

# Constantine's Constantinople: A Christian Emperor, A Pagan City

Mary Balzer

On 11 May, 330 C.E., Emperor Constantine stood at the head of the ceremonial festivities that officially consecrated his new capital in the East.<sup>1</sup> Constantinople, as the new city was called, heralded a new era of Constantine's reign with him ruling as the sole emperor. His last co-emperor, Licinius, was defeated at the battle of Chrysopolis in 324.<sup>2</sup> Following this, Constantine selected a site for his new capital and began building what he would later call the "New Rome."<sup>3</sup> Constantine had begun his rule as one of four co-emperors, but by 324 he was the one and only ruler.

Although the historians of the time agree on the date of the ceremonies, each author gives a unique description of Constantine's vision for his new capital. The Christian sources Eusebius, the *Easter Chronicle*, and Zonaras highlight Constantine's Christian building program in his new capital. But the archaeological record does not corroborate their emphatically Christian accounts. Zosimus, one of the last pagan historians, has historically been overlooked because of his anti-Christian stance. Concerning Constantinople as his account does not describe any

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Barnes, *Eusebius and Constantine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 222.

<sup>2</sup> Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, "Introduction" in *Eusebius: Life of Constantine*, translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 41.

<sup>3</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324 to A.D. 440*, trans. Edward Walford (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855), 54.

specific emphasis on Christian architecture in the city.<sup>4</sup> Zosimus provides a good balance to the Christian writers and provides an opposing, albeit not unbiased, picture of the early architectural landscape in Constantinople. Somewhere between the contrasting written descriptions of the city combined with the limited archaeological evidence that we have, we can identify the major civic, religious, and social centers in the urban layout in order to look at Constantine's role in their design, construction, and use.

The small city of Byzantium and the surrounding area that Constantine would merge to create the city of Constantinople had few natural resources that would make it appropriate for the new capital of a powerful emperor's vast empire. Constantinople suffered from a shortage of agricultural lands and a limited water supply.<sup>5</sup> Yet the city became the Eastern political and economic center of the empire, not because of its location, but due to the incredible imperial patronage that forcibly pushed it to the forefront.<sup>6</sup> It was not a natural process of urban development, but rather a concerted imperial effort. Unlike Rome, which had developed over centuries, Constantinople was the result of the personal determination of one emperor. Although he and his successors built harbors, cisterns, and aqueducts to supply the city with water and grain,<sup>7</sup> it would have been much easier to simply pick one of the other frontier cities that had those resources already. Set above the Bosphorus, the city was extraordinarily scenic and beautiful. Lying in the East, it was also a site of military importance because its location near the frontier could at the same time allow the emperor to respond to external attacks quickly, but also escape from internal insurrections. There must have been several sites that fit these criteria, so the choice of Byzantium, with its limited natural resources suggests a deeper cause. Perhaps it was the imperial residence of Licinus, maybe it was the closest city to the last major battle between the final co-emperors,<sup>8</sup> or perchance it was an arbitrary decision based on its incredible natural scenery. In the fourth century, Constantinople could have become a Christian capital, but Constantine first had to establish his new capital as a rival to the Rome of

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<sup>4</sup> James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis, "Introduction" in *Zosimus: Historia Nova: The Decline of Rome*, trans. James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis (San Antonio, TX: Trinity UP, 1967), ix.

<sup>5</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins, "The Cities," *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. XIII *The Late Empire, AD 337-425*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 386.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London, Quercus, 2009), 194.

<sup>7</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins, "The Cities," 389-390.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor*, 193.

the imperial past—even if it meant postponing the construction of churches until the end of his own reign.

### Selection of the Site

The Christian historians attribute Constantine's choice of Byzantium to a direct vision from God. Sozomen, writing in the fifth century, tells us that Constantine, "[i]n obedience to God, ...enlarged the city formerly called Byzantium, and surrounded it with high walls."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the *Easter Chronicle* relates how "Constantine, having become the sole emperor, founded Byzantium, after receiving an oracle that the empire was about to perish, and became Christian."<sup>10</sup> The *Easter Chronicle* thus dates his conversion not after the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 313 as the other sources relate but instead nearly ten years later, after a vision commanding him to construct a new capital. Concerning the battle, it merely states how "Constantine killed Maxentius in battle, and thus was the sole emperor of the West," neglecting any mention of his vision on the eve of the battle.<sup>11</sup> From this account, the *Easter Chronicle* implicitly relates that the vision from the Christian god ordered the emperor to create a new and most importantly Christian city.

