

## CHAPTER XLII

### THE ABSOLUTE MONARCHY

284-375 A.D.

#### I. POLITICAL HISTORY

**536. Diocletian** (284-305 A.D.); **Augusti, Caesars, and Pretorian Prefects.** — Di-o-cle'ti-an was a native of Dalmatia, a province full of martial spirit. The son of a freedman, he entered the army as a common soldier, and made his way to the imperial office by genius and force of will. As a statesman his great achievement was to embody in a new organization of the empire the spirit of the past century of revolution.

He first chose as colleague Max-im'i-an, a rough but able soldier. For purposes of administration and military defence they divided the Roman world between them, Diocletian taking the East and his colleague the West. We are not to suppose that this act meant the creation of two separate empires. There was but one empire, as before; and though each colleague bore the title Augustus, as had been the case under Marcus Aurelius,<sup>1</sup> Diocletian remained the real head of the government. Later two Caesars, Ga-le'ri-us and Constan'ti-us Chlo'rus, were appointed as aids and heirs of the Augusti. The Caesars had to be experienced generals, as they were assigned the most exposed and most difficult posts on the frontier. Each of these four great magistrates had a pretorian prefect as lieutenant. The object of the whole arrangement is clear. In the first place, the frontier was far too extended for one commander to defend; and any general intrusted with a great army at a distance from the emperor was sure to become a rival and enemy of the latter, unless he was already a colleague or an heir. Furthermore, the death of an emperor by natural causes or violence had frequently plunged

<sup>1</sup> § 527.

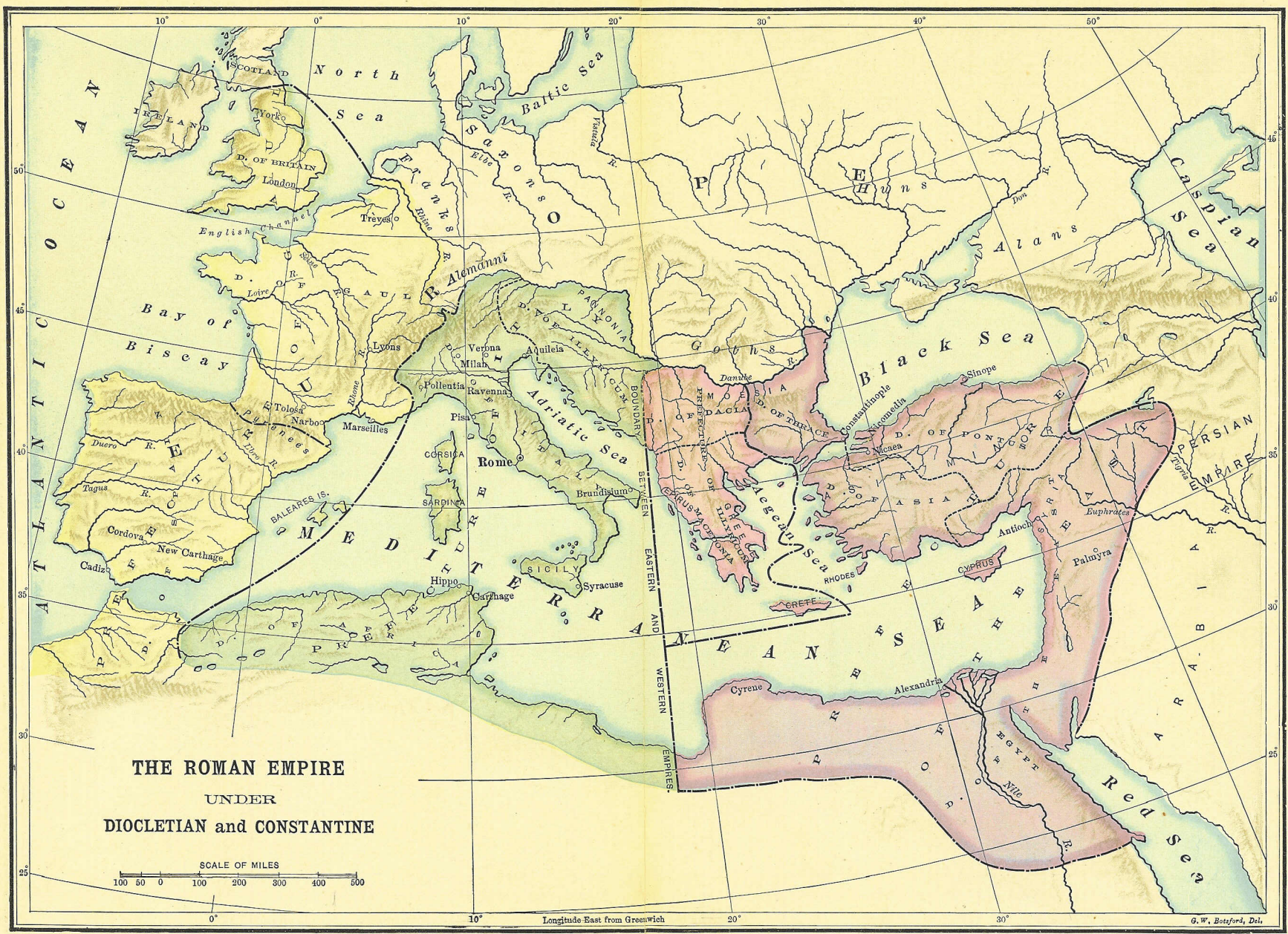
the Roman world into civil war among rivals for the throne. Under the new arrangement the empire could never be left headless or without legal heirs to the throne. Thus the temptation to kill an emperor was greatly diminished.

