his next move,

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and it's likely he guessed that Maxentius would try to leave the city and come at him. So his plans would have allowed for that contingency. But that was not his only insight. There was another that would crown his page in Christian history.

At a point prior to the impending battle, something happened to Constantine, something so vital, so shattering, that it would change fundamentally both the course of his own life, and the course of the life of the world. There are two accounts of this extraordinary event, whatever it was. Eusebius, his biographer who knew Constantine well, tells it this way:

Constantine called on God with earnest prayer and supplications that he would reveal to him who he was, and stretch forth his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven. . . . He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, "Conquer by this." At this sight, he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle. He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.

Lactantius, another contemporary, tells the story somewhat differently.

Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the Heavenly Sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round . . . at the top, being the cipher of Christ. Having this sign, his troops stood to arms.

Whether Eusebius was right, or Lactantius, or neither—and they could



Though it began as a crude abbreviation painted on shields and carved furtively on coins, houses, and walls, the Chi-Rho became an imperial standard. The large marble version of the monogram (now in the Vatican Museums) is decorated with a laurel wreath, fruit and flowers. To this have been added the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega (Christ being the First and the Last). However, the smaller medallion from Britain shows the addition was still unfamiliar to some Christians: The omega is upside-down.



both have been right, since there could have been both a dream and a vision—one fact seems conclusive. The man who left Britain to fight for the crown and the man who advanced upon Rome on the morning of October 28, 312, were in certain substantial respects not the same person. From that point on two new terms figure prominently in the thought, language and policies of the emperor. One is God and the other is Jesus Christ.

Perhaps even then he saw, however faintly, that such wars as men fought, wars that up until then he had spent most of his life waging, were but mere shadows of another war, the *real* war, the war between good and evil that rages unseen within the soul of each man. This was the war that the Christians had always understood, and that he would better understand himself in the violent personal struggles that lay ahead of him.

But now the vision was over, and he must attend upon the task at hand. There were, then, on that fateful morning of October 28, tens of thousands of grizzled war veterans working over their shields at dawn, squinting at hastily scribbled drawings of the Chi-Rho that they passed from hand to hand as they tried to reconstruct the symbol with sticks or wire or paint. As they painted Xs on their shields, then put through the Xs vertical lines with rounded tops, they must have scratched their heads in puzzlement. The overwhelming majority of them were pagans who worshiped the bullfighting god Mithras, protector of

Roman soldiers. Christians, after all, still constituted only about ten percent of the Western empire's population at the beginning of the fourth century. And the resemblance to the cross? Even the Christians themselves shirked at using that shameful symbol in their religious art, although their Jesus had died on a cross. The cross was the slave's punishment, grist for gallows humor, not for bearing proudly into battle. But orders were orders.

It seems clear, from everything that followed, that Constantine knew he could defeat Maxentius only with divine help, and that somehow that help was available only from the God of the Christians, not from any pagan deity. Clearly grateful, he did not hesitate later to declare openly his trust in the God of the Christians. So wherever you looked among the ranks of Constantine's army on October 28, 312, you saw among his soldiers the sign of Christ, painted brightly on shields or hoisted high on standards.

As he had planned, Maxentius marched out of Rome with his army, confident the day was to be his. He crossed the Tiber over the Milvian Bridge and continued along the river on the Flaminian Way. About a mile up the narrow defile, he

found his path blocked by a phalanx of men with crude, savage-looking markings painted on their shields.

To his pagan eyes, the Chi-Rho sign was undoubtedly a

fearful sight: a dancing stick-figure demon. Then he got word that Constantine's forces, advancing to the Tiber on the other fork of the road, had attacked his men back in the lines, at the Milvian Bridge; Constantine seems, with his usual canniness, to have guessed correctly where his enemies would be. Maxentius was trapped. His troops, assaulted at both ends, were forced back in a pincer to the Tiber.

There they were slaughtered like cattle. Panicked, a mob of them, including Maxentius himself, tried to push their way back across the bridge, but failed. Maxentius, along with thousands of others, was shoved over the edge of the bridge and drowned.