Although the other Christian historians date Constantine's conversion to the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, years before the selection of the site, they do agree that God gave him a divine mission in a vision to create a new capital to bring glory to the Christian emperor. Zonaras relates how "the emperor himself turned his attention to Byzantium, was pleased examining the place, changed his purpose, transferred the workmen from Chalcedon, lavishly constructed the city, called it Constantinople after his own name, and dedicated it to the Virgin and Mother of God."<sup>12</sup> Zonaras is not the only historian to write that Constantine had in fact abandoned work at his original location and only chosen Byzantium as a site after a vision from God.<sup>13</sup>

Zosimus, the only pagan writer of these events although he doesn't credit it to a vision from God does say that Constantine "had a change of heart and, leaving his work unfinished, went to Byzantium."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324-A.D. 440*, 53-54.

<sup>10</sup> *Chronicon Paschale: 284-629 AD*, trans. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1989), 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*, translated by Thomas Banchich and Eugene N. Lane (London: Routledge, 2009), 153.

<sup>13</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324-A.D. 440*, 53

<sup>14</sup> Zosimus, *Historia Nova: The Decline of Rome*, trans. James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis, (San Antonio, TX: Trinity UP, 1967), 72.

Zosimus writes that Constantine's first choice was ancient Illium.<sup>15</sup> This was the traditional location of the legendary City of Troy.<sup>16</sup> If Constantine's change of heart is understood as a result of the Christian vision, then his switch from Illium to Byzantium can be read as a symbolic switch from pagan tradition rooted in the legends of the ancient city of Troy to the new Christian religion and its need for an imperial capital to match its growing role in Roman society. If Zosimus is correct that Constantine changed locations from the site believed to be the ancient Troy, it would suggest that Constantine wanted to break free from old pagan traditions.

Byzantium's location offered Constantine huge military and political potential. Once he selected the site for his new capital, he may very well have decided to make it Christian, but the city did not have enough of a Christian tradition or ecclesiastical importance to warrant selection based upon its Christian history. Constantinople was the home of only two relatively unknown martyrs, Mocius and Acacius, who were only venerated locally and for whom Constantine most likely built Christian structures.<sup>17</sup> But even those structures are only attributed to Constantine by a process of deduction, as Constantine's honorary architecture to the only two local martyrs is not described in any detail by his biographers.

Sozomen refers to a great oak tree outside the city walls where Constantine replaced a pagan shrine with a Christian building to honor the martyrdom of an unnamed Christian.<sup>18</sup> Sozomen later relates that the shrine at "The Oak" was dedicated to Mocius.<sup>19</sup> If the oaks are the same, these two episodes in Sozomen's history imply that Constantine was responsible for the dedicatory church to Mocius outside the city walls. In this case, Constantine's action is not heralded by his biographers as would be reasonably expected by the readers of the other biographies. For some reason, perhaps because the structure was much less than grand, it could not be used as an example of Constantine's extreme dedication to Christianity in the new capital. Another way to explain this lack of written description may lie in the fact that the shrine was located outside of the city walls. If it was in a very rural location, it is likely that neither the author nor the audience would be familiar with Mocius' martyrdom. In either case Sozomen's limited description, which is more

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> D.MAN., M.KO., and Jan (Kiel) Stenger, "Troy." *Brill's New Pauly*. edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Brill, 2011), accessed December 28, 2011, [http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp\\_e1221310](http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp_e1221310).

<sup>17</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins, "The Cities," 400.

<sup>18</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324-A.D. 440*, 56-57.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 387.

than any of the other sources write, implies that the martyrrium was no longer in place or viewed as an important Christian landmark by the time he wrote his biography of Constantine.

Although it is generally believed that Constantine was responsible for any martyrrium dedicated to Mocius outside the city walls, it is not so clear regarding any dedicatory structure within the city. Despite a lack of irrefutable evidence, Constantine may have been responsible for two Christian structures dedicated to the city's two local martyrs, Mocius and Acacius. According to some historical sources, Constantine had a hand in constructing the church in Constantinople dedicated to Acacius.<sup>20</sup> This is most likely the same as the shrine dedicated to the saint that was in place by 359.<sup>21</sup> Whether a church or a shrine, there seems to have been a structure dedicated to the local martyr during or just after Constantine's reign. There was another local historical tradition that Constantine was responsible for the construction of a vast basilica dedicated to Mocius, but there is little contemporary written evidence of his personal role in the project.<sup>22</sup> If he was directly responsible for both or either dedicatory churches, it is clear that he was capitalizing on the martyrdom histories that he did have in the new city.

But ultimately, Constantinople did not have martyrs important enough to warrant selection based on Christian significance. Constantine selected Byzantium for reasons other than its Christian importance. Lacking a strong tradition of martyrdom in the city, the small Christian community in Byzantium could not even claim political importance within the ecclesiastical structure in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> Constantinople only became an important city because of the imperial attention. Therefore it cannot be said that Constantine selected the site based on any local Christian tradition.