**537. The Provinces, Dioceses, and Prefectures.** — Augustus had begun the policy of dividing the greater provinces into two or more smaller ones. The object was in part to cut down the power of the great governors. Diocletian, and after him Constantine, continued the process till the empire consisted of more than a hundred small provinces, whose governors were correspondingly unimportant. These little districts were grouped in thirteen large territories termed dioceses. They were to be ruled by the four pretorian prefects. As a prefect could govern directly but one diocese, the remaining nine were assigned to *vi-ca'ri-i*, who ruled in the place of the prefects.<sup>1</sup> The few provincial governors who had the title *proconsul*, and were superior to the rest in importance, were directly under the emperor; every other governor obeyed the head of his diocese, whether a *vicarius* or a prefect. Though the *vicarius* was inferior in dignity to the prefect, he was subordinate only to the Augustus. These intricate relations among the high officials served as a check on their power.

**538. The Bureaucratic System.** — The civil service, brought to a high degree of perfection by Hadrian,<sup>2</sup> continued to expand. Diocletian and Constantine multiplied the number of offices. Every magistrate, from the lowest provincial governor to the emperor, had his body of officials, who differed from one another in dignity and rank. The court of an Augustus comprised a great host of such officers. He needed, too, an army of imperial agents to keep the central power in touch with all the local authorities. An intricate system, consisting of many classes and ranks of officers, one subordinate to another, is called a bureaucracy. This official machinery worked so well that the government generally went on smoothly, even under weak or vicious emperors. Through it the emperor made himself absolute — independent of all other powers

<sup>1</sup> Some time after the death of Constantine the dioceses were definitely grouped in four prefectures, each governed by a prefect.

<sup>2</sup> §§ 507, 525.



**THE ROMAN EMPIRE**  
UNDER  
**DIOCLETIAN and CONSTANTINE**

SCALE OF MILES  
100 50 0 100 200 300 400 500

Longitude East from Greenwich

G.W. Batsford, Del.



in the state. At the same time, it enabled him to undertake in detail the government of the provinces, and even of the towns. In other words, through the creation of a bureaucracy the emperor had transformed the aggregate of communities which originally made up the empire<sup>1</sup> into a strongly centralized state, such as is France to-day, and such as the United States is becoming.

Corresponding with the civil magistrates we find in the army masters of troops, dukes, and lesser officers. The title "count" applied to the holder of any great office in war or peace. The higher civil and military places gave their holders the only nobility then existing. The three chief grades of nobility from lower to higher were the Worshipful, the Honorable, and the Right Honorable.<sup>2</sup> The army, long composed largely of Germans,<sup>3</sup> had attempted to degrade the emperor to the condition of a temporary war chief; for these barbarians were acquainted with no other kind of leadership.<sup>4</sup> To counteract their influence, Aurelian had adopted the Oriental idea of monarchy. This example was followed by Diocletian and his successors. In the new system the emperor was proprietor of the state; his citizens were slaves. He wore a crown and a silken robe which sparkled with jewels and gold. He claimed to be a god, and compelled his subjects to prostrate themselves before him. By these means the imperial office was saved from destruction at the hands of the German barbarians.