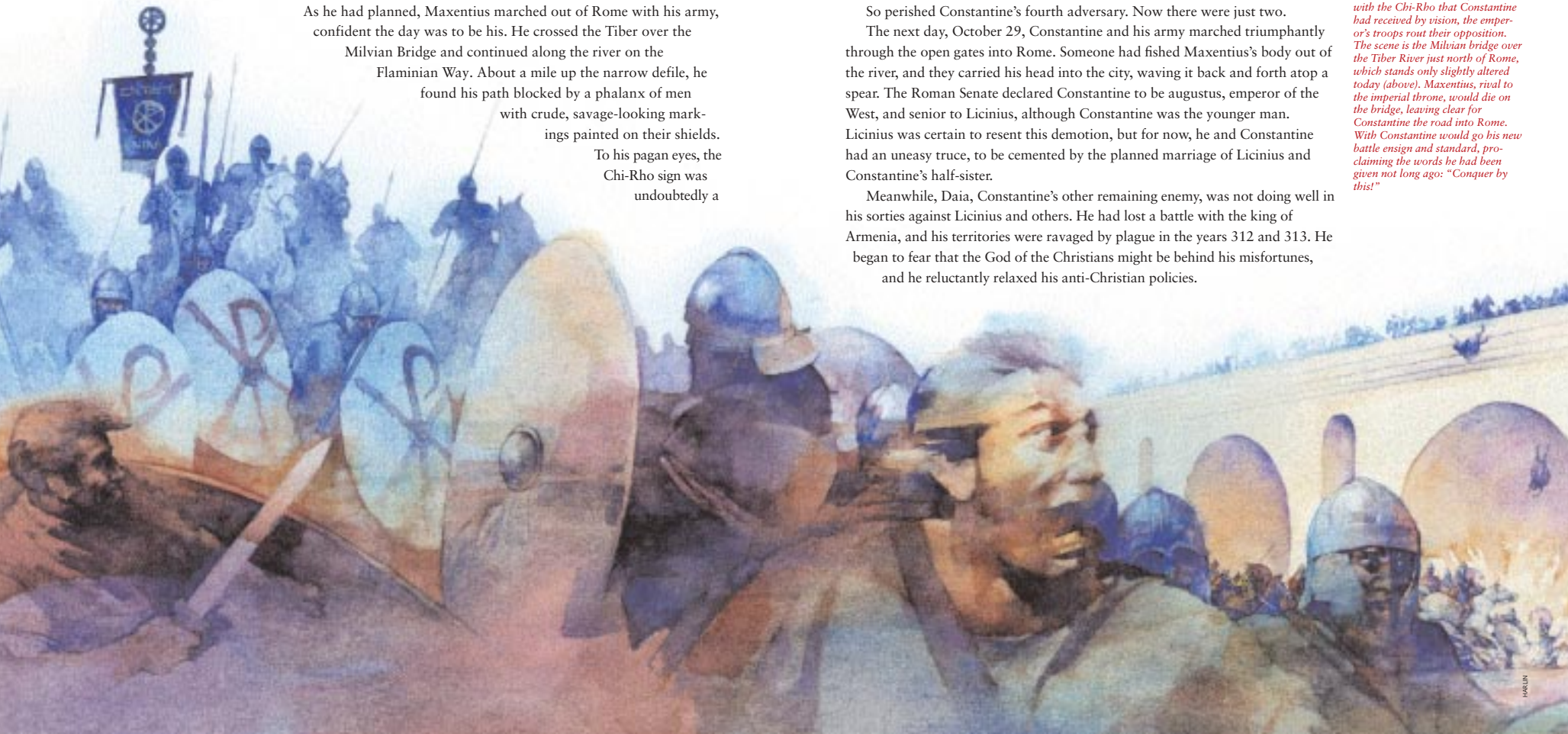
So perished Constantine's fourth adversary. Now there were just two.

The next day, October 29, Constantine and his army marched triumphantly through the open gates into Rome. Someone had fished Maxentius's body out of the river, and they carried his head into the city, waving it back and forth atop a spear. The Roman Senate declared Constantine to be augustus, emperor of the West, and senior to Licinius, although Constantine was the younger man. Licinius was certain to resent this demotion, but for now, he and Constantine had an uneasy truce, to be cemented by the planned marriage of Licinius and Constantine's half-sister.

Meanwhile, Daia, Constantine's other remaining enemy, was not doing well in his sorties against Licinius and others. He had lost a battle with the king of Armenia, and his territories were ravaged by plague in the years 312 and 313. He began to fear that the God of the Christians might be behind his misfortunes, and he reluctantly relaxed his anti-Christian policies.