### **Civic Construction**

Constantine's largest obstacle in constructing a Christian city, if that was indeed his intention, was to create a city that could claim to be the new Christian capital in the East as well as the successor to a pagan Rome. In assuming the iconographic and symbolic language of imperial power, he would be forced to contradict the monotheistic Christian

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<sup>20</sup> See the comments of Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall in *Life of Constantine*, translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, p. 297, n. 47: 4-49.

<sup>21</sup> Oliver Nicholson, "Constantinople: Christian City, Christian Landscape," *The Making of Christian Communities in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, edited by Mark F. Williams (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 44.

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 222.

<sup>23</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins, "The Cities," 400.

doctrines. Constantinople's civic construction, although not overtly pagan, alludes to the pagan past insomuch that it legitimizes Constantine's claim to imperial authority and the city's effort to re-center the empire around itself as the new successor to Rome.

The Christian structures in the new capital were certainly the most important to the Christian historians writing the history of Constantine's reign after the fact but Constantine was just as, if not more, concerned with the civic construction that would cement his imperial authority and raise Constantinople to a level comparable with Rome. The first action Constantine took once he settled on the location was to build high walls around the perimeter of the ancient city and more to make a bigger city upon the old.<sup>24</sup> Constantine proceeded to rebuild the public baths of Zeuxippon, which had fallen into disrepair and decorated them in the Roman style, with "varied marbles and works of bronze."<sup>25</sup> Walls and baths are all imperial structures necessary for a city to claim to be the capital of the Roman Empire, but none have especially Christian characteristics. The baths, although not overtly polytheistic, are traditional civic buildings of the pagan past rather than the Christian one. Constantine as a Christian emperor would have chosen pagan decorations for the sake of tradition rather than worship. The more similarities between Rome and Constantinople the better; Constantine wanted his new city to be Rome's replacement—even if it meant perpetuating pagan art and architecture.

Zosimus brings about a direct comparison with Rome when he tells how Constantine, "when in this way he had encompassed a city far larger than its predecessor he constructed a palace not much smaller than the one in Rome."<sup>26</sup> The palace being nearly the same size as the one in Rome affirms that Constantine was aiming to rival the ancient tradition of Rome with a new capital. Baths, walls, and a palace were necessary for a city to claim imperial importance. In the period of the Tetrarchy, emperors built imperial complexes in their cities of residence.<sup>27</sup> These additions to cities besides Rome showed how a construction project could legitimize a city—and in this way, many smaller cities were put on the map. But unlike the other emperors of the third and fourth century, Constantine only built two palaces in order to create one new imperial capital city.<sup>28</sup> He first rebuilt the imperial residence in Rome and then constructed the new palace in Constantinople. Because he only built

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<sup>24</sup> *Chronicon Paschale, 284-629 AD*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> James J. Buchanon and Harold T. Davis, "Introduction," ix.

<sup>27</sup> Slobodanuri, "Late Antique Palaces: The Meaning of Urban Context," *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 23, Pre-Modern Islamic Palaces (1993), 72.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

those two imperial residences, the tie between the “Old Rome” and the “New Rome” is especially strong

But if Constantine was indeed a pious Christian assembling pagan decoration without belief in those gods as his biographers attest, then the lack of a Christian chapel within the palace is a puzzling piece of evidence. Although there are no physical remnants of Constantine's palace, the historians detail the decoration and construction of the building in their—sometimes conflicting—accounts.<sup>29</sup> Eusebius, as always, promotes Constantine's Christian legacy and describes:

So great was the divine passion which had seized the Emperor's soul that in the royal quarters of the imperial building of all, at the very middle of the gilded coffer adjoining the roof, in the centre of a very large wide panel, had been fixed the emblem of the saving Passion made up of a variety of precious stones and set in much gold. This appears to have been made by the Godbeloved as protection for his Empire.<sup>30</sup>

The other historians do not give any direct contradiction to this statement, but no matter how magnificent this emblem of the Passion may have been, it does not explain the lack of a Christian chapel within the imperial residence.

Although Constantine did not make Christianity the official state religion, his decision not to build a chapel in his own palace suggests reluctance to even promote his personal choice of religion within the political ruling structure. When he assumed power in the East, it is estimated that only five to ten percent of the people living within the borders of the Empire were Christians.<sup>31</sup> The first Christian chapel in the palace was dedicated to St. Stephen and was not begun until 421 C.E., nearly a century after Constantine dedicated the city.<sup>32</sup> In order to appease the pagan majority, Constantine “allow[ed] it to believe that his Christian faith was a purely personal matter.”<sup>33</sup>

Equally important to the palace was the new forum that Constantine constructed in the center of his building projects. The forum was traditionally the final location of imperial displays and processions. The purpose of the forum in Constantinople was the same as it was in Rome. The pagan sculptures adorning his new forum follow an ancient tradition of civic construction, but call into question the dominance of

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor*, 194.