**539. Failure of Diocletian's Plans; Constantine Emperor** (306-337 A.D.). — The empire was enjoying peace and good order in 305 A.D., when Diocletian resigned his authority and compelled Maximian, his colleague, to do the same. Immediately the new system proved defective in the provision for the succession. It became clear, too, that the senior Augustus lacked the means of holding his colleague and the heirs to their respective duties. On the retirement of Diocletian and Maximian, the two Caesars, Constantius and Galerius, became Augusti, and new Caesars, relatively obscure persons, were appointed. But after the death of Constantius in Britain, 306, his soldiers raised his son Constantine to the rank of Augustus, ignoring the legal heir. At Rome Maxentius,

<sup>1</sup> § 485.

<sup>2</sup> *Clarissimi, Spectabiles, and Illustres.*

<sup>3</sup> §§ 530, 556.

<sup>4</sup> For an explanation of these matters, see the next chapter.

son of the retired emperor Maximian, was created Augustus by the guards in the city. Two or three other Augusti arose, and altogether the government fell into dire confusion. In 312 Constantine marched against Maxentius, and overthrew his army at the Milvian



CONSTANTINE  
(Lateran Museum, Rome)

Bridge outside Rome. In the battle Maxentius was drowned in the Tiber, leaving Constantine master of the West. Galerius had died, and in 313 a certain Licinius became sole Augustus in the East. A few years afterward Constantine went to war against his colleague, defeated him (323), put him to death, and thus became sole emperor. His reign was marked by two important events — the public recognition of Christianity, and the selection of Byzantium as the capital of the empire. The growth of Christianity from its origin to the death of Constantine will be reviewed in the second section of this chapter.

During the frontier wars of the third century, Rome had practically ceased to be the capital, as the emperors had to live in camp on the frontier. Constantine chose Byzantium as his abode, and named it Constantinople after himself. It was admirably situated for commerce, and was much nearer than Rome to the frontiers of the Danube and the Euphrates, which especially needed defence. The Latin West and the Hellenic East were drifting apart. The eastern half of the empire was still richer and more densely peopled than the other. The change of capital looked to the preservation of the East at the expense of the West.

**540. From the Death of Constantine to the Death of Valentinian (337-375 A.D.).** — Constantine was followed by his three sons, who, though Christian in name, were treacherous and savage. They massacred nearly all their kinsmen to rid themselves of possible

rivals, and then turned against one another. One was killed by a brother's hand; another by a usurper; and while the third devoted himself to theology, the Persians, the Franks, and the Alemanni invaded the empire. His cousin Ju'li-an, leaving his philosophic studies at Athens, took command in Gaul, and routed the Alemanni in a great battle at Strass'burg. He drove the barbarians from the province, and strengthened the frontier defences. The philosopher, who thus proved his ability to rule, became sole emperor on the death of his cousin. Disgusted with the character of his Christian kinsmen, he became a pagan, and strove to suppress Christianity. For this reason he is called an apostate. He refrained from persecution, however, and his mild efforts to restore the gods of the old world failed. He was still a young man when, after a brilliant campaign against the Persians, he was killed by an arrow of the enemy. In him the empire lost an able ruler and defender.

In the year after Julian's death, the army made Val-en-tin'i-an emperor. Ferocious in temper, yet strong and just, he was well adapted to command the imperial troops, most of whom were now barbarians. Through the eleven years of his reign he maintained the hard-pressed frontiers of Britain and Gaul, and even crossed the Rhine to chastise the Alemanni in their own country. He spent most of his time in the West, whereas the East was ruled by his brother Va'lens, a man of little worth. As long, however, as Valentinian lived, the empire remained intact. After his death its history is chiefly concerned with the invasions and settlements of barbarians. Before coming to this subject, however, it is necessary to consider (1) the early history of Christianity, (2) the general causes of the decline of the empire.

## II. HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY TO THE DEATH OF CONSTANTINE

**541. Origin and Character of Christianity.** — The early history of Christianity is to be learned from the books of the *New Testament*.<sup>1</sup> The *Gospels* narrate the life and teachings of Christ. The book entitled *Acts of the Apostles* gives an account of the lives and

teachings of those whom he appointed to continue his work after him, and of the origin of the earliest churches. The *Epistles* are letters written by St. Paul and others to the various churches to



MARY AND THE INFANT JESUS

(About 200 A.D.—earliest known Madonna and Child. Isaiah pointing to the new star. Catacombs of St. Priscilla; pen drawing by Miss Katherine Fuyertes)

explain Christianity and to encourage men to accept it and live up to the faith. Everywhere the lower classes welcomed a religion which esteemed the soul of the slave equal to that of the emperor. It taught further that in Christ man was so united with God as to receive from him wisdom and strength for meeting every emergency of life. The believer felt that his sins were forgiven and that he had become an heir to eternal happiness. In giving this positive assurance of pardon and immortality, Christianity satisfied a spiritual craving which had come upon the world.