Their battle shields newly adorned with the Chi-Rho that Constantine had received by vision, the emperor's troops rout their opposition. The scene is the Milvian bridge over the Tiber River just north of Rome, which stands only slightly altered today (above). Maxentius, rival to the imperial throne, would die on the bridge, leaving clear for Constantine the road into Rome. With Constantine would go his new battle ensign and standard, proclaiming the words he had been given not long ago: "Conquer by this!"



Constantine's victory at the Milvian bridge was eventually celebrated empire-wide. A crude memorial of the event (right) was discovered in what would then have been Dacia. On a grander scale, Constantine in 315 erected an arch in Rome (far right) to hail the event, looting other monuments to complete its decoration.

The inscription on the arch recounts that "through the prompting of divinity and the greatness of his mind, together with his army, [Constantine] avenged the republic with just arms from both the tyrant and all his faction."



Clearly, the Battle of the Milvian Bridge—and the perceived intervention of Christ, who had clearly granted Constantine his victory—changed the new emperor's life. The Christian God had deigned to favor him personally; he considered that fact undeniable. So he took the Christians under his wing and became their aggressive protector.

Even before the battle, writes Eusebius, Constantine had ordered a goldsmith to fashion a golden version of the army standard, which he called the *Labarum*, with a crossbar and a jewel-encrusted Chi-Rho. And over the next few years, he launched a massive construction and legislative program to further the Christian cause.

Of far more immediate significance to Christians, however, was a proclamation, drafted by Constantine in 313, that was designed to put an end, once and for all, to official Roman persecution—not only of Christianity, but of all religious practice, and not only in the West but in the East as well. Constantine was able to persuade Licinius, emperor of the East, to sign the document when the two met in Milan in February 313 to celebrate Licinius's wedding to Constantia.

The Edict of Milan, as Constantine's proclamation came to be called, pivotally changed the status of Christians. For the first time since the year 64, when the emperor Nero had declared war on the Christians of Rome and burned them as human torches in his garden, there were grounds for Christian optimism. Perhaps they need no longer fear official reprisals for holding to their faith. For more than two centuries, Christian spokesmen had pleaded for full religious



toleration. Now it might be a reality—no more demands to offer the pinch of incense to the gods, no more tortures with the rack and the red-hot irons, no more burnings and crucifixions, no more lions in the arena, no more mutilations, or deportations to the imperial mines. High hopes had been crushed before, of course, but maybe Christians would finally be free to practice their faith on equal terms with the pagans.

History has preserved the Edict of Milan in the form of a letter by Licinius to the governors of the provinces of the East, where Christians had suffered at Daia's hands.¹ The letter (as quoted by the historian Lactantius) declares: "No one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion, or that religion which he should think best for himself, so that the Supreme Deity, to whose worship we freely yield our hearts, may show in all things His usual favor and benevolence."

The letter continues: "Now any one of these who wishes to observe the Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation." Of equal importance and more immediate practical consequence, the edict also required the Roman authorities to return to the Christians all property that had been confiscated from them, and all seized Christian churches were to be restored.

The edict did not formally make Christianity the official religion of the empire; it merely offered to place

Christianity on a par with the other religions that enjoyed freedom under Rome, in order "that we may not seem to detract from any dignity or any religion." Constantine had to be careful not to alienate the pagans who still formed the vast majority of the empire, especially those in the army, which adored him, but had no sympathy for the Christ he was promoting; and in the Roman aristocracy, on whose support the new emperor depended and who still expected sacrifices to be made to the pagan gods.

Yet it became increasingly clear that Christianity enjoyed Constantine's special favor. Gradually, the old pagan influences began to fade from Constantine's administration. As time passed, he ceased paying the traditional homage to Jupiter on Rome's Capitoline Hill, and ceased striking coins bearing the images of other pagan deities. The Edict of Milan marked the beginning of a new Roman Empire, that before the end of the fourth century would become Christian, not pagan. No wonder Eusebius called the edict the "perfect and thoroughly detailed law on behalf of the Christians."

1. Historians in recent years have concluded that the long-cited Edict of Milan was not an edict at all, but rather an agreement between Licinius and Constantine preserved in the form of Licinius's letter.

That spring of 313, Licinius won a decisive victory against Daia at Adrianople in Thrace (in the southern Balkans), and marched eastward in triumph into Nicomedia. Daia fled and was captured at Tarsus, where he was forced to commit suicide. For Constantine, there was just one rival left, a big one: his new brother-in-law, Licinius, now sole emperor of the East, the empire's larger and richer half.