<sup>30</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 140.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Veyne, *When Our World Became Christian*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, MA: 2010), 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor*, 201-202.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Veyne, *When Our World Became Christian*, 75.

Christian art in the central plaza in Constantinople. Sozomen explains the presence of pagan sculpture as the byproduct of Constantine's Christianizing efforts. He writes how Constantine ordered the cult statues to be removed from their shrines and "carried to the city named after the emperor, and placed there as objects of embellishment."<sup>34</sup> By calling them embellishments, Sozomen reconciles the pagan imperial imagery of the forum with Constantine's Christian vision for the new capital. Their presence demonstrates Constantine's reluctance to part with the Roman tradition of displaying statues of the gods, but the sculptures in his forum were taken from their religious context and exposed to public scrutiny. A forum was a traditional civic structure that provided the stage upon which the emperor could display his wealth and power. In other words it was absolutely necessary for Constantine's plan for the new capital in which he could emulate the traditional Roman imperial displays. But in the attempt to mimic the traditions of the Roman emperors of old, he had to negotiate the conflicting pagan and Christian faiths. His solution was to keep the forum decoration accurate in the traditional Roman sense, but at the same time he took the statues out of their original context rather than commissioning new ones to be built.

Reusing statues was an expedient tactic that helped him keep on his construction timeline to be ready by the anniversary of St. Mocius. Re-appropriation of sculpture was a common practice,<sup>35</sup> but Constantine's choice to take cult statues out of religious context added significant symbolic meaning. Statues and columns were moved from building to building or even city to city in the ancient world, but Constantine extended this practice by removing cult images and secularizing them by displaying them in public places. He took the images that had once been worshipped as gods and stripped them of any identity other than that of architectural decoration. The statues of the pagan deities made his civic center look like a traditional forum that could have been found in Rome, but it was also the best way to rationalize Roman traditional architecture within a Christian city.

Constantinople provided Constantine with a unique opportunity to build a city designed to accommodate the needs of an emperor. He designed it so that its structures and roads would provide the perfect stage for imperial displays of power. Rome's civic buildings were constructed over centuries, but under Constantine's new civic building plan, the original city of Byzantium was nearly demolished and a new civic center popped up in a short period of time. Starting from scratch,

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<sup>34</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324-A.D. 440*, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Alchermes, "Spolia in the Cities of the Late Empire: Legislative Rationales and Architectural Reuse," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* (1994):167, accessed December 30, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1291726>.



Constantine organized the city in a linear fashion, with all the major monuments lined up so that it appeared made for imperial triumphal processions.<sup>36</sup> As if checking items off a list, Sozomen explains how Constantine “erected all requisite edifices, a hippodrome, fountains, porticoes, and other beautiful embellishments” to build his new capital city.<sup>37</sup> As he sought to recreate the traditional civic spaces of Rome, he had to find ways to imitate the architectural style without wholly supporting the pagan tradition.

By incorporating the traditional imperial iconography and symbolism in a set of new buildings dictated by what was standing in Rome, Constantine added authenticity to his new capital. By mimicking Rome in content and style, Constantine hoped for Constantinople to assume some of the symbolic power the Rome had held during the days of the Roman republic. The identity of Rome had to be transposed upon Constantine’s new imperial building projects through the architectural style. The architectural similarities between the public buildings in the two cities made the comparison even more clear. Rome’s public buildings provided Constantine with a template from which he designed his new capital.

## Church Construction

Despite attempts to rationalize the presence of pagan styled buildings as merely Constantine’s desire to fashion himself after the pagan Roman emperors of the past, the lack of Christian buildings in the civic center of Constantinople suggests that Constantine may have had an ulterior motive. Until recently, historians have perpetuated the idea that Constantine built Constantinople as a new Christian capital, but Constantine can only be connected with any certainty to one Christian building among the vast civic building projects, the mausoleum of the Holy Apostles.<sup>38</sup> The Church of the Holy Apostles, which is most directly attributed to Constantine will be discussed in detail later. But the Christian historians Eusebius and Zonaras as well as the authors of the Easter Chronicle proudly list several other churches Constantine constructed within the city. One major church in the capital, the Hagia Sophia may have been begun by Constantine, but was finished during the

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<sup>36</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins, “Constantinople, Imperial Capital of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries,” in *Sedes Regiae*, ed. Gisela Ripoli and Josep M. Gurt, (Barcelona: Reial Academia de Bones Lletres, 2000), 70.