**542. Relation of Christianity to the Empire; Persecutions.**—During the first century of our era the followers of Christ attracted little attention. The government, which protected the public worship of all peoples within the empire and adopted many of their gods as its own, included the Christians with the Jews. For that reason it tolerated them. In the second century, as the sect grew more numerous and powerful, it was felt to be a disturbance to the peace and happiness of society. Unlike the Romans, the Christians were intolerant of all other forms of religion, and exceedingly aggressive in making converts; for they were under a command to bring the whole world into their faith. As all social festivities were religious, they could not associate with others in such pleas-

ures, for they had to keep themselves free from idolatry. Hence they came to be thought of as "haters of mankind." In like manner their refusal to worship the Genius<sup>1</sup> of the emperor was naturally construed as impiety and treason. The government, always suspicious of secret meetings, could see nothing but danger to the public peace in those of the Christians, whose Church was in fact becoming a great secret society, with branches in every city and town. Their pagan neighbors insisted, on mere rumor, that they were guilty of gross immorality and feasted on children! This superstitious hatred excited the belief that famine, pestilence, and other calamities were sent by the gods in their indignation at the Christians. They were assailed by mobs and falsely accused before the officials. Some of the princes, looking upon them as vile, lawless wretches, ordered the officials to punish with imprisonment, torture, and death those who refused to give up their faith. In Church history the execution of these commands is termed persecution. The most conscientious emperors, for example, Marcus Aurelius, were often the most active persecutors. There were periods of persecution broken by intervals of comparative quiet. They were most severe toward the end of the third and in the beginning of the fourth century. Through all these tribulations the Church grew rapidly in numbers and strength. The world had long been without ideals — a want of which the founder of the new religion supplied. It was the spiritual and moral force of his personality which gave energy to the Church and a new vitality to the world.

**543. Organization of the Church.** — The Church was strong not only in spirit, but also in organization; in this feature it imitated the state. In the beginning each society of worshippers was independent. It had its officers: deacons, who cared for the poor; elders or presbyters, who instructed the congregation in religion, and who in council looked after its interests; and an overseer or bishop who was chief of the presbyters. In time, as the Church of a city sent out branches to neighboring towns and rural districts, the bishop of the parent community came to have authority over a group of congregations. In various other ways a large church

<sup>1</sup> § 504.



gained control of many small ones. Again, among the bishops of the age of Constantine some differences of rank and of influence began to appear. The bishops of the provincial capitals acquired authority over those of the less important cities, while those of Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and one or two other great cities were held in still higher honor. Those in authority over provinces were archbishops or metropolitans, whereas the still higher officials were generally called patriarchs. For the one at Rome the term pope<sup>1</sup> came to be preferred. The government of the Church in the time of Constantine was democratic in that freemen and even slaves might rise to the highest offices. It was already tending to unity under one head; and though never losing the democratic quality here mentioned, it became in time a strongly centralized monarchy.

**544. Official Recognition of Christianity.** — After a severe persecution extending through several years the emperor Galerius issued an edict of complete toleration for the Christians, containing a request for their prayers in his behalf (311). In some parts of the empire, however, persecutions continued. Constantius Chlorus, though a pagan, had treated the Christians under his rule with great mildness, and his son Constantine was equally favorable to them. In fact, Christian ideas were creeping into Constantine's religion and mingling with his paganism.

Faith in the supernatural had greatly increased since the time of Augustus. In the fourth century all people, whether pagan or Christian, believed in the direct interference of supernatural powers in human affairs. Constantine noticed that the Christians had prospered through all their tribulations, and that their persecutors had suffered in various ways. Thus he concluded that Christ was a mightier power to aid than any combination of pagan gods. This consideration induced him, before the battle at the Milvian Bridge,<sup>2</sup> to put the monogram of Christ  $\chi\rho$  on the shields of his soldiers. It was a piece of magic to secure the help of the mighty

<sup>1</sup> The word pope (Latin *papa*, father) was for a time applied to other bishops as well, and to common priests. It was not till the eleventh century that the title came to be restricted to the bishop of Rome.