The showdown started about 314, when Constantine and Licinius began to quarrel over the appointment of new caesars, and Constantine had one of Licinius's nominees executed for treachery. Licinius in turn ordered Constantine's statues knocked down in the town of Emona in Pannonia—the

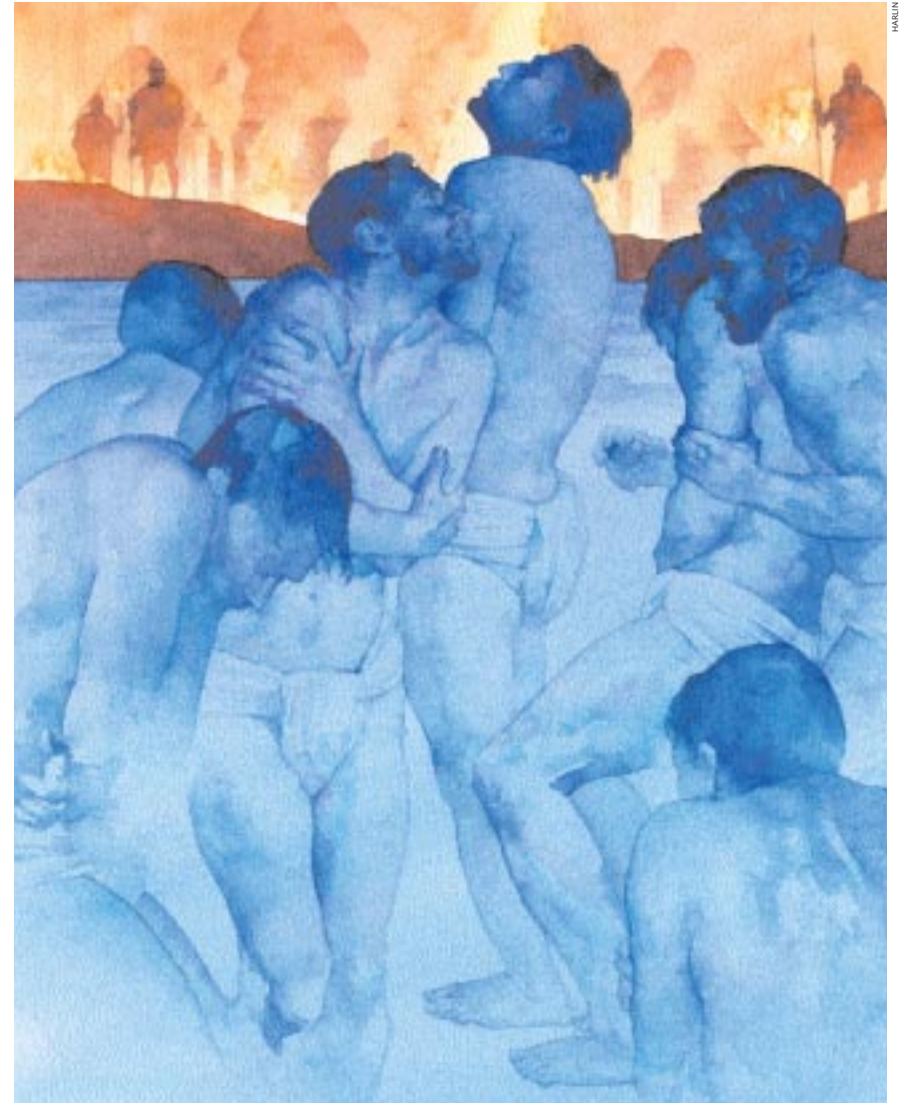
The edict pivotally changed the status of Christians. For the first time since 64, when Nero had burned them as human torches, there were good grounds for optimism.

equivalent of a declaration of war. Constantine, flushed with a victory in Gaul against the barbarian Franks, promptly marched his army eastward into Licinius's territory. The invasion was hugely successful. At Cibalae, near Sirmium in Pannonia, he won a major battle against Licinius's numerically superior troops, and when it was over he held control of all of Licinius's eastern European holdings, including Pannonia, Dalmatia and Greece—except Thrace.

Temporarily, the pair reconciled. But in 321, Constantine appointed his sons, Crispus by Minervina and Constantine Junior by Fausta, to be consuls, Rome's supreme military and civil magistrates, without seeking Licinius's consent. That heightened the tension, and soon Licinius turned against the Christians within his jurisdiction. Though he did not revoke the Edict of Milan, he began hounding the followers of Christ, forbidding Christians to assemble or worship within the cities. Bishops were arrested and executed, and some churches were demolished.