<sup>37</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324-A.D. 440*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> See the comments of Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall in *Life of Constantine*, translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, p. 297, n. 47: 4-49.

reign of his son.<sup>39</sup> Constantine was undoubtedly a convinced Christian in his personal life but did not feel it appropriate to add monumental Christian structures to the center of his Rome-inspired capital.<sup>40</sup>

Even if the churches were of secondary importance in Constantine's grand plans for the new city, his patronage influenced Christian building during the initial years following the dedication of the city. It was not only an outward display of piety, but church construction by an emperor was also a way to claim land for the empire and when constructed by his followers, it was a way to claim to be of the same mind of the emperor himself. Constantine was responsible for many shrines to martyrs in the hinterlands around the city even if he did not reserve a spot of importance within the center of his new city. He often replaced pagan shrines with his new Christian buildings of worship, which directly imposed imperial will on the people surrounding the capital city.<sup>41</sup> He did not merely provide them with an alternative worship site, but he replaced their traditional sites with Christian and imperially approved shrines. In a similar grasp for power, the new elites of the city began constructing private buildings of worship. This demonstrated their enthusiastic support of the imperial religion, aligning themselves with the emperor, and solidifying their claim to aristocracy in a way that their non-senatorial blood could not. Even if Constantine did not, himself, push for the construction of new churches in the center of his new capital when it was built, his Christian legislation and later actions promoted church building.

Disregarding the fact that he may have personally contributed little to the construction of Christian buildings within the capital, he was able to improve the public's view of his legitimacy as a ruler. Constantine and his contemporaries believed that God offered protection to those who proved and spread their Christian faith. Sozomen finds it important not only that the Constantine of his account donated to the Church and built new houses of worship, but also that God accepts his building program as a kind of sacrifice and in return extends his good favor towards the Christian emperor and his capital city. Although he does not list the churches by name—perhaps because his account exaggerates Constantine's actual contributions—Sozomen does emphatically describe how “Constantine further honoured this new city of Christ by adorning it with numerous magnificent houses of prayer, in which the Deity vouchsafed to bless the efforts of the emperor by giving sensible

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<sup>39</sup> Gregory T. Armstrong, “Constantine’s Churches: Symbol and Structure,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (1974), 7-8, accessed October 26, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/988835>.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Veyne, *When our World Became Christian*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory T. Armstrong, “Constantine’s Churches: Symbol and Structure,” 14.

manifestations of His presence.”<sup>42</sup> Christian structures provided a political security to Constantine as well as a place for him to display his personal religious devotion publicly. If people believed that God valued grand churches dedicated to Him, then they would have assumed that the favor of God increased in direct relation to the number of buildings that their emperor allowed to be built. In this way, every time Constantine helped build a new church he secured for himself legitimacy and loyalty as his subjects believed him to be getting forever closer to complete invincibility.

## The Dedication Date

Although Christian buildings were not a priority, Constantine used the Christian calendar to set the date of the dedication. He rushed construction in order to finish by May 11 because it was the festival of Saint Mocius, one of two Byzantine martyrs. In this way, he connected the foundation of Constantinople to what there was of a Christian legacy in Byzantium. Churches may not have been his initial priority, but after the necessary buildings of a Roman-styled capital city were complete Constantine could then turn to Christianity and integrate it into his new city.

The dedication of the city on 11 May, 330 C.E. is the day by which the buildings Constantine felt to be most integral to the operation of the new capital had to be complete. It was a short period of time in which to build a city and Constantine's plans were limited by what was possible to build in time.<sup>43</sup> Constantine rushed construction on the hippodrome, the baths, the palace, the forum, the porticoes, but no church was constructed with such haste. Zosimus, sometimes a harsh critic of Constantine, relates how in his haste to build some buildings “were demolished as being unsafe owing to hasty construction.”<sup>44</sup> If Constantinople were meant to be first and foremost a Christian city as the later historians suggest, then Constantine would have built a church as soon as the foundations of the city had been established. Instead he spent more time making sure that his imperial palace, administrative centers, and traditionally Roman public recreation buildings were in place in time for the dedication.

Judging from the choices Constantine made during the construction period, Constantinople can only correctly be termed an imperial city. Constantine later supported church building within the new capital, but the buildings that identified it as an imperial capital—those he

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<sup>42</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324–A.D. 440*, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor*, 196.

<sup>44</sup> Zosimus, *Historia Nova: The Decline of Rome*, 74.

rushed to finish by 330—were the secular public buildings designed with the pagan Roman architectural style in mind.<sup>45</sup> Constantine decided not to change the definition of an imperial city by adding new types of buildings, namely churches, to the prescribed civic structural formula.

