

*Establishing a Proper Balance: A Study of How the Relationship of Church and State Evolved in the Hands of Constantine, Clovis, and Charlemagne*

By

Derek Guest

December 2023

Director of Thesis: Jonathan Reid

Major Department: History

ABSTRACT

This thesis evaluates how the relationship between the Church and State was established in Western Society. I look at three foundational civil leaders in the first millennia of this process: Emperor Constantine, Clovis, King of the Franks, and Charlemagne, who would later be called the first Holy Roman Emperor. These men make up a common thread in this historical study, each becoming an essential turning point in the relationship between the governing bodies. Each man's relationship with the Church is evaluated by how they pursued unity in their kingdoms and the Church, how they involved significant religious leaders in their most important decisions, and how they organized their civil structure and provided for the Church in a way that promoted the local bishops. Constantine's conversion, legalization of Christianity, and calling of the Council of Nicaea were all significant moments in Church History, followed by Clovis's conversion, unifying the Germanic Franks and Gallo-Roman majority of the fallen western portion of the Roman Empire, which would build a foundation that allowed for Charlemagne's growth of his kingdom, partnership with the popes, and Carolingian Renaissance that would set up the backdrop for Europe through the Middle Ages.



*Establishing a Proper Balance: A Study of How the Relationship of Church and State Evolved in  
the Hands of Constantine, Clovis, and Charlemagne*

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of History  
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in History

By

Derek Guest

December, 2023

Director of Thesis: Jonathan Reid, Ph.D.

Thesis Committee Members:

Richard Hernandez, Ph.D.

John Stevens, Ph.D.

© Derek Guest, 2023

## Contents

Introduction .....	1
Christmas Day .....	1
Purpose .....	5
Chapter One: Constantine.....	11
Historiography .....	12
Diocletian .....	19
The Great Persecution .....	23
Constantine: Emperor and Bishop.....	27
Becoming Christian Emperor .....	28
Establishing Unity.....	37
Inner Circle .....	52
Bishops in the Empire .....	60
Bishop to Those Outside .....	69
Reflection .....	74
Conclusion .....	77
Final Reflection.....	89
Chapter Two: Clovis .....	92
Historiography .....	92
The Barbarian West .....	96
Christian Barbarians .....	101
Pursuit of Unity.....	104
Inner Circle .....	113
Bishops in the Kingdom.....	118
Reflection .....	122
Conclusion .....	124
Successors.....	124
Final Reflection.....	128
Chapter Three: Charlemagne .....	131
Historiography .....	131
A Strong Inheritance .....	133
Frankish Religion.....	135

Holy Roman Emperor.....	139
Pursuit of Unity.....	140
Inner Circle.....	149
Bishops in the Empire.....	163
Reflection.....	169
Conclusion.....	170
A Christian West.....	176
Bibliography.....	181
Primary.....	181
Secondary.....	182

## Introduction

### Christmas Day

December 25 has been a day of primacy in the lives and hearts of those who have lived in Western Society for hundreds of years. To any Western reader, this day is the day Christmas is celebrated. What this means for the celebrant varies widely, but for most, it is the culmination of a whole cultural season that defines the music we listen to, the movies we watch, and our work/school calendars. Many people can even explain in depth why we have historically celebrated Christmas Day: the birth of Jesus Christ. However, few can explain why we accept December 25 as the day of Christ's birth, how the celebrations of this day have come about, and potentially, most importantly, how such a holiday has become a common practice across most parts of society.

Christmas Day symbolizes the more remarkable story of how Christianity grew into one of the most defining features of Western Civilization. The holiday and the story of its celebration run alongside the story of Christianity. The day has served as a celebration not only of the birth of Christ but also of the birth of a new government based on religion, and Christmas Day played a significant role in the lives of three founders of this new religiously oriented political order: Constantine, Clovis, and Charlemagne, tying the three together in a way representative of an evolution that has proven to be far more significant.

In many ways, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was, in itself, an insignificant story of a poor family whose decisions were shaped by the Roman government. Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph were to be married, and thus when Augustus called for an empire-wide census they were forced

to go to Bethlehem from Nazareth where they lived.<sup>1</sup> While in Bethlehem Jesus would be born. This happened during the reign of Herod the Great, who was named “King of the Jews” by the Roman Senate. The book of Matthew records that men came from the East seeking out a baby who was just born to be “King of the Jews,” so that they could anoint him and give him gifts. Herod, of Jewish descent himself, understood certain prophecies, and sought out this baby which he considered a threat to his own rule. Therefore, he killed all male children under the age of two in the areas in and around Bethlehem. Jesus and his family escaped this persecution.

So, while this story seemingly only effects a piece of a Roman territory, it represents the early years of Christianity and the Roman government—a seemingly insignificant population was forced to live under the Roman rule, and as long as they did not bother the power and peace the empire and its leaders desired, it was allowed to carry on, but when it challenged the Roman way, the officials would seek to destroy it.

This relationship changed when the first official recorded celebration of Christmas happened in Rome on December 25, 336.<sup>2</sup> Before this in the Roman Empire, there was the prominent celebration of Saturnalia, the celebration of the Winter Solstice, a multi-day festival that culminated on the 25<sup>th</sup>. This also happened to be the day of the celebration of the god Sol Invictus, beginning officially in the Roman Empire in 274 after Aurelian had integrated the god into the pantheon. So, what was this new holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ? Why was it celebrated in 336, and who was this new god in the pantheon?

The first official celebration of Christmas happened just six months before the death of Constantine. It marks symbolically the revolution Constantine brought about in the Roman

---

<sup>1</sup> Lk. 2:1-5 ESV

<sup>2</sup> This date, as well as all subsequent dates are AD/CE unless otherwise noted.



Empire. Christmas Day had been calculated and celebrated by small communities of Christians, but the communities largely remained on the outskirts of society. As an unofficial member of Diocletian's Tetrarchy, Constantine converted to Christianity in 313. As he progressed in consolidating the Roman imperial throne, he also grew in his relationship with Christianity. In Constantine, the two sides of his identity—the religious and the civil—would grow in power and stability. Despite their empire-wide growth through this singular ruler, the Imperial throne and Christian Church remained two separate entities. This date in 336 did not mean an empire-wide acceptance, even in Constantinople, Constantine's newly established capital, which he intended to be a Christian Rome; Christmas would not be celebrated there until 373. Long after 336, Romans would continue to celebrate Saturnalia.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, Constantine began Christianizing the Roman Empire on an official level, even though it would take generations for its people to embrace the new faith and the holiday Constantine established to celebrate it and his new order.

The building of Constantinople marked a significant development: a distinction between the Eastern and Western halves of the Roman Empire. The East would continue in Roman Christian fashion for another thousand years; the West would fall into the hands of ‘barbarians’ within a century or two, depending on which event you acknowledge as the death stroke. These Germanic peoples had their ways of worshiping their gods, which Parry gives as the reason for their post-conversion incorporation of the evergreens and a large, powerful man with a long white beard, just like Odin, into their Christmas celebrations.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the Germanic kings, with their strong militaries, when settling their long-nomadic people in the remnants of Rome, had little reason to accept Roman Christianity; instead, they maintained their own culture and

---

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Parry, *How Christmas Became Christmas: The Pagan and Christian Origins of the Beloved Holiday* (Jefferson, NC; McFarland, 2022), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Parry, *How Christmas Became Christmas*, 14-6.

religion, though before settling some had already adopted Arian Christianity, to which the local Gallo-Romans were staunchly opposed. These military powers allowed the remaining Roman population, which comprised most of the land, to maintain their culture and religion. On Christmas Day, 503, this would change with the baptism of Clovis. On that day in Reims, Clovis and three thousand of his soldiers were baptized into Orthodox Christianity. After that, the Frankish Germanic King was accepted by the Gallo-Roman bishops, forming a new partnership between the barbarian and the Gallo-Roman.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly three hundred years after this event, on Christmas Day, 800, Charlemagne went to St. Peter Basilica in Rome to celebrate Christmas Mass. While there, he was crowned the Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. The Pope crowned Charlemagne as the new emperor of the West in recognition of his growing influence on the continent and his continuous support of the Church and the Pope specifically. Indeed, by 800, Charlemagne had already taken steps to de-paganize his empire and its practice and expand its power and influence on new regions. Ultimately, Charlemagne would solidify the population of Europe as a new type of people, neither wholly Germanic nor wholly Roman, but some amalgamation of both, almost all of whom were members of the Catholic Church. Their traditions and celebrations, like Christmas, were a line of demarcation between them and the surrounding nations, i.e., the Vikings who were then making incursions south (and who would similarly convert via that contact). However, what Charlemagne had established would be strong enough to survive despite threats from outside forces and influences. While his kingdom would split into multiple kingdoms, eventually nations, his unification of Christianity with the governments of Europe would ensure that

---

<sup>5</sup> Parry, *How Christmas Became Christmas*, 24.

Christmas would be celebrated throughout the continent and remain a major holiday throughout the Western World today.

For much of this study, Christmas is hidden in the background, but its discussion here paints a clear picture of what will come. We have three rulers for whom the holiday symbolizes their Christianity and solidifies its impact on their lives and rule. Christmas does not just impact their personal lives, but it also represents their impact on the greater society. The story of these men is significant because they wielded great power to tremendous and long-lasting effect; each would grow their power and hold it for a considerable amount of time in tandem with their adoption and promotion of Christianity and its corporate body, the Church. This thesis focuses on these men because they set the course for the eventual near-universal acceptance of their religion by the peoples of their empires. The conversions took centuries, and many actors and factors played a part: favor-seekers, prudent rulers, conformists, and unrelenting evangelizing missionary monks, priests, and bishops. Therefore, the core matter this study seeks to understand better—Christmas serving above as its symbol—is not the adoption of the holiday or even the religion but the intents and impact of the religious leaders and civil magistrates who guided, directed, and partnered (both by turns subjecting themselves to and using their power over the other) to advance the religion, the church, and the Christian state.

### Purpose

It is unquestionable to say that the Church and State relationship has been a formational aspect of the West. This remains true despite the ideologies of the French and American Revolutions that tried to separate the two entities; ideologies that grew out of the philosophies of the Enlightenment. However, before the official split of the Western and Eastern Roman Empire, Christians played a significant and direct role in governance. This thesis aims to show how the

relationship between Church and State, intended to create a balance and be mutually beneficial, became cemented into Western Society over hundreds of years.

A general understanding of the politics involved reminds us that in any relationship between multiple entities/people, there needs to be a balance of power and mutual benefit for the relationship to last. In this work, the Church-State relationship is defined by the rulers, representing the State, and the prominent bishops with whom they interacted, representing the Church. To see how the partnership of Church and State was established, we must understand that this partnership was cemented through a process that took several centuries. I examine this process by concentrating on three civil leaders who each took the essential “next step”: Emperor Constantine, followed by Clovis, King of the Franks, and Charlemagne, who was called both King of the Franks and eventually Emperor and Augustus.

The impact these men have had on history is undeniable. Constantine elevated the Christians from being a persecuted sect to being the favored religion of the Roman Empire. Clovis, whose impact is highly underrated, became the first barbarian King in the West to convert to Nicene Christianity and unified the Gallo-Roman Christians with the Frankish government that ruled over their territory. Charlemagne then took all that was already established, secured the Church, unified many of the lands that would eventually become Europe, and made Christianity accessible to everyone in his jurisdiction. Each of these accomplishments increased the ruler's influence in the Church, but they also gave new power to the men of the Church. I believe that we can see throughout the process of these rulers that it is not just the Church/State relationship that was established; this process also leads to the idea of what it means to be Western. Therefore, the work of these men was essential, not just in

promoting Christianity but in promoting commonality in Europe and in places where Europeans spread.

It is from the foundation that these men established in both the civil and religious aspects of their society that Medieval Europe builds towards modernity. I hope that this conclusion is evident despite the limitations of this study. The nature of the project does not allow me to develop all the complexities and decisions of each man to promote Christianity, nor does it give enough credence to those who authorized, supported, and carried on their influence. I have highlighted the decisions of Constantine, Clovis, and Charlemagne that had the most significant impact and show the common traits/goals of the three rulers.

Each ruler pursued unity in their kingdom and Church, built strong relationships with critical Christian leaders, and provided for and utilized the bishops throughout their lands to carry on the Church and State goals in their local communities and churches. Because of these decisions and their power, these three were the essential progenitors of significant change, but there were many others, both Christian and pagan, who had vital influence on the changes the rulers made. However, I am not able to discuss all the significant hands who helped mold this process. I must also acknowledge the geographic limitations of the work. Constantine's rule stretched far beyond the West. Still, as the empire split (which was spurred on by his decisions), the two halves moved in very different directions, so it is more pertinent to our history to focus on the part over which the Roman emperors lost control. The focus on the lands of the Franks is necessary because it will be their efforts and under the rule of their leaders that the future European identity was most strongly established. Many facets of this history are not covered, but there is enough to prove my conclusions are warranted.

I desire to use a similar structure and vocabulary to describe all three men, seeking to establish a connection and consistency. However, this consistency is limited at times. Constantine is given the most attention for several reasons. Being the first Christian ruler, he did not have a Christian government foundation to build upon or any real example to follow, making his conversion a watershed moment in the overall narrative. Compared to Clovis, whose conversion story has limited coverage, and to Charlemagne, who was born into a Christian world, Constantine's conversion story requires more significant attention. The Roman Emperor also converted a vast empire from pagan to Christian. Clovis was a substantial factor in the conversion of the Franks but was much less hands-on with his relations with the Church and ruled over a much smaller territory. Charlemagne was very involved in the religion of his expanding kingdom. Within the Frankish lands he inherited he worked to improve Christian practice; his work in converting was directed to the pagans he conquered. Constantine's conversion is also one of the most debated in history, requiring a more extensive coverage of the event and its historical significance. Therefore, while each man plays a critical role in building a Christian West where Church and State have long been intermingled, Constantine receives the most significant attention in describing how this came to be so, including an additional section of his chapter devoted to how this emperor became Christian, with an explanation of the historical treatment of the event.

I heavily rely on each ruler's contemporary historians to accomplish these goals of this thesis. For Constantine, this primarily involves Eusebius, with Lactantius also utilized. The study of Clovis requires significant dependence on Gregory, Bishop of Tours, who was born several generations after the king's death. Still, his work, *The History of the Franks*, remains the most important historical work from the period and one of the only lasting descriptions of Clovis. The

story of Charlemagne comes from Einhard, a key figure in the king's court, who wrote Charlemagne's biography while advising the king's heirs. Additionally, each biographer plays a significant role—in this work, in their ruler's life, and in history—because, along with their role as historian, they were prominent religious figures. This provides the unique perspective of the Church while also giving a clear bias in their histories. Gregory is treated with greater significance as well because he is considered the primary historian of the Merovingian Era—at least its first half—although his work is not intended to be a biography of Clovis.

To further assist the interpretation of these historians and to give a more evolved historical understanding of these rulers, I depend on prominent modern historians for each. Constantine's primary historians include Noel Lenski, Timothy Barnes, and H.A. Drake. For Clovis, the most recognized historian is J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, while I also gleaned significant information from Patrick J. Geary and Katharine Scherman. For Charlemagne, the primary historians are Rosamond McKitterick and Janet Nelson. Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* from 1776 plays a vital role in recording the history throughout this period. Still, this influential work has also shaped the memory of Church and State relations in this early period. Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom* also gives a helpful timeline overview. I gather these interpretations of Constantine, Clovis, and Charlemagne to reexamine Church-State Relations and how the historical perception of each ruler has evolved.

Further using these resources, I follow the thread that connects these men and their influence in Church and State relations. I describe how each man accomplished significant change as ruler through: their pursuit of unity, both in their kingdom through military conquest and in the Church through common practice and orthodox theology; their reliance on significant ecclesiastical figures in their decision-making as ruler; and their promotion of bishops on the

local level, using donations and an additional organizational structure to carry out the will of the ruler and of God. For each ruler, I follow the development of these three pursuits—each tactic evolving throughout their reigns—organizing each chapter thematically around them, not necessarily chronologically.

Through this, I hope to make clear how crucial Constantine, Clovis, and Charlemagne were in establishing Church and State relations, often pursuing a healthy balance between the two. The three men are not equal in historical stature; still, each is necessary. I intend to establish their interdependence, while also portraying their reigns, along with that of their heirs, as all members of a singular, linear process. While I end with Charlemagne, who died in 814, I rely on the reader to see the continuation of what these men accomplished through the rest of history: how they established a Christian West that lasted at least through the Middle Ages, with remnants still very prevalent in our societies today.



## Chapter One: Constantine

The first half of the fourth century was the most momentous period in the history of the Christian Church since the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ. In many ways, the Church has been molded by its relationship with the Roman Empire, and this relationship, in its first three centuries, had been hostile. As is well known, in the fourth century, this relationship was recast entirely: from a criminal and persecuted sect, Christianity became *the* religion of the Empire. The result was foundational in shaping the future of the Western World.

Emperor Constantine (272–337; 306–337) is mainly responsible for that momentous change. His military prowess provided the foundation: he reunified the throne, defeated the barbarians threatening the Roman borders, and maintained stability not seen for most of the previous century. In his thirty-one-year reign—the third longest of any Roman Emperor—he also carried through economic, social, and political change—previously initiated by Diocletian—that temporarily but effectively kept the empire afloat. Constantine’s actions earned him renown in his day and future centuries. His stamp on history was further marked by moving the empire’s capital to the *Nova Roma*—New Rome—before it became known as Constantinople—City of Constantine—where he reshaped the history of both East and West.

However, none of his decisions were more transformative than his conversion to Christianity. He used his imperial power to unify Christians—who were in danger of fracturing—and to lift them from a persecuted minority to a privileged elite. Constantine actively pursued a universally accepted Christian dogma, referred to here as orthodoxy, that became Orthodox Christianity. In this process, he formed a strong bond with Church leaders. He would hold some bishops closely in his court while simultaneously promoting the local churches and their leaders throughout his empire. “The age of Constantine is one of the most fertile periods of

historical change in all of antiquity,”<sup>6</sup> and it is this “change” that I most desire to measure, specifically the change he brought in terms of relations between Church and State.

### Historiography

For historians, Constantine is a complex individual. His Christianity is probably one of the most debated personal religious affiliations historians have ever evaluated. Whether he converted out of genuine piety or for political reasons, whether his famous vision of God and the labarum—a sign composed from Chi & Rho, the first two letters in Greek of “Christ,” the latter bisecting the former—were what led to not only his conversion but also his military victory; and whether or not he truly gave up the typical Roman religion or merely took upon himself another religious title adding to his power, are some of the questions modern historians often wrestle with. When discussing the role of Constantine as a part of the Church, these questions are essential but are not the aim of this paper. Therefore, the answers from prominent relevant historians and famous works are summarized and relied upon to allow more study of Constantine's direct actions with his bishops. I also depend on the works of various historians, from his contemporaries to ours, to establish a series of parameters and varying viewpoints on the life of Constantine.

Eusebius of Caesarea (265–339) and Lactantius (250–325) are the two contemporary biographers of Constantine. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, wrote a *Church History* and *The Life of Constantine*; Lactantius wrote *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (*On the Deaths of the Persecutors*). *Church History* and *De Mortibus Persecutorum* were completed during the life of Constantine sometime between 314 and 324; Eusebius completed *The Life of Constantine* after the emperor's

---

<sup>6</sup> Noel Lenski, "Introduction" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 1.

death. These accounts of Constantine's life and times have been incredibly influential. Lactantius was a rhetoric teacher in Diocletian's court before being expelled from the emperor's court alongside other Christians in 303. Eusebius was a bishop in Constantine's inner circle of advisors. He recorded many events and communications that defined Constantine's life and religious practice. Their works have obvious pro-Christian bias, but they are essential histories for this work and any other historian trying to understand Constantine.<sup>7</sup>

For the study of Constantine, as with any other major topic of Late Roman Antiquity, Edward Gibbon's (1737–1794) *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* provides a baseline. Gibbons' multi-volume book, first printed in 1776, extensively covers nearly 1500 years of the Roman Empire. His social and political history of the empire is a standard for all researchers of the period. The version consulted for this study is the abridged version edited by D. M. Low. Jones, writing in 1935, recommended Gibbon's work “for the general history of the age” but notes that “the reader should, however, be forewarned against Gibbon's great weakness, which is not so much anti-Christian bias as a temperamental incapacity to understand religion: to Gibbon's eighteenth-century rationalism a religious man was either a fool or a knave.”<sup>8</sup> Gibbon, writing in the time of the American and French Revolutions, is highly critical of the relationship that Constantine built with the Church. Still, his work remains seminal for any study of the time. Gibbon argues Constantine, by definition and practice, was not a faithful Christian until he was baptized on his deathbed, criticizing his piety while recognizing the complications of such a

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Life of Constantine* the work most directly concerned with Constantine and unmatched in length, detail, and authority in terms of his life. Zosimus in his *New History* is used by historians to remove the bias of Eusebius. However, it is a biased against Christianity and was written several hundred years after Constantine's death.

<sup>8</sup> A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London: The English Universities Press, 1948), 209–10.

conversion. Jacob Burckhardt's *The Age of Constantine the Great* (1852) famously follows Gibbon's criticism of Constantine, regarding his pursuit of the Church as a pursuit of power, not God, attributing Constantine's conversion to a politically advantageous decision rather than an act of personal piety.

More modern historians have worked hard to reevaluate Constantine's motivations, acts, and their effects via a more developed understanding of his historical context.

Noel Lenski, one of the seminal modern scholars on Constantine, has written several significant emperor studies. In *Constantine and the Cities*, Lenski analyzes epigraphical, panegyric, and historical documents from Constantine's era to reveal how he legitimated his actions, interacted with the different cities in his empire, and assessed the genuineness of his conversion. First, Lenski shows how Constantine favored Christianity, giving extraordinary power to the bishops, patronizing the cult of the saints and their relics, transferring lands and riches from pagan temples to churches, and promoting people who accepted his new religion with imperial gifts and protections.<sup>9</sup> Second, Lenski provides the general timeline of Constantine's development as a Christian ruler that helps us understand Constantine in this topical approach to his life. Lenski claims Constantine's progressed through four stages of development:

- 306–310 – he fit himself within the existing structures of the Tetrarchy
- 310–321 – he focused on his role as a conqueror of tyrants
- 321–330 – he added the notion that in attacking tyrants, he was championing the Christian faith

---

<sup>9</sup> Noel Emmanuel Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3–4.

- 330–337 – he explored what it meant to be a divinely ordained ruler as the first Christian emperor<sup>10</sup>

Lenski also evaluates the events of Constantine’s conversion, a monumental moment that was the foundation for the new imperial relationship with Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

In many ways complementing Lenski’s work, Drake focuses on the political dimensions of Constantine’s time and rule. His most important work, *Constantine and the Bishops*, examines Constantine’s importance in the scheme of world history. He argues and attempts to show that “the real significance of [Constantine’s] reign ... is not the quality of the emperor’s faith or even the nature of his conversion but the relationship he worked out with the Christian leadership on an official level, the relationship between Church and State which developed during this period.”<sup>12</sup> He summarizes the impact of Constantine on Christianity claiming that “during the thirty years of his reign, more change took place in the status, structure and beliefs of the Christian church than during any previous period of its history.”<sup>13</sup> Drake argues that the emperor’s conversion is important for evaluating the Christianity he instituted and judging the coercion he established to be a social norm, not a theological requirement or a (mis)judgment on Constantine’s part. This thesis draws heavily on Drake’s conclusions evaluating Constantine as a political figure and his role in shaping the Church.

This study then relies on Mark Edwards to understand the religious context of the emperor’s reign. Edwards focuses on the spiritual evolution throughout the empire during the

---

<sup>10</sup> Noel Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 29.

<sup>11</sup> Noel Lenski, “The Reign of Constantine” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 59-90.

<sup>12</sup> H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2000) ,32.

<sup>13</sup> H.A. Drake, “The Impact of Constantine on Christianity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 111.

emperor's life. He shows that Constantine intended to convert and unify the Empire in Christianity as he worked within the extent and limits of his influence and power. Edwards concludes Constantine successfully unified the Empire under one rule. In his work on the *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*, Edwards focuses on the Christian and pagan/pluralistic religious context of Constantine's rise to power. For Edwards, Constantine was a Christian emperor who maintained the ancient role of the Roman Emperor as master of both the political and religious.<sup>14</sup> Edward religious focus, alongside Lenski and Drake's social/political focuses set the foundation for this thesis.

In *Constantine, the Emperor*, Potter argues, much like Drake, that “without Constantine, Christianity probably would not occupy the place that it does today.”<sup>15</sup> But Potter does not just consider Constantine's impact on Christianity; he further claims, “Constantine was remembered in later generations not only as the first Christian emperor but as the emperor who shaped the future course of the Roman world.”<sup>16</sup> Despite his Christianity, the emperor remained devout to Roman tradition, “when it came to governing the empire, what mattered to Constantine was reputable tradition, not the Bible.”<sup>17</sup> Even with that dedication to tradition, Potter argues that in establishing Constantinople, Constantine was “fully aware and appreciative of the traditions of the past while seeking to set those traditions in a fresh context.”<sup>18</sup> Potter importantly points to

---

<sup>14</sup> M.J. Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 206.

<sup>15</sup> David Potter, *Constantine the Emperor* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Potter, *Constantine the Emperor*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 256.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 263.

Constantine's impact on the Roman Empire by stating that in "restructuring his aristocracy, Constantine created a new sort of senate."<sup>19</sup>

Hans Pohlsander, in *The Emperor Constantine*, believes that the most unique and essential aspect of Constantine's reign was his approach to governing. He begins this discussion by saying, "Constantine refrained from sweeping innovations, being content, for the most part, with completing or continuing the arrangements made by Diocletian."<sup>20</sup> In seeking to eradicate corruption in the civil administration, he argues that Constantine "like a Roman censor of Republican times, was anxious to protect the moral fiber of Roman society, especially in sexual conduct."<sup>21</sup> The author contends that Constantine used imperial funds to support the Church for similar reasons, levied new taxes, re-organized the army, introduced a new coin, and established a Diocletian-like succession plan centered around his heirs.<sup>22</sup> Pohlsander reminds the reader that Constantine was far more impactful via his policy and administrative innovation than just through his conversion but also through how he approached the State and the Church.

While Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou have a pro-Christian mindset, in their work *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*, they do not take a pro-Constantine approach. The authors claim Constantine brought about a convulsion of Christian thought and initiated a grotesque marriage between the Church and State. In some ways, their theses echo Gibbon's. Their assessment informs their analysis of the Russian Orthodox Church and its corrupted relationship with the Russian Government over the last two centuries. Still, historians

---

<sup>19</sup> Potter, *Constantine the Emperor*, 266.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 68.

<sup>21</sup> Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*, 69.

<sup>22</sup> Despite his intentions, like Diocletian's failed attempt to establish the Tetrarchy, one of the Caesars quickly took over power to unify the government.

of any Western Power could easily share this conclusion that since the time of Constantine the marriage of Church and State had been unquestionably corrupted at some point. However, the beginning of their book reveals their belief in the corruption of Constantine on Christianity and the corruption of Christian History by his conversion:

Theological discussions on political theology are ultimately *haunted by the shadow* of Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity (312 CE), which has left its indelible stamp on Christian thinking of the political; his shadow even extends to the pre-Constantinian era, as scholars of Christianity cannot interpret the pre-Constantinian Christian response to the question of political without being aware of what occurred after Constantine. In the fourth century, Constantine's turn to Christianity was simultaneously the constitution of dualism in Christian political theology between Constantinianism and pre-Constantinianism that continues to *haunt* Christian theological reflection on the political.<sup>23</sup>

Timothy Barnes contradicts this sentiment in his essay "Constantine, Athanasius, and the Christian Church," which speaks most directly to the topic of this thesis. In it, Barnes argues for the importance of Constantine's true conversion and its impact on the empire and Christian religion. Barnes deems it essential for the reader to understand that Constantine did far more than prepare the way for Christianity: he took necessary steps to make orthodox Christianity triumph in the empire. Constantine's successors made this religion the Roman Empire's official religion; Barnes argues that Constantine proactively moved to make this happen. He claims Constantine was actively engaged in theological discussions, most notably at the Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Tyre (335), as a mere participant, not a ruler.<sup>24</sup> Barnes also wrote a treatise on the life and rule of the emperor in his book *Constantine*. His most crucial contention is that "religion had influenced Constantine's actions as emperor from the start," signifying the essential role of

---

<sup>23</sup> Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Barnes, "Constantine, Athanasias and the Christian Church," in *Constantine: History, Historiography, and Legend*, ed. Samuel Lieu and Dominic Montserrat (New York: Routledge, 1998), 10.



religion in the emperor's life, beginning with pagan worship and amplifying the impact of his conversion to Christianity.

Therefore, this paper proceeds with these professional historical perspectives. Gibbon is a source relied upon because no historian has matched the extent to which he covered the social, political, and religious contexts in which Constantine came to rule. Despite lacking details in some key areas, Gibbon also formalizes discussions surrounding Constantine's memory and impact, specifically his relationship with his empire's Christianity, establishing indispensable narratives for this paper. To measure the more specific actions of Constantine, Lenski, Drake, and Edwards provide more satisfactory interpretations of the emperor's decisions, evolution, and motivations. Lenski's numismatic approach offers some of the most substantial proof for the evolution of Constantine. Drake gives the political perspective, concentrating on Constantine's relationship with his Church leaders. Edwards gives the social/religious context of the religions, specifically Christianity, during the life and reign of Constantine.