<sup>2</sup> § 539.

God of the Christians. The result of the experiment surpassed all hope. To assure himself of the same aid for the future, the victor became a Christian. One of his first acts after the battle was to free the Christian churches from taxation and to grant them support from the imperial treasury. In this way he placed Christianity on a level with the other forms of worship recognized by the state. To bring about the practical toleration of the Christians it was only necessary to enforce the edict of Galerius.<sup>1</sup> While Constantine accepted Christianity and favored it more than paganism, he still believed in the existence of the old gods, and continued to consult them through divination.

**545. The Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.).** — Meantime a Christian theology was growing up. The teachings of Christ are simple, as every one will find who reads the *Gospels*. They contain no creed. For a time after his death his followers thought and spoke mainly of the personal tie which bound them to their Saviour. Not satisfied merely with believing, some of them attempted to explain the nature of their belief and the relation of one part of it to another. This is especially true of the Greek philosophers who had accepted the faith. In their effort to explain and systematize Christianity they brought their philosophy into it. Many ideas, too, were introduced from Roman law. They gradually built upon the original simple faith an intricate theology, full of fine distinctions which none but themselves could understand. Differing from one another, they created opposing doctrines. Each believed his own view to be the only truth, the only way of salvation, whereas those who differed were heretics and under the wrath of God. In the time of Constantine there were already elaborate theologies and wide differences between one sect and another. The chief controversy was that between two church officials of Egypt — Ath-an-a'si-us and A-ri'us — concerning the nature of Christ. Although both admitted that he was the Son of God, Arius maintained that the Son was by nature inferior to the Father. Athana-

<sup>1</sup> Scholars now believe the story of Constantine's dream before the battle to have been invented at a later time. This, however, is a mere trifle; there can be no doubt as to his experiment with Christianity. Scholars are strongly of the opinion, further, that there was no "Edict of Milan" granting toleration to the Christians; in fact, no new edict was necessary.

sius, on the other hand, asserted absolute equality between the Son and Father. In order to strengthen the Church by securing uniformity of belief on this as well as on other points, Constantine called a council of bishops from all parts of the world to meet at Ni-cae'a, a city in northwestern Asia Minor, to settle the disputes and to decide upon a creed which all should accept. By adopting the view of Athanasius, the council made it orthodox, whereas that of his opponent became a heresy. The West readily accepted the Nicene Creed, as this decision is called; and in this manner it has come down to the Roman Catholic Church and to most of the Protestant denominations of to-day; but Arianism continued widespread in the East and among the Germans. The council of Nicaea was the first gathering which professed to represent the entire Christian world. The institution of such a general council, to meet as occasion demanded, added greatly to the power of the Church in its conflict with paganism.

### Suggestive Questions

1. Write summaries of the two parts of this chapter like that on p. 444.
2. Give four or five reasons why the government of the empire, as Diocletian found it, was too simple to meet the needs of the time.
3. What can be said in justification of Diocletian's despotism?
4. What are the advantages and the disadvantages of a bureaucracy?
5. Under the new system, was the emperor the real ruler, or was he at the mercy of his officials?
6. What other religions, besides Christianity, arose among the Semites? Who were St. Peter and St. Paul? Who were the Apostles?
7. What conditions in the Roman Empire favored the extension and acceptance of Christianity?
8. Why had the Christians less religious tolerance than the Romans? Were the Christians blameworthy in this respect, or the contrary?
9. In what respects did the Christians violate long-established custom?

### Note-book Topics

**I. Christianity and the Empire.**—Botsford, *Story of Rome*, 294 f.; Munro, *Source-Book of Roman History*, 163-178; Robinson, *Readings*, i. 21-27; Allen, *Christian Institutions*, ch. ii (Apostles, Prophets, Teachers); Sohm, *Outlines of Church History*, ch. i (Persecutions); Davis, *Roman Empire*, ch. iv; Duruy, *History of Rome*, v. ch. lxxxvii. § 6; vi. ch. xc; vii. 472-520.

**II. Constantine.**—Gwatkin, *Selections from the Early Christian Writers*, 171-177; Jones, *Roman Empire*, 362-396; Duruy, vii. chs. ci, cii; Firth, *Constantine*.

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