## Public Roles

Perhaps because of political instability, or perhaps because of his recent conquest in the East, Constantinople was built with the public's perception of the emperor in mind. The inclusion of Christian architecture only occurred where it would help his public image. Christianity was yet another useful tool for Constantine to use for the promotion of his public image. But he also maintained the traditional imperial titles of leadership within pagan cults so as not to lose any of his influential public offices.<sup>46</sup> He was not willing to sacrifice the respect of the majority of his pagan population by fully Christianizing society too suddenly.

The fact that the great monuments were all placed at the same time, and were placed in a linear fashion ending in an open square, would have made imperial processions easier and grander with the emperor passing each major monument without having to turn onto side streets on his journey through the city's center.<sup>47</sup> Constantine was focused on assuming the traditional power of a Roman emperor by styling himself after the old leaders of Rome. His success at imperial displays of power in Constantinople is confirmed by the actions of the barbarian kings of the West. The Germanic leaders chose to copy the evolving processions of the leaders of Constantinople in the 4<sup>th</sup> century rather than the past traditions of the old Rome when they attempted to assume an air of imperial authority.<sup>48</sup>

The day of dedication in Constantinople in 330 C.E. may have been chosen from a Christian calendar, but the festivities were pagan in spirit. Constantine was not ready to break with the tradition of the pagan Roman emperors, and although the games and processions of the dedication may not have been overtly pagan, they were not Christian either. During the chariot-racing contest, Constantine "proclaimed that the city, formerly named Byzantium, be called second Rome."<sup>49</sup> At the dedication of the city and throughout the elaborate ceremonies in 330,

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Veyne, *When Our World Became Christian*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>47</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins, "Constantinople, Imperial Capital of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries," 70.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>49</sup> *Chronicon Paschale, 284-629 AD*, 17.

Constantine believed that it was necessary to the legitimization of his power to link his new capital to Rome.

Constantine prescribed a new tradition to be carried out each year on the anniversary of the dedication of the city that was more reminiscent of pagan festivals than anything done in a Christian mass. The purpose of the anniversary activity was to keep his memory alive for the duration of the city and shows an assertion of the godlike status of the emperor that would be troublesome for Christians to accept. The *Easter Chronicle* describes how Constantine:

...made for himself another gilded monument of wood, bearing in its right had a Tyche of the same city, itself also gilded, and commanded that on the same day of the anniversary chariot races, the same monument of slippers, all holding white candles; the carriage should proceed around the further turning-post and come to the arena opposite the imperial box; and the emperor of the day should rise and do obeisance to the monument of the same emperor Constantine and this Tyche of the city.<sup>50</sup>

The ceremony can in no way be classified as Christian, and it is very difficult to rationalize its place in a supposedly Christian capital. The *Easter Chronicle* does not even explain away the pagan roots of the ceremony; it merely describes it. Worship of gilded images is most certainly not Christian, and the Tyche statue dissuades all argumentation for merely an honorific ceremony of appreciation to an emperor of the past. By building a monument of him-self that matches the one of the Tyche of the city, Constantine implies a godlike status. This is nothing new, and if there was to be one element of paganism that a Christian emperor would hold on to as a carryover into the new society, emperor worship makes sense. This particular element of paganism, namely the divine nature of the emperor, is understandable in Constantine's aim to legitimize his power and raise his new capital to the same symbolic importance of Rome, but it is not compatible with the idea of a Christian city. Even if he professed faith in the Christian god, Constantine was born in a pagan imperial world, and could not separate the imperial from the pagan. He may have been a Christian emperor, but Constantinople was not to be celebrated as a Christian city.

### **Relation to Paganism**

Although Constantinople's anniversary ceremony borrowed much from the pagan past, Constantine's policies in the East serve as

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

evidence for his Christian faith. In 324 C.E., six years before the dedication ceremony at Constantinople, Constantine had defined his policy on Christianity in a letter to the people of the East.<sup>51</sup> He proclaimed himself to be Christian and added that other Christians can expect favor from the emperor. However, he was more tolerant of the pagans than his predecessors had been towards the Christians. He allowed pagans to keep their temples and shrines, but only if they limited their worship practices to fit with the Christian teachings. He prohibited “sacrifice, divination, and the dedication of new cult images...[which were] precisely the activities which constituted the essence of the traditional religions of the Roman Empire.”<sup>52</sup> His policy discouraged active pagan worship, but did not encroach on any of the imperial symbolic tradition because it did not require any buildings or statues to be destroyed immediately. Constantine may have been a Christian within the palace, but he understood the power of imperial symbolism in entrenching himself in tradition and in clarifying his complete imperial power publically.