### Diocletian

The rise of Diocletian (245–312; reigned 284–304) to the imperial purple was unexpected and controversial, which fit a pattern that plagued the second and third centuries in the Roman Empire. Corcoran summarizes the importance of Diocletian's trend-breaking reign: Regardless of how he had risen to the top, the new emperor proved to have the energy and ingenuity to stay in power for two decades of administration. As did Augustus, this earned him a place as one of the 'great' emperors, creating a new imperial matrix. The latter stood at the beginning of the

Diocletian Dominate, a period characterized by an authoritarian, aggressive,<sup>25</sup> and bureaucratic style of imperial rulership.<sup>26</sup>

This new “style of imperial rulership” set the example and the stage for Constantine. In many ways, Constantine took up many of Diocletian's reforms—pursuing stability and unity through reforming the military, coinage, imperial organization and administration, and succession—while working in direct contrast and opposition to Diocletian, himself, and his policies—after being a political prisoner of sorts to Diocletian, Constantine significantly took a contradictory approach on Christianity. Their relationship was complex, but the two were undoubtedly great and influential emperors, with Constantine’s rule owing much to Diocletian's decisions. Therefore, a proper understanding of Constantine, his rise to power, his relationship with Christianity, the balance of power he aimed to set up, and his use of imperial power requires a proper understanding of the reign of Diocletian.

Diocletian is known for many of his reforms. His creation of the Tetrarchy was unique for several reasons. First, he divided his power and eventually gave it up, hoping to break the tumultuous succession cycle that plagued Rome for over a century. Secondly, as Stephenson notes, Diocletian framed this system religiously: “Diocletian, as the Jovian, might achieve all he desired alone, but frequently relied on his Herculean subordinate Maximian to execute his wishes.”<sup>27</sup> Thirdly, he developed a system of hierarchal control, setting a precedent he would extend to nearly every level of the empire.

---

<sup>26</sup> Simon Corcoran, “Before Constantine,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 39–40.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor* (New York: The Overlook Press), 20.

The Tetrarchy plays a significant role in the story of Constantine's early life, rise to power, political moves, and even conversion. As Corcoran observes, Diocletian no longer took the pretentiously egalitarian title of *Principate* but adopted *Dominate*—meaning lord—to fully recognize the role of Emperor as not the first citizen but instead the most powerful leader. He aimed to organize the governmental structure better. He divided the empire, provinces, and every civil and military administration branch. His reorganization also included the introduction of regional vicars who represented the emperor in their province (or diocese), a system that the Church in the West then replicated.<sup>28</sup> He also decided to separate the military and civic leaders, which looks obvious in hindsight. Generals were to be chosen from within the military, not from the senatorial ranks, and administrators were to be taken from the civil political order, not the military.

A final change worth noting here is the treatment of Rome. Diocletian saw the size of the empire and knew that one man ruling from Rome could not sufficiently handle all the threats, which was a part of the reason for the Tetrarchy and other organizational changes. However, Diocletian also did not hold the same respect for the ancient capital as his predecessors. As Gibbon notes in *The Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire*, the emperor did not love the capital

---

<sup>28</sup> The Church, up until this point, had largely organized itself in a way that replicated the Roman Empire. Each major city had its head bishop, similar to a governor, of which it looked to as the supreme authority in the city. The local districts around these cities also looked to these governing bishops. The cities of greatest civil prominence were also the cities that contained the greatest ecclesiastical powers for their region, with the bishop of Rome being a natural head of the Church of the Roman Empire. This figure later would be named “Pope” and in many ways reflected the Emperor, even after the Imperial throne moved away from Rome. Therefore, when Diocletian made the changes to the diocese, where a person was put in charge of multiple cities, the Church would adopt a similar system.

Rome. He said, “Diocletian and Maximian were the first Roman princes who fixed their ordinary residence in the provinces in time of peace.”<sup>29</sup>

These policies demonstrate Diocletian’s intense and intentional work, showing his organizational skills. His reforms gave breath to a deteriorating empire. Taking control of part of it within a decade of Diocletian’s demission, Constantine took it in a new possible but unforeseen direction. Diocletian intentionally set up a system in which the emperor was a more aloof and unapproachable leader, setting himself apart from the people to maintain a higher level of respect. His adoption of the titles *Dominate* and *Jovian* designated the emperor as the all-powerful representative of the gods to rule the empire. Constantine significantly did not fully adopt this mentality of such extensive imperial superiority or religious power. Diocletian, an emperor from the East, established his residence in the practical land of Nicomedia;<sup>30</sup> Constantine officially moved the capital to the East, with significant consequences for the empire that are too numerous to discuss fully here. Chief among them was the political vacuum the move eventually opened in the West. Finally, after the fall of Roman power in the West in the fifth century, the Church and its leaders would fill that hole, leading to change so significant in the West that it would transform the very nature, or better yet, establish a new foundation, of what is considered Western Society; changes both directly and indirectly initiated by Constantine. The Church also adopted Diocletian's organization reforms, much like they had adapted to the governing structure of the provinces previously, where the vicar and the diocese remained in active organizational roles in the Roman Catholic Church.

---

<sup>29</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 127.

<sup>30</sup> This capital would be roughly mid-way between the historical heart of Roman and its economic center in the East.

## The Great Persecution

In all these changes, Diocletian sought to regain the glory and tradition of the old Roman Empire. This continued to be the goal, but it was the persecution of the Christians that created the biggest blemish on Diocletian's career and made Constantine's conversion more monumental.

As Barnes points out, “It was the emperor Gallienus in 260 who had granted Christian churches, or perhaps Christian bishops as heads of Christian communities, the right to own property and thereby recognized Christianity as one of the lawful religions of the Roman Empire.”<sup>31</sup> This barely lasted the century as Diocletian, with Galerius (Caesar: 293-305; Augustus: 305-11) beside him, pronounced the destruction of churches throughout the empire, starting in 303 with the Nicomedian Christian building within viewing distance of his lodging, as well as the scriptures and direct persecution of the Christians themselves. This persecution lasted a decade, only to be supplanted by an emperor who made it his mission to return all these things and much more, putting Christianity at the forefront of Roman society.

Diocletian’s choice to name himself Jovius and his senior partner Herculius was not only because he wanted to paint a picture of the relationship between the two Augusti, but it was also a representation of their devotion to the traditional Roman gods. Corcoran acknowledges that “this was a matter not simply of seeking divine favor from traditional gods but also of the reverse, of Diocletian publicly asserting his confidence in them.”<sup>32</sup> This pursuit of tradition, organization, unity, and the backing of the highest power in Roman society eventually led to what may seem like an inevitable collision: the persecution of Christians, a sub-group of citizens who were growing in power, popularity, and assets who condemned the worship of such gods as

---

<sup>31</sup> Barnes, *Constantine*, 97.

<sup>32</sup> Corcoran, “Before Constantine,” 51.

Jupiter. Harold Mattingly suggested that Diocletian also saw such a collision and sought peace with the Christians by adopting the Jovius and Herculius monikers. Mattingly posited: “What if Diocletian, in his new system of Jupiter and Hercules, meant to offer an interpretation of paganism, which might be so far acceptable to the Christians as to induce them to pay that modicum of conformity, in return for which Rome was always ready to grant toleration for the rest?”<sup>33</sup> There is little proof that this was the intention of the emperor, but regardless, come the year 303, empire-wide persecution targeted Christians and their property.

Gibbon gives February 23, 303, as the date which “was appointed ... to set the bounds to the progress of Christianity.” He explains that:

The Christians (it might speciously be alleged), renouncing the gods and the institutions of Rome, had constituted a distinct republic, which might yet be suppressed before it had acquired any military force but which was already governed by its laws and magistrates, was possessed of a public treasure, and was intimately connected in all its parts by the frequent assemblies of the bishops, to whose decrees their numerous and opulent congregations yielded implicit obedience. Arguments like these may seem to have determined the reluctant mind of Diocletian to embrace a new system of persecution.<sup>34</sup>

Galerius is continuously mentioned as the passionate supporter of the persecution, with Diocletian being a moderate and cautious enforcer of his edict. This was until “the resentment, or the fears, of Diocletian at length transported him beyond the bounds of moderation which he had hitherto preserved, and he declared his intention of abolishing the Christian name in a series of cruel edicts.”<sup>35</sup> Yet “Diocletian had no sooner published his edicts against the Christians, than, as if he had been desirous of committing to other hands the work of persecution, he divested

---

<sup>33</sup> Mattingly, Harold. “Jovius and Herculius.” *The Harvard Theological Review* 45, no. 2 (1952): 131–34.

<sup>34</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 226.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 230.

himself of the imperial purple.”<sup>36</sup> Galerius took the reins and staunchly persecuted the Christians. At the same time, Constantius, Constantine’s father, then ruling as Augustus in the West, was “averse to the oppression of any part of his subjects.”<sup>37</sup> Finally, in 311, Galerius succumbed to the stubbornness of the Christians, publicizing an edict of toleration, asking them to pray on behalf of their emperors to their god. However, this was not the last persecution of the Christians of this generation, with Licinius’s (265-325; reigned 308-24) eventual reversal of philosophy.

Lactantius wrote *On the Death of the Persecutors* in 314–15, barely a decade since the empire-wide persecution began, condemning the actions of these emperors. By then, Christianity was legalized throughout the empire, and at least one emperor openly promoted the religion. As noted above, Lactantius, formerly a rhetorician at Diocletian’s court before being thrown out for being a Christian when the persecution started, had first-hand experience. Lactantius relished giving the details of the sicknesses and sufferings of those in charge of the persecutions. He then transcribes the whole of the Edict of Serdica, in which Galerius pronounced an end to this administration's policy against the Christians as if it were a certificate of Christian victory.

Lactantius also recalled the persecution with horror in terms echoing the Book of Revelation: “All this [persecution] was fulfilled in my time when I saw with my own eyes the houses of worship demolished ... Sacred Scriptures committed to flames ... and the pastors of the churches hiding shamefully ... or arrested and held up to ridicule by their enemies.”<sup>38</sup> However, Eusebius saw the persecution as a just divine punishment because, in his view:

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 231.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 231.

<sup>38</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 259.

The greater freedom [of Christian leaders after Gallienus' relaxation of restrictions on the church had] brought with it arrogance and sloth ... Church leaders attacked Church leaders, and laymen formed factions against laymen while unspeakable hypocrisy and pretense reached their evil limit. Finally, while assemblies were still crowded, divine judgment with its accustomed mercy gradually started to intervene.<sup>39</sup>

This does not mean that Eusebius excused the emperors from their responsibility, much like Pharaoh of the Old Testament. He credits Diocletian's rule with establishing long-lasting peace "but as their [the tetrarchs'] authority increased day by day without check or hindrance, they suddenly canceled their peaceful attitude toward us and started a perpetual war."<sup>40</sup> Eusebius then blames the primary emperor's near-death illness and subsequent mental derangement—which he uses to explain Diocletian's unimaginable desire to return to private life—for his unleashing of perpetual war. Eusebius interprets Diocletian's many policies as "increasing their authority day by day," reflecting his adoption of the *Dominate*, while contrasting this to Constantius who "took no part at all in the war against us—in fact, he even rescued the godly among his subjects from injury and abuse."<sup>41</sup> Because of Constantius's mercy, Eusebius argues, God blessed, honored, and favored both him and his son, Constantine, who would be pronounced Augustus by his soldiers upon his father's death.

The impact of the persecution was substantial. Many Christians faced persecution with confidence, celebrating those who refused to recant and lost their lives because of it. Diocletian's persecutions decreased the number of people openly professing Christianity in the empire while increasing the number of the holy martyrs whose faithfulness would encourage Christians for centuries. Unsurprisingly, Diocletian's reduction of the number of Christians did not just include those who died for their beliefs but also included a considerable number who were willing to

---

<sup>39</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 259-60.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 273.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 273.



save their own lives to appease the persecutors. Their apostasy led to many vital disagreements within local churches as they had to decide what to do with those who abandoned their convictions, disagreements which initiated Constantine's direct involvement of the synods of Christian leaders, a defining aspect of his relationship with the Church. The Great Persecution was also aimed at the property of the Church, creating a need for physical churches throughout the empire, which once again would be a focus of Constantine's efforts after his conversion.

### **Constantine: Emperor and Bishop**

Constantine was the son of Constantius and Helena.<sup>42</sup> This Constantine was born into an unstable Roman Empire. He grew up watching, at first from afar, but eventually, from within the camp of the most senior emperor,<sup>43</sup> Diocletian put the land on solid ground. For some years, Constantine seemed destined to be crowned Caesar but was ultimately overlooked by Diocletian in favor of another. He was eventually proclaimed Augustus by his father's soldiers but accepted the subordinate title and position of Caesar, initially granted to him by the senior Augustus

---

<sup>42</sup> The story of Helena and her relationship with Constantius is complicated and largely unknowable for historians. However, the fact that Constantine is the firstborn son of Helena, Constantius' first wife (or potentially concubine), rather than Theodora is significant. Helena is either divorced or set-aside by Constantius but is not completely discarded. Theodora was the daughter of Augustus Maximian and potentially the connection that led to Constantius becoming Caesar. Regardless, in many imperial families, the son from a previous marriage is in danger, at least if there is a son with the new marriage, which there would be for Constantius. This means that the potential for Constantine to be dismissed, replaced, or even completely removed at any point before adulthood was a very real possibility. Constantius would protect his eldest son and train him as his eventual heir, the sons and daughters by Theodora would be treated as brothers and sisters by Constantine, but the eldest son was always in the seat of primacy.

<sup>43</sup> Significant to his story, but not necessarily this work, Constantine, as heir apparent to his father's position, would spend a large amount of time in the East under the tutelage of his father's rival emperors. Diocletian did not necessarily order this as an imprisonment of the imperial son, but that did not mean this was a comfortable time for the young student. He would eventually leave the camp of Galerius to his fathers, but the circumstances would even be recorded in several conflicting stories.

Galerius after defeating Maxentius (see below). In time, Constantine would unify the whole empire under a single throne. During his climb to the top, he adopted another title and less acclaimed, the title of Christian. Through a long evolution of personal religion and increased civil power, Constantine became “the self-proclaimed bishop to those outside [the Church, i.e., the Roman people].”<sup>44</sup> This evolution was unprecedented and unforeseen, having consequences that would make him one of the most influential men in Western history.

### Becoming Christian Emperor

Constantine’s rise to political power did not follow a predictable path. He was not named the successor to his father’s position despite being trained in the East by Diocletian and Galerius themselves. This meant that Constantine had to fight his way to the top of the Roman political hierarchy, and it was during this fight that his religious life was also changed drastically.

In the *Origo Constantini (OG)*, a part of the *Anonymous Valesianus*, a biographical work on Constantine widely accepted as having pagan authorship, we see how Constantine rose to prominence in imperial rule and the Christian Church. “Constantine was made Augustus by the will of all the soldiers.” Immediately after this, Maxentius, son of former Augustus Maximian, rose to power: “After Constantius had died in Britain and Constantine, his son, had succeeded him, suddenly the Praetorian Guard in the city of Rome created Maxentius, the son of Herculius [Maximianus Herculius, i.e., Maximian], emperor.”<sup>45</sup> In response, Augustus Galerius camped near Rome to remove Maxentius, only to be abandoned by his soldiers. Therefore, Galerius

---

<sup>44</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averill Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999) 161.

<sup>45</sup> Anonymous, “The Origin of Constantine: The Anonymous Valesianus Pars Prior (*Origo Constantini*),” trans. Jane Stevenson; annotated by Samuel N. C. Lieu. *In From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine views—A source history* (London, and New York: Routledge, 1996), 44.

promoted Licinius to Caesar and ordered him to remove Maxentius. To solidify his authority, however, instead of being viewed as a usurper like Maxentius, Constantine granted the wish of the most senior emperor and marched to Italy. After Constantine defeated Maxentius, Galerius, the senior emperor, recognized him as Caesar, which, despite being a demotion from Augustus, the title his soldiers had bestowed on him, was a step in legitimizing his position.

In *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, a pamphlet created to generate more significant support for Constantine, Lactantius made a point of how Constantine and his father allowed church buildings to be built and for Christians to meet without consequence or persecution. In contrast, the other emperors, including Maxentius and his father, had inflicted cruel, hateful, and disgusting acts upon the Christians. This juxtaposition, Lactantius believed, proved that Constantine was a sympathizer to the Christians and would be their eventual savior, vindicator, and champion.

The most influential event in the life of Constantine in solidifying his rule and his Christianity was his battle against Maxentius. While *OG* explains the later civil war and its battles against Licinius in detail, it merely summarizes the events at the Milvian Bridge as follows:

Meanwhile, Constantine, having defeated the generals of the tyrant[’s army, first] at Verona, sought out Rome. When Constantine was coming to the city, Maxentius, coming out of the city, chose a plain above the Tiber as the place where they would fight. There, he was defeated and, fleeing with all his men, perished, trapped in the crowd of people, and thrown down by his horse into the river. The following day, his body was taken up from the river, and his head was cut off and brought into the city. When questioned about his origins, his mother confessed that he had been begotten by a certain Syrian. He ruled for six years.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Anonymous Valesianus, *Origo Constantini*, 45. This pagan recording focuses on the military victory and excludes any mention of a vision or the intervention of any god.

The victory at Milvian Bridge cemented Constantine's rule within the empire's political hierarchy. While significant, the political victory is not what most changed the course of history. The facet of this battle that is most memorable, and nowhere reported in *OG*, is Constantine's apparent conversion to a small cult called Christianity.

Lenski argues that, despite its exclusion from several of Constantine's contemporary historians and panegyrists, one cannot explain the rise of Constantine to the full extent of his empirical powers without considering his conversion. The most decisive moment in the life of Constantine (at least as far as ancient Christian historians were concerned) was his victory in the Battle at Milvian Bridge and the days leading up to it. Eusebius relates in his *Life of Constantine*, his self-proclaimed authoritative and widely read account of Constantine's conversion. Here is how Eusebius records the recollection of Constantine:

About the time of the midday sun, when the day was turning, he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, "By this conquer." Amazement at the spectacle seized both him and the whole company of soldiers, who accompanied him on a campaign he was conducting somewhere and witnessed the miracle.

He was, he said, wondering to himself what the manifestation might mean; then, while he meditated and thought long and hard, night overtook him. Thereupon, as he slept, the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign that had appeared in the sky and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy. When the day came, he arose and recounted the mysterious communication to his friends. Then he summoned goldsmiths and jewelers, sat down among them, explained the sign's shape, and gave them instructions about copying it in gold and precious stones.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, Constantine received two visions. The first sign, clearly defined as a cross, which he saw in the daylight, had an accompanying message telling him that this sign would assist him in his conquests. The emperor's initial response was confusion and pondering. Later,

---

<sup>47</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 81.

he received a dream in the nights preceding the battle, where God revealed himself to the emperor and showed him a sort of emblem that would give him the power to lead his men to a sure victory.<sup>48</sup> From this point, Constantine acknowledged himself as a Christian and took up the cross and the Chi-Rho as an official symbol.

Eusebius bookends his conversation about the vision stating:

If someone else had reported it, it would perhaps not be easy to accept, but since the victorious Emperor himself told the story to the present writer a long while after, when I was privileged with his acquaintance and company and confirmed with oaths, who could hesitate to believe the account, especially when the time which followed provided evidence of what he said ... This [story] was something which the Emperor himself saw fit to let me also set eyes on, God vouchsafing this.<sup>49</sup>

It is essential not to ignore that Eusebius, just before and after his account of these events of Constantine's conversion, give as strong a validation of its truthfulness as he could conjure.

While often considered more of a hagiographer than a historian, with some legitimacy to these accusations, it is clear here that Eusebius firmly believes that what Constantine related, and he recorded, is holy truth.

One of the most common arguments made by those attempting to assess the validity of Eusebius's account is that the very sign of the cross seen by Constantine while awake in the daylight, was simply the scientific phenomena: light reflecting off atmospheric ice crystals can seem to form a shining cross to observers. While this may be what Constantine saw, that does not change its impact. Not only did Constantine describe this event specifically to Eusebius, but the multiplicity of oaths and the sacredness of such things, especially to the Romans, holds

---

<sup>48</sup> This recalling of the event will be significantly from *The Life of Constantine* written after the death of the emperor and was not in *Church History*, finished before 324 which covers the Battle of the Milvian Bridge but does not record this event. This may have been because it was a personal story that Constantine did not relay to the bishop until after the first work was written.

<sup>49</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 81-82.

significant weight themselves. The quick adoption of the cross, as seen on many coins issued by Constantine soon after the battle, gives further credence that whatever he saw having had significant impact on him and that he interpreted the sign as a Christian symbol. The scientific explanation of Constantine's 'vision' of a heavenly cross also does not consider the further details of the account, namely the presence of the phrase "by this conquer" and his vision from God. Eusebius also stated above there were a variety of other witnesses to these events, potentially giving greater credence to the story.

Another argument against such a miraculous conversion is that Constantine was desperate for a god to worship and chose the Christian God, whether by chance, as a wise political decision, or some other motivating factor. As Eusebius recorded before Milvian Bridge:

Constantine also considered that he would need more powerful aid than the military might have given him since the tyrant was making great efforts to obtain evil arts and deceitful magic spells. He sought a god to be his helper and depended on the soldiers, and the size of the army was only second place. He considered divine aid to be invincible and unconquerable. So now he thought seriously about which god he should enlist as a helper, and it crossed his mind that most previous rulers had put their hopes in several gods when they came to power and had worshipped them with offerings of wine, sacrifices, and votive offerings. Having been initially deceived by positive prophecies and oracles that promised good auspices, they did not, however, come to an auspicious end. Not one of the gods had stood by them to protect them from the ruin which was destined by heaven. Only his father had taken the opposite way, had rejected their error, and all his life had worshipped that God, who is enthroned over all and had found Him to be the savior and the protector of the kingdom and giver of all good things. He thought this to himself and fully considered that they had put their trust in a significant number of gods and thus had come to great disaster so that nothing was left of their generation or their family, not a root, name, or memory among men. But his father's God had given his father very many clear signs of His might. He reflected that those who had waged war against the tyrant and dared to go into battle trusting in their many gods had come to a shameful end. For example, one of them had withdrawn from the encounter in disgrace without achieving his aim, and the other was killed by his soldiers and so became death's subject. After he had thought about all this, he would have considered it stupid to waste time on gods that do not exist and to be seduced by error even after such obvious proof. He believed instead that he must worship only his father's God.

So, in prayer, he called up this God, asking and pleading with Him that He might reveal who He was and offer Him His right hand in his forthcoming undertaking. While the emperor prayed thus, claiming fervently, a quite incredible divine sign appeared to him.<sup>50</sup>

We have already seen how that divine sign plays out in the mind and testimony of Constantine. This retelling, however, shows that it was a large part of the emperor's psyche to find a god that would give him an advantage. When Apollo seemed to fail him, he chose the Christian God, potentially the god of his father Constantius,<sup>51</sup> and as the victory at Milvian Bridge is only followed by more victories, giving the man a long and prosperous life, why would he begin to question the God who had given him more success and victories than he could reasonably have hoped for given his precarious place in the lines of succession to highest power—regardless of whether or not we believe that it was God that was the actual cause of his success?

Despite the many doubts about the vision just before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, what matters most is its impact on history. We see that Constantine had been introduced to Christians via his father's rule in Gaul, and this sect garnered the mercy of the Caesar and his son. We will see at the beginning of his rule after his conversion that he also had a relationship, or at least knowledge of, specific bishops in Gaul. However, while his father was sensitive to the Church, he would do little compared to Constantine. Without a doubt, a significant change began to take place in the religious life of Constantine after the Battle of Milvian Bridge. This battle holds a special place in the emperor's mind as he brings drastic change to the empire, and it is

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>51</sup> I find this presumption highly unlikely, despite his lack of persecution of these peoples, his acceptance of their religion would have had become a significant aspect of his relationship with Diocletian and Galerius.

not the victory itself, but rather the symbol and the God that he believed brought him this victory.

In *Church History*, Eusebius relates that after this victory “at Rome [and] Maxentius fell at the hands of Constantine”:

Constantine ... was the first to take pity on the victims of tyranny in Rome. Praying to God in heaven ... as his ally, he advanced with all his forces to restore the Roman to the liberty of their ancestors. Maxentius, however, relied on magicians ... Then, so that he would not have to fight against Romans because of the tyrant, God himself dragged the tyrant with chains, as it were, far outside the city gates. [Here, Eusebius uses Hebrew Scriptures to compare Constantine to Moses and Maxentius to Pharaoh]. Then he entered Rome with songs of triumph, and all the senators, high notables, women, children, and all the people of Rome, beaming with insatiable joy, received him with praises as a deliverer, savior, and benefactor. But he, with inborn reverence for God, was neither thrilled by their shouts nor elated by their acclaim, knowing that his help came from God. He immediately ordered a trophy of the Savior’s passion placed in the hand of his statue, and when it was erected in the most public spot in Rome, holding the Savior’s sign in his right hand, had them engrave this inscription in Latin:

*By this saving sign, the proof of valor, I saved your city from the tyrant's yoke and liberated her. I also freed the senate and people of Rome and restored their ancient fame and splendor.*<sup>52</sup>

When the leader of the Western World makes life-altering decisions, it also becomes a decision that alters the lives, and for many, the religion, of the people under their rule. Thus, drastic change swept worldwide when Constantine, one of the Augusti, converted to Christianity, a previously minor but often persecuted cult. The most immediate of these changes is the official ending of persecution and acknowledgment of Christianity as an officially recognized religion. The less quick but more significant changes occurred throughout the life and direct lineage of the emperor. Transitioning away from the imperial cult, Constantine took a hands-on approach to promoting, unifying, and protecting his new religion. More significant to modern historians is that the coming together of Western Government with the Christian Church began a relationship

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 294-6.



that has remained strong yet controversial for the last 1700 years. One might ask of this turning point in history whether this vision helped Constantine and his army defeat his rival on the outskirts of Rome, moving him into greater power and influence? Regardless, this vision brought about the wide acceptance of a young cult.

The impact of the battle on the relationship between Constantine and the Church seems to be immediate. As seen above in Eusebius's account of his entrance into Rome, Constantine quickly built a statue of himself, in which he holds the chi-rho as a vital symbol. After this *epiphany*, he gave immense importance to the symbol of the labarum. Scholars have debated whether this was an actual change, given that he had previously emphasized pagan symbols following a previous epiphany of Apollo. As Lenski acknowledges, "such monograms, like the vota symbols of his earlier interpretation, were common in the period, but Constantine's decision or perhaps the revelation that the sign stood for Christ was up to that point unique. *He had converted to Christianity.*"<sup>53</sup> This conversion is not expressly stated by Constantine or his apologists/biographers/panegyrists until a decade later, but [almost immediately] "in numerous ways he made it abundantly clear that he was a Christian. Most obvious to the Romans, in the three months he spent in the city following his victory, was his initiation of the construction of several massive Christian churches."<sup>54</sup>

Drake asserts that the vision he believed led to his victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge "was the miraculous vision, endowing him with the charisma of biblical proportions, which gave Constantine special standing in Christian eyes, marking him, as it did, with the sign of God's

---

<sup>53</sup> Noel Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 71.

<sup>54</sup>Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine," 71.

favor.”<sup>55</sup> So, not only did he defeat a political rival on the battlefield, but he also gained political allies. Few could have imagined the impact this relationship would have. The change of Constantine proves more evident for historians looking back on his life than it would have for those in the empire in 313, but we can still see when the change began and how significant this change would prove to be. Drake does not view this event as the conversion of an empire but “merely one stage in a process whereby members of a previously scorned and outcast faith moved into the centers of power and, in the fourth century, undertook to use the coercive force of the state to compel attachment to their unique set of beliefs.”<sup>56</sup>

This watershed moment alone could have meant little had Constantine or the Church not carefully established this new relationship. Influential pagans could have displaced Constantine if the people turned against him; the Church could have condemned the emperor for any number of actions; or Constantine, facing any failure, could have tried a new god. Drake notes the emperor’s predicament: “Now the Roman emperor had to establish a working relationship with an organization over which he had no formal control whatsoever,”<sup>57</sup> which was in direct contrast to the previous pattern of emperors and their control over imperial religion. Constantine was committed to building a relationship with the Christian Church of his empire from the immediate moments after he consolidated power in the West; however, his complete devotion to the religion was not yet apparent.

After the Milvian Bridge, Constantine was a *new* emperor. He was officially recognized and accepted into the Tetrarchy. He also experienced a defining conversion to a recently

---

<sup>55</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* xvi.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

persecuted religion. Therefore, though these changes were not fully realized, Constantine became the first *Christian* Emperor.

### Establishing Unity

What we see in Constantine's actions as a Christian Emperor is his goal to establish both political and religious peace. The *Pax Romana* of Roman ideology remained at the heart of Constantine and what he pursued in the ecclesiastical portions of his empire. Constantine quickly saw that such unity would not be easily achieved, but his relationship with the Church remained his primary focus.