The most memorable Christian victims of Licinius were a company of Roman soldiers stationed at Sebaste in Lesser Armenia (see map, page 131, F3) who had openly confessed their faith before the Roman prefect. They were ordered stripped naked and left to freeze to death on the surface of a frozen pond. Of the forty, only one yielded and made his way to the warm baths near the lake that the prefect had prepared for any who would apostatize. One of the guards set to watch over them is said to have seen a brilliant light over the dying men. Shedding his garments, he joined them, returning their total number to forty. At daybreak, any of the stiffened bodies that still showed signs of life were burned and the ashes cast into the river. The Christians collected the remains of the other men, and their relics were distributed far and wide to Christian churches. They are known to Christian history as "the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste."

Another victim was a Roman general, exposed as a Christian in Thrace in 319. He was brought before a military tribunal and reprieved as a good soldier



In a last gasp of persecution before his defeat by Constantine, Licinius ordered that all Christians be purged from the ranks of his armies. One of the most famous of the consequent martyrdoms resulted, as forty Christian members of the great "Thundering Legion" were condemned to die on the ice of a pond in the frigid Armenian winter.

who had made a mistake. Set free, he promptly burned down a pagan temple, was rearrested and ordered to recant his Christianity. When he refused, he was flailed, then burned to death. He is known as Theodore the General, sometimes called Theodore the Recruit or Theodore Tyro.

To Constantine, such actions as these justified war, not a mere war of succession, as against Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, but a full-fledged holy war on behalf of the Christian God. Constantine summoned Christian bishops to aid him, had a tent equipped as his portable chapel, and awarded the gold-covered Labarum with its Chi-Rho the place of honor as the primary standard of his troops. Licinius, for his part, decided to represent the old gods, surrounding himself with pagan priests and soothsayers, and making traditional sacrifices. According to Eusebius, he swore that if he defeated Constantine, he would do his best to exterminate the “atheists,” as he called the Christians throughout the empire. The fate of Rome, whether it was to be Christian or pagan, thus lay in the balance.

In 324, the two imperial armies assembled. Constantine was, as usual, outnumbered by Licinius’s infantry, cavalry, and vastly superior fleet. On July 3, Constantine, taking the initiative, engaged Licinius at Adrianople, and his seasoned and superbly disciplined veterans, bearing the Labarum in their midst, chased Licinius and his army out of the city. Licinius retreated to the seaside city of Byzantium, at the easternmost end of Thrace, and facing Asia Minor on the Straits of Bosphorus, with his navy protecting the Dardanelles. There, Constantine’s son, Crispus, who had been placed in charge of his father’s fleet, dealt him a decisive blow, sinking nearly half of Licinius’s ships.

Licinius and his remaining forces retreated again, crossing the Bosphorus to the town of Chrysopolis. But it was already all over for him. On September 18, 324, Constantine’s army resoundingly defeated his troops once more. Licinius fled to Nicomedia and sent his wife, Constantia, to her half-brother, to plead for his life. Constantine would have none of this. He did not want another Maximian on his hands, scheming treacherously to get his old title back. Licinius, his final and most formidable rival, was executed.

Constantine was now master of the Roman world. His life had come to a new circle. The last time he had seen Nicomedia, which lay only about one hundred miles east of Chrysopolis and Byzantium, had been when he galloped out of the city with Galerius’s riders on horseback behind him, to save his life, some eighteen years earlier. Now all the empire was his. He would settle in Byzantium, renaming it Constantinople, rebuilding and adorning it with treasure as a new Rome, capital of the East.

Historians, Christian and non-Christian, would argue

from that time forward over the origins and depth of Constantine’s Christianity. Had it all begun with the vision before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge? Was he ever really Christian? Or had he been a believer all his life?

Had he indeed been exposed to Christianity as a child? Some historians believe that he had been, among them the University of Toronto’s T. G. Elliott, who holds that both Constantius and Helena were Christians, keeping their faith secret while teaching it to their son. He cites significant evidence. For one thing, Constantius had largely declined to enforce Diocletian’s persecution edict in Britain and Gaul. He had knocked down a handful of churches, to be sure, so as

To Constantine, such actions as these justified war, not merely a war of succession, as at the Milvian Bridge, but a full-fledged holy war for the Christian God.

not to call down the displeasure of Diocletian or of Maximian, another enthusiastic persecutor of Christians. But Constantius had refused to arrest, much less punish, any Christians at all. True, Constantine’s mother, Helena, was with her son when he married Fausta at Trier, and it was only then, or shortly thereafter that she openly professed the Christian faith. But she might have been a Christian all along.