Although he allowed pagan shrines to continue to exist in the East, Zosimus is the only historian who alleges their presence in Constantinople itself. Sozomen ardently professes that within the city walls, Constantinople “was not polluted by altars, Grecian temples, nor sacrifices[.]”<sup>53</sup> Likewise Eusebius explains how:

In honouring with exceptional distinction the city which bears his name, [Constantine] embellished it with very many places of worship, very large martyr-shrines, and splendid houses, some standing before the city and others in it...Being full of the breath of God's wisdom, which he reckoned a city bearing his own name should display, he saw fit to purge it of all idol-worship, so that nowhere in it appeared those images of the supposed gods which are worshipped in temples, nor altars foul with bloody slaughter, nor sacrifice offered as holocaust in fire, nor feasts with demons, nor any of the other customs of the superstitious.<sup>54</sup>

The cause of this discrepancy must derive from the backgrounds of the writers. Zosimus is the only pagan biographer of the three. When the sources openly disagree it is difficult to distinguish the true version from the ideal. Both the pagan and Christian biographer have a vision of the emperor they would prefer to continue into the memory of future generations. Considering Constantine's pagans in the empire, it is likely

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<sup>51</sup> Timothy Barnes, *Eusebius and Constantine*, 210.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 211

<sup>53</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324-A.D. 440*, 54.

<sup>54</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 140.

that he allowed the structure of some pagan shrines to remain, but limited the actions of worship that could be carried on within. In that way each group of biographers is partly correct, and Constantine was able to yet again tread the boundary between pagan and Christian tradition.

### Constantine's Personal Monuments

The Church of the Holy Apostles and Constantine's porphyry column are the most significant buildings in the discussion of Constantine's Christian vision for his new capital. All our sources attribute their construction directly to Constantine, and both projects shed light on the emperor's relationship to Christianity in tandem with his desire to emulate the imperial pagan tradition.

The Church of the Holy Apostles is the one church within the city walls that is generally attributed to Constantine.<sup>55</sup> But it is likely that Constantine was directly responsible only for his mausoleum and that his son, Constantius II, added the actual cruciform church structure after his death.<sup>56</sup> The original mausoleum was a centralized structure with Constantine's golden coffin the central focus.<sup>57</sup> The coffin was surrounded by a ring of twelve chests, each dedicated to one of the holy apostles.<sup>58</sup> Constantine may have intended the chests of the apostles to serve as reliquaries, but it was not until the reign of his son that relics were brought to the building.<sup>59</sup> The actual church building was not built by Constantine but the mausoleum that he constructed became a part of the grand Christian church after his death, and that church—the Church of the Holy Apostles—then became the first important Christian structure in the city.

Although the Church of the Holy Apostles eventually became one of the most famous and important in the city, Constantine's original mausoleum disguises hints of paganism. Undoubtedly Christian in form, the intended function of Constantine's mausoleum was derived from pagan ideas. Eusebius writes that:

He had prepared the place there for the time when it would be needed on his decease, intending with supreme eagerness of faith that his own remains should after death partake in the invocation of the Apostles, so

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<sup>55</sup>See the comments of Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall in *Life of Constantine*, translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, p. 297, n. 47: 4-49.

<sup>56</sup> Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 106.

<sup>57</sup> Sozomen, *History of the Church: From A.D. 324-A.D. 440*, 105.

<sup>58</sup> Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*, 110.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

that even after his decease he might benefit from the worship which would be conducted there in honour of the Apostles. He therefore gave instructions for services to be held there, setting up a central altar.<sup>60</sup>

Constantine intended to link himself with the twelve apostles and encourage people to worship at his tomb. Eusebius specifies that Constantine desired only to benefit from the presence of those worshippers praying to the Apostles, but the central location of the coffin suggests that Constantine wanted to be the primary focus. Had the coffin been placed in a niche on the side then it would be conceivable that the building was intended to be dedicated primarily to the Apostles, but with the central plan designed to house the coffin in the center it seems that Constantine was intending that worshippers be aided in their prayers for the emperor by the surrounding shrines to the apostles.

Constantine believed that he had a special place in salvation history. Although he was not constructing a Christian capital, he was constructing a capital that would later be able to accommodate a growing Christian population. He believed that he had “been chosen, destined by a divine decree to play a providential role in the thousand-year-old system of salvation.”<sup>61</sup> Many Christian rulers have been buried in churches near the relics of saints, but Constantine's desire to align himself with the saints' rings of the pagan idea of a divine emperor, or at the very least an extraordinary Christian one.

The centralized plan with the twelve apostles surrounding the central imperial coffin speaks to his desire to be worshipped as a divine figure. Constantine's choice to have a central altar and to have his coffin placed in the middle of a ring of the apostolic dedicatory chests indicates that the altar was most probably directly next to his coffin. It would be physically impossible to worship at the altar without performing the Christian rituals directly above the coffin. It is not a Christian ideal to worship the emperor, but as have been evidenced before Constantine was more interested in how Christianity could help his imperial status than his personal piety.