After accepting Christianity and settling temporarily in Rome after the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine immediately found out about and pursued a solution to conflicts among the Christians in his Empire. After acknowledging factions within the Church, Constantine got actively involved in the calling of ecclesiastical councils—the meeting of powerful Bishops to settle the disagreements in the Church. This judicial process was similar to that of the greater empire, except that he did not make the final decisions in these councils. Instead, it was a group of bishops responsible for making the decisions. Constantine sent letters to convene the bishops and provided all the necessary resources for travel and the gathering. These councils were not new under Constantine.<sup>58</sup>

Constantine hoped to instill in ecclesiastical society the values at the heart of his civil rule, most significantly the *Pax Romana*. Constantine used his political experience and aimed for peace by replicating Diocletian's empire-wide hierarchal organization. He also sought to undo

---

<sup>58</sup> The first Christian council can be seen in Chapter 15 of the Book of Acts. This council gathered in Jerusalem to discuss how to integrate the previously pagan worshippers into the exclusively Jewish Christianity that existed at the time.

some of the damage done by Diocletian by rebuilding the Church, both the physical and organizational structures that make it up. In this way, even early in his evolution into a thoroughly Christian emperor, he established a firm partnership with the Church.

Peace and unity may seem at first appearance to be the antithesis of Constantine's actions since he spent 18 of his 31 years as emperor dealing with civil war. Still, Roman history teaches that imperial strategy uses war to accomplish “peace.” For Constantine, his pursuit of peace and unity meant removing disputes in the Christian Church. These disputes were crucial because disagreements had never been allowed to become major public problems in the Roman Empire. Religion has not historically been a problem because Romans permitted each person, city, sect, and religion to practice and do as they pleased if they did not threaten the “peace” of the empire. As we can see throughout the first three centuries of the empire, Christians usually had the freedom to worship as they pleased as long as they remained quiet and did not stir up any unrest. As Eusebius previously claimed, there were many disagreements within the Church, which he determined to be the God-ordained reason for the Great Persecution.<sup>59</sup> Constantine expected unity within the Church and pursued agreements in theology and practice among the bishops to establish a universal orthodoxy.

Constantine's first involvement in the Church happened almost immediately after his conversion while still in Rome after he pried the city away from Maxentius. This dispute involved Bishop Caecilian in North Africa. This dispute is now referred to as the Donatist Controversy, a disagreement between Church leaders as they struggled with clergy and

---

<sup>59</sup> Edwards' *Religion of the Constantinian Empire* chapter 13 covers the most significant of these controversies, such as the Gnostics and the Origen Controversy. Edwards does a significant job in pointing to how these quarrels will lead to the explosion of the Arian Controversy discussed at the Council of Nicaea.

laypeople, who had in some way given in to the requests of Roman authorities during the Great Persecution. Eusebius introduces Caecilian in a letter from Rome where Constantine first promises “contribution for expenses [for the bishops to fulfill their duty]” but ends by acknowledging that he had “learned that certain people of unstable mentality are eager to lead the laity of the most holy catholic church astray by foul inducements.”<sup>60</sup> The mediation Constantine offers the bishop evidently failed since Eusebius records another letter to Miltiades, Bishop of Rome, ordering a meeting of bishops where they will settle the matter between Caecilian and those who accuse him of sinful practices.<sup>61</sup>

Pohlsander gives an excellent summary of the events of the Donatist Controversy, the process of several imperial solutions, and the role Constantine took:

In formulating his response to the petition, Constantine probably had the assistance of Bishop Ossius (or Hosius)<sup>62</sup> of Cordova ... . Constantine chose three Gallic bishops to serve as judges in the dispute ... . He also asked Bishop Miltiades of Rome to preside. Caecilian was invited to defend himself in person ... . The synod convened on 2 October 313 in Rome’s Lateran Palace, which Constantine had given to the bishop of Rome as his residence. It took the council only three days to find in favor of Caecilian. The dissidents did not give up; they appealed, again not to Bishop Miltiades but to the emperor. The ordination of Caecilian was invalid, they claimed, because Felix, the Bishop who had consecrated him, had been a *traditor*, that is, one who had surrendered the scriptures. They even doubted Bishop Miltiades because he had been a deacon ten years earlier to Marcellinus, the lapsed (briefly) bishop of Rome. Constantine responded to the appeal by convening a larger council of bishops to meet on 1 August 314 at Arles in southern Gaul under the presidency of Marinus ... . To the participants he generously offered the services of the imperial transport service. Thirty-three bishops, mainly from Gaul [were summoned for the Council of Arles] ... . In his *Life of Constantine*, in the context of events transpiring in the years 312–15, Eusebius reports approvingly that Constantine convened synods of God’s servants, sat with them in their assembly, and participated in

---

<sup>60</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 326–7.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 324–5. Eusebius records the second letter first as his intention is rarely an accurate recording of chronology. Rather he was describing the variety of immediate decisions of the emperor while in Rome. His focus in the letter to Caecilian was the provisions for the work of the bishops, not the controversy discussed in the end of the letter.

<sup>62</sup> Hosius will be a bishop of prominence to Constantine discussed later, but his presence through these events as an advisor to the emperor in ecclesiastical disputes is important to note.

their deliberations ... . The council must have been in session for a number of weeks since it considered not only the Donatist problem but other matters as well, such as celibacy of the clergy, consecration of bishops, the date of Easter, the thorny issue of rebaptism, and Christians serving in the Roman army. In the end, the emperor dismissed the assembled bishops, calling them his *fratres carissimi* (dearest brethren), but reportedly tiring of [their inability to make peace]. At the conclusion of the council the bishops reported on their labours and their decisions to Pope Sylvester; part of their letter and the twenty-two canons are extant. They had found, as had their colleagues meeting at Rome in the preceding year, against Donatus and in favour of Caecilian. The Donatists, however, did not submit. Constantine issued another imperial ruling against them in the autumn of 316. His attempts to suppress them show his readiness to use the powers of the state in an effort to end a dangerous schism in the church but failed. Although the so-called Edict of Milan proclaimed religious toleration throughout the empire, he ordered their property be confiscated, and their leaders be exiled. In 321 he decided to abandon the use of force against them and turned his attention to other matters. A separatist Donatist church possessed considerable strength in North Africa through the fourth and into the fifth century. In 336 no fewer than 270 Donatist bishops assembled for a council. St Augustine's theology was shaped in part in response to the Donatist challenge. Only the Muslim invasion in the seventh century finally wiped out the last traces of Donatism.<sup>63</sup>

Pohlsander's summary leads to some crucial observations in terms of the work of Constantine and his relationship with the Church. The first is that while Constantine was the convener of this meeting and he left control of the proceedings largely to the bishops. The Synod of Rome included the assistance of Hosius, which shows the Emperor's use of the Bishop as a close advisor; his choosing of three Gallic bishops, revealing how he used his power and the potential of a pre-existing relationship or favoring of bishops from Gaul; the appointment of Miltiades of Rome to preside, who then chose fifteen Italian bishops, quickly giving the Roman See and the Italian peninsula a place of grand prominence, especially Rome, where the emperor was at the time. He then allowed for an appeal made to him and not a bishop, where he conceded to those appealing due to their lack of trust in the proceedings in Rome, only to show a significant favoring of Gaul once again. Boojarma notices how this event shows that "the bishops

---

<sup>63</sup> Pohlsander, *Emperor Constantine*, 33–4.

recognized Constantine's right to evoke the assembly; they recognized his right to close it."<sup>64</sup>

The second synod, the Council of Arles, made critical decisions beyond the Donatist Controversy, one of which was the date of Easter, which would also be dealt with by many future councils.

The second significant observation of Pohlsander was Constantine's frustration that the Donatist sect remained after both councils. "They demand my judgment when I await Christ's judgment. For I say, and this is the truth, that the judgment of priests ought to be regarded just the same as if the Lord himself were presiding in judgment."<sup>65</sup> This statement is significant because it shows the emperor's faith in the bishops to carry out God's judgment in these disputes. This letter also indicates Constantine subjecting himself to Christ and the bishops—acknowledging these disputes as the bishop's jurisdiction. Pohlsander observes Constantine's frustration continued because he struggled with what power he had to ensure the judgments of the bishops were carried out—he could eliminate disrupters of peace using his forces, as he did in his rise to power, but often settled on banishing these religious malcontents, which he did not then carry out. His lack of follow-through on these punishments could be explained by cowardice (unlikely), fear of Christ's judgment for punishing His Bishops, fear that he could be on the wrong side, or overstep his jurisdiction into that of the Church. Regardless of the reason,

---

<sup>64</sup> John L. Boojarma, "Constantine and the Council of Arles: The Foundations of Church and State in the Christian East," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 43, no. 1–4 (Spring, 1998): 137.

<sup>65</sup> Charles O'Dahl, "Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Aries: A Defence of Imperial Authorship," *Journal of Religious History*, 17 no. 3 (June 1993): 274–89. The purpose of this article is to answer those who question the legitimacy of this letter as Constantine's. These historical difficulties of Constantine call in to question documents such as these, but O'Dahl argues for its legitimacy. Many question this depth of faith so early in his career, but O'Dahl comes to the conclusion that this depth and faith is legitimate.

not all of Constantine's pronounced punishments were thoroughly carried out, an issue that plagues the rest of Constantine's story and aspects of his legacy.

Lenski also discusses Constantine's frustration that arose from this controversy. He had hoped that the councils would settle the dispute. Still, the continued friction initiated by the Donatists would lead to further frustration, threats, violence, and ultimately, the abandonment of any real action. Constantine had assumed that, like good Roman citizens, unity was the goal for Christians, and their obedience to authority would end the matter. Lenski concludes:

Constantine's conflict with the Donatists resulted from his mistaken assumptions about the totalizing power of the Christian religion and the unimpeachable sacrality of its clergy. Blind faith in the power of God and his ministers led Constantine to believe in the real possibility of a unified and concordant church ... . As the first Christian emperor, he was in a unique position to actuate this imagined harmony through the tools of governance. With his help as emperor, the church could reach a utopian state of perfect concord, or so he believed.<sup>66</sup>

The Donatist Controversy played a significant part in history. The disagreement stemmed directly from the Great Persecution. The use of a council to attempt to find agreement followed a tradition long established by the Church, but for the first time, the council's decisions were approved by the emperor, representing a new partnership in Church/State relations. Finally, the outcome showed Constantine's limitations, which he willingly accepted, as he subjected his judgment to the bishops and then was unable and unwilling to enforce the council's decisions fully.

Amid this process, Constantine and Licinius signed the Edict of Milan. When Constantine finally did leave the Eternal City, it was to go to Milan in February to meet his fellow emperor Licinius. These emperors made two significant decisions that established unity

---

<sup>66</sup> Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 254.



between them. The first was the marriage of Constantine's sister to Licinius in Milan, making Licinius Constantine's family. The second is the letter they co-wrote and disseminated throughout the empire, now called the Edict of Milan. This decision was decisive in establishing unity between both sides of the empire and beginning a recognition and promotion of Christianity.

Gibbon provides an extensive summary and evaluation of what he calls the Edict of Toleration. His significant insight into the intentions, impacts, implications, and questions surrounding this document is worth quoting extensively:

The wisdom of the emperors provided for the restitution of all the civil and religious rights of which the Christians had been so unjustly deprived. It was enacted that the places of worship and public lands, which had been confiscated, should be restored to the church, without dispute, without delay, and expense, and this severe injunction was accompanied by a gracious promise that, if any of their purchasers had paid a fair and adequate price, they should be repaid from the Imperial treasure. The salutary regulations which guard the future tranquility of the faithful are framed on the principles of enlarged and equal toleration, and such equality must have been interpreted by a recent sect as an advantageous and honorable distinction. The two emperors proclaim to the world that they have granted a free and absolute power to the Christians, and all others, of following a religion which each individual thinks proper to prefer, to which was addicted his mind, and which he may deem the best adapted to his use. They carefully explain every ambiguous word, remove every exception, and exact from the governors of the provinces a strict obedience to the true and simple meaning of an edict that was designed to establish and secure, without any limitation, the claims of religious liberty. They condescend to assign two weighty reasons that have induced them to allow this universal toleration: the humane intention of consulting the peace and happiness of their people; and the pious hope that by such a conduct they shall appease and propitiate the Deity, whose seat is in Heaven. They gratefully acknowledge the many signal proofs that they have received of the divine favor, and they trust that the same Providence will forever continue to protect the prosperity of the prince and people. From these vague and indefinite expressions of piety, three suppositions may be deduced of a different but not of an incompatible nature. The mind of Constantine might fluctuate between the Pagan and the Christian religions. According to the loose and complying notions of Polytheism, he might acknowledge the God of the Christians as one of the many deities who compose the hierarchy of Heaven. Or perhaps he might embrace the philosophic and pleasing idea that, notwithstanding the variety of names, rites, and of opinions, all the sects and all the

nations of mankind are united in the worship of the typical Father and Creator of the Universe.<sup>67</sup>

Here, we see Gibbon's inclination to doubt the validity of Constantine's conversion and employ a gradualist interpretation, similar to Lenski's progressive one—of the nature of Constantine's religion at this time. We see Constantine's continued desire to promote religious peace. The peace he sought was not a unification of all Roman faiths but their acceptance within the empire. Constantine implemented this principle of religious tolerance throughout his life, even as he promoted Christianity more actively later in his reign. It would be several generations before Christianity became the official religion of the Romans.

Constantine was seeking unity in both Church and State. In 316, a division arose between him and his ally Licinius. This division led to skirmishes over bordering lands, but the battles repeatedly proved inconclusive. Lactantius and Eusebius claimed it was all due to Licinius' persecution of the Church.

Eusebius records Licinius' persecution as a mirror of Diocletian's, starting with the removal of Christians within his household and then purging the army of those soldiers unwilling to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Then, the removal and persecution of the bishops—stemmed from his jealousy of Constantine.<sup>68</sup> He then:

---

<sup>67</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 286–7. It does need to be noted that an appropriate view of what Constantine mandates recognizes that the intention is not to make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, but rather creates religious freedom. This freedom is not unique to the Roman Empire and a major focus of the philosophies growing in Gibbon's time. From a larger historical view, the Edict and Gibbon's work are nearly bookends of the unofficial reign of Christianity in the West. This is a testament to the impact of Constantine.

<sup>68</sup> Eusebius finishes off his work *Church History* with the story of Licinius' persecution then defeat at the hands of Constantine (pages 328–32) while Lactantius finishes his work with the

Planned to renew a general persecution against all. He had the power to do this, and nothing prevented his carrying it out—had not God, the Champion of his souls, quickly foreseen the impending danger. Out of the dark and murky night, he caused a great light and savior for them all to shine forth, his uplifted arm leading his servant Constantine to that spot.<sup>69</sup>

In 324, Constantine won a unifying victory over his final major Roman ally-turned-rival Licinius. Lenski points out that “with his victory over Licinius, Constantine captured sole power for himself and his dynasty for the next four decades.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, the Tetrarchy was dead.

Constantine’s newly gained sole power allowed him to rule the Roman Empire without competing edicts or visions. Therefore, in 324, we see the direction that Constantine desired to take the Empire, and what he showed was that the Church would be a significant partner, tool, and concern of his reign.

Edwards, in his discussion on the evolution of councils during the life of Constantine, shows that “the policy of Constantine after reuniting the Roman world in 324 was to govern the Church in the east as he had governed in the west, through bishops whose disputations he did not control but might see fit to amend.”<sup>71</sup> The Council of Arles gave Constantine a *modus operandi* when one of history’s critical theological disagreements arose in his empire—this time, he could use the whole of the empire.

This disagreement is known as the Arian Controversy. In the simplest terms, Arius, a presbyter—subordinate to a bishop—held that Christ, the Son, or Logos’s existence depended on the Father. At the same time, his more traditional Bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, believed that

---

fall of Maximin at the hand of Licinius, clearly representing the anticipation that the tyrants were all judged, and persecution had ended once and for all.

<sup>69</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 330.

<sup>70</sup> Lenski, “The Reign of Constantine,” 77.

<sup>71</sup> Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*, 280.

the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all co-equal. Alexander was the higher authority and demanded that his inferior submit, but the bold, confident, and pious Arius refused. He refused to surrender and fought for his ability to speak, defend, and promote his ideology. Arius' was founded on Neo-Platonic thought, translated into Christian understanding, and became popular in the East.

The theological nature of this debate—in contrast to the Donatist Controversy that dealt with Church practice—made unity so vital. Drake explains:

The issue this time was not moral rectitude but the even more central problem of correct belief (orthodoxy) ... Taking into account universal belief in the direct role divinity played in human affairs and the natural role the emperor played in ensuring the goodwill of that divinity, it is not difficult to understand how, in short order, enforcing correct belief became the prime mission to the Christian Emperor.<sup>72</sup>

Drake expands that “Theology was not [Constantine’s] primary concern.” Instead, it was the lack of unity that Constantine pleaded for between the state’s most prominent defender of his belief—and his bishop Alexander—who remained an obstinate supporter of the more traditional view. According to Eusebius, the disagreement devolved into “bishop[s] of one city attacking the bishop[s] of another ... all but coming to physical blows with each other ... [and] committing sacrilegious acts, even daring to insult the images of the emperor.”<sup>73</sup> This disunity forced Constantine to find a solution. He first sent a letter to Alexander and Arius with his most trusted bishop, Hosius, to put aside their differences and find a peaceful compromise. When the emissary failed, he once again had to call a council. This council was not a regional gathering. Now that the empire was wholly his, he could make it a genuinely ecumenical council.

---

<sup>72</sup> Drake, “The Impact of Constantine on Christianity,” 123–4.

<sup>73</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 122.

The chosen location of this council was in Nicaea. Barnes says Constantine decided this location “because Nicaea had a more salubrious climate. This was (and is) true, but the emperor’s real motive was to participate in the council debates.”<sup>74</sup> While this may have been an incentive for Constantine, Nicaea was primarily chosen for its central location. Constantine, now with complete control of the civil offices of the Roman Empire, used this council to centralize the Church as well. This proved to be the first truly and probably most significant ecumenical council. “For those who were furthest separated from each other, not only in spirit, but in physical presence and territories and places and provinces were brought together, and one city received them all.”<sup>75</sup>

Constantine hoped that Nicaea would culminate in a decision as decisive as Arles’s. Edward acknowledged the added difficulty of this because “[The Council of Nicaea] was bound to be larger and likely to be more turbulent, as the Christian population of the east was much more numerous, and no one who sees it could boast a pre-eminence comparable to that of Rome in the west.”<sup>76</sup>

Eusebius gives his first-hand account of what happened at the council:

Alone in all of history, one emperor, Constantine, wove such a crown for Christ with the bond of peace and to his Saviour dedicated a thanks-offering fit for God for his victory over enemies and foemen, gathering among us this replica of the apostolic assembly ... On the day appointed for the Council ... many tiers of seats had been set along either side of the hall. Those invited arrived within, and all took their appointed seats ... All rose at a signal, which announces the Emperor's entrance, ... all these [clergymen], blended with the elegance of his manners and the gentleness of imperial condescension, demonstrated the superiority of his mind surpassing all description. When he reached the upper end of the rows of seats and stood in the middle, a small chair made of gold having been set out, only when the bishops assented did he sit down. They all did the same after the emperor ... silence fell on all as they gazed intently at the Emperor. He with shining eyes looked

---

<sup>74</sup> Barnes. *Constantine*, 121.

<sup>75</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 123.

<sup>76</sup> Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*, 280.

kindly on them all, and then collecting his thoughts, in a soft and gentle voice he gave a speech somewhat like this [Constantine gave a benediction to those present about why he called the synod] ... The emperor listened to all without resentment and received the proposals with patient flexibility. He addressed each person gently ... he made himself pleasant and agreeable, persuading some and shaming others with these words, praising those who were speaking well, urging all towards agreement, until he had brought them to be of one mind and one belief on all the matters in dispute. Thus, the Faith prevailed in a unanimous form ... . Finally, he urged them to offer fervent supplications to God for him. Therefore bidding them farewell, he sent them all off to go back where they belonged. They went back with joy, and there at last prevailed among them all a unanimity, which he had arrived at in the Emperor's presence, those who had been far apart being joined together as in a single body.<sup>77</sup>

Eusebius gives a very emperor-focused telling of what happened in Nicaea. Much different than his account of previous councils, Eusebius portrays Constantine as the summoner of this council and the organizer, master of ceremony, and concluder of the meetings. Eusebius describes Constantine as having been shown immense respect by the bishops, which he returned, yielding to their knowledge and authority on matters of theology.

The council proceedings are significant as they reveal the emperor's place within the Church and show the Church's favor from the emperor. However, the most crucial aspect of the Council of Nicaea is that the Nicene Creed will define "Orthodox Christianity" for the next 1800 years of the Church. This statement of faith adopted by the commission, as recorded by Athanasius (296-373), reads:

"We believe in One God, the Father Almighty, the maker of all things visible and invisible. And in One Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Only-begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God, begotten not made, One in essence with the Father, by Whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things in earth; Who for us men and our salvation came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and cometh to judge the quick and dead. And in the Holy Ghost. And those who say, 'Once He was not,' and Before his generation He was not.' And 'He came to be from nothing,' or those who pretend that the Son of God is 'Of

---

<sup>77</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 121–34.

other subsistence or essence,' or 'created,' or 'alterable, or mutable,' the Catholic Church anathematizes.”<sup>78</sup>

According to Athanasius, Constantine “confessed moreover that such were his sentiments, and he advised all present to agree to it and subscribe to its articles and to assent to them ... And such were the theological remarks of our most wise and religious Emperor.”<sup>79</sup> This shows the role that Constantine played in establishing Orthodoxy. The bishop’s acceptance of Constantine's involvement reveals a proper balance and respect for the emperor. His words may seem like an overstep to us today, and the bishop’s acceptance may appear as a weak submission to a more robust power. Still, Athanasius, in particular, is willing to disagree with his emperor when he deems it essential.

After the long-fought contest, the seventeen synod members who remained faithful to the Arian argument were winnowed to two. This was Arius himself and Eusebius of Nicomedia—who had grown in influence over the emperor. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine's position at the end of the council was clear:

Constantine ratified the Nicene creed, and his firm declaration that those who resisted the divine judgment of the synod must prepare themselves for immediate exile annihilated the murmurs of a feeble opposition ... The impious Arius was banished into one of the remote provinces of Illyricum; his person and disciples were branded, by law, with the odious name of Porphyrians; his writings were condemned to the flames, and capital punishment was denounced against those in whose possession they should be found. The emperor had now imbibed the spirit of controversy, and the angry, sarcastic style of his edicts was designed to inspire his subjects with the hatred which he had conceived against the enemies of Christ.

But as if the conduct of the emperor had been guided by passion instead of principle, three years from the council of [Nicaea] were scarcely elapsed before he discovered some

---

<sup>78</sup> Athanasius, “Council of Nicaea,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Volume IV, trans. under the supervision of Henry Wace and Philip Schaff (New York; Charles Scribners Sons, 1907), 75. This statement is a slight expounding on what we consider the Nicene Creed; it references not only what the established orthodoxy was for, but arguments that it was against.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 75.

symptoms of mercy, and even of indulgence towards the proscribed sect, which was secretly protected by his favourite sister. The exiles were recalled, and Eusebius [of Nicomedia], who gradually resumed his influence over the mind of Constantine, was restored to the episcopal throne, from which he had been ignominiously degraded.<sup>80</sup>

Here, we again see Constantine's passion and respect for the judgment of the Church leaders. We also see that Constantine did not remain dedicated to his pronouncements.

Drake claims Constantine's imperial involvement in the debate between Arianism and Orthodoxy makes sense, "taking into account universal belief in the direct role divinity played in human affairs and the direct role the emperor played in ensuring the goodwill of that divinity, it is not difficult to understand how, in short order, enforcing correct belief became the prime mission of the Christian emperor."<sup>81</sup> This point is further complicated as he did not use all his power to eradicate Arianism, which he condemned at the council. Still, even more than that, he later re-accepts some Arians into his camp. The continued unwillingness of Constantine to fully commit to these decisions is representative of the complications of Church/State relations: Constantine appears weak and lacking devotion to the decisions he initiated; however, if he used his physical powers to get more involved, it would be a severe breach of Church sovereignty. Constantine's fault here is reneging on the punishments already established, and the Arian bishops' readmission perpetuated Arian belief. Constantine's unwillingness to do all necessary to eradicate Arianism from the empire invited future disunity.

Corcoran introduces a unique contrast to the work of Constantine's emperor-organized council. He suggests that Licinius' persecution was done "in the light of the explosion of the Arian controversy, and might have been as much a measure to hinder the opponents of Licinius'

---

<sup>80</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 319–20.

<sup>81</sup> H.A. Drake, "The Impact of Constantine on Christianity" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 124.



favorite, Eusebius of Nicomedia, as to undermine the intercourse between Christian communities.”<sup>82</sup> The accuracy of this theory is indeterminable, and a defined reason for his reversal of Church policy is not provided; however, it shows a potential intervention of Licinius that differs significantly from Constantine’s approach to the same dispute. Instead of preventing the gathering of Church leaders, Constantine initiated councils utilizing his own will and resources.

This kind of civil involvement in the religious does not sit well with the modern reader, but as Drake points out, it makes sense to the Roman Church in every way. Since Numa Pompilius one thousand years prior, the leaders of Rome had always led the people’s worship of gods. Constantine is humble in comparison to Diocletian, who declared himself Jupiter’s representative on earth. Constantine’s involvement in Church matters is not an expansion of his power; instead, his submission to the decisions of the Church leadership in Nicaea should be considered a reduction of power. I would argue the reason for the criticism that comes from Gibbons and his readers comes more from the modern experiences with monarchs and Church relations, as well as a growth in the political philosophy of separation between Church and State. However, this was a relatively new movement. Also, Constantine’s primary concern is not the decision the Church leaders came to, but that they came to an agreement, bringing peace and unity to the organization. His unwillingness to fully carry out his judgment of excommunication shows this ecclesiastical Pax Romana was to him more important than his use of power. The personal piety of the emperor also needs to be considered here. As previously mentioned, the disagreement dividing the Alexandrian Church was not over practical or organizational issues but a salvation-defining theological issue. Any Christian who doubts this issue would feel the

---

<sup>82</sup> Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs*, 195.

need to settle it, so Constantine should not be blamed for using his resources to handle such an essential issue; his mission in Nicaea was to utilize the best minds in the Church to solve a problem and create peace in the Empire, the Church, and the minds of individual Christians.

### Inner Circle

Constantine did not achieve unity in the Church by himself. As he remained impressively restrained in dealing with the Church's disagreements, Constantine established balance between Church and State by not aiming to be the head of both. Constantine was able to show constraint and concede Church leadership because he had bishops he relied on. We do not have much surviving evidence about their place in his court, but we do have some surviving recordings of his relationships and communication with several significant bishops.

Through these documents we see that Constantine had learned from Diocletian's organizational policies. Constantine did not need to create a Church structure because it had long been established following the form of Roman civil structure and naturally adjusted to Diocletian's reforms. Constantine depended on this structure—like Diocletian's civil apparatus—to deal with the disputes (theological and practical) that would arise within the local communities—recognizing that he was ill-equipped to do so himself. The emperor relied on his bishops and their established practice of synods and councils to handle disagreements in Christian communities. Significantly, he took all necessary provisions for these meetings, sometimes being present and even weighing in himself, creating an essential new precedent in Church/State relations.

Constantine did not make many significant decisions to support the Church without assistance. Eusebius reports that immediately after Constantine defeated Maxentius and entered Rome, he began to help his Christian advisors:

The emperor personally called together the ministers of God, regarding them honorably and cherishing them with the highest consideration since he favored those men by deed and word as consecrated to his God. Thus, he had as his table companions men whose appearance was modest as to the style of dress but by no means humble in the consideration he gave them because he thought he should have regard not to the man as most people see him but to the God honored in each. He took them with him wherever he set out on the campaign, trusting that in this, too, the one they worshipped would be present in his right hand.<sup>83</sup>

One of the men is likely Hosius<sup>84</sup> the Bishop of Cordova, Spain. In his study of Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* and Philostorgius' *Church History*, De Clercq declares "that Constantine received his first detailed knowledge of the Christian doctrine from [Hosius], and that he played a decisive role in the conversion to Christianity."<sup>85</sup> Hosius' presence in Rome right after the battle most likely means that he was an advisor to Constantine before Milvian Bridge—the two having formed a relationship before Constantine entered Italy. The exact timeline of Constantine's relationship with Hosius is obscure, but we know that influential bishops surrounded him from the moment of his conversion. Hosius of Cordova was next to Constantine for his whole life as a Christian and even as emperor. Hosius was there in Rome to instruct the emperor immediately after he defeated Maxentius, and he was the representative of the Church sent out by the emperor when a bishop was required. Hosius was Constantine's first line of defense for the significant disagreements that sprang up. Similarly, bishops had always been there for Constantine when

---

<sup>83</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 86.

<sup>84</sup> Hosius is also referred to as Ossius, but for consistency Hosius will hitherto be used.

<sup>85</sup> Victor C. De Clercq, "Ossius of Cordova: A Contribution to the History of the Constantinian Period" (Ph.D. Diss., Catholic Universities of America, 1954), 152.

making important decisions and even were sent out by the Emperor to deal with issues of Church administration.<sup>86</sup> Hosius may be one of the most influential and under-appreciated bishops in all of Church History with his role in Constantine's Church/State relations. This can be seen by Hosius' presence immediately after Constantine's conversion where he assumed a greater role in the development of the emperor's understanding of Christianity; his continued presence alongside Constantine as his trusted advisor in all things Church-related; and his mediator in several disputes including the Council of Tyre. This leaves Hosius an essential character in the story of the Church, but it also represents the beginning of Constantine's relationships with his bishops specifically.