Constantine himself had given no previous indication that he knew very much about Christianity. It is far more probable that he, like most semi-educated pagans of his time, worshiped a panoply of gods, but regarded them all as manifestations of one supreme God. Along with many of his contemporaries, he would have identified that one God with the unconquered Sun—Sol Invictus—whose feast day was December 25 (a date the Christians later took over as Christmas) and whose shining image appeared on Constantine’s coins for many years. From Sol Invictus, it seemed only a short mental step to the God of the Christians and Jews.

In any event, one thing makes the Milvian Bridge incident seem pivotal. After the battle, when he entered Rome in triumph, when the Senate and the whole populace greeted him exuberantly, he ordered a statue of himself placed in the busiest part of the city. He instructed that in his hand be placed a spear in the form of a cross, with an inscription declaring by this sign had the city been delivered. In persistently pagan Rome, this would not have been widely appreciated.

Now the whole Roman Empire belonged to him. But as he saw it, it also belonged to the Christian God. So one of his first acts after his victory over Licinius was to proclaim the empire Christian—in fact, a vast Christian church of which he, Constantine, was protector and leader. “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus said, but for the moment anyway, it was. ■

With the last of his foes, Licinius (below), defeated, Constantine assumed the mantle of sole emperor of the Roman Empire. The reverse side of a coin minted at this point in his career shows him dealing brutally with his enemies, while on the coin’s other side he lifts his face in prayerful contemplation—to what or whom is unclear. He wears the Greek symbol of royalty, the diadem, not the Roman laurel wreath.



The birth of Christian Britain

Though the traces of the faith are scanty in Rome's most northern province, the convert Alban's martyrdom for trying to save a priest is sound history

No one knows exactly when or how Christianity came to Britain to take its place among many competing religions and pagan cults (including the "elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves," described in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*). In fact, we know less about the introduction and spread of Christianity in Britain than in many other parts of the Roman Empire.

Legends abound. The most romantic of them concerns Joseph of Arimathea, the Sanhedrin member whom Mark's Gospel calls Jesus' "secret disciple" ("a good and just man," Luke adds). According to all four Gospels, Joseph begged Pilate's permission to inter the crucified body of Jesus in his own garden tomb.

Apocryphal sources and some early Christian traditions say that Joseph first cared for Mary, Jesus' mother, and then set out with a small band of followers carrying the Holy Grail (the chalice used at the Last Supper) and came to Britain. Thirty years after the Crucifixion, Joseph is supposed to have built a rudimentary chapel at what later became Glastonbury Abbey (where he is still the patron saint).

Alas, romance must yield here to two intractable facts: one, the legend did not exist prior to the thirteenth century; two, the story derives more from literary than religious sources.

Thriving Christian communities did exist in Britain in the fourth century, however. Sensational confirmation surfaced in 1975, at Water Newton in

Huntingdonshire, when a man discovered, in a cultivated field, a treasure trove of Christian artifacts including dated gold coins in a lidded pottery jar. Among other items in what scholars called the Water Newton Treasure was a silver communion chalice, the earliest discovered in the West.

About 340, a portrait of a young, beardless Christ was incised in a stone mosaic later found in a field at Hinton St. Mary, in Dorset (see page 68). Incidentally, the absence of crosses among these early Christian artifacts has led some scholars to speculate that the cross had not yet come into use as a popular Christian symbol.

But on the whole, there is little evidence of Christians in Britain much before the year 300. True, two early church fathers (Tertullian and Origen) boasted that Christianity extended to the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire; in this context, they mention *Britannia*, but most scholars treat this not as history but hyperbole.

Nor is there evidence of church buildings in Britain before the fifth century. Worshipers met together outside or in private homes. The first organized dioceses are believed to have been in York and Lincoln. Records show that three impoverished British bishops attended the Council of Arles in 314.

Were Christians subject to martyrdom in Roman Britain? This question, too, is open to scholarly debate. According to a British monk named Gildas (c. 490–570), they were. Gildas wrote of "the nine-year



Discovered in 1975 by a plowman in Water Newton, England, this cup may be a chalice. Vessels and plaques found with it may be the earliest liturgical silver from the Roman Empire yet found.