Like the mausoleum at the Church of Holy Apostles, the porphyry column in Constantine's forum is a structure of ambiguous religious intent. The column was the central monument in his new forum and there is evidence of a sense of urgency in its construction.<sup>62</sup> Perched

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<sup>60</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 176.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Veyne, *When Our World Became Christian*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Garth Fowden, “Constantine's Porphyry Column: The Earliest Literary Allusion,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 81 (1991), 124, accessed October 19, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/300493>.



atop the large column of precious marble was a statue of Constantine himself. Due to the need for hasty construction before the dedication of the city, the statue was removed from its original location, transported to Constantinople, and was set upon the column as a representation of the emperor. Zonaras remarks that “the cult statue was a monument of Apollo.”<sup>63</sup> Constantine nurtured the association between himself and Apollo for the sake of expediency, but also because it heroicized him and elevated him to a godlike status. Perhaps in an effort to cast the statue in a Christian light, Eusebius tells how Constantine “immediately ordered a tall pole to be erected in the shape of a cross in the hand of a statue made to represent himself.”<sup>64</sup> There is no reason not to believe Eusebius’s account, but the presence of cross does not negate the pagan implications of reusing a statue of a god as a representation of the emperor. Upon the striking central column of his forum, Constantine cast himself as the reincarnation of Apollo.

Despite his desire to be conceived of as a new Apollo, legend attests that Constantine took great pains to amass Christian relics in the base of the column. A lack of contemporary evidence suggests that this may have been a legend added later to rationalize the presence of a pagan statue in the forum of the supposedly Christian capital. Zonaras relates how Constantine “erected the statue in his own name, having fastened to its head some of the nails which fastened the body of our lord to the salvific cross.”<sup>65</sup> Alongside the presence of Christian relics, there was also a belief in the presence of pagan relics beneath the base of the column. The *Easter Chronicle*, whose authors were writing centuries after the original dedication ceremonies like Zonaras, tell that “Constantine secretly took away from Rome the Palladium, as it is walled, and placed it in the Forum built by him, beneath the column of the monument.”<sup>66</sup> The Palladium was a statue of Athena believed to have been given to the city of Troy by the gods. Several cities in Greece and Italy claimed to be in possession of the idol before it was believed that Constantine had placed it under his porphyry column.<sup>67</sup> The column was meant to be, primarily, a symbol of Constantine’s invincibility. He combined both Christian and pagan relics that demonstrated the favor and protection of the gods in his

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<sup>63</sup> Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*, 153.

<sup>64</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> *Chronicon Paschale, 284-629 AD*, 16.

<sup>67</sup> Francesca Prescendi (Geneva), “Palladion, Palladium,” *Brill’s New Pauly*, edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, (Brill, 2011), accessed November 21, 2011, [http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp\\_e904560](http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp_e904560).

new capital. What was important was not the public display of Christianity, but the public display of the favor of the Christian God as well as that of the traditional Roman gods.

### Constantine's Middle Ground

Constantine was a Christian man, but a Roman emperor. His greatest civic contribution to the empire, the city of Constantinople was not a Christian city. It was constructed by a Christian emperor—a Christian emperor whose legislation and funding promoted Christianity—but a Roman politician who understood the importance of his pagan political appearance. The city of Constantinople was a newer and better version of the cities of the past emperors and dedicated to the *romanitas* of tradition, not a city dedicated to a new and controversial monotheistic god.

Constantine's public religious ambiguity contributed to his political success. He could not afford to change the state religion of the empire to Christianity when the vast majority of his citizens were pagans.<sup>68</sup> Especially after the tumultuous years leading up to his reign, the empire needed stability and a familiar leader. It would not have been politically viable for Constantine to reestablish the single emperor form of rule, move the center of the empire to a new capital city, and abolish the traditional state religion. Personally, Constantine was a Christian, but he could not suddenly change the religious foundation of the state at the same time that he was trying to recapture the traditional role of the emperor and revive the power of empire.

Constantine built Constantinople as a reference to the past glory of the Roman Empire and a symbol of his hope for the future strength of the revival that started during his reign. Architecturally, the civic center housed all the prerequisite structures that graced all the important cities of the Roman Empire. He may have been looking forward to the future but in order to possess the power and respect needed to change it, he had to return to the past and secure his image as an emperor worthy to join the ranks of those heroes of the Roman past. His promotion of Christianity had to be subtle. His legislation and his actions did more for the future security of the Christian religion than the construction of his new capital. Constantine had to tread the boundary between Christianity and paganism to remain both politically popular and personally fulfilled. Constantinople became a Christian city only after Constantine's reign through the legislative precedents and ecclesiastical traditions he set, and not through the physical design of the city which did not stray far from imperial tradition.

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Veyne, *When Our World Became Christian*, 1.

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