Constantine built relationships with a number of other influential Christians. Eusebius and Lactantius played a huge role during his reign, whence their ability to provide the most significant eye-witness accounts of the emperor's life. Despite their obvious bias, the historian's relationships with Constantine gives modern-day readers otherwise unavailable content. Eusebius' self-proclaimed authoritative and widely read account of Constantine's conversion in his *Life of Constantine* has proved to be unmatched in providing biographical information. Beyond these, Church figures like Athanasius and Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Miltiades of Rome, and Caecilian of Carthage all played major roles. For these leaders, "[Constantine] legalized their god and created a mechanism for imperial involvement in regulating their cult. In so doing, Constantine made Christian bishops politically relevant, and by endowing them with

---

<sup>86</sup> As seen in Constantine's letter to Caecilian recorded in Eusebius, *Church History*, 336.

churches and patronage resources, he enhanced their power and status.”<sup>87</sup> Drake later summarizes, “What his reign produced was power players, in the persons of the bishops.”<sup>88</sup>

Glimpses of these relationships are scattered throughout the extant writings from the time. We see mentions of Hosius for much of his life, in personal letters and his histories, often alluding to a significant role of the bishop in the life of Constantine, but we have little description of their personal relationship. Eusebius of Caesarea records his own relationship with the emperor, portraying himself as a close advisor and trusted friend, which is believable considering the details of which he recorded. We saw in letters and recordings of the councils that Constantine relied on certain powerful men to make the most significant decisions, and his goal was to support them with every resource he had. Constantine did not try to establish something new, but relied on his ecclesiastical advisors in this process, providing for them all they needed. We saw in the Synod of Rome a reliance of Miltiades in Rome, then an expanded network of bishops from the most important imperial cities to lead the processions of the councils.

It is also significant that disagreements like this reached Constantine’s throne room. The readers do not know how these disputes were made known to him. Still, I would argue that the bishops in the emperor's proximity are relaying this information, primarily due to his lack of contacts in areas like North Africa and his lack of Christian training. This is significant because it reveals his relationship with his bishops; not only were they near him, but they also discussed the internal matters of the Church. This shows a civil leader taking a legitimate interest in the

---

<sup>87</sup> H.A. Drake, “The Impact of Constantine on Christianity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, 132.

<sup>88</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 396.

inner workings of the Church and direct communication with this body to be aware. The emperor then used these bishops as emissaries from the imperial camp to work with the Churches to settle the disputes. Lenski acknowledges this process is significant because of the initiation of the bishops:

The rigorists noted that Constantine was now treating the church as a legally recognized entity and inviting it to enlist imperial officials for the restitution of its property, the enforcement of its rights, and the grant of imperial privileges. With their petitions, the Donatists were asking to move their ecclesiastical leadership dispute— with its attendant consequences on the control of church property and the definition of church community— into the imperial courts. For his part, Constantine was just as eager to bring the matter to a close without being pulled into the question. He, therefore, chose to sidestep the request for an imperial trial and called instead for a synod of bishops to decide the case in Rome under the leadership of Pope Miltiades.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, we see how Constantine built connections with the Patriarchal Sees to assist in making unique, powerful, and long-lasting decisions. Constantine took the debate that split Alexandria and activated the universal council that defined Orthodoxy for the rest of history. He re-established a significant Christian presence in Jerusalem, making the prominent place of worship Christian. He sent his mother to the Holy Land to oversee the building of some of the grandest Churches in the world that stood as controversial monuments and relics to be warred over for centuries. This paved the way for Jerusalem to be added to the Patriarchal thrones of the Church. Rome was the location of his miraculous conversion where he distributed previously unseen favors to the Church. However, the most significant impact he had on the Church of Rome happened when he established a new capital elsewhere. He brought an end to the Roman Senate, leaving a vacuum that the Church filled; maintaining at least partial control of the Italian Peninsula for the next 1500 years. Constantine took his camp to the small city of Byzantium and converted it into a new capital. In many ways the capital he built was like the old, except the new

---

<sup>89</sup> Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 250.

reflected on every corner the worship of his new religion. The walls of this new capital became impenetrable for over one thousand years as it held the importance of the East. This city now contained the new throne of the Empire and the new seat of primacy for the Eastern Church.

The relationships with these prominent bishops did also prove complicated.

The Donatist Controversy showed Constantine that his prominent bishops would not accomplish all he had hoped. The initial letters, written with the help of Hosius, that the emperor sent to North Africa failed to settle controversy. Therefore, he brought the competing clergymen to Rome, hoping that a synod in the presence of Miltiades would find compromise and peace. However, the legitimacy of the See in the West was called into question, and the Council of Arles proved necessary, though even the decision of this council would not prove final.

The Council of Nicaea would prove that the expansion of his Empire further complicated these relationships as well. Eusebius of Caesarea entered the council sympathetic to the Arian definitions of Christology, but, somewhat questionably, accepted the compromise put forth by Constantine. Athanasius, an ardent and outspoken supporter, and eventual successor of Alexander left Nicaea victorious. However, his life-long zeal against the Arians who were not fully removed from North Africa led to various confrontations. These confrontations became so serious that he would eventually flee to Constantine at his palace in Constantinople only to be exiled to Gaul.<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, the bishop who eventually got the great honor of baptizing the emperor was Eusebius of Nicomedia, the only bishop at the Council of Nicaea who remained on the side of Arius. Thus, his immediate fate after the Council was exile at the decree of the other

---

<sup>90</sup> The story of Athanasius will be given more significant treatment in the conclusion of this chapter as his story proves to be an excellent representation of direct relationships between emperors and bishops with Constantine and his heirs. This outline of his story sufficiently acknowledges the many complications of what Constantine pursued.

bishops and Constantine. Constantine's struggle to stay firm on the ecclesiastical punishments he handed out allowed the Bishop of Nicomedia to return to his bishopric. This decision challenges the commonly held view that Constantine was the Victor of Orthodoxy, as the Arian bishop remained an influential figure in Constantinople long after baptizing the emperor, greatly influencing Constantine's heirs.

Criticism of Constantine's relationship with his prominent bishops also stems from his incremental adoption of Christianity. Jones criticizes how these bishops must have felt uneasy, at best, but were willing to overlook a generally Christian emperor:

It may seem strange that the bishops he met with increasing frequency did not sooner enlighten him on this point. But they were probably only too thankful to secure toleration and favor after the horrors of persecution. Constantine, like Maximin, might change his mind: it was safer not to provoke the Emperor and to receive the subsidies and immunities he showered upon the Church. It would be a bold man who offered unsolicited advice to a Roman emperor, and none of the bishops seems to have felt called upon to instruct Constantine, much less to rebuke him for his errors.<sup>91</sup>

This viewpoint is impossible to prove, especially as Christian writers will write only with the tremendous respect and honor given to the emperor.<sup>92</sup> However, with the fight against the corruption of their religion, the devoted bishops were most assuredly uncomfortable with Constantine's self-identification with *Sol Invictus*, meaning that they chose to maintain peace

---

<sup>91</sup> Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 87.

<sup>92</sup> Jones is promoting the view of "Christian Intolerance," or the rigid fight against any contrary beliefs and strict separation from anyone who may hold them. In *Constantine and the Bishops* (pages 20–34) Drake attributes Burckhardt for the establishment of this view in historians of the time, of which Jones would fit squarely. This view, as Drake discusses, would be a major criticism of the fourth century Church as Jones is presenting here and would be supported by councils and actions of the bishops throughout this period. This would also become a criticism of Constantine as the emperor grows in his promotion of the Church. Burckhardt used this rigidity and Constantine's future wavering on the Arian controversy as proof that the emperor was not actually Christian. Ultimately, Drake dismisses these accusations as modern interpretations that do not properly take into consideration the religious and political contexts of Antiquity.



with the emperor as they were in his favor. This recognition complicates the “balance” of power that Constantine tried to establish. There is the possibility that Constantine was trying to maintain peace with his pagan citizens with the intent of fully promoting Christianity, but slowly, and his clergymen knew this.<sup>93</sup> However, it is equally likely that his Christian advisors were trying to maintain peace with the emperor, afraid of the potential of his wrath.

Regardless of how accurate the perceived intolerance of Christians was at this point and how the bishops may have felt, Jones is introducing a conflict that becomes very important at this point of our discussion. Just as Constantine is trying to figure out how to deal with the Church, the Church needs to figure out how to deal with a Christian ruler. From the beginning of the Church, Christians have been at the mercy of the emperor's and their local official's whims, knowing that persecution could ramp up at any time. This created a religion where the most stubborn believers were sanctified, as their obstinate disregard for civil authority to maintain their religious practice led to their deaths. Therefore, standing against the emperor, the martyrs had become the Christian victors. So when the emperor sought to become a Christian victor, they had to reevaluate how to approach the throne. As Jones proposes, some of the bishops may have been willing to accept a slightly pagan ruler as one in their assembly.

Ultimately, we see from the moment of his conversion that Constantine prioritized relationships with prominent bishops in his Empire. I would argue the relationships that he established proved to be more advantageous for their power than for his. He sought their help, guidance, and wisdom while promoting their work and solidifying their power and positions for

---

<sup>93</sup>As discussed, the tolerance of Constantine for the pagans, while simultaneously promoting Christianity, would be the conclusion of Lenski's *Cities*. If this is a conscientious decision of Constantine, then surely Christian advisors such as Hosius were aware of it, if not fully accepting or even promoting the practice.

centuries to come. Constantine's relationship with these men is complicated. Still, he does not abuse whatever power they may provide for him. In these relationships, he establishes strong ties between Church and State that will remain as long as there is a remnant of the Roman Empire.

### Bishops in the Empire

Constantine surrounded himself with several bishops who played a significant role in his reign; the most prominent and often mentioned of these men have been discussed above. To understand the relationship between Church and State that Constantine had built, it is also vital to see how he worked with the bishops and local churches in a more general, empire-wide manner. The many bishops throughout the empire, in cities of all sizes and influence, represented the Church and Constantine daily before their congregations and were responsible for enacting their decisions. Constantine increased the power of these bishops by making them a de facto branch of the Roman government, by providing for their needs, most specifically through building, and by decreasing the impact of their pagan counterparts.

Immediately after the Battle of Milvian Bridge, we see evidence of the emperor giving new advantages to the local churches in Rome. Barnes notes that:

When he was in Rome in November and December 312, Constantine began to grant privileges and subsidies to the Christian church and Christian clergy; indeed, before he left Rome, Constantine had already set in motion a religious transformation of the Roman world ... . Constantine began to grant fiscal privileges to Christian clergy and to raise the status of the Christian church within Roman society.<sup>94</sup>

Constantine sought to promote the Church most significantly by promoting the Church leaders.

The bishops quickly became the focus of his distribution. Each church building he financed, he

---

<sup>94</sup> Barnes, *Constantine*, 84.

handed over the project to the city's bishops. Beyond the financial provisions described, raising the Church's social status also gave these churchmen increased power and roles in the Empire.

From Rome, Constantine also began his involvement in the Donatist Controversy. Eusebius recorded the initial letter from Constantine to Caecilian. However, two letters cited by Jones, both to an Anullinus, who was a provincial ruler in North Africa, where Caecilian was bishop, show us how Constantine simultaneously began to provide for the physical needs of local congregations. The first letter is a brief command to return the people and property seized by the local officials to the churches. The second letter, however, is more revealing of a pious Constantine:

The annulment of the worship in which the highest reverence of the holiest heavenly power is maintained has brought the most significant dangers upon the commonwealth. The lawful revival and protection of this same worship has caused the most incredible good fortune to the Roman name and exceptional prosperity to all the affairs of men, the divine beneficence affording this[.]<sup>95</sup>

The letter further commands that those “who are commonly called ‘clerics,’ shall be kept immune from all public burdens of any kind whatever.”<sup>96</sup> This established another core policy of Constantine where he gave special treatment to the Church and its leaders, equivalent to that of imperial officials. This is a mandate that Constantine soon after expanded beyond North Africa to all clergy throughout his Western Empire and further developed the decree when he took the East.<sup>97</sup> The letter to Anullinus shows how Constantine guaranteed these rights by requiring his provincial leaders to support the Church. Specifically, the men were leading the churches in their jurisdiction.

---

<sup>95</sup> Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, 76.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.* 76.

<sup>97</sup> Stephenson, *Constantine*, 174. The exemption from compulsory public services for the Christian clergy comes from the Theodosian Code 16.2.1–2, dated to 313 AD.

Awoa describes a significant decree in which Constantine continued to increase the ecclesiastical and civil powers of these local bishops and promote their partnership with local magistrates:

Constantin avait remarqué que l'administration de la justice exercée par le tribunal impérial ne fonctionnait pas assez bien. Il était urgent et nécessaire d'intervenir dans ce domaine pour limiter les injustices et régler une bonne fois pour toutes la question ... . L'Evêque devenait alors une personnalité ressource en matière de justice et ses décisions avaient un pouvoir d'exécution garanti par le pouvoir en place.

Constantine recognized that the imperial administration of justice was not functioning sufficiently. It was urgent and necessary to intervene in this area in order to limit injustices and settle this problem for good ... . The bishops then became a resource to administer justice, and their decisions had power, guaranteeing them a position of power.<sup>98</sup>

The decree, which is recorded in the *Theodosian Code* without date specified, was, according to Awoa, a part of the *lex christiana* which Constantine issued in June 318 to cement church organization officially. This act established *audiencia episcopalis*, formal proceedings, where bishops could hear and give official judgment on issues brought to them by local citizens. Awoa cites the communications of two bishops from North Africa and their experience with this power. The first communication is a letter from Constantine to a bishop named Ablabius, which was an apparent response to a letter from the bishop to the emperor asking about *audiencia episcopalis*. Awoa discusses the emperor's excitement, noting that he answered the bishops' questions with comfort and assurance. Constantine acknowledged that the bishops lacked certain powers to enforce their judgments. Still, he asserted that the civil magistrates were required, per the emperor's decree, to enforce the bishop's judgment. Awoa also relates the experience of another North African bishop, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), over a century later. The famous

---

<sup>98</sup> Andre Cyrille Awoa. "Audiencia Episcopalis comme Forme d'exercice du gouvernement dans l'église antique. Une Relecture de l'expérience d'Augustin." *Kościół i Prawo* 6, no. 2 (2017), 11.

bishop discusses the responsibility given to him in this law with great humility and seriousness. Augustine reasserts his devotion to the truth while acknowledging the corruption of others. Awoa concludes that Constantine took a mandate found in the Bible for the Church to settle disputes among its members internally and, out of pragmatism, instituted the practice in the imperial law to reduce the burden on pagan judges. He ends his article by pointing to the future and the many judgments from bishops and popes alike, drawing their precedent from Constantinian law.

Constantine's institution of the *Audientia episcopalis* is essential for several reasons. Firstly, the biblical precedent for the law and its establishment relatively early in the emperor's reign<sup>99</sup> point to the practical significance of the emperor's conversion: he used the Church as an instrument of state on a local level to promote order. Secondly, the pragmatic purpose of this novel institution reveals his likeness to Diocletian: he was using the Church to assist him in improving the Empire. Thirdly, he gave local bishops further prominence, making them equal to the long-established imperial courts, and bolstered their power by mandating that civil magistrates enforce their decisions. Finally, the law also opened up the unintended possibility that bishops might abuse their new powers. Oversight of the bishop's judgments was impossible for Constantine, his court, and their successors. Augustine's letter reveals that his fellow bishops were already abusing their power in just over a century. While we can assume many local imperial judges were corrupted in this fashion, the potential for corruption in Church leadership brings particular danger to the relationship between Church and State. However, overall, I believe that the decree of Constantine shows a leader who sought a symbiotic and cooperative

---

<sup>99</sup> Awoa's date of 318 also points to the prominence of North Africa, occurring while Constantine only ruled over the West, but as pointed out above, all signs point to Constantine ruling the East as he did the West.

relationship between Church and State which he hoped bishops would activate at every level of the Empire.

These steps established the local bishops as de facto pieces of a refreshed Roman government. Once again, this reflects Diocletian's creation of new magistrates, who would enable him to increase his oversight throughout his Empire. Constantine's reorganization did not establish an official new position, but rather he took a pseudo-governmental structure, the churches administrating bishops, and provided them with equal protection and power as if they were Roman magistrates. This initiative, I believe, betrays his attempt to establish balance in Church/State relations: if Constantine had officially made the bishops a part of the Roman government they would have been subject directly to the emperor and his imperial officials, but if he had only suggested these powers to bishops without guaranteeing them enforcement by the state, the bishops would have seen little change in their roles or power.

Eusebius introduces Constantine's further actions in promoting the local bishops in Book II of *Life of Constantine*. First, he notes that in the letter from Constantine to the Provincials of Palestine, in which he introduces himself as a Christian emperor, he mandates that all that was taken from any Church or churchgoer during the persecution of Licinius should be returned immediately and in full. Eusebius then relates:

Such were the dispositions made in the first communication of the emperor to us. The things referred to in the law were immediately implemented. There was a complete reversal of policy from the violence done shortly before by the tyrants' cruelty. Those for whom they were decreed enjoyed imperial bounties.<sup>100</sup>

Then the emperor "took several practical steps:" he banned pagans from sacrificing and "permitted them [Christians] to make public use of the name [Christian]." Next, he issued two

---

<sup>100</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 109–10.

laws simultaneously: one restricted the pollution of idolatry; the other dealt with erecting buildings as places of worship and extending in breadth and length the churches of God as if almost everybody in the future belonged to God once the obstacle of polytheistic madness had been removed.<sup>101</sup> Eusebius then quotes in full a letter to the general provincials of the East, which Eusebius summarizes by saying, “Such words the emperor, like a loud-voiced herald of God, addressed to all those in the provinces through a personal letter, protecting his subjects from demonic error while encouraging the pursuit of true godliness.”<sup>102</sup>

Providing for the needs of these churches on a structural scale began at his conversion. The Edict of Milan then reveals Constantine, not as a passive leader allowing the churches to rebuild, but as an active, passionate initiator of this rebuilding. Johnson reveals the impact of Constantine, comparing what the Church looked like before to what Constantine provided through the outworking of the edict:

Previously, the growing Christian communities in the cities of the empire had never enjoyed the privilege of meeting in public buildings and had instead been relegated to house churches, the residences of wealthy congregants that were often left as legacies to the local Christian community. The growth of Christianity and the emperor's involvement with it demanded a massive new building campaign that would both accommodate the day-to-day needs of various Christian congregations throughout the empire and also honor the sites of the most significance to the faith. A need and an opportunity had arisen, and Constantine responded with the resources and of the emperor to take advantage of the opportunity and meet that need.<sup>103</sup>

The immediacy with which Constantine began these building projects proves that the Edict of Milan was far more than a notice of tolerance; it quickly revealed new favoritism. Constantine does not simply rebuild the simple structures that existed before the Great Persecution for those

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 109–10.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 115.

<sup>103</sup> Mark J. Johnson, “Architecture of Empire,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 279.

congregations who managed to meet in a place more official than the larger homes of its members.<sup>104</sup> However, the favoritism of the Church was still in the formative stages during Constantine's civil wars; his subsequent building projects were grander.

Even before the Edict of Milan, while still in Rome after Milvian Bridge, Constantine quickly began building these churches. The most historically significant "subsidy" he gave to the church in Rome in 312 was the possession of the site and funds for the construction of the Church of Saint John Lateran, which would become the Papal seat.<sup>105</sup> Early in his reign, Tyre completed its basilica in 315 and Aquileia by 319, but Constantine was only involved in providing funding for them. Bardill emphasizes churches built in Nicomedia in Bithynia, Antioch in Syria, Constantina in Numidia, Heliopolis in Phoenicia, and other "known Constantinian churches [which] were mainly located in major cities and pilgrimage centers."<sup>106</sup>

When it came time to build Constantinople, the emperor built an utterly Christian city, removed all pagan temples, and built churches. The most significant was to be the Hagia Sophia; though he just ordered the building of the church; the task would not be completed until the reign of Justin I in 537. Constantine's mother, Helena, then went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where she began building new Churches in Bethlehem and Jerusalem.<sup>107</sup> Constantine started such an extensive program, giving his people prominent places to worship.

---

<sup>104</sup> This is a reference to what the majority of local congregations were forced to do before the legal building of church structures. The primitive Church was forced to meet in the houses of their congregants and as more citizens of prestige joined their ranks, they were able to gain access to larger homes, some of which would be later turned into churches themselves.

<sup>105</sup> Barnes, *Constantine*, 87.

<sup>106</sup> Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*, 237.

<sup>107</sup> Eusebius' story of the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher records several significant elements. He continues the narrative that Constantine was Divinely inspired and needed to defeat those who tried to prevent the work of God, as some tried to decimate the cave



The building of churches was in every way a promotion of Christianity and its leaders throughout Constantine's Empire. The churches provided a place for spiritual worship while also being a physical representation of the church's growth in Roman society, including the visual transformation of the Roman city.

Lenski shows how the building of the churches was not just a promotion of Christianity, but also a demolition of the pagan religion.

At some point after gaining control of the East in 324, Constantine appears to have infringed on the long-standing immunity of temples from random confiscations. This is described in rather stylized terms in the *Life of Constantine*. Eusebius begins by telling us that he stripped the temples of their doors and the cladding of their roofs—which constituted massive depositories of metallic wealth because of their bronze construction and gold covering. He then explains the fate of gold and silver idols in much the same terms: avoiding the use of military force, Constantine simply sent out “one or two of his nobles alone” to proceed through the provinces and order pagan idols in gold and silver to be brought forth from temples and melted down into bullion in public view. Some bronze statues were also brought forth, but rather than being destroyed, they were confiscated and transported to his new city of Constantinople for public exhibition . . . . In essence, then, Constantine engineered a widespread program of iconoclasm that simultaneously removed pagan idols and liquid wealth from temples and converted these into bullion or movable art works.<sup>108</sup>

The physical building of the Christian churches could only happen with the physical destruction of the pagan temples. In *Constantine and the Cities*, Lenski discusses Constantine's evolution,

---

in which they believed Christ was buried. Beyond this common narrative in *Life of Constantine*, the historian copies a letter of Constantine not only promising all the required goods and tradespeople, but he concedes various details to Macarius, the Bishop of Jerusalem, allowing the bishop who would sit on the throne of this basilica to oversee the construction. Up until the pilgrimage of the emperor's mother, the Holy Land had been a tertiary land, even for the Christians in the empire, at least since 70 A.D. when they were officially made distinct from the Jewish populations. Constantine and Helena would reinvent the city. “The reinvention of the Holy Land as a site of Christian pilgrimage and a locus of Christian spiritual power would have profound effects that lasted through the Middle Ages and down to the present” (Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 80).

<sup>108</sup> Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 168-9.

promotion of the Church, and reluctant allowance of pagan worship,<sup>109</sup> not through broad programmatic decrees, but by evaluating individual relations and communications with the emperor. This approach is important because it reveals that Constantine's promotion of the local bishops was not a general decision, but one that happened on a personal scale for the emperor.

Barnes further summarizes Constantine's work in the religious life of the cities throughout his empire. These changes rarely dealt with the individual citizens but concentrated on the leading and practice of faith by those in charge of places of worship:

In the Winter of 312-13, Constantine began a systematic policy of giving honors, privileges, and donations to the Christian Church and clergy. In 324-5, as the new master of the East, he prohibited the cultic activities that had characterized the Roman Empire's traditional religions, and he thus affirmed the status of Christianity as the official religion of the state and its rulers. Constantine outlawed the performance of animal sacrifice, ordered that no new cult statues of the traditional gods be dedicated, and forbade magistrates and governors to begin official business with the traditional act of casting incense or some other similar offering on the altar standing in their court for this ceremony.<sup>110</sup>

By using his resources, Constantine took care of the physical needs and the physical worship of his fellow Christian citizens. He accomplished this by providing for his bishops in every way and conversely removing pagan priesthods. In forbidding their practice, preventing their growth, and dissembling their relationship with the local magistrates—whom we have seen he replaced with Christian religious leaders—Constantine effectively began the destruction of the pagan cult in Rome, without actually attacking or outlawing pagan practice.

---

<sup>109</sup> Lenski's work in *Cities* should be noted here because he looks at the interactions between Constantine and his citizens who remained pagan, even allowing new temples to be built in his own name. Lenski fits this into his overall thesis arguing that these decisions were made only in the earlier stages of his religious evolution and did so because as a political move not wanting to fully ostracize those traditional Romans.

<sup>110</sup> Timothy Barnes, "Constantine, Athanasias and the Christian Church" in *Constantine: History, Historiography, and Legend*, ed. Samuel Lieu and Dominic Montserrat (New York: Routledge, 1998) 7–9.

In many ways these actions show Constantine adopting the bishops into the Roman governmental organization. Bishop was not an official title, but he granted them the same effectual power and social status. He provided for their every need and gave them access to the imperial treasury. He promoted their position specifically, while removing the preferential treatment of the position of their pagan counterparts. Lenski 's *Constantine and the Cities* shows that not all cities desired to become Christian, however, and Constantine could not merely ignore or take away their desire for pagan worship. Lenski even gives examples of Christian cities that did not seek the emperor's approval, which while awkward, did not play a major role as most Christian cities desired the partnership with the throne. Difficulties also arose with the Churches' social status, as the bishopric became an increasingly powerful position. Future generations are filled with examples of bishops who had little concern for the spiritual and sought these positions to increase personal influence.

Overall, Constantine directly and indirectly granted unique power and authority to the local bishops throughout his territory. These men, alongside the civil magistrates, became the religious overseers of their local populations, accomplishing this while being supported by, and often supporting, the emperor himself.

### Bishop to Those Outside

Finally, we see how these relationships helped shape Constantine's view of his role.

Eusebius tells us:

Hence, it is not surprising that on one occasion, when entertaining bishops to dinner, he let slip the remark that he was perhaps himself a bishop too, using some such words as these in our hearing: 'You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside.' By this saying, he exercised a bishop's

supervision over all his subjects and pressed them all, as far as lay in his power, to lead a godly life.<sup>111</sup>

These are perhaps the most significant of all of Constantine's recorded words. They reveal his care for his citizens and a self-defined description of his role as part of the Church. He considered himself the bishop “to those outside” of the Church. This mentality describes a civil leader whose primary concern was not about his own wealth, power, the strength of his nation, or even the approval of his people, rather it was his “shepherding” of these people of which he was responsible for their physical and spiritual lives. It is, however, inconceivable to consider “those outside” a church—i.e., needing or accepting a bishop—as the Roman Empire remained pagan for centuries. The Regardless this self-perception impacts every decision the ruler makes, how this played out in Constantine’s mind is unclear. Did this mean he meant to convert the whole empire?

Lenski suggests Constantine may have used his authority to promote his new religion to those who practiced pagan religions, highlighted in a speech called *The Oration to the Saints* and recorded in Eusebius’s *Life of Constantine*. This public speech references a mixture of biblical characters and Greek and Roman philosophers to create an apology for Christianity—relevant to all who would listen. In promoting Christianity “Constantine engaged his subjects in a dialogue that invited them to use those claims that they accepted— his right to rule and to establish a legal framework for civic interaction— to test the validity of other claims his subjects may not, initially, have been willing to accept— that the Christian god was the one true god.”<sup>112</sup>

In Schott’s view of this vital speech:

---

<sup>111</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 161.

<sup>112</sup> Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 15.

Constantine's new imperial ideology did not require an empire-wide anti-pagan program. Paganism, or 'error' as Constantine puts it in the *Oration*, was the foil to true piety. As such, its existence was vital to the stability of Constantine's empire. More accurately, the continuous threat of a descent back into the chaos of "tradition" was crucial to Constantine's reign.<sup>113</sup>

The *Oration* is not wholly revelatory of what he meant by being a 'bishop to those outside' as this is a speech given to 'the saints' firmly in the grasp of the Church. It does show the promotion of the Church while also practicing tolerance, an apparent attempt to build up his favored side while not needing to eliminate the other, potentially even an ability to pursue both personal religion and the well-being of an empire made up mostly of citizens committed to another religion. This balance and freedom under Constantine's rule should be viewed much more favorably by the modern reader. Two hundred fifty years ago, Gibbon helped spark the condemnation of Constantine's conversion of the empire to Christianity blaming the religion for ultimate destruction of Rome, with many historians sympathizing with his argument. However, we can see and appreciate that he was a temperate emperor, not one using his position to purge his enemies.

Constantine did not just make himself the bishop to those outside the Roman Church, but he also took up the role of protector of those Christians outside his empire. Barnes, in several works, defines this:

Shortly after 324, the Caucasian kingdom of Iberia [Armenia] embraced Christianity and a Roman alliance, and Constantine wrote a personal letter in his own hand (not dictated), which Eusebius quotes, to the Persian king asserting his patronage of Shapur's Christian subjects.<sup>114</sup>

Constantine regarded himself as a divinely ordained protector of Christians everywhere, with a duty to convert pagans to the truth, and this fundamental assumption about his

---

<sup>113</sup> Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 122.