Although it looks as fresh as if it were far more recent, the mural in the Roman villa at Lullingstone, England, was actually painted in the early fourth century.



Some of England's cities trace their history to Roman settlements and have grown up around early Roman monuments. The city of Bath (above) takes its name from a well-preserved local Roman spa. A man (right) strolls along the Roman wall at Oxford.



persecution by the tyrant Diocletian.”

The most comprehensive history of the early church in Britain was written by an eighth-century British monk, the Venerable Bede. His *The History of the English Church and Nation*, which drew upon Gildas, was completed in the year 731.

Bede vividly describes the first British martyr, St. Alban (died c. 304), a pagan living in Verulamium (now St. Albans), who gave sanctuary in his home to a priest fleeing the Roman authorities. After observing how the priest prayed night and day, and put his complete confidence in God, Alban became a convert. In Bede’s words, “he forsook the darkness of idolatry and became a wholehearted Christian.”

When the Roman authorities received a tip that Alban was sheltering the priest, soldiers were dispatched to Alban’s home; but Alban exchanged clothes with the priest so that the soldiers arrested Alban instead. He was brought before a judge who happened, at that moment, to be offering sacrifices to pagan gods. The judge commanded Alban to do likewise. Alban refused and declared himself a Christian; the judge ordered him tortured.

“Though subjected to the most cruel tortures, Alban bore them patiently and even joyfully for the Lord’s sake,” Bede writes. The judge then ordered

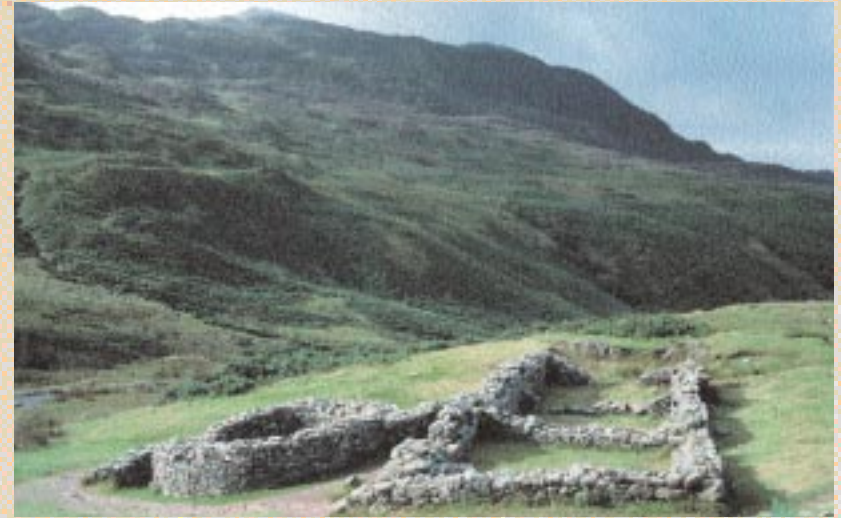
Alban executed. He was taken first to the river to be drowned, but as Alban entered the waters, they parted before him, as once they had parted for Moses.

“On seeing this miracle, Alban’s executioner threw away his sword, fell to the ground, and “earnestly prayed that he might be judged worthy to be put to death with the martyr.” Both men were then taken to a nearby field and beheaded. In a final miraculous twist, Bede records that “the head of the blessed martyr and the executioner’s eyes fell to the ground together.” Thereafter, Alban became “Saint Alban, illustrious Alban, fruitful Britain’s child.”

Also believed to have been martyred at about the same time as Alban were St. Julius and St. Aaron, whose feast days are still observed in South Wales. According to Bede, “They were racked by many kinds of torture and their limbs were indescribably mangled, but when their sufferings were over, their souls were carried to the joys of the heavenly city.”

After the decade of Diocletian’s persecution ended, Bede says Christians emerged from “woods, deserts and secret caverns,” where they had been hiding and continued to proclaim the gospel.

Their lives, indeed the lives of all inhabitants of Roman Britain, were (in Thomas Hobbes’s pithy phrase) “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” ■



Constructed in 121 to keep out the fierce Caledonians, Hadrian’s wall (left) still stretches across the pastures and fields of Northumberland. Farther south, a Roman outpost (top) guards Hardknott Pass in the Lake District. At what is now Wroxeter (above), a garrison town evolved into Viroconium, fourth largest city in Roman Britain.