<sup>114</sup> Barnes, *Constantine*, 166.

mission in life inevitably shaped his policy towards Persia, where a large number of Christians lived under a Zoroastrian monarch.<sup>115</sup>

Constantine planned his invasion of Persia from ideological motives and advertised it to his soldiers, his subjects, and the Christians of Persia as a religious undertaking. He invited bishops to travel with his army, he prepared a tent to serve as a mobile church and accompany him everywhere, and he declared his intention of being baptized in the River Jordan before beginning the actual invasion.<sup>116</sup>

When Constantine concluded a treaty with the Goths in 332, and again when he completed a treaty with the Sarmatians in 334, he insisted on including religious stipulations, which enabled him (and his panegyrist Eusebius) to claim that he had converted the northern barbarians.<sup>117</sup>

These examples show the significance to Constantine and his religious brothers and sisters beyond his imperial power. Constantine's "Christian Victor" image could be considered—similarly to his work "against the tyrants"—a power grab with false religious pretense. I, however, would argue this is a legitimate concern of the emperor, consistent with his consistent aims for unity, support, and growth of his Church. Constantine understood that the Church was not a solely Roman entity. His actions, even if politically driven, also represented his devotion to his religion.

This war against the Persians is uniquely significant. It reveals a new application of Constantine's power—one that would be replicated by many "Christian" leaders in the future. This event also was the last act of the emperor as leader—one that he was unable to carry out. The Persians and Romans had been in near-constant conflict for centuries. At several points in his career Constantine neared war with these neighbors.

In 336, a Persian army under the command of the royal prince Narseh installed a Persian nominee on the throne of Armenia, which had been officially Christian since 314. Constantine seized the opportunity to conduct a holy war to rescue the Christians of

---

<sup>115</sup> T. D. Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985): 131.

<sup>116</sup> Barnes, *Constantine*, 166.

<sup>117</sup> Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia," 131.

Persia, who were disposed to welcome him as a liberator, as the fifth treatise of Aphrahat proclaimed in unambiguous terms.<sup>118</sup>

It was during the preparation for this “holy war” that Constantine fell ill and died.

We can therefore see the completed development of Constantine. He was a *new* emperor and established a *new* empire; in broad and general terms, his conversion converted Western Civilization. Lenski gives a picture of this new sort of commander:

Where in previous centuries, a standard set of assumptions about the nature of the divine had been shared between emperor and subjects, Constantine’s conversion put his religious worldview at odds with collective truths shared by most of his subjects— truths about cosmology (Olympian versus Judeo-Christian), ritual (the value of sacrifice and idolatry), and theology (polytheism). Thus, although his authority to issue normative regulations was accepted as valid, his claims regarding the divine authority that undergirded his imperial authority became open to challenge.<sup>119</sup>

A new relationship between the ruler and religion created this new era of civil leadership. As presented, Constantine increased the power of the bishops which created competition for the State’s power—this contrasted greatly with previous emperors who named themselves the high priests. Constantine’s use of the bishops in his inner circle and throughout the empire also gave men a new authority over the emperor, even the Dominate. While this was not to be a practice entirely accepted by many of his successors in the Western World, it did begin a precedent leading to more accountability, better balance, and a way in which to reign in political leaders. Regardless of the impact Constantine’s conversion had on the empire, or how future leaders would carry on his practice, we see in his desire to be the bishop to those outside the Church that he had a heart intent on seeking the salvation of all his subjects.

---

<sup>118</sup> Barnes. *Constantine*, 166.

<sup>119</sup> Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities*, 14.

## Reflection

Edward Gibbon condemns the emperor in no short order in a way that is easy to summarize and reflect upon. With his famous judgment of the emperor, the breadth of his work, and, as we will see, his love for the emperor's nephew Julian (331-63; 361-63), it is impossible to measure all his criticisms of Constantine in this work. However, in his concluding thoughts on Constantine, Gibbon describes the new office of the bishops and how they were corrupted because of the changes of Constantine. Gibbon criticizes Constantine and the impact that the emperor had on the leaders of the Church. He introduces and numbers his criticisms below:

“A new and perpetual order of ecclesiastical ministers, always respectable, sometimes dangerous, was established in the Church and State. The important review of their station and attributes may be distributed under the following heads: I. Popular election. II. Ordination of clergy. III. Property. IV Civil jurisdiction. V. Spiritual censures. VI. Exercise of public orator. VII. Privilege of legislative assemblies.”<sup>120</sup>

I will summarize what he means in terms of the position and the criticism of Constantine in each:

I. From the start of the Church, they freely elect their leadership once the previous one died. Gibbon discusses how this election process became influenced by political outside influence, just like the “commonwealths of Greece and Rome.” He discusses his hesitation regarding the civil desire for peace. He recognizes the emperors “might effectually declare their wishes in the choice of a primate: but those absolute monarchs respected the freedom of ecclesiastical elections.” In other words, Constantine and those who picked up the civil leadership after him mostly did not abuse this process.<sup>121</sup>

II. Here, the “ordination of clergy” respects the Church’s position and powers. With a mixture of respect, disdain, pity, and fear of potential abuse, Gibbon sees the exemption

---

<sup>120</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 302.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* 303.



of the clergy from all civil duties (military service, taxes, etc.) as legislation “which pressed on their fellow citizens with intolerable weight.” This exemption given by Constantine was compounded by an inappropriate number of clergy ordained in each church, exemplified by the 525 clerics in the Church in Constantinople, a “moderate number [fixed] by the emperor to relieve the distress of the church, which had been involved in debt and usury.”<sup>122</sup>

III. The Edict of Milan guaranteed the church's property, but as we have discussed, Constantine led the way in building projects across the empire far beyond the rebuilding of what was previously destroyed. Gibbon says this is because “Constantine too easily believed that he should purchase the favor of Heaven if he maintained the idle at the expense of the industrious and distributed amongst the saints the wealth of the republic.” As with the numerous ornate churches financed by Constantine, Gibbon views this as a drain on the empire and a lack of separation of Church and State.

IV. Gibbon describes the bishops' freedom from the fear of civil punishment. He explains how Constantine preferred to keep all ecclesiastical issues quiet under the jurisprudence of the reigning body of bishops. Gibbon does not describe this as an abuse of civil power but sees it as paving the way for the clergy to abuse their power. Next, he introduces the unique situation of sanctuary within churches for the fugitive, leading to awkward Church and State interactions for years to come.

V. This point looks to the bishops as the moral police of their lands. Gibbon gives a series of examples of Church leaders condemning the actions of others, including local

---

<sup>122</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 303–4.

magistrates. While this section does not refer to Constantine, it indicates that this was a power indirectly given to them by Constantine. Gibbon points to the significant problems this precedent led to, declaring, “Such principles and examples insensibly prepared the triumph of the Roman pontiffs, who have trampled on the necks of kings.”

VI. Gibbon criticizes the public preaching of the bishops and clergy, not because of its inferior quality, but because of its effectiveness. This is Gibbon's least substantial or understandable point, especially when considering the role such orations have played in the history, creation, and daily life of the Greek and Roman societies. He discusses his distrust of the eloquence of these Church leaders and the multitudes they were able to convince based on their ability.

VII. His final criticism relates to their function as “representatives of the Christian republic.”<sup>123</sup> He points to the biannual meetings of the Church councils and the power of their decisions. Here, he gives the most unmodern criticism of all, claiming that this group of leaders denigrated the power of their ruler. He deemed Constantine's subjection to the will of these councils [as an inversion of the right order of power relations?]: “such a profound reverence of an absolute monarch towards a feeble and unarmed assembly of his subjects can only be compared to the respect which the senate had been treated by the Roman princes who adopted the policy of Augustus.”<sup>124</sup> He claims that Constantine’s bowing to the power of bishops in ecclesiastical affairs constituted a disrespect and emasculation of their emperor. In Gibbon’s estimation, Constantine proved himself weak

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 309.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 309.

and pointed the way to “the catholic world unanimous[ly submitting] to the *infallible* decrees of the general councils.”<sup>125</sup> Gibbon italicized 'infallible' to indicate his doubt about the legitimacy of these councils to decide Christian doctrine and practice for the rest of the Church’s history, an argument which modern readers may find slightly more agreeable. However, they may find less so his apparent preference for respect, honor, and submission to a monarch.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, Potter asserts concerning Constantine’s lasting impact:

“Of all Roman emperors, he has kept the longest and most persistent presence in the consciousness of later generations; though, except for the Nicene Creed, very little of what he is remembered for has much to do with what he set out to do, while his authority has at times been invoked to support the most improbable assertions.”<sup>126</sup>

As Potter shows, his significant impact is seen not only in Late Antiquity but can also been seen through the growth of the Roman Catholic Church and the “Donation of Constantine,” the frescoes commissioned by Pope Leo V, the “New Constantine” brought about in the Enlightenment. Even in reference to the emperor in Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, Constantine is memorialized throughout history, even if this man has many faces.<sup>127</sup>

Constantine's memory is complicated by the doubts many have about the sincerity of his actions, the veracity of his piety, and the motivations for his conversion. The unity of both his Church and Empire began to crumble from the moment of his death. He reversed the excommunications of the two bishops who did not yield to his orthodoxy, even being baptized by one of them. He continued to use pagan monikers through much of his life and allowed the

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 309.

<sup>126</sup> Potter, *Constantine the Emperor*, 292.

<sup>127</sup> Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*, 298.

Imperial Cult to worship in the name of him and his family throughout his life. Despite the difficulties of the details, Constantine is accredited with the conversion of the Roman Empire and the creation of Orthodoxy, both of which laid the foundation for what the West would become and for a new East, which lasted 1100 years. A general study of Church history makes Constantine a great hero of the Christian faith. However, a more in-depth look at what he did, what he accomplished, and how he left the relationship between Church and State brings that conclusion into question.

In the introduction to their translation of the *Life of Constantine*, Cameron and Hall suggest the purpose of Eusebius' writing was to "make the work function as a 'Mirror for Princes,' offering covert advice to the sons of Constantine."<sup>128</sup> Therefore, how his sons reflect the works of Constantine must be evaluated in the impact of Constantine.

There may be no better story to explain how Constantine's most immediate heirs carried out the emperor's work than the story of Athanasius. In 335, Athanasius—champion of anti-Arian sentiment, stubbornly devoted to the absolutism of Christian theology—approached the emperor in his capitol, clouded in controversy. This controversy was centered around the Council of Tyre in 335.

Barnes uses the story of Athanasius and the Council of Tyre at the beginning of *Constantine and the Bishops* to represent Constantine's relationship with the clergy. Gibbon uses Athanasius as an example of how Constantine's immediate successors used their power, both over individuals and in Church disputes.

---

<sup>128</sup> Cameron and Hall, "Introduction" in *Life of Constantine*, 2.

The council was called to deal with accusations against Athanasius from local Arian bishops, who accused him of violence against other Christians in his dioceses. Given Athanasius's zeal for Nicene Christianity and the suppression of heresy, some of these accusations may be believable. This complicated situation for Constantine and frustrated his desire for peace. Athanasius was first summoned to a council in Palestine to discuss these matters the prior year, but he refused to attend. When Constantine called the bishops to Tyre this time, his invitation included explicit threats for anyone who failed to be present.<sup>129</sup> Athanasius attended—taking heed of the emperor's warning. Athanasius saw the impending judgment against him during this council and fled before it could be pronounced. He fled to Constantinople and directly interrupted the imperial procession—a dangerous act—to plead with the king. Constantine did not immediately punish the bishop but called Athanasius's opponents to join them in the emperor's court. A consultation between the emperor and this bishop led to Athanasius' banishment to Gaul.

After Tyre and his subsequent banishment, Athanasius remained in Gaul for over two years, but significantly, his bishopric was never filled in his absence. Constantine II, when taking over a portion of his father's empire after the death of Constantine, reinstated Athanasius. However, soon after this, bishops met in Antioch and declared that a bishop could not be reinstated unless by a council equal to the council that removed him from his seat—a strong declaration against the co-emperor and his action. Supported by Constantius, a pro-Arian who made Eusebius of Nicomedia the bishop of Constantinople, the bishops did not reinstate him. Therefore, he spent the next three years in exile, going to Gaul repeatedly. Athanasius befriended

---

<sup>129</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 3–9. Drake begins his book with the story of this council, and on records several communications we have extant from the proceedings.

and was supported by many Western bishops and by Constans, emperor of this western section of the empire. The support from these individuals led to further debate. “Athanasius, who in the West was revered as a saint, was exposed as a criminal to the hatred of the East. The Council of Sardica reveals the first symptoms of discord and schism between the Greek and Latin churches, separated by the accidental difference of faith and the permanent distinction of language.”<sup>130</sup>

This was not just a disagreement within the Church. Athanasius found personal support from Constans, who desired “to emulate the zeal and glory of his father [Constantine]. The emperor declared his resolution to employ troops and treasures of Europe in the Orthodox cause. He signified, by a concise and peremptory epistle to his brother Constantius, that, unless he consented to the immediate restoration of Athanasius, he, with a fleet and army, would seat the archbishop on the throne of Alexandria.”<sup>131</sup> To avoid a civil war at this point, Constantius conceded, and Athanasius returned home to Alexandria, stopping in Constantinople and seeing Constantius on his way.

This stay in Alexandria only lasted as long as Constans reigned, but he died not long after the bishop’s reinstatement. After the death of his imperial protector, the Council of Arles and Milan discussed his fate. The previously mentioned Hosius of Cordova and the soon-to-be important Hilary of Poitiers, as well as the bishop of Rome, went to Constantius, who was now emperor in both West and East, to seek the reinstatement of Athanasius, but instead, he was given another exile. This was a much more contentious fight, as was his refusal to leave the city with the support of its citizens. Constantius then used the military to remove Athanasius. When violence ensued, the bishop fled his city once more with the help of its citizens against the

---

<sup>130</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 327.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 328.

imperial soldiers. Athanasius spent the following years of his life hiding throughout northern Africa, including monasteries in the desert, and occasionally sneaking into his city. Gibbon ends this story by declaring “Constantius as a weak and wicked prince, the executioner of his family, the tyrant of the republic, and the Antichrist of the church ... the son of Constantine was the first of the Christian princes who experienced the strength of those principles which, in the cause of religion could resist the most violent exertions of the civil power.”<sup>132</sup>

Julian, nephew to the emperor who is remembered by history as Julian the Apostate, then treated Athanasius as a personal enemy. “Yet I learn that the most audacious Athanasius, elated by his accustomed insolence, has again seized what is called among them his episcopal throne and that this is not a little displeasing to the God-fearing citizens of Alexandria.”<sup>133</sup> Julian then wrote another letter to the prefect of Egypt saying, “by all the gods there is nothing I should be so glad to see, or rather hear reported as achieved by you, as that Athanasius has been expelled beyond the frontiers of Egypt.”<sup>134</sup> Athanasius once again fled to the monasteries of Egypt to outlive another emperor who tried to defeat the outspoken bishop. Athanasius had one more brief exile under the reign of Valens, but that was his last imperial enemy; surviving another ten years in which he ruled his episcopate and wrote his story and theology.

Athanasius was one of the most significant influences, supporters, and protectors of the Nicene Creed whose formulation Constantine helped organize. However, Athanasius would be driven out of his Church because of his zeal and the continued presence of enemies within his

---

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 336.

<sup>133</sup> Julian, “Letter to the Alexandrians, an Edict,” in *The Works of Emperor Julian*, trans. William Cave Wright, Volume III, 75.

<sup>134</sup> Julian, “To Ecdicius, Prefect of Egypt,” in *The Works of Emperor Julian*, trans. William Cave Wright, Volume III, 75.

diocese. Athanasius could stand against these lesser clergy, but when his plea to the emperor failed, the bishop had to leave for Gaul. Athanasius continued to promote orthodoxy wherever he went—the West did remain much more faithful against Arianism than did the East. He continued to fight in Gaul and played a significant role in cementing the belief system in the West, which will play a substantial role for Clovis, Charlemagne, and the rest of the Western emperors.

So, what does Athanasius reveal to us about Constantine?

First, it reveals Constantine's inability to hold to his judgments as Athanasius fought against the sect the emperor had made illegal. On a broader level, this shows that while Nicaea would later define Christian Orthodoxy, to credit this to Constantine is a severe misrepresentation, even if he can be considered a progenitor of the idea. His readmission of Eusebius of Nicomedia led to political/religious fighting between his sons, and Athanasius proved the more passionate promoter and defender of Nicene theology. His passionate discourse paired with his time in both Gaul and North Africa could lead to the conclusion that the establishment of Nicene Christianity is more the work of Athanasius than Constantine.

Next, it reveals how quickly Constantine's intentions were discarded by his heirs. Constantine sought to divide the empire equally, recognizing that it was too big to be ruled by one man. This led to civil war almost immediately after his death—a failure ironically similar to the Tetrarchy. While Diocletian was in power, the Tetrarchy found outstanding balance and cohesion, but this quickly proved to be because Diocletian was uniquely equipped to make it succeed. This proved equally true for Constantine and his relationship with the Church; he found a good balance and kept himself subject to his bishops, but soon after he died, those who took over his position abused the power he had established. Constantine's sons no longer sought peace



within the Church or the empire; instead, they would use both portions of their inheritance to promote their power and influence.

Finally, it represents the separation of the Eastern and Western halves of the Roman Empire. Moving the capital to Constantinople impacted the civil administration, but that separation had existed long before. What Constantine did, though, was extend this separation to the Church. Even without civil support, the Roman Pontificate had long been the seat of prominence in the Church, but now the new Imperial City in the East created a rival. In the story of Athanasius, the East/West divide did not take long to be represented in the councils, with Arius getting support from the East and the West supporting Athanasius. When looking at Church history, it is surprising how quickly this separation developed. It was a problem that lingered for hundreds of years until there was a formal schism and a separate ~~that the~~ Christian Orthodox Church still sees very prominently today.

The story of Athanasius shows the complications of Constantine's relationship as a civil leader with the Christian Church. Constantine searched for peace and genuine righteousness but he was inconsistent in supporting the councils he summoned. In his sons, the consequences of these inconsistencies led to war. The "orthodoxy" he established was quickly challenged, and his sons would forego the same level of submission to the Church and pick up the sword against one another and members of the Church to gain their religious preferences and political power. His sons nearly undid much of Constantine's work. Moreover, when he ascended to the throne, his nephew attempted to reverse the Empire's Christianization.

The story of Athanasius is an excellent representation of how Constantine's sons carried on his legacy. As with many great leaders, his successors corrupted the changes he brought about. These rulers did try to carry on the legacy, or at least the power, of their father; however,

when Julian was the sole ruler of the empire, he directly opposed every aspect of Constantine and his Christianity.

Constantine's sons argued over which Christian theology they should promote as they wrestled for real and perceived civil authority. Julian's hunting of Athanasius was not because he was an Arian but a pagan who despised disruptive bishops especially. Julian's short reign must be discussed, as he was, most likely intentionally, the antithesis of his uncle Constantine.

What makes Julian remembered in history is more his moniker, Julian *the Apostate*, than his rise to power, his role in postponing the fall of the empire in the West, or his unique writings. Born a potential competitor of Constantius, his young age allowed him to survive and still attain a proper education. This Christian and classical education developed his love for philosophy and Roman tradition. He eventually was given the freedom to take this love to go and study in Athens himself. Despite his upbringing in the teachings of the Church, Julian, upon ascension as sole emperor, quickly put away the Christian faith and admitted he had long been pagan, devout to gods of the Roman and Greek Pantheon.

Adopting the traditional Roman religion led the emperor to reinstate many conventional Roman emperors' religious activities. He reapplied the title of *Pontifex Maximus* to his position. He removed the name of Christ from the Labarum present on his army's equipment. He redirected the public tithes previously given to the Churches to his pagan pontiffs and removed all the favorable promotions and exemptions granted to the Christian leaders. He also sought to reestablish the pagan temples. The great difficulty was that during the forty-eight years since the Edict of Milan, the rise and favor given to Christian Churches meant that the pagan temples had fallen into the tertiary parts of society and irreparable disrepair. This destruction came mainly at the hands of the Christians. Therefore, when Julian ordered that these temples be put back to

their previous glory, a declaration, being a sort of pagan version of the Edict of Milan, he made the Christians bear the most significant responsibility for returning them to their previous glory. This proved even more challenging for the men of these cities as the Edict of Milan ended a ten-year reign of persecution against the religion. Still, after nearly half a century of taking a back seat, the original use of these buildings had significantly evolved through several generations.

While promoting pagan religion, Julian openly directed his legislation against the Christians. He outlawed any Christian from teaching grammar and rhetoric. He, claiming appreciation for the acts of Moses, supported the Jews in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. This could be considered an act of showing no partiality other than the freedom of religion or an appreciation of Moses, which he studied as a child. Still, I believe it is most accurately seen as an objection to Constantine (or, more accurately, the actions of Constantine's mother, Helena) and his religion. He went on to make new martyrs that future generations of Christians would celebrate.

Julian proves to be the antithesis of Constantine. For Gibbon, this draws great praise. In his introduction to this preferred ruler, Gibbon states:

The character of Apostate has injured the reputation of Julian, and the enthusiasm which clouded his virtues has exaggerated the real and apparent magnitude of his faults. Our partial ignorance may represent him as a philosophic monarch who studied to protect, with an equal hand, the religious factions of the empire and to allay the theological fever which had inflamed the minds of the people from the edicts of Diocletian to the exile of Athanasius. A more accurate view of the character and conduct of Julian will remove this favorable prepossession for a prince who did not escape the general contagion of the times ... . A devout and sincere attachment for the gods of Athens and Rome constituted the ruling passion of Julian; the powers of an enlightened understanding were betrayed and corrupted by the influence of superstitious prejudice ... . The vehement zeal of the Christians, who despised the worship, and overturned the altars, of those fabulous deities, engaged their votary in a state of irreconcilable hostility with a very numerous party of his subjects, and he was sometimes tempted by the desire of victory or the shame of a repulse, to violate the laws of prudence, and even of justice. The triumph of the party

which he deserted and opposed has fixed a stain of infamy on the name of Julian, and the unsuccessful apostate has been overwhelmed with a torrent of pious invectives.<sup>135</sup>

The significant evaluation of Gibbon suggests that “it is indeed more than probable that the restoration and encouragement of paganism revealed a multitude of pretended Christians, who, from the motives of temporal advantage had acquiesced in the religion of the former reign, and who afterward returned, with the same flexibility of conscience, to the faith which the successors of Julian professed.”<sup>136</sup>

We see in his conclusion that Gibbon reflects on what almost was:

The Christians considered Julian as a cruel and crafty tyrant ... . They expected that as soon as he had triumphed over foreign enemies of Rome, he would lay aside the irksome mask of dissimulation, that the amphitheaters would stream with the blood of hermits and bishops, and that the Christians who still persevered in the profession of the faith would be deprived on the expected benefits of nature and society ... . It is impossible to determine how far the zeal of Julian would have prevailed over his good sense and humanity, but if we seriously reflect on the strength and spirit of the church, we shall be convinced that before the emperor could have extinguished the religion of Christ, he must have involved his country in the horrors of a civil war.<sup>137</sup>

Here, we see Gibbon's lamentations of Julian's recording of history. Gibbon, a product of the Enlightenment himself, saw this emperor's study of and love for the classics as the ideal of an emperor. Gibbon went into further detail about the praiseworthy philosophical actions and understanding of Julian while diminishing the theology that the emperor took up. However, Julian becomes 'clouded' by his 'enthusiastic' devotions to the 'gods of Athens and Rome,' which 'injured the reputation' of the man. This devotion against the 'party which he deserted and opposed' would eventually 'fix a stain of infamy on the name of Julian' because history, as is often seen, is written by the victors.

---

<sup>135</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 346.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* 360.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* 375–6.

Julian only reigned for about sixteen months. If another would have taken up Julian's work, the persecution would have reached the feverish heights the Christians feared, and possibly even the civil war that Gibbon proclaimed would have been inevitable. However, instead of a true successor, as Julian would leave no plan, the accession overseen by Julian's closest advisors and soldiers in the camp in Persia selected Jovian, a devout Christian.

Jovian died after a reign of only eight months. After Jovian, Valentinian became emperor and associated with his brother Valens. The western and eastern provinces were now formally divided. Valentinian maintained religious toleration in the West. Valens professed Arianism in the East ... . In the general calamities that followed, Theodosius's investment as emperor in the East marked a turning point in secular and ecclesiastical government ... . He earned the title of the Great by his enforcement of Catholic orthodoxy ... . Theodosius was the last sole ruler of the empire in the West and the East.<sup>138</sup>

This Theodosius would solidify Constantine's legacy in the Romans' minds, laws, and history through significant steps.

The first was his aggressive promotion of Nicene Orthodoxy on an official and empire-wide scale. Gibbon paints the picture of Theodosius as a wise and successful ruler, who gave in to the temporal passions of his anger. Ultimately, in Gibbon's view, his reign "was polluted by an act of cruelty which stained the annals of Nero or Domitian."<sup>139</sup> Theodosius promoted Nicene Christianity first by taking a more active step against paganism. He destroyed more temples, further limited the worship of pagan gods, and, at times, actively sought to destroy pagan enemies within his lands. His promotion of Christianity was not satisfied by the suppression of paganism; he also pursued the acceptance of a common Christianity. The over-zealous emperor promoted Nicene Christianity at the expense of the lives of some of the Arians under his rule. Ambrose, the staunch promoter of Nicene Orthodoxy and Bishop of Milan, criticized such

---

<sup>138</sup> D.M. Low, summary of Gibbon *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 387–8.

<sup>139</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 395.

actions and denied the emperor access to communion. Likely to gain favor and show repentance, Theodosius eventually issued the Edict of Thessalonica (27 February 380), officially declaring Nicene Christianity as the Roman Empire's official religion.

Theodosius's second step was the collation of Roman Law under what is referred to today as the Theodosian Code, which he began, and his son, Theodosius II, completed. In his study of legislation from the time of Diocletian and Constantine, Corcoran says that "the aim was to include imperial constitutions from the time of Constantine up to its day [390 AD]."<sup>140</sup> In terms of Constantine, this accomplished several essential steps in establishing his legacy: first, it pointed to Constantine as the primary progenitor of the many changes that revolutionized the empire, coming a century after his rule and from the perspective of one of his imperial heirs; second this shows historians the actions of Constantine and how he actually followed through on his promises through official actions; and finally it codified the changes that Constantine made, establishing the norm for future proceedings. This meant that the imperial relationship with the Christian Church was now defined in Roman Law, supporting those who, like Theodosius, would carry on the works of Constantine while making the reversals of such laws un-Roman, preventing another Julian from reverting to previous pagan regimes.

Therefore, we see that Constantine revolutionized his world. His accomplished change was significant, and his thirty-year reign was monumental. Julian only ruled for sixteen months, but he still managed to reinstall paganism and do significant damage to the Christians. Had he ruled for longer, the bishops' roles, positions of power, favor, and necessity could have been removed permanently. Constantine's legacy and his changes were not cemented at his death.

---

<sup>140</sup> Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs*, 9–18.

Only after years of tribulation, evolution, and uncertainty, did Theodosius establish Orthodoxy in both Eastern and Western Christianity as the official religion of the Romans.

### Final Reflection

Lenski summarizes the profound impact of the emperor on the whole of the Roman and modern world

above all, his reworking of Christianity into a triumphalist religion allowed for the development of the Christian monarch in all its manifestations from late antiquity down to the Crusades. Indeed, Constantine's victorious Christian king, combined with his Christianization of the Holy Land, has had consequences throughout history, with profound effects on Judaism, Islam, and Christianity that endure up to the present.<sup>141</sup>

The life of Constantine left a significant physical, spiritual, civil, and philosophical imprint on the Roman Empire. At his birth, no one could have imagined any facet of the changes that Rome would see by the end of his life: the rise and fall of the Tetrarchy, reorganization of every piece of Roman society under Constantine and Diocletian, the Great Persecution only to be followed by the meteoric rise of Christianity and the official demise of Rome as the Imperial City and her Senate.

Even when Constantine's relationship with the bishops was tested, he built something new, balanced, and not always self-promoting. Constantine brought the empire and the world with it through immense change in a relatively short period. Drake reminds us of this in his explanation of his disagreement with Athanasius:

What makes this meeting remarkable is not the fireworks between emperor and bishop ... what is remarkable about the meeting ... [is its] testimony to the extraordinary impact of this emperor's reign, during which relations between church and state had not only

---

<sup>141</sup> Noel Lenski, "Introduction" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 2.

changed from cold to warm but indeed had become intertwined in ways that are not yet fully untangled.<sup>142</sup>

Lenski best summarizes the long-term impact of Constantine:

Historical change is, of course, inevitable and can hardly be traced to one man. Still, Constantine's position as *an* emperor and later *the* emperor of the Roman world for the first third of the fourth century gave him a more significant role than any of his contemporaries in fostering productive change. Thus, while we can assume that, in the absence of Constantine, the world of late antiquity would have shifted and developed into something different from what preceded it, it is impossible to conceive how it might have evolved. Without Constantine's patronage of holy men like Paphnutius and Anthony, we can hardly comprehend the rise of spiritual greats like the stylites of Simeon and Daniel. His cultivation of theologians like Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea paved the way for influential figures like Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom. Without his support of powerful bishops like Ossius of Cordova or Eusebius of Nicomedia, it is hard to believe that Augustine of Hippo and Cyril of Alexandria would have had the influence they did. His summoning and oversight of the Council of Nicaea established a precedent of imperial involvement in ecclesiastical policymaking for centuries. His reclamation of the Holy Land for Christianity prepared the ground for Christians like Malania the Younger, Jerome, and even the empress Eudocia to refashion their lives in Palestine. Above all, his reworking of Christianity into a triumphalist religion allowed for the development of the Christian monarch in all its manifestations from late antiquity down to the Crusades. Indeed, Constantine's victorious Christian king, combined with his Christianization of the Holy Land, has had consequences throughout history, with profound effects on Judaism, Islam, and Christianity that endure up to the present.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 7–8.

<sup>143</sup> Lenski, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, 2.



## Epilogue

The tribes who first infiltrated into the empire and established principalities in its western provinces, the Visigoths, the Vandals, and the Ostrogoths, were already Christians before they entered the imperial territory, though, like the later conquerors of Italy, the Lombards, they were. Unfortunately, Arians, having been converted while the empire was in the Arian phase which followed Constantine's death. The Vandals in Africa and the Ostrogoths in Italy were eliminated by the great restorer of the Roman empire, Justinian, before they could conform to the now dominant Catholic Faith, but the Visigoths in Spain and the Lombards who succeeded the Ostrogoths in Italy succumbed to the pressure of the Roman name, and became Catholics. *The more barbarous Franks, who were still pagans when they overran Gaul, immediately adopted the Catholic Faith under the leadership of their king Clovis*, and the rival efforts of the Irish Church and the Roman mission of Pope Gregory the Great converted the even more uncouth Angles and Saxons who had occupied Britain. *The conversion of the Franks and the English proved crucial, for it was English missionaries who first evangelized the heathen tribes of Germany, and the Frankish king Charles the Great launched the great series of crusades that finally brought them within the Catholic Church.* In the next century, the heathen Slavs who had overrun the Balkans yielded to the missionary efforts of Constantine's New Rome. At the end of the tenth century, the splendors of Constantinople so impressed Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, that he, with all his people, were baptized, and the conversion of Russia began.

Thus, though Christianity lost its original homeland to Islam, its future was safe in the hands of the European nations, who were to carry it to the New World. *Would this have come about if Constantine had not seen his heavenly vision of the Cross?*

– A.H.M. Jones in the conclusion (pages 115-6) to his work *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*.

## Chapter Two: Clovis

Clovis (466-511; 481-511) was born shortly after the death of Justinian, the Emperor of the East. Though a prince in the Merovingian Dynasty who ruled over the Salian Franks, little in the first thirty years of his life suggested that he would play much of a role in forming a Christian society that has defined the West for over a millennium. However, this is undoubtedly the case. At the point of his birth, the Franks were a divided people who were allowed to settle on Roman lands while practicing a traditional pagan religion that may have adapted the names of their gods to reflect the Roman Pantheon. By the time of Clovis's death, the Franks were unified, not just with one another but with the Gallo-Roman population of the area. Clovis's role in history proves vital as he became, in effect, the political successor to the Roman Empire in the West. By the end of his dynasty, when the Carolingians took charge, the Franks were no longer barbarian but a Germanic-Roman people with a solid central government and a guiding Church structure, which had far-reaching influence.

### Historiography

Gregory of Tours (539-94)<sup>144</sup> *The History of the Franks*, written a generation after Clovis, gives us the best historical insight into what happened during his life. Gregory was every bit a Roman-styled biographer and a Christian Bishop, as Thorpe suggests, drawing this dual-role from Eusebius and his work *Church History*.<sup>145</sup> He wrote his *History of the Franks* with continued edits until 591, providing historical details and emphasizing Church/State relations. As will be seen throughout, “Gregory of Tours is a recorder and a narrator.”<sup>146</sup> As a prominent

---

<sup>144</sup> Dates from Lewis Thorpe’s introduction of his translation of Gregory’s works.

<sup>145</sup> Lewis Thorpe, “Introduction,” *History of the Franks* (London; Penguin Classics, 1974), 25.

<sup>146</sup> Thorpe, “Introduction,” *The History of the Franks*, 43.

bishop in the nation, his role was “to sway large congregations, in noble and impressive ceremonies to play the central part, to speak up bravely in public assemblies for the cause of justice and Christian loving-kindness, to bring a whispered word of comfort at the midnight hour.”<sup>147</sup> Gregory approaches Clovis as one of the heroes of the Frankish Church and the model of a good Frankish King.<sup>148</sup> Therefore, Gregory has become a central figure in the power struggle between Church and State, with Clovis being the hero of this relationship for the Franks.

As a historian, Gregory gives a retelling that is undoubtedly biased with details that cannot be fully trusted. Still, his perspective as a bishop provides a uniquely effective view of this work. Wallace-Hadrill spends a whole chapter of his most significant work, *Long-Haired Kings*, discussing the historical usefulness of Gregory’s work, concluding that : “[the] examination to which ... scholars have subjected Gregory on Clovis, has, on the whole, brought him unexpected credit, even though his chronology needs some serious adjustment.”<sup>149</sup> His book reflects on the life of Clovis with the intent to set the standard for his contemporary kings. His recollection of the Franks’ history lacks details about their origins. He recounts vague legends to explain their rise in the few generations before Clovis. He then labels Clovis the 'New Constantine,'—a significant image for my thesis and my investigation into the relationship between Church and State. He then details the interworking of Frankish politics during the sixth century. Despite his clear bias and Church focus, he stands as the only surviving historian describing the Franks from his period. Therefore, modern historians rely heavily on him to understand this period.

---

<sup>147</sup> Thorpe, “Introduction,” *The History of the Franks*, 41.

<sup>148</sup> J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings* (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 1982), 63.

<sup>149</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings*, 63.

Alexander Callander Murray's *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul* is a collection of primary sources providing essential letters from Clovis and some of the most relevant bishops of his time. Murray has collated, translated, organized, and edited the few extant sources from this period. His translation of sources from the life of Clovis includes several letters used below to examine Clovis's rule, including some sent directly from or to the king. The focus here is on: two letters from Remigius (437-533), Bishop of Rheims, to Clovis; another to the king from Avitus (450-517), Bishop of Vienne, discussing Clovis's upcoming baptism; a fourth letter from Clovis to foreign bishops before his attempt to conquer their lands; and a fifth from the Council of Orleans to Clovis. These letters provide essential insight into Church/State relations before, during, and after Clovis's conversion. This thesis also benefits from Murray's translation of important sections of the Salic Law. Therefore, *From Rome to Merovingian Gaul* is a critical work because it provides some of the few important surviving sources in translation in a single volume.

Wallace-Hadrill is the primary historian for much of the Merovingian period. He has several works with slightly different focuses; all of them are works of social history. His *Long-haired Kings* is the standard study of this period. This work, named for the Merovingian defining physical trait, examines the nature of Frankish kingship in this formative period: half the book relates how significant Merovingian authors, including Gregory of Tours, Fredegar and Hincmar, and the Salic Law presented kingship; the other half begins by comparing the rule of kings in Frankish Gaul to the rule of contemporary Gothic and Roman kings, ending with the warring that led up to Frankish dominance and a chronology of the kings. Wallace-Hadrill presents Clovis as an iconic king, who established the Franks' firm control of the land, their partnership with the Church, and the basis for the legitimization of their rule in future generations. His comparative

examination of the Merovingian Kings, centered on Clovis, helps us understand the king's context and impact.

In *Before France and Germany*, Geary explains the transformation of Roman Gaul from the fifth century until the end of the Merovingian Period in terms of political history. He pays significant attention to the political roles of the Church and its bishops in the Merovingian realm. Geary describes how the Roman churchmen and the Germanic rulers co-managed the land. This includes what this relationship looked like before Clovis and what changed during his rule and those of his successors. Geary's work is especially foundational for this thesis, because he has fully explored the actions of both kings and the bishops and their evolving impact in establishing church state relations.

The final work relied upon extensively below is Scherman's *The Birth of France*. Scherman writes with a thesis parallel to my own, as she aims to redefine the history of France by examining how Clovis was a central lynchpin of the country's development, by defining his conversion to Christianity as the catalyst for the emergence for a Roman Gaul and recognizing his "aim: to unify the autonomous and discordant Frankish tribes into one nation under one leader," with "active collaboration of the Gallic upper clergy".<sup>150</sup> She does not focus on the Church as much as this thesis does, but she still recognizes, describes, and analyses the Church's role. Scherman gives a clear context, explanation, and reflection on the Merovingian Dynasty that helps establish the otherwise convoluted story of Clovis and his successors; she shows the civility of the kings that Carolingian historians try to discredit, and how the Merovingians,

---

<sup>150</sup> Katharine Scherman, *The Birth of France: Warriors, Bishops and Long-Haired Kings* (New York; Random House, 1987), 107.

stemming largely from Clovis' conversion, prepares a less-barbaric and more Romanesque Frankish Kingdom.

### The Barbarian West

Constantine's practical decision to move the empire's capital to Constantinople had lasting political ramifications. The empire was long-splitting between East and West, but for the first time, the official center of the Roman civil authority was not in the West.<sup>151</sup> This left the primary strength of the empire in the East. From here, the history of the Western Roman Empire sees many weak and oppressive Western emperors contending with large influxes of Germanic tribes, both invited and unwelcomed.

In 476, Odoacer became Italy's first Germanic king, having officially removed Romulus Augustus from his imperial throne. This marked the end of the Western Roman Empire; however, this did not mean the end of Romans in the West. Wallace-Hadrill points out that the Germanic kingdoms "distinguish[ed] the Gallic Catholics from themselves by calling them Romans: they did not call themselves Romans."<sup>152</sup> Gibbon explains how the fall of the West came about:

The Roman government appeared less formidable to its enemies every day and more odious and oppressive to its subjects ... . [This mistreatment] compelled the subjects of Valentinian to prefer the more simple tyranny of the barbarians ... . If all the barbarian conquerors had been eradicated in the same hour, their destruction would not have restored the empire of the West: if Rome still survived, she survived the loss of freedom, virtue, and honor.<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> Previous emperors would stay elsewhere, most significantly was Diocletian who set up his imperial residence in Nicomedia and on his sole visit to Rome he would leave quickly, disgusted with the lifestyles of its prominent citizens.

<sup>152</sup> J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 1982), 37.

<sup>153</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. D. M. Low (New York; Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 497.

Odoacer did not take control over the whole of the Western Empire but ruled one of the many Germanic kingdoms in the land.

The Germanic peoples had settled down among the Romans on the Western lands that were in general, to be their permanent homes; in Africa, reached after an incredible migration through Gaul and Spain, the Vandals; in Spain and Southern Gaul, the Visigoths; in Northern Gaul, the Franks; in Eastern Gaul, the Burgundians; in Italy, successors to the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths.

The relationship of these settlers with the established population, their assumptions about Roman rule, and their attitude towards the civilization they found conformed to a single pattern.<sup>154</sup>

The barbarization of Gaul was limited to civil/militaristic control on a general/central scale.

Scherman states, “The Roman political organization was deteriorating, and the still-barbarian conquerors were ignorant of the techniques of handling their diverse new lands.”<sup>155</sup> The Gallo-Roman Church was then the surviving institution in the land to lead the religious and social lives of the Gallo-Roman people. Its prelates served as the local civic leaders in their ecclesiastical territories. Geary states that:

So closely did the office of bishop come to be identified with the Gallo-Roman aristocracy that in the fifth century, as these new values altered the Western concept of episcopal office, so too did they permeate the idea the aristocracy held of itself. Thus, the aristocracy increasingly focused on the episcopacy as its central institution, and in doing so, began slowly to redefine itself and its *Romanitas* in terms of Christian values.<sup>156</sup>

As seen in the discussion of Constantine, Gaul had its significant churches and bishops, and the bishops became the consistent leaders to whom the local populations turned. Between the fall of Rome and the rise of Clovis:

---

<sup>154</sup> J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Barbarian West, A.D. 400–1000; The Early Middle Ages* (New York; Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 24.

<sup>155</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 6.

<sup>156</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1988), 35.

[The townsfolk] needed leaders on whom they could rely, to maintain their spirits ... they found these in the Christian bishops. The intensely communal quality of the Christian churches, which we have seen develop in the cities of the fourth century, now stood out in pointed contrast to a divided and easily dispersed aristocracy. The local church became the 'fixative' that held whole populations in place.<sup>157</sup>

The Gallo-Roman Christians also looked to their cult of heroes, the Gallic saints. Hen discusses these saints' importance to Merovingian Gaul:

The Merovingian cult of the saints was first and foremost a popular cultural phenomenon, which developed as a response to popular demand and with immense popular support... There is no doubt that the cult of the saints in the Frankish kingdoms of the Merovingians can be classified as both religious and a cultural phenomenon, common to all classes of society, without difference of age, sex, or social position.<sup>158</sup>

Wallace-Hadrill posits that the Merovingians' *The Lives of the Saints* became a pseudo-biblical or apocryphal book centered on their religious identity.

There may have been no more critical extra-biblical characters to the Gallo-Roman Church at the time than the primary saints of Gaul. The two great saints of Gaul for the fourth-century Church were St. Hilary and St. Martin. Hilary of Poitiers was deemed the 'Athanasius of the West,' standing strong against Arianism during the reign of Constantius. He, like Athanasius, continued the fight for Orthodoxy, specifically the Trinity, through exile and his eventual return. He wrote pamphlets against Constantius and directly challenged imperial rule.<sup>159</sup> He became a Gallic hero, known for his theological strength and fortitude, specifically as a hero against Arianism, promoting Orthodoxy as an essential facet of the Gallo-Roman Christian identity. Martin, Bishop of Tours, was a hero of a different kind. Martin, whose cult Gregory of Tours

---

<sup>157</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200–1000* (Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 62.

<sup>158</sup> Yitzkah Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul A.D. 481–751* (Leiden; E.J. Brill, 1995), 120.

<sup>159</sup> Robert Latouche, *Cesar to Charlemagne: The Beginnings of France*, trans. By Jennifer Nicholson (London: Phoenix House, 1968), 133–6.



emphasized in his ministry and history writing, founded Gallic monasticism. Martin abandoned his position in the Roman military to become a disciple of Hilary in Poitiers. Hilary sent Martin to do “missionary work among the simpleminded pagan peasantry”<sup>160</sup> in Liguge, where he established France's first monastery. Martin grew in popularity and was elected, slightly against his will, as the bishop of Tours. Biographies of his great works were written during his lifetime. Immediately after his death, Poitiers, where he began his ministry, and Tours, where he spent most of his ministry as bishop, feuded over the ownership of the saint's body. This rivalry lasted for centuries.

The focus of this work is not to evaluate Christianity during Clovis's dynasty, but to understand the traditions that played a significant role in shaping his civil and religious decisions. The worship of these saints included their holidays, the long-lasting dedication of their bishoprics to their legacy, and the collection of their relics. The local bishops controlled the cult of saints. This is essential to understand especially for Gregory of Tours who took great local pride in Saint Martin. The social aspect of this worship drives the Frankish/Gallic identity of these local heroes. Yen argues that both popular culture and religious sentiment led to the citizens shared commitment to one another and their slice of the fallen Roman West.

When the various Germanic *gentes* came to official power over the land, some remained pagan, but many brought Christianity. However, the Christianity of many of these barbarians “proudly ascribed the victories of their armies to their own 'Arian' orthodoxy” which was “unacceptable to 'Nicene' Catholic Christians.”<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 86.

<sup>161</sup> Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 60.

Scherman explains that a young Goth named Ulfilas received a Christian education in Constantinople during a period when Arian theology was taught. Ulfilas went back as a missionary to his people and:

By the end of the fourth century, the Goths and all the barbarians who now dominated the kingdoms of Europe and North Africa had become Christians—of the Arian heresy. Only the Franks, still an obscure rural confederacy confined to northern Gaul, remained pagan. The rulers of the Vandals, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Burgundians, Suevians, and Herulians tried to impress their religious deviation on their Roman subjects, sometimes intemperately, sometimes with moderation, but never with success. The opposition and the rulers only hardened the orthodox Christian convictions of the subject peoples—the majority of the population. They had to contend with the obstacle of an ever-discontented populace.<sup>162</sup>

The existence of these Arian barbarian kingdoms and the continuation of the Nicene Gallo-Roman Church brings up the question that Wallace-Hadrill tries to explain: how did the barbarians and the Church both exist in this land for this length of time without partnering or destroying one another? This question is essential to understanding the impact of Clovis.

The two groups remained separate entities; Wallace-Hadrill insinuates that the bishops of Gaul “did much to make assimilation possible.”<sup>163</sup> The bishops of Gaul did not view the Christianity of the barbarians favorably because of its Arianism. Conversely, the Arian kings did not strongly like the Orthodox bishops. Therefore, due to their differing views of Christianity, they remained distinct. The bishops did not concern themselves with converting Arians over to Orthodox Christianity.<sup>164</sup> This represents a loss of the Church's mission of evangelizing, an unwillingness to work with heretics, and a view of themselves as more than a religious organization keeping them from partnering with a political rival. Regardless of their reason for

---

<sup>162</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 72–3.

<sup>163</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-haired Kings*, 35.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

not pursuing the conversion of the barbarians, the opposing religious identities long remained a determining factor for their relationship.

The author further explains this separation by identifying the Roman-ness of the bishops. They remained faithful to Roman clerical authority, i.e., the pope who presided in Rome, and so, as Romans, looked to the Theodosian Code to guarantee their positions as ecclesiastical authorities separate and protected by/from the civil authorities. They used the Code for protection and to justify their roles though they recognized that these barbarians were not Roman authorities. These men did not have a military to guarantee this ideology. Still, they used their rhetoric and religious power to influence the Gallo-Roman majority to accept the civil rulers that were in power at the time. Despite previous generations' desire to be Roman, the barbarians who eventually took over Gaul did not consider themselves Roman. Therefore, the bishops were the closest body to representing Roman authority; these bishops were also able to survive because of their power and the power of the population they ruled. This meant they could protect themselves despite not having an aggressive organization. Instead, they only claimed religious authority. However, their actions showed that they took on local civil responsibilities and submitted themselves and their congregants to whichever king/emperor conquered their territory.

The separation of identity between the barbarians and their conquered Gallo-Roman subjects was decisive until the reign of Clovis.

### **Christian Barbarians**

Up to this point, the discussion has been about barbarians, a general term used by the Romans to describe the groups of nomadic peoples from the lands north of their borders. These tribes had unique impacts on the history of the West and the marriage of Church and State. None

was more essential to promoting the Orthodox Church than the tribe of the Franks. Not much is known about the history of this group. They are first named as *foederati* of the Romans fighting off Attila the Hun in the famous Battle of Catalaunian Plains (June, 451), and Wood records that “the Franks were the last of the invaders of Gaul, although ultimately they were the most successful.”<sup>165</sup>

Gregory of Tours, from the perspective of historian and bishop, provides the essential background that “this particular race of people always seems to have followed idolatrous practices, for they did not recognize the true God. They fashioned idols for themselves out of the creatures of the woodlands and the waters, out of birds and beasts: these they worshiped in the place of God, and to these they made their sacrifice.”<sup>166</sup> This was, of course, significantly contrasting to their Germanic relatives whose kings had primarily converted to Arian Christianity.

There is an uncertain history of the Merovingians and their rule over the Salian section of the Franks, but they begin to come into focus under Childeric (457-481). Wallace-Hadrill summarizes Childeric as “a Salian chieftain who repeatedly brings his warriors into Gaul to fight the barbarian enemies of the *rex Romanorum*<sup>167</sup>, and who subsequently falls out with his

---

<sup>165</sup> Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms: 450–751* (New York; Longman Publishing, 1994), 33.

<sup>166</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. By Lewis Thorpe (London; Penguin Books, 1974), 125.

<sup>167</sup> This is a reference to Aegidius, the pseudo-king from a Roman senatorial rank that ruled this portion of Gaul. This represents the Franks as subjects, to some extent, to a surviving Roman civil power.

employer and retreats to his stronghold of Tournai, perhaps with a pension from Byzantium.”<sup>168</sup>  
Upon Childeric's burial,<sup>169</sup> the rule of the Franks passed to his fifteen-year-old son, Clovis.

There is no singular passage that better represents how Clovis's actions made him the lynchpin of Church/State relations than what Scherman writes describing the king's final battle with the Visigoths after his conversion in 503:

Clovis entered on his last campaign in 507 against the Visigoths ... [Alaric] had grown into a weak king, fearful of his aggressive neighbor yet unwilling to placate his Gallic subjects. Though not as determined an oppressor as his father, *he made himself unpopular with this support of the Arian clergy against the Gallo-Roman Catholic bishops of his main cities.*

This made it easier for Clovis, who now *considered that he had a moral and practical duty to eradicate the power of the heretic Visigoths in Gaul. His aims were abetted by his higher clergy, who wanted the Arian king confounded for the sake of their uncomfortable brethren in Gaul's southern provinces.*

At first, this was a war of words and intrigue. The *Catholic clergy of Aquitaine actively campaigned in favor of the Frankish savior north of their border.* At the same time, Alaric, apprehensive of his energetic neighbor, sought to keep peace by negotiation ... . Clovis conferred with his counselors when he is reported as saying: *“I find it hard to go on seeing these Arians occupy a part of Gaul. With God's help, let us invade them.”*

Alaric was camped at Vouille, near Poitiers, where the kings met in battle. It was a fierce hand-to-hand engagement, but its end was foreordained. *“The Goths fled,” wrote Gregory, “as they were prone to do, and Clovis was the victor, for God was on his side ... .”*

When Clovis got to Tours, he found letters awaiting him from Anastasias I, the emperor in Constantinople, conferring on him the ranks of patrician and consul, honorary titles coveted by the ambitious arrivistes of barbarian Europe. These honors worked both ways: they symbolized the empire of continued sovereignty and imparted august overtones to newcomers with no backgrounds to their thrones but force. The recognition from Byzantium did not make Clovis a vassal of the emperor; his absolute rule of his people was inviolate. But the favor of imperial Rome, its center of government conveniently far away, *was essential to a king, the majority of whose subjects still regarded themselves as Roman citizens.* Proudly, Clovis stood in *Saint Martin's great new basilica (erected in*

---

<sup>168</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-haired Kings*, 162.

<sup>169</sup> The burial of Childeric is significant in itself, with the discovery of his grave in 1633, revealing a chief with substantial wealth, dedication to pagan gods, and gifts from the Roman Emperor in Constantinople. See: *Long-Haired Kings*, 162–3==; *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 40–1.

473), clad in a purple tunic and his military mantle, and let himself be crowned with the diadem. After the ceremony, he rode through the streets of the city, scattering gold and silver coins among the people. (italics used to highlight the aspects most relevant to this chapter)

This passage represents Clovis in full: an effective conqueror and intelligent politician, subject to his victorious God, who has won over the Orthodox bishops in his territory and his neighbors', giving his subjects, both Frankish and Gallo-Roman a ruler with whom they identified. These details are essential to understanding him as a historical character. Still, more importantly, they define his relationship with the Church, outlining his unification process and his reliance on the significant bishops in his territory to strengthen his kingdom.

### Pursuit of Unity

Clovis came to power in 481 A.D. but not over a solidified nation. His father had had to fight for control, and then Clovis would seek to expand on this inheritance. For these wars, Gregory of Tours is the source that we must rely on with the understanding that the author paints Clovis as the ideal king, and his recording of Clovis's victories is described much too simply to be believed completely.

Gregory recounts how Clovis's first challenge was the continuation of his father's rivalry with Aegidius. This Aegidius was selected as King of Gaul when plans of regicide drove out Childeric. Childeric eventually reestablished rule over the Franks, but Aegidius remained in a seat of power, which his son, Syagrius, acquired. The sons of Childeric and Aegidius then rekindled their fathers' rivalry:

Clovis marched against him with his blood-relation Ragnachar ... . Syagrius did not hesitate to [accept Clovis's challenge], for he was not afraid of Clovis. They fought each other, and Syagrius's army was annihilated. He fled and made his way as quickly as he could to King Alaric II in Toulouse. Clovis summoned Alaric to surrender the fugitive, informing him that he would attack him in his turn for having given Syagrius refuge. Alaric was afraid to incur the wrath of the Franks for the sake of Syagrius and handed

him over bound to the envoys, for the Goths are a timorous race. When Clovis had Syagrius in his power he ordered him to be imprisoned. As soon as he had seized the kingdom of Syagrius he had him killed in secret.<sup>170</sup>

This first conquest is essential to read as it shows Gregory's favorable/biased view of the king. Gregory mentions that Syagrius was simply 'annihilated' in a single battle. He then records Alaric's fear of the Franks, which led him to hand over the refugee, which may be the whole truth or an exaggeration to praise the victor. We then see the patterns of both Clovis' unwholesome murders of his defeated rivals and Gregory's recording of them with no criticism. Gregory has no difficulty criticizing subsequent kings but has no negative words about Clovis or his methods. This pattern continues throughout his *History*. With that understanding, Clovis's further military ventures are summarized below, emphasizing the aspects of his construction of Church-State relations with the Gallo-Roman bishops.

Gregory introduces Gundioc, king of Burgundy, who "was of the family of that King Athanaric who persecuted the Christians."<sup>171</sup> Not only this, but Gundioc had four sons, one of whom was Gundobad, who killed his brother Chilperic, Chilperic's wife, and exiled Chilperic's two daughters, one of which was Clotilde, who became the wife of Clovis. Clotilde and the women of her family were converted to Nicene Christianity by Avitus, Bishop of Vienne, which caused some animosity in the Gundioc family. As Gregory continued the story of Gundioc's family and Clovis's, he recorded that Clotilde as not only the wife of Clovis but also as the primary evangelist to the king, urging him to accept the Nicene Christianity she practiced. Her efforts caused some strain between the pagan king and his Nicene bride. Nevertheless, Gregory relates that when Clovis was in a battle against the Alamanni and his soldiers were being routed,

---

<sup>170</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 139.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* 141.

Clovis called out to the God of his wife, asking for deliverance. “I called upon my own gods, but, as I see only too clearly, they have no intention of helping me. I, therefore, cannot believe that they possess any power, for they do not come to the assistance of those who trust in them. I now call up you. I want to believe in you, but I must first be saved from my enemies.” The Alamanni then began to retreat and, when their king was killed, gave their loyalty to the King of the Franks. Clovis went home and told his wife that “he had won a victory by calling on the name of Christ.”<sup>172</sup>

After discussing the process of Clovis becoming a Christian king, Gregory turns his narrative back to the Gundioc family. Seeing Clovis’s success, Godigisel sought to betray his brother, Gundobad, to the Frankish King. Both of these Arian kings would agree to pay tribute to Clovis, but, like many who tried scheme with/against Clovis, Godigisel died at the hands of the Clovis after taking “refuge in one of the heretic churches.”<sup>173</sup> Gundobad was allowed to live and continue to rule in Burgundy.<sup>174</sup> He sought protection from his local Nicene bishop, Avitus, but did not convert to Nicene Orthodoxy himself.<sup>175</sup> This success constituted a major victory for both Clovis and the Church as the Burgundians were now subject to both and provided for the Franks a buffer between them and the powerful Lombardian Kingdom.

---

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. 140–3.

<sup>173</sup> This is an interesting note from Gregory. It appears that, despite being a church, there was not any recognition of political sanctuary in the Arian building. This idea of churches as a place for 'sanctuary' will come up several times in the story of the Merovingians. To add to the possible degradation of the Arian Church, Gregory records that it was not just Godigisel that dies at the church, but also the Arian bishop with him.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 143. Gregory records Gundobad “institut[ed] milder laws among the Burgundes, to stop them treating the Romans unjustly. So not only was Godigisel an enemy of the Church, but of the Romans in general as well.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 147–50.



Alaric II, the King of the Goths, was the next to recognize Clovis's power and seek peace with him. Gregory says the people in Gaul, under the rule of Alaric II, desired to be ruled by Clovis, especially one Nicene bishop, Quintianus. Quintianus was accused of being an enemy of the Goths and forced to flee. Clovis did not need much more encouragement to go and fight 'on behalf of his new brothers and sisters in Christ.' So, with these statements from the king, the Franks moved against the Goths. 'The heretics' fell, including their King Alaric II, because Clovis had the 'favor of God.' Upon his return to Tours, Clovis received letters from the Eastern Emperor Anastasias offering him the consulship.<sup>176</sup>

The next step of Clovis's consolidation of power occurred within the Frankish kingdoms. He first sent to Sigibert, son of the Frankish king, Chloderic, promising an alliance if Sigibert would kill his father, asserting that Chloderic was "led astray by his lust for power." Clovis promised that at the hand of Sigibert's assassins, Chloderic would fall "by the judgment of God." Sigibert did take the life of his father, but this did not result in a partnership with Clovis. After Chloderic was felled, Sigibert and Clovis met in the fallen king's treasure room where Clovis beheaded his ally Sigibert. Gregory records that this sect of Franks then willingly lifted Clovis as their king after he falsely explained the death of their previous kings. "Day in day out God submitted the enemies of Clovis to his dominion and increased his power, for he walked before Him with an upright heart and did what was pleasing in his sight."<sup>177</sup>

Chararic, King of the Salian Franks, was the next victim of Clovis. Chararic had made the mistake of remaining neutral despite being called upon by Clovis to assist in the fight against

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. 151–4.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. 155–6.

Syagrius. Therefore, “Clovis now attacked him in his wrath.”<sup>178</sup> After threatening vengeance on Clovis, Chararic's son was killed as well. In these accounts, Gregory refrains from commenting on the Salian Franks’ religious affiliation; whether they converted alongside Clovis or remained pagan is unclear. Gregory, who views paganism as more amenable for foreign kings than Arianism, could leave this out because they were pagan or Nicene. Still, he did not wish to diminish Clovis by depicting him as a murderer of Nicene Christians.

Next in Gregory’s account, he relates that Clovis killed his relatives: the Frankish kings Ragnachar and Ricchar, and their brother Rignomer. He did so because Ragnachar “was so sunk in debauchery that he could not even keep his hands off the women in his own family.”<sup>179</sup> Clovis accomplished this by bribing Ragnachar's bodyguard, tricking him into thinking they could go to battle against Clovis. When they did, the personal bodyguard did not protect their king, and Clovis killed Ragnachar. The bodyguard then brought Ricchar, whom Clovis chastised for allowing himself to be bound, before taking his axe to Ricchar as well. Unfortunately for them, the bodyguard realized the treasure given to them by Clovis was fake, and when they approached him about this, he killed them as well for delivering their king over to his death.

“In the same way, he encompassed the death of many other kings and blood relations of his whom he suspected of conspiring against his kingdom. By this, he spread his dominion over the whole of Gaul.” Once he had defeated these rivals, Clovis called a general assembly, lamenting that he had no family left. Gregory records the king did this “because, in his cunning way, he hoped to find some relative still in the land of the living whom he could kill.”<sup>180</sup> Lacking

---

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 156.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. 156.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. 158.

a true rival to his throne, Clovis's unification of the Franks was complete. As if this were the sole goal of the king, Gregory finalizes his telling of Clovis's story, recalling how he left behind his widowed wife who then devoted the rest of her life entirely to the Church.

Gregory depicts the king as a ruthless, ambitious ruler who successfully removed those he chose to consider an enemy. Clovis had no qualms about killing his own family and using war, lies, and trickery to gain power. He rose to power as a fifteen-year-old leader of a small tribe and, after thirty years, consolidated much of Gaul under a single throne as the King of the Franks. Most importantly, Gregory's accounts of these events are complex. He chooses not to criticize the apparent lies and sins of the king, attributing his success to God's blessing. Gregory, writing to Clovis's heirs, presents the founder of the Merovingian Dynasty as an ideal king before chastising the king's heirs for their civil wars against one another. Gregory described Clovis to his heirs as "the founder of your victorious country, who slaughtered those rulers who opposed him, conquered hostile peoples, and captured their territories, thus bequeathing to you absolute and unquestioned dominion over them!"<sup>181</sup>

Ultimately, I believe that Gregory aimed to paint Clovis as a protector, unifier, and promoter of the Romans and, more importantly, the Church.

Clovis's conquests proved crucial, especially for the history of the Franks. Wallace-Hadrill claims that "his prestige rested on his unique achievement of seizing the kingdoms of Syagrius and Alaric, northern and southern Gaul, and then ruling them much in the way they were used to."<sup>182</sup> This conclusion of Wallace-Hadrill acknowledges one aspect that made Clovis such a vital character in Frankish history—his defeat of rival kings—however, it leaves out what

---

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. 253.

<sup>182</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings*, 4.

allowed him to unite all persons in his kingdom: his dual barbarian-Christian identity. There were many Germanic conquests seeking unification, but even with Clovis's unique success in war, what made him most successful was the impact his conversion had on unifying the barbarians with the Christians. These other kings "could never have run Gaul without leaning heavily, like their Roman predecessors, on the local authority of magnates, lay and ecclesiastical."<sup>183</sup> Clovis is known for his work in unifying the Franks, many of the neighboring Germanic kingdoms, and, most uniquely, the Gallo-Roman subjects within these lands; being accepted by this last group because of his partnership with the clergy, rather than a reliance on them as a separate entity. All of these peoples eventually subjected themselves to his rule and accepted the title of Frank. Clovis is a significant actor in Western history because he unified the barbarians with the Romans. His adoption of and baptism into Nicene Christianity allowed the Christian Gallo-Romans in his lands to deem themselves as fully his subjects.

In many ways, Clovis's story replicates Constantine's. First, Clovis began his rule in a divided Kingdom, requiring his time in unifying the people under a single throne. While doing so, he converted to Christianity on the precipice of defeat. From here, he used his new identity as an orthodox Christian king to justify further actions against competing Arian rulers to unify a large kingdom under his rule.

Clovis's consolidation of power was far more barbaric than the "pursuit of unity" may suggest, which complicates his inclusion as a significant player in promoting Christianity. Despite his tactics, his legacy is much less of a barbarian than that of a good king—the exemplar

---

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. 7.

for future Merovingian kings—and Christian victor.<sup>184</sup> However, like Constantine, Clovis's treatment by historians concentrates on the fruit of what he did, which most often outweighs the morality of his actions. As we saw with Constantine, his conquests increased his civil power, giving him more significant influence over his subjects and ultimately expanding the conqueror's legacy. Clovis proved an incredibly successful warrior-king who used any means necessary to defeat whoever got in his way.

We immediately see the impact of Clovis's conversion on the unity of his kingdom. First, we see the capitulation of the Alemanni soldiers. Gregory then says that 3,000 of his soldiers followed him in this conversion, which Scherman points out was only half his forces. Despite not having all his soldiers, Scherman does explain that “the entire Gallic clergy now favored him.”<sup>185</sup> Even Genevieve, patron saint of Paris, present at the siege of Clovis's father, opened the gates of Paris to invite the new Christian king. The bishop of Rheims, Remigius, then baptized the newly converted king at his Church on Christmas Day 503 AD. Like Constantine, Clovis, in his adoption of the new religion, “would willingly and enthusiastically subject himself to the church.”<sup>186</sup> Ultimately, the process of Christianization of the Frankish leadership allowed them to partner with the aristocracy of the Gallo-Romans, which was mostly made up of the bishops. While cooperation happened between these groups in the varied Germanic kingdoms, it was a true unification with the Christian Franks.

---

<sup>184</sup> The credit for this is probably, and significantly, due to the work of Gregory of Tours. However, the focus on Clovis as the most significant and model Merovingian king can be followed through the works of modern historians as well, solidifying his legacy as ‘a good king.’

<sup>185</sup> Scherman, *Birth of France*, 113.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.* 114.

His conversion, which may be considered a political decision and thus a risky bet, increased his significance to Orthodox Christians throughout the West. The decision proved to solidify his kingdom while simultaneously destabilizing the internal relations of their neighboring rival tribes.<sup>187</sup> The Britons, orthodox themselves, finally conceded to the king, but he would not subjugate them as he did others. Foreign Nicene bishops looked to Clovis for their protection, seeking the rule of Nicene King. Bishop Avitus of Burgundy sought out Clovis, who then entered Burgundy, attacking Gundobad and Godigisel.

More than just his conversion to Christianity, Clovis created unity with his non-Frankish subjects by making himself more attractive to their Roman-ness. The first way he accomplished this was his surprise naming as patrician and consul of the Roman Empire by the emperor in Constantinople. Having consolidated control over much of the previous Western Empire and having promised the Byzantine emperor to limit future expansion,<sup>188</sup> the former territories of Rome were most solidly in his hands. He then collated the *lex Salica*, the long-lasting Germanic code of conduct, written down in Latin for the first time, acknowledging the Franks as non-heretical Catholics and heirs of Rome. The codification of this law gave the Germans new legitimacy to the outside world while also establishing the king's legitimacy to the barbarians and his Gallo-Roman subjects, including the bishops.<sup>189</sup>

Historians see how this unity affected Clovis, the Church, and the West. "Clovis has kept his fighting force intact about his person; he is rich enough in treasure and land to secure fidelity;

---

<sup>187</sup>Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 86.

<sup>188</sup> This point is made by Wallace-Hadrill where he compares how Clovis and Theodoric experienced different fates at the hands of the emperor. Theodoric became too ambitious which caused the emperor to withdraw his approval.

<sup>189</sup> Scherman, *Birth of France*, 124–30.

his rule over Romans is acknowledged by the emperor and encouraged by the Church; and significantly last, he has collected his Frankish followings into a people that accept the law that he says is their own.”<sup>190</sup> Thus, “the vestige of imperial authority in Gaul evaporated, and the history of France began.”<sup>191</sup>

### Inner Circle

Clovis’s role as Christian King was much different than Constantine’s. Constantine took a very hands-on approach to his Church in a way that has brought ire from historians following Gibbon. Clovis cannot be accused of doing the same. Clovis proved very reliant on the bishops to do their job in ruling the Church. Clovis continued the role of the Germanic king, who had long been a chieftain whom his people relied on for military success and strength. Meanwhile, his bishops, playing the role of Roman aristocrats, were still in charge of much of the empire’s property, people, and possessions and were responsible for civil oversight of their local population. The bishops also played their traditional religious role of ensuring their congregations’ salvation by establishing proper theology and administration of the sacraments.

It is possible that Clovis had a more involved role in the Church than Gregory records. One of the underlying messages in his *History* is that Gregory believes that kings should have a minimal role over the Church and that some kings had overstepped their boundaries. This may be why he depicts Clovis as the hero and ideal king of the Franks. Clovis allowed the Church to reign over itself, fought against the Arians, and repeatedly favored the church in Tours.<sup>192</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings*, 181.

<sup>191</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 108.

<sup>192</sup> Gregory, as Bishop of Tours, uses his history to show the significance of his episcopal seat. Anytime Martin or the city are involved in the story of the Franks, Gregory makes sure to point this out, while generally referring to other churches without naming them. In Tours he received

However, I believe that Clovis was unlikely to have intervened much in church affairs as it would have been too significant a change from the Germanic understanding of kingship. Future kings, like Charlemagne, developed a more hands-on role. Clovis did organize an ecclesiastical council in the last year of his reign. Still, he did not attend, nor is there any evidence that he played any further role other than giving the bishops a list of organizational details to iron out. That future rulers were more engaged in church affairs further reveals Clovis's hands-off approach to Church rule.

While Clovis proved far from Constantinian in his handling of Church matters, and he seemed to be nearly pagan when judged by his actions compared to those of Charlemagne, Clovis relied upon the bishops of Gaul to play a significant role in his reign. The few surviving letters these bishops sent to him, which are among the principal communications from his lifetime, reveal the degree to which he relied upon them.

Significantly, the Bishop of Rheims, Remigius (sometimes referred to as Remi), gives us the first contemporary glimpse of Clovis. The bishop was "Clovis's chief instructor in religion,"<sup>193</sup> and two letters from him to Clovis are extant. He wrote the first letter around 481 AD to congratulate the fifteen-year-old king. His second letter took a different tone, and we see several vital details in this letter.<sup>194</sup> Remigius congratulates Clovis on his ascension to the throne of *Belgica Secunda (Roman Gaul)*. In part of his greeting, he writes, "You have begun to be as

---

word of his consulship, where he then handed out riches through the streets of the city the place of residence for Clotilde after the death of the king, as well as several other minor incidents in which Clovis gave additional gifts and/or protection. Therefore, his recording of events in Tours may be overstated. Regardless, this does add to Gregory's appreciation for Clovis.

<sup>193</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 113.

<sup>194</sup> Remigius, "Letter of Bishop of Remigius of Rheims to Clovis," in *Rome to Merovingian Gaul*, trans. Alexander Calander Murray (Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 2008), 260.



your parents ever were, “which signifies that the bishop previously knew the royal family, if not the king. The letter has two main themes, both promoting the practice of Christianity: first, he asks the young king to utilize the bishops of his kingdom as his counselors; second, to practice and encourage his people to practice Christian values. Remigius states that Clovis, in humility, “must see to it through [Clovis's] merit that God's favorable judgment does not turn from [him] and if there is good agreement between [Clovis] and [the bishops], [His] province will better endure.” This letter has a clear peace-keeping mission. Though condescending, he argues that it will best serve the king to heed the interests of the Gallo-Romans, not just the Franks.

We have another letter from Remigius to Clovis in which he tries to comfort Clovis on the death of his sister. Remigius encourages Clovis in his Christian faith, hailing the faith and dedication of this sister. and encourages the king to remain firm in faith in order to fortify the people of his kingdom. This letter, though undated, must have been written after the conversion of Clovis and shows the pastoral care this bishop had over the king. Remigius also apologizes for sending words through his messenger, a priest, instead of visiting himself, but expresses his willingness to travel through Gaul in winter to please the king with his presence. The message of the first letter is in effect: “Belgica is Roman and is run by Roman bishops, and a prudent rex will wish to take note of this since most of his subjects are Romans. Clovis has crossed the frontier and is welcomed on terms.”<sup>195</sup> The second letter exhibits a far more pastoral relationship. Instead, he seeks to console the king and encourage him to be a Christian example to his subjects, promising a blessing on the kingdom if he did. This letter contains no veiled threats, discusses their shared belief in God, and shows concern for the king beyond his civic role. The differences of tone and content in this letter are partly due to the context, but they also

---

<sup>195</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings*, 166.

acknowledge an evolution in the relationship of the king with the Catholic clergy. Regardless of the depth of their relationship, it is still quite evident that Clovis took to heart the words of the bishop, despite, or perhaps because of, having grown significantly in power since Remigius had first addressed him. By then, he could have easily ignored the advice of the bishops.

The author of these letters played a more significant role than even these letters represent. Remigius was the bishop who was allowed to baptize the newly converted king. The Basilica of Saint Remy remains standing in the city to memorialize this event. The bishop's remains are interred there and a stone carving in the cathedral memorializes this moment, depicting both men. This church would also be where many future French kings would be crowned and anointed with holy oil. There is also evidence that Remigius had a close relationship with Avitus, bishop of the gothic city Vienne. The collaboration of the two may have played a major role in the king's significant decisions: his marriage to Clotilde as well as Clovis's desire to free Nicene bishops from the Arian rule of the Burgundians. Remigius played a substantial role in the life of Clovis, and much like those early bishops during Constantine's reign, his example would set up a pattern for the new dynasty, as "there had been a succession of bishops ready to point out their duty to the Merovingians; and sometimes they were listened to."<sup>196</sup>

Avitus, Bishop of Vienne, also played a significant role in the king's life. This impact started far before they knew each other. Avitus is credited for the Orthodox views of Clovis's wife, Clotilde. Clotilde's constant encouragement of her husband to convert to her religion is recorded by Gregory. So, the bishop who influenced her played a significant role in the king's religious development. This bishop may have helped arrange the marriage and was often updated

---

<sup>196</sup> Ibid. 222.

on the king's life. This is seen in his letter to Clovis shortly after the king's baptism into Nicene Christianity.

This letter exhibits the strength of the bishops in Germanic Gaul and their hopes to strengthen a partnership with a similarly Orthodox ruler. Much of the letter praises Clovis for accepting a Christianity that is not “empty as far as truth is concerned,” which references his understanding that Clovis had rejected the allure of Arian beliefs. He also praised the king for not merely accepting the religion of his ancestors but coming to a more excellent knowledge by his choosing. Both assertions were explicit and potentially belligerent condemnations of Avitus's king, Gundobad. Avitus then rejoiced that the 'western regions' had a 'prince who is one of us' like Greece (i.e., the Western Empire now had a Nicene ruler, like the Eastern Empire). He also harped on the day of Clovis's baptism, Christmas, a date that continued to play a significant role in the lives of Frankish Kings. The tone of his letter was that of a pastor concerned about what to preach to the king, but there are also obvious political connotations. His judgment is most significant: “Though you [Clovis] choose on your behalf, you make a judgment for us all: your faith is our victory.”<sup>197</sup>

This letter points to the historical significance of Clovis' conversion. It shows the political power of the bishops through his encouragement of a foreign king and open criticism of his own. This promotion of Clovis for accepting Nicene Christianity not only represents the Burgundian view but represents the view of the Gallo-Roman Christians throughout the region. Most of this population joyfully accepted the yolk of the Franks, as it provided them with a leader with views like their own. The Gallo-Romans accepted the domination of foreign kings because the Roman

---

<sup>197</sup> Avitus, “Letter to Clovis,” in *Rome to Merovingian Gaul*, trans. By Alexander Callander Murray, 261.

burden during this period grew too heavy. Still, this acceptance of new kings was limited. Avitus points out the strong position of this Christian King. This letter promoted this king, and historians see in it the first proclamation, in effect, of 'le roi très chrétien' or Most Christian King, a title French kings used for the next millennia.

### Bishops in the Kingdom

The examples of Remigius and Avitus exhibit the direct influence of the bishops in the life of Clovis but also, more generally, in the Germanic kingdoms. Their ability to engage meaningfully the pagan or Arian kings shows their critical roles as a part of the aristocracy and how these local, and sometimes national, civic leaders represented the interests of the Gallo-Roman majority. Therefore, how Clovis treated, utilized, and promoted the bishops of Gaul is the final factor of his establishment of Church and State. The extant sources do not reveal his closest advisers, but we can see various examples of how he indirectly supported the churches.

The most significant impact of Clovis's reign on the bishops of Frankish lands was a decision made primarily for his security. In the *Lex Salica*, we see the cementing of Clovis as the Merovingian's king. The Franks no longer chose their next leader based on their confidence in him as the best warrior chief, but Clovis and his dynasty were cemented in their possession of the throne. This had obvious civil consequences for Clovis and his heirs, but the bishops of the kingdom benefited as well as they secured, through this law, a lineage of civil rulers that was devoted to promoting their role in the kingdom as well. "Politically, he was subsequently supreme. In matters of the spirit, he gave precedence to his bishops and sought the wisdom of the Gallo-Roman elders in administrative affairs. But his authority was absolute."<sup>198</sup> As noted above,

---

<sup>198</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 132.

the bishops were the surviving replacements of the Roman imperial government for the local Gallo-Roman communities. Still, in these actions, Clovis removed the Frankish competition to both his power and that of the bishops. Geary defined the local bishop's responsibility to "maintain much of the public life of the cities, undertaking the traditional civic obligations of poor relief and the maintenance of walls, aqueducts, and the like."<sup>199</sup> This left the two powers to balance one another. Clovis could accomplish little in his kingdom without the support of his bishops. They, in turn, relied on him for continuity, protection, and support. This cooperation proved effective throughout his lifetime.

Clovis did far more for his kingdom's ecclesiastical organization than solidifying the bishop aristocracy. One of these key facets of his reign was how he promoted the cult of saints, which was crucial to Gallic Christianity. Gregory, in the story of the defeat of Alaric II, describes Clovis's respect for both St. Martin and St. Hilary as Clovis marched through Tours on the way to face Alaric II. Out of respect for Martin, he commanded his soldiers not to plunder at Tours and gave quick judgment to a soldier who went against this order, stating, "It is no good expecting to win this fight if we offend Saint Martin." Gregory reports that he then received a prophecy of his impending victory from the clergy of Martin's church before marching on. In Poitiers, Clovis faced the difficulty of crossing the Vienne, but a "pillar of fire arose from the church of Saint Hilary," showing them where to travel on their way to defeat the Arian Alaric much like Hilary, who "had so often done battle for the faith." Once again, the king did not allow any of his soldiers to plunder in the lands of the saint. This campaign ended after the defeat of Alaric in Tours, where Clovis was met by the news of Emperor Anastasias' declaration of him as

---

<sup>199</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 98.

consul. As he left for Paris, Clovis bestowed on Saint Martin's church much of the treasure from the fight against the Visigoths, and “henceforth Martin was the Merovingians' guardian saint.”<sup>200</sup> Wallace-Hadrill calls his gifting of treasure to the church specifically “a submission.”<sup>201</sup> Geary adds that Clovis adopted Martin as his patron because the story of how the simpleminded saint, an outsider soldier who established a new order under his leadership, resonated with the king. Clovis’s patronage transformed the saint into “the patron of the Frankish kingdom and the symbol of the new Frankish church.”<sup>202</sup>

Clovis also did much to support the other local churches. Gregory records a unique incident where the king did this at the beginning of his reign, well before his conversion. The story involves the looting of his victorious army. When a bishop requested the return of a piece of treasure taken from his church, Clovis asked his army to give him it as part of the spoils in order to fulfill the bishop’s request, which shows respect for the churches even while pagan.<sup>203</sup>

Clovis also used his unique relationship with local churches to establish a tradition of Frankish royalty and church burials.<sup>204</sup> Clovis, his sons, his wife, and Saint Genevieve were all buried in the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul that he and his wife had built “at the instigation of Saint Genevieve” in Paris.<sup>205</sup> This church was just a part of his expansion, and his

---

<sup>200</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 124.

<sup>201</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-haired Kings*, 175.

<sup>202</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 142.

<sup>203</sup> This story (139-41) would also be a picture of the king's mode of leadership. After asking for the piece as his portion a single soldier dissented then broke the piece asked for. Clovis would later, unsuspectingly and before the whole army, use his axe to remove the soldier's head. This is one of the many questionable moments in which Gregory is clearly aiming to portray the king as a Christian hero. The story also portrays a piety and respect toward the Church even before his conversion.

<sup>204</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 174.

<sup>205</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 133.

importance in his capital was an example of how he gave significant portions of the lands he won in battle to the Church. Along with these donations, we see further protection, even to the churches outside his jurisdiction, as Gregory displays above in a letter from Clovis to the churches in Visigothic land. This extant letter<sup>206</sup> warns the bishops of his coming and promises that the church's physical and human capital would be guaranteed protection from his soldiers.

In the last year of his life, following the example of Constantine, Clovis additionally called the Council of Orleans, the first of many called by Frankish kings. Clovis called about thirty-two bishops, mainly from the newly conquered, previously Visigoth lands, to deal with the physical disputes in the Gaul. A letter written to Clovis from the council records these bishops' gratefulness and their willing subjection to "their lord the most glorious king Clovis, son of the Catholic church."<sup>207</sup> The questions that Clovis had the bishops deal with were mainly about the treatment and disbursement of the land given to the Church by the king and the awkward situations that arose when civil criminals sought refuge in the churches. This is important as it shows the ability of the churches to govern themselves, even in disputes that may arise out of State decisions. Wallace-Hadrill concludes that this council shows "the king accepts the bishops, and they accept him,"<sup>208</sup> and with this, the precedent that "the Merovingians meant to control the Church wherever they conquered fresh territory."<sup>209</sup> Clovis, in the one council he called, both proved that there was a balance of Church and State and established a way in which the Merovingians continued this balance as new churches inevitably became Frankish. He called the

---

<sup>206</sup> Murray, *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul*, 267–8.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. 268.

<sup>208</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-haired Kings*, 178.

<sup>209</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church*, 95.

council to command the bishops to handle the difficulties that arose from the practice of this balance and allowed these bishops to find their solutions.

Ultimately, we see Clovis as the great unifier of the many peoples of Roman Gaul. It was through the combination of his conquering and his support of the church that he accomplished this goal. The originally pagan king proved skilled, cunning, and treacherous enough to be a successful military leader. However, there is little proof that he was a profoundly religious man. After prodding of his wife, the support of the bishops, and the providence of the Christian God led him to his new religion, he relied heavily on these same bishops to oversee the heart of his people. These bishops already ruled the spiritual and civic lives of the local Gallo-Romans. Still, the king and Church partnership would unite the two *gentes* into a singular Christian Frankish nation.

### Reflection

Constantine and Charlemagne overshadow Clovis. He is not well-known or studied, especially outside of France or Germany. He is known more for being a barbarian king than a Christian convert. However, I believe we can see how he was the essential lynchpin in making the Franks, who were known for little more than their use as warriors for/against the Roman Emperors, into the people who ultimately replaced the Romans in the West.

To reflect on his role in establishing the Church and State relationship in the West, we must look at how effectively he balanced the two institutions. Despite our limited accounts of his life, we still can evaluate what he accomplished.

First, we see the unification of Gaul under his rule. The most predictable and natural method by which he accomplished this task was through his military conquest. He was victorious



in every battle we have recorded and effectively overtook many of his biggest rivals. In doing this, he had to incorporate the Gallo-Roman citizens, who comprised most of the land. Clovis found a way of doing this that proved more effective than any other barbarians; he converted to Nicene Christianity. This meant that the existing aristocracy, the bishops, welcomed him in as a brother, a partner, not just a temporal overlord. He then becomes a Christian victor, much like Constantine. The biggest question this raises is how he accomplished some of his military victories. Clovis used questionable tactics, using 'most amoral actions with the approval and, on occasion, the active collaboration of the Gallic upper clergy.'<sup>210</sup> A proper balance between Church and State requires keeping one another in check, but we do not see the Church holding Clovis to moral account. This may be a failure of this new relationship, but as Gregory shows throughout his history, future bishops, including Gregory, would openly criticize Merovingian kings for immoral practices.

We also see how Clovis increased the power of both of these entities. He made his position as king and successor permanent by removing the Frankish traditions that gave the other chieftains power. This removal proved successful for himself, but this also proved a boon for the bishops, who no longer had a rival on the local scale. Geary evaluates this as problematic, ironically, for both institutions. This development gave the bishops nearly exclusive civic power: "The episcopacy held the keys to power, both human and divine, in sixth century Francia." But removing rivals for the bishops turned the bishops into rivals of each other. "Much has been written about the Frankish church. In reality, no such thing existed. The religious landscape was composed of a great number of churches, each headed by a bishop and serving as the cultic and

---

<sup>210</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 107.

political center of the local elite.” This manipulation of power did happen eventually. Still, at least for a time, “the Frankish monarchs brought some sense of unity to the episcopate.”<sup>211</sup>

Ultimately, Clovis proved a strong leader, a victorious warrior, and an apt politician. He took the landed aristocracy (the bishops), found a way to conform them to his will while maintaining his Germanic identity, and subjected them to his rule. He allowed them to rule in their religious duties and leaned on them to govern their local communities. His partnership was one of mutual respect with common ideologies and goals. His rule is recorded, primarily by a member of this aristocracy, in a favorable light, and though his sources are few, we see a clear impact of his work.

## **Conclusion**

### Successors

To understand his role in establishing Church/State relations on a grander historical scale, we must see how the actions of Clovis's heirs carried on his legacy.

Like Constantine, Clovis's heirs quickly became rivals, engaging in blood feuds that roiled much of the Merovingian Dynasty. However, unlike Constantine, the title and bloodline of Merovingian, paired with an effective beard and a newly revised code of laws, were enough to maintain power due mainly to the memory of Clovis, the support of the Church, and the *lex Salica*. This was true until 751 A.D. when Pepin, the Mayor of the Palace under Childeric III, officially took over and established his dynasty. The lineage of the Merovingians had princes of all abilities with varied corruptions and reformations, moments of imminent collapse, heroes on

---

<sup>211</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 122–3.

the throne, threats from inside and outside of the kingdom, and abuse and strengthening of their relationship with the Church.

Gregory of Tours was the quintessential bishop/aristocrat. He was born into a powerful family and given a quality Roman education. *The History of the Franks* is an essential work. He wrote it based on the Roman tradition. His recounting of events defines the period and the first half of the Merovingian Dynasty, mainly because it is the only quality primary source that remains extant.<sup>212</sup> As stated, Gregory's perspective is essential that of a bishop and is also heavily skewed towards Clovis, Tours, and the separation of Church and State.<sup>213</sup> The survival of his work is also enlightening because it gives an account opposite in many ways to what arose out of the Carolingian period, where the historians had a clear desire to legitimize the new dynasty and give sufficient reasoning for the removal of the Merovingians. Therefore, Gregory provides a mid-term assessment of the Merovingians, shaping the legacy of Clovis. With this idea, I highlight the aspects of Clovis's life covered and see how they present themselves in the bishop's life.

Gregory opens Book V of his work by lamenting the civil wars that the familial kings are waging against each other:

The Franks ought to have been warned by the sad fate of their earlier kings, whom their enemies killed through their inability to agree with each other. How many times has Rome, the city of cities, the great head of all the world, been brought low by her civil debates, yet it is true that, when the strife was over, she rose once more as if out of the ground! If only you kings had occupied yourselves with wars like those in which your ancestors larded the ground with their sweat, then the other races of the earth, filled with

---

<sup>212</sup> The Chronicle of Fredegar is the only potential rival, but this work from a century later largely based itself off of Gregory's work and less believable legends. The very author of this work is vague, and it adds little in the understanding of Clovis to be considered here.

<sup>213</sup> The separation of Church and State for Gregory may be better defined as removal of any civil authority on the Church. Gregory does not seem so inclined to keep the Church out of political affairs.

awe at the peace you imposed, might have been subjected to your power! Just think of all that Clovis achieved, Clovis, the founder of your victorious country, who slaughtered those rulers who opposed him, conquered hostile people, and captured their territories, thus bequeathing to you absolute and unquestioned dominion over them! When he accomplished all this, he possessed neither gold nor silver like you have in your treasure-houses! But you, what are you doing? What are you trying to do? You have everything you want! Your homes are full of luxuries; your storehouses have vast supplies of wine, grain, and oil; the gold and silver are piled high in your treasuries. Only one thing is lacking: you cannot keep peace, and therefore, you do not know the grace of God. Why do you keep stealing from each other? ... If internal discord pleases you, King, turn your attention to that struggle which, according to the Apostle, is waged deep inside every man so that your spirit may lust against the flesh. Your virtues overcome your vices, and as a free man, you may serve your leader, Christ the Lord, who were wont, in chains, to serve instead the root of all evil.

Gregory disapproves of the in-fighting that has overtaken the Franks. The rivalries of his heirs split the kingdom into three regions, with the Merovingian bloodlines competing with each other for political dominance. Gregory criticizes their failure to fight external enemies and proposes that as a solution for peace. He sees their riches and comfort as their weakness due to Clovis's success. It is essential to understand, and equally revealing, that Gregory published the writings in his lifetime, so his warnings and criticisms were public knowledge and available to those in power. These recorded words were most likely accessible to the kings; therefore, the criticisms show Gregory's boldness and the ability of the bishops to criticize the kings.

The outcomes of Gregory's criticisms can also be seen in future synods. Geary discusses how, through the Merovingian period, councils picked up in frequency and attendance in carrying on the legacy of the Council of Orleans. "Much of the legislation concerns episcopal collegiality and the protection of episcopal authority. Annual provincial synods were required [initiated by the kings] to encourage 'fraternity and charity' among themselves. Bishops were protected from each other, their clergy, and the king's interference."<sup>214</sup> Gregory recorded several

---

<sup>214</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 148.

of these councils, at many of which he was present, in some of which he played a very prominent role. There was a council in Paris where Bishop Praetextatus was put on trial, with accusations coming from King Chilperic and his wife Fredegund, who accused this bishop of openly supporting an enemy of the throne. The trial was before his peers, the bishops, and Gregory paints it as highly farcical scene, relating that the queen tried to bribe to Gregory himself to find her enemy, Praetextatus, guilty. Instead, Gregory denied the queen and continued to stand for his fellow bishop.<sup>215</sup> These actions turned on him at the Council of Berny-Riviere, where Gregory was trialed for similar accusations. This trial via council took place at the residence of Childeric. Bringing forth similar accusations to those against Praetextatus, Gregory took a stance against the civil authorities, holding little back, and recording events of extreme political overstepping by the king and queen. Gregory survived this council, and his stories exhibit the struggle between Church and State during this period.

These councils are troublesome in our understanding of balance, but we can see that this is because of personal vendettas, not the destruction of established institutional balance. These accusations were handled in a council of the bishops' peers, not in the court of the King, showing that despite the monarch's influence, it was still the job of the bishops to rule over the bishops. The submission of these bishops who agreed to hold these councils, putting their peers on trial, also indicates that the bishops feared and obeyed the king. These charges of regicide brought against the bishops also showed the Church's desire to protect the king. It is also important to note that these councils, when they did express hostility to kings, were not a condemnation of the Merovingians in general.

---

<sup>215</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 275–83.

Through Gregory's life, we see the perversion of much of what Clovis accomplished, but the core structure of what he established remained firmly entrenched in the Frankish identity. The fighting was between competing Merovingian heirs, not between Franks and Romans. The Church and State aimed at one another, but they both proved strong enough that they still relied on one another and potentially created a more excellent balance as they were willing to correct one another. The problems that we see in Gregory's recounting of the events of his life continued through the Merovingian Era, but this did not lead to the destruction of the Franks. Through all this, the kingdom remained impressively secure, increased the scope of its influence, and added new saints, relics, and churches to the Frankish Christian identity.

### Final Reflection

One hundred and eighty-four years after the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Clovis, king of some of the Franks but not yet all of them, petitioned the support of Constantine's God during a battle on the outcome of which his future career depended. Again, it worked -- history does not record the unsuccessful bargains with God. The resultant partnership between the Franks and the Catholic Church was the decisive factor in the ascendancy of the Frankish kingdoms under the Merovingians and later under Charlemagne.<sup>216</sup>

The legacy of Clovis is essential to French and often German identity. He is the lynchpin that attached the Roman culture to the barbarian legend. In him, France's very idea and name could be established in a land that had previously been the ruins of ancient Rome trampled on by disconnected barbarians. As the New Constantine, he did this via the conversion to Nicene Christianity.

The modern reader will naturally question the legitimacy of his religion, criticizing his use of religion to gain power as manipulation rather than acts of piety. While this is a legitimate question that confuses our acceptance of his actions, it is, like the controversy over Constantine,

---

<sup>216</sup> Scherman, *The Birth of France*, 64–5.

complicated, unprovable, and most importantly, not central to his historical impact. Clovis changed history only because his powerful bishops welcomed him into their congregation, making his Gallo-Roman subjects more willing to accept and identify with his kingship. Then, he utilized his bishops to advance his goals. These same bishops grew in authority and power and were already quite significant among their Gallo-Roman subjects. They established a tradition in France that built on the legacy of their cult of saints and would later define the Catholic Church.

Clovis established a balance between Church and State that would go down in history as “the first exponent of the alliance between the kings of France and the Catholic Church. A union that would be influential and advantageous to them in the medieval power balance of Europe. Clovis was the forerunner of *le roi très chrétien*. His contemporaries regarded him as a spiritual child of Constantine.”<sup>217</sup>

This is where Clovis positioned the Franks, enabling them to put forth their king as the Holy Roman Emperor. Compared to Clovis, Charlemagne is far more Roman: more civilized and less barbarian; he ruled a land more settled than expansive, more present on the global scale; more like Roman itself; and led with greater intentionality towards the Church with more intellect and less manipulation. However, none of what Charlemagne became would have been possible if Clovis had not unified and expanded the Frankish Kingdom and adopted Orthodox Christianity and the Gallo-Roman population with it. Clovis allowed it so that Charlemagne was born into this religion, and it was unnecessary to convince his people to participate. Clovis established a foothold that the Franks had never seen, cemented the *lex Salica*, and integrated

---

<sup>217</sup> Scherman, *Birth of France*, 114.

them with the Romans, building a genuine civilization on the ruins of the Western Roman Empire that paved the way for Charlemagne's Renaissance.



### Chapter Three: Charlemagne

Constantine was born the illegitimate son of a Caesar into an empire in decline, a pagan who, despite the recognition of his father and training from the Augustus himself, did not receive the title of his father from Diocletian. Ignoring this slight, his soldiers appointed him to replace his father. He solidified his position by defeating his rivals, slowing down the empire's decline, and adopting Christianity, legitimizing religion in the Roman Empire for the first time. Clovis, a pagan barbarian, inherited a fractured kingdom, playing a minor role in the remnants of the Western Roman Empire. He used his army and cunning to defeat rival kings. Then he adopted Nicene Christianity, which allowed him to get the full support of the Gallo-Roman population and their aristocratic bishops in a way no other conquering barbarian had accomplished.

Compared to these men, and primarily due to their accomplishments, Charlemagne (747-814: 768-814) inherited an established Frankish Kingdom, which had long embraced Orthodox Christianity. From this solid initial position, he developed the Frankish realm and the Western Church into a revolutionary new world, the basis for Medieval Europe. Charlemagne strengthened his State and the Catholic Church, solidified their relationship, and reformed Church practice and education, paving the way for the coming European identity based on firmly established rulers, Church influences over every aspect of life, and advancement of knowledge and thought.

#### Historiography

This chapter analyzes how Charlemagne took what he had inherited and reformed his kingdom into one that would establish the foundation of this new Europe. In this chapter, the approach to Charlemagne differs from that of Constantine and Clovis. This is for two reasons:

the first is that we have a far more significant number of sources available concerning the life of Charlemagne, and the second is that his list of accomplishments is far more extensive. Therefore, I rely more heavily on modern experts to evaluate, interpret, and summarize the sources on the life and work of Charlemagne, concentrating on the aspects that best pertain to this thesis.

There are several primary sources utilized in this thesis. Bernard Walter Scholz provides the introduction and translation of the *Royal Frankish Annals* and Nithard's *Histories*.<sup>218</sup> Thomas F. X. Noble introduces and translates Einhard's *The Life of Charles the Emperor*, alongside several other primary sources in *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*.<sup>219</sup> I also utilize *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, translated by Ephraim Emerton,<sup>220</sup> to elucidate his context. I will use modern historians' translations, summaries, organization, and descriptions of the various annals and capitularies that pertain to Charlemagne and his relationship with the Church.

The most significant historical debate surrounding the interpretation of Charlemagne is how to treat the primary sources. The ones mentioned above are used because they either concentrate on Charlemagne (Scholz and Noble) or because they cover a period/topic not otherwise handled by many sources (Emerton). Outside these already mentioned primary sources are copies of letters and rulings from Rome and Constantinople, which provide essential non-Frankish perspectives. Modern experts, namely Janet Nelson and Rosamund McKitterick, best utilize these sources. These experts use the whole library of letters, annals, and capitularies and

---

<sup>218</sup> Bernhard Walter Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles: The Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories* (Ann Arbor; The University of Michigan Press, 1970).

<sup>219</sup> Thomas F. X. Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious: The Lives by Einhard, Notker, Ermoldus, Thégan, and the Astronomer* (University Park; The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

<sup>220</sup> Ephraim Emerton, *The Letters of Boniface* (New York; Norton, 1976).

explain why they are using them, how much we can trust them, and how/when multiple sources are required to balance out the truth.

Nelson and McKitterick are the historians I depend on most. Janet Nelson's *King and Emperor: A New Life of Charlemagne* provides a detailed account of the king's life. McKitterick also gives a broader cultural and political perspective on the whole of “the Carolingian kings, the aristocracy and the church in their social context.”<sup>221</sup> Her book *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* is utilized extensively among her other her works. Both works' titles represent their prime purpose: Nelson's focused solely on the life of Charlemagne, and McKitterick places Charlemagne as a significant building block of the West. While these are used most, this study will utilize other historians providing complementary perspectives.

### A Strong Inheritance

As mentioned above, Charlemagne, alongside his brother Carloman, had inherited a well-established Frankish kingdom. Their thrones were strong as they ruled over a singular nation. Their kingship was given additional support by the Roman Church which had also established a significant role in the West.

The Merovingian Dynasty sat upon the throne of the Franks, running true to the blood of Clovis, for two hundred and fifty years before the Carolingians took power. The length of their rule was remarkable, as was the people's faith to remain loyal to the dynasty. The Merovingian's rule over the Franks in this period was turbulent, rarely peaceful or united. Clovis's sons, much like Constantine and many other rulers with multiple heirs, rivaled one another and fought for

---

<sup>221</sup> Rosamund McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms Under the Carolingians* (Essex; Pearson, 1983), ix.

control. These struggles eventually split the kingdom into three competing thrones, remaining part of the Frankish territory. After Clovis, this kingdom experienced rare moments of unity, the last being under the final great king of the Merovingian Dynasty, Dagobert (605-639). After Dagobert's death, the Merovingian kings' power dissolved despite Clovis's heirs remaining on the throne.

These kings remained the figureheads of their kingdom, but their regents, the Mayors of the Palace, effectively wielded their power. This transfer of power eventually led to the end of the Merovingians and the rise of the new Carolingian Dynasty. Charlemagne's great-grandfather Pippin II was the forbearer of this transition of power, taking over as Mayor of the Palace.

McKitterick records how Pippin was the true ruler of the realm:

Pippin II received delegations from the Greeks, Romans, Lombards, Slavs, and Saracens and defeated the Frisians. Pippin II and his son Charles Martel set out to restore Frankish control over the Saxons, Frisians, Alemans, Bavarians, Aquitanians, Gascons, and Bretons ... . The mayors' leadership of the army, support of the church, protection of widows and orphans, and ability to summon assemblies and convene synods were royal functions.<sup>222</sup>

The power of the mayors is fully attested in letters from the times, including one from Pope Gregory III, in which he names these mayors as the true rulers over the Frankish Kingdoms.<sup>223</sup>

These mayors conquered Frankish and foreign peoples, uniting many under their jurisdiction.

Charles Martel, which means Charles the Hammer, also defeated the Saracens in the Battle of Poitiers in 732, expelling the Muslim armies from France. They were quickly becoming victors of France and of the Church.

---

<sup>222</sup> McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 64–5.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.* 65–6.

Finally, in 751, Charles' son, Pippin III, removed the symbolic king-in-name-only Childeric III and assumed the Frankish throne himself. Bishop Boniface, sent from Rome to minister to Francia,<sup>224</sup> anointed Pippin III as king. Three years later, Pope Stephen II came from Rome to Paris, where he anointed Pippin's sons Charles (Charlemagne) and Carloman as Frankish Kings.

### Frankish Religion

As the Merovingian Dynasty was falling apart, so was the Church. McKitterick evaluates the Merovingian Church as “initially, at least, a religion whose doctrinal and theological content was minimal.” Still, she denies the myth that the Franks’ adoption of orthodox Christianity was “the simple substitution of one form of religious observance, one set of myths, one god or gods, for others.” Still, she would be “a very gradual process by which the complexion and context of Frankish society, its religion, ethics, law, and social institutions became completely transformed.”<sup>225</sup> While he may not disagree with this evaluation of the overall Merovingian Church, Emerton shows that the Church the Carolingians inherited reflected the kingly position they took over: “A complete episcopal and monastic organization was there, but it, too, shared with the political structure the decline in spirit that was dragging both toward an inevitable collapse. For more than two generations, there had been no gathering of the national Church for deliberation or common action.” Emerton does not entirely blame the Merovingians: the decline of the church was also due to Charles Martel, who was far more concerned with “war and

---

<sup>224</sup> Francia will now be used as the term best relating to the Frankish Kingdom. This change is present in that of the major historians of each period and a representation of a more concrete and established land of the Franks.

<sup>225</sup> Rosamund McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms, 789–895* (London, Royal Historical Society, 1977), xviii.

political action” than religious renewal, even requisitioning some of the Church's lands. He earned himself thereby the title “despoiler of churches.”<sup>226</sup> All this shows the Frankish Church was weak, declining in power, never fully established in proper theology or practice, close to complete collapse, and in need of significant reform.

As the Carolingians grew to have a significant influence, so did Saint Boniface. The saint, born an Anglo-Saxon, had been sent to Northern Europe, mostly made up of Saxon, Frankish, and Germanic kingdoms, to be a missionary to these Christian-in-name-only peoples. He was sent out initially by Pope Gregory II (715–31) to Francia as a “missionary,” which placed the Christians of the Merovingians in an awkward place if the pope thought this was necessary. The record of Boniface in Francia is critical for several reasons: it allows the modern reader to evaluate the Christianity of the time from an outside perspective; it reveals the growth of the influence of the Papal See, a position that slowly during the Merovingian period expanded its influence beyond Rome and Italy; and it exhibits how the papacy gave legitimacy to the Carolingians in return for their support of religious reform.

We have several letters from his trips to Francia and his evaluation of and work with its Church. The first records Gregory II’s charge to Boniface: “In admitting within the Church those who have already believed in God, you will insist upon using the sacramental discipline ... . Whatever you may find lacking in your work, you are to report to us as you have opportunity.”<sup>227</sup> Gregory II also wrote to Charles Martel encouraging him to welcome, promote, and protect Boniface in his mission to those in the Frankish kingdom who were “fettered by pagan errors,

---

<sup>226</sup> Ephraim Emerton, “Introduction” in *The Letters of Boniface* (New York; Norton, 1976), 8.

<sup>227</sup> Pope Gregory II, “Gregory to Boniface” in *The Letters of Boniface* (New York; Norton, 1976), 33.

many of them still lost in the darkness of ignorance.”<sup>228</sup> Charles complied, requesting Frankish prelates to accept Boniface and promising his peace and protection of Boniface.<sup>229</sup>

Boniface did not think highly of the state of the Church in Francia. We see his experience and interpretation of the events in his letter to the new pope, Zacharias, on the occasion of his ascension to the See:

Be it known also to Your Paternity that Karlmann, Duke of the Franks, summoned me to him and requested me to bring together a council in the part of the Frankish kingdom under his rule. He promised that he would do something toward reforming and reestablishing the ecclesiastical discipline, which for a long time, not less than sixty or seventy years, has been despoiled and trampled upon. If, therefore, he is willing, under divine inspiration, to carry out this purpose, I should have the advice and direction of your authority—that is, the authority of the Apostolic See. According to their elders, the Franks have not held a council for more than eighty years, nor have they had an archbishop or established or restored anywhere the canon law of the Church. Mostly, the episcopal sees in cities are in greedy laymen’s hands or exploited by adulterous and vicious clergymen and publicans for secular uses. If, then, I am to undertake this business by your orders and at the instance of the duke mentioned above, I desire to have at once the command and the suggestions of the Apostolic See, together with the Church canons.

If I find among these men certain so-called deacons who have spent their lives since boyhood in debauchery, adultery, and every kind of filthiness, who entered the diaconate with this reputation, and who now, while they have four or five concubines in their beds, still read the Gospel and are not ashamed or afraid to call themselves deacons—nay rather, entering upon the priesthood, they continue in the same vices, add sin to sin, declare that they have a right to make intercession for the people in the priestly office and to celebrate Mass, and, still worse, with such reputations advancing from step to step to nomination and appointment as bishops—may I have the formal prescription of your authority as to your procedure in such cases so that they may be convicted by an apostolic judgment and dealt with as sinners? And certain bishops are to be found among them who, although they deny that they are fornicators or adulterers, are drunkards and shiftless men, given to hunting and to fighting in the army like soldiers and by their own hands shedding blood, whether of heathens or Christians. Since I am the recognized servant and legate of the Apostolic See, my word here and your word there ought to agree, in case I should send messengers, as I have done in the past, to learn the decision of your authority...

---

<sup>228</sup> Pope Gregory II, “Gregory to Charles Martel” in *The Letters of Boniface* (New York; Norton, 1976), 45.

<sup>229</sup> Charles Martel, “Charles Martel to Frankish Officials” in *The Letters of Boniface* (New York; Norton, 1976), 47.

Some bishops and priests of the Frankish nation who were adulterers and fornicators of the worst kind, whose children born during their episcopate or priesthood bear witness against them, now declare, on returning from the Apostolic See, that the Roman Pontiff, has permitted them to carry on their episcopal service in the Church. Against this, we maintain that we have never heard that the Apostolic See had ever given a decision contrary to canonical decrees.<sup>230</sup>

We see a Frankish Church that is long lost but never fully converted. Several of the problems relayed by Boniface should not surprise the modern reader. The power of the aristocratic bishops that arose during the fall of Rome and was solidified during Clovis's reign, at this point, shows that the bishops' episcopal power had become corrupted by their civil powers, either distracting from or undermining their spiritual responsibility. There is also a noticeable lack of accountability to the Church. Emerton records Charles Martel's reluctance to fully accept what Boniface was doing, which is understandable when looking at the reports he sent back to Rome. Carloman, son of Charles Martel and brother to Pippin, welcomed Boniface and supported the reformation of the Frankish Church from the throne, making Carloman another significant person in Frankish Church history. Still, his role from a central level would be limited as he would cede his claim to the throne and take up monastic life.

I believe there was a more legitimate Christianity among the Franks than Boniface represents here. While some "back-sliding" is possible, Boniface exaggerated the depravity of the Frankish Church, specifically how pagan its people were. This could be due to his passion as a zealous missionary and representative of Rome aiming to gain as much power as possible for the Pope.

The work of Boniface shows us the Frankish Church that Charlemagne worked with when he came to power: a church more highly influenced by the Papal See than any of the

---

<sup>230</sup> Saint Boniface, "Boniface to Zacharias" in *The Letters of Boniface* (New York; Norton, 1976), 81.



previous generations of the Franks, but also in need of being newly reformed and strengthened, choking out the remnants of the old pagan religion that remained despite the Franks adoption of the name Christian.<sup>231</sup>

Constantine's story has a clear line of demarcation, slow evolution, relatively definable periods, and an apparent differentiation between political and religious reforms. Clovis's barbarism and largely hands-off approach to Church matters allows historians to conclude that his partnership with the bishops leaned heavily on their influence and organization on a local level, creating a solid partnership with them. Both men also dealt with few established powers outside of their kingdom. Constantine led one of the largest empires in history, with minimal contact outside of this empire. Clovis had several significant military encounters with definite outcomes and a little outside of that, making his rule easier to define.

Discussing the story of Charlemagne is more complicated. He was constantly moving politically, religiously, socially, culturally, and militarily. Charlemagne also came into contact with many foreign powers. He went to war against some of his neighbors, traded with nations worldwide, and sought partnership with the Eastern Roman Empire. However, the fluctuations in these relationships make understanding the story of Charlemagne more difficult, especially in comparison to the more straightforward foreign relations of Clovis and Constantine.

### **Holy Roman Emperor**

When Charlemagne assumed sole kingship of the Frankish Kingdom, he entered with already established relationships with some of the other most influential people in the world. However, this in no way guaranteed success. History gives many examples of influential people

---

<sup>231</sup> Pope Gregory II, "Gregory II to the Germans," in *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, 42.

who use their position solely to maintain their comfort or increase their power. What we see in this king of the Franks is an extremely busy man, as “there were no 'average' years in the reign of Charles.”<sup>232</sup> Charlemagne stepped into his powerful position and increased his power and comfort. Still, he also unified many of the peoples of Europe, solidified Christianity as the religion of the continent, promoted the education of his subjects, and built strong relationships with religious powers that defined the structure and story of Europe and the Church for centuries to come.

### Pursuit of Unity

Like Constantine and Clovis, Charlemagne used everything to establish a unified empire. He needed to utilize his military to maintain the subjection of Francia while also warring against his enemies to protect and expand its borders. He needed political stability within his realm and with those powers outside. Most importantly, Charlemagne worked alongside the Church in Rome, to unify his lands and all of Christianity.

The Francia that Charlemagne inherited in 768 was the strongest the kingdom had been in a century due to his father's and grandfather's leadership. However, upon his father's death, Charlemagne was not the only inheritor of his father's kingdom; his brother, Carloman, was also given half of his father's realm. The brothers had a rivalry, like most co-rulers in history, which was significant and/or noticeable enough that it concerned Pope Stephen.<sup>233</sup> This rivalry was not dissimilar from their father's, and, as with Pippin, the matter settled itself without conflict. After the natural death of his brother, Charlemagne quickly consolidated rule over Francia.

---

<sup>232</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 106.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

The lord king Charles came to the villa of Corbeny [just a few km north of where the Roman road from Reims to St-Quentin crosses the river Aisne], as did Archbishop Wilchar of Sens and Abbot Fulrad of St-Denis, with other bishops and priests and counts Warin and Adalhard and other primates: these were Carloman's men. But Carloman's wife, with some few Franks, went to Italy. And the illustrious King Charles celebrated the lord's birthday at the Attigny villa [previously in Carloman's kingdom].<sup>234</sup>

With his father's kingdom now solidly under his sole control, Charlemagne then brought many other peoples under his rule, stretching his kingdom to cover much of what became Europe.

The first major conquest of Charlemagne outside of the borders of Francia was in Italy at the behest of Pope Hadrian (772–95) in 773. According to the *Royal Frankish Annals*<sup>235</sup> of that year, “Hadrian could no longer bear the insolence of King Desiderius and the oppression of the Lombards. He resolved to send an embassy to Charles, king of the Franks, and ask him to render aid to him and the Romans against the Lombards.” The conflict with Desiderius was amplified because the Lombard king was harboring Charlemagne's deceased brother's wife and children, who fled Francia to Lombardy after the death of Carloman. These brothers could have been used as Carolingian heirs to the Frankish throne if Desiderius successfully defeated Charlemagne. Therefore, Charlemagne marched to Italy with his army. The Franks besieged Pavia, where most of the Lombard army was held up. During this campaign, Charlemagne visited Rome for the first time to meet Pope Hadrian. Hadrian revealed to the king that Desiderius took the king's nephews to Verona. Therefore, Charlemagne had to extract his nephews and return to the siege at Pavia. The siege proved successful, and “all the Lombards came from every city of Italy and submitted to the rule of the glorious Lord King Charles of the Franks.”<sup>236</sup> This battle proved essential,

---

<sup>234</sup> *Annales regni Francorum*, ed. Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 108.

<sup>235</sup> *Royal Frankish Annals*, trans. Bernhard Walter Scholz with Barbara Rogers in *Carolingian Chronicles* (Ann Arbor; The University of Michigan Press, 1970), 37–125. The translated annals are labeled by the year in which they describe, cover 741 A.D. through 829 A.D.

<sup>236</sup> *Royal Frankish Annals*, in *Carolingian Chronicles*, 50.

giving Charlemagne the title King of the Lombards and increasing his partnership with the Papal See. There was the occasional uprising out of Italy and some debate between king and pope over the division of civil power in the Italian territories, but this was one of Charlemagne's most important victories.

Unlike his quick success in Lombardy, Charlemagne's conquests against the Saxons lasted decades. This war against the Saxons was an apparent expansion of territory, but Charlemagne's justification was to convert the pagan Saxon tribes. The *Royal Frankish Annals*, a source mainly devoted to this conflict, shows that "the annal-writers' main purpose was to highlight Charles's military exploits in Saxony and his efforts to convert Saxons to Christianity."<sup>237</sup> Einhard explained the difficulty of the wars, saying: "No other war undertaken by Franks was longer, fiercer, or more difficult than this one because Saxons, like almost all the peoples who live in Germany, were ferocious by nature, devoted to the cult of demons, hostile to our religion, and did not consider it shameful to defile or transgress divine or human laws."<sup>238</sup>

The Annals relate that Carloman and Pippin first made war with the Saxons in 743 A.D. when they still ruled as the Mayors of the Palace. The *Annals* subsequently tell that in 774, Charlemagne sent most of his army straight from the acquisition of Lombardy to the fight against the Saxons because of Saxon attacks on Frankish Borderland. The following year, "he decided to attack the treacherous and treaty-breaking tribe of the Saxons and to persist in this war until they were either defeated or forced to accept the Christian religion or entirely exterminated."<sup>239</sup> For

---

<sup>237</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 149.

<sup>238</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Constantine*, trans. by Thomas F. X. Noble in *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, 28.

<sup>239</sup> *Royal Frankish Annals*, in *Carolingian Chronicles*, 51.

the next decade, the Franks marched seemingly annually, following this pattern continued, but it failed to end the war.<sup>240</sup> There were near-constant rebellions from Saxony until 805, where Einhard finally records “the war which had lasted for so many years ended on this condition imposed by the king and accepted by them [i.e., the Saxons], that they would reject the worship of demons and abandon their ancestral rites, receive the Christian faith and the sacraments of religion, and, united with the Franks, be made one people (Populus) with them.”<sup>241</sup>

This war is significant for many reasons. It first demonstrates the duality of Charlemagne as Christian-King. It is easy to argue that the battles were fought due to rebellion against the king and, therefore, that it was a purely political move to grow and consolidate his lands. However, Charlemagne would pull his armies back and accept the subjugation of the Saxons once they agreed to be baptized. Just as with Clovis, baptism was a significant act of submission to Christianity and a cleansing from paganism, proving that conversion of these peoples was among Charlemagne's essential war goals. Charlemagne also sent in Frankish bishops/missionaries to instill the Frankish identity and religious understanding. This again promotes the idea that his desire was a Saxon conversion, using clergy instead of generals to incorporate conquered peoples into his kingdom. Surviving letters from Hadrian praise Charlemagne for his mission in Saxony, which, unlike Lombardy, did not threaten the pope's lands and increased his influence.<sup>242</sup> The length of the war and its continual weight on the king's mind played an essential role in Charlemagne's life. His pursuit of the Saxons' submission to Christianity was to unite them with the Franks by affective ties rather than force.

---

<sup>240</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 179.

<sup>241</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Constantine*, eds. By Nelson in *King and Emperor*, 405–6.

<sup>242</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 209.

Charlemagne expanded his power on several other fronts as well. He fought and gained control over most of Germany. His victories over the Slavs and Thuringians 'cleaned up' the remaining barbarians in the area. He was forced to go against his cousin Tassilo, who led an uprising in Bavaria. Charlemagne also continued the legacy of his grandfather, Charles Martel, (who defeated Islamic armies at the Battle of Poitiers), by marching into Spain, capturing Saracens, and subjecting the Spanish Basques and Navarins to the Frankish kingdom.

Ultimately, we see how Charlemagne united the diverse ethnic groups of Western Europe into a single polity and faith. He saw varying cultural/social integration levels between these groups, meaning he did not establish a singular Frankish identity. However, this would create a powerful Catholic identity throughout the lands. Furthermore, these conquests and imposition of Orthodox Christianity did begin the idea that the people living in the former Western Roman Empire again shared a common identity overarching their particular ethnic and political ones. Depreux argues that the consolidation of these lands allowed Charlemagne to accomplish the goals of his Renaissance: “L'unité de l'Empire (ou du moins le rayonnement politique du souverain franc) favorisait ce brassage de personnes, qui permit une meilleure circulation des idées (The unification of the Empire, or at least the political influence of the Frankish King, encouraged the mixing of the people, allowing for better circulation of ideas).”<sup>243</sup> Historians have often debated whether this made Charlemagne the Father of Europe. Still, it should not be doubted that Charlemagne played a significant role in building a European population.

---

<sup>243</sup> Depreux, “Ambitions et limites des réformes culturelles à l'époque carolingienne,” in *Revue Historique* 304, no. 3 (July/September 2002), 723.

Warring was not the only avenue by which Charlemagne pursued foreign relations. He grew up in the household of Pippin, who, as Mayor of the Palace, sought those relations that could increase his power. “Within Pippin’s close family, political relations took priority, inseparable from dynastic concerns.”<sup>244</sup> At five years old, the young Charlemagne was a member of the welcoming party that came out to meet Pope Stephen II as he approached the estate at Ponthion. Stephen II was coming to anoint Pippin and his two young sons on this visit as king. Pippin also welcomed ambassadors from Constantine IV and Saracen envoys from Baghdad.

King Charlemagne, like his father, pursued relationships with the most significant powers worldwide, the primary focus being the promotion of the Church.

His relationships with the Greeks were a series of awkward situations, but ultimately, each side recognized the other as a legitimate power. Several of Charlemagne's enemies fled, seeking refuge in Constantinople. Irene tried to marry her son to Charlemagne's daughter, but this did not ultimately happen. Around the same time, the Second Council of Nicaea was called to discuss the terms of iconoclasm. Pope Hadrian was invited, but not a single bishop from Francia. Charlemagne took this as a personal affront and, with the help of Theodulf, wrote an extensive treatise to disagree with the conclusions of this council. The treatise would ultimately prove useless as the disagreement with the councils' decision was due to a poorly translated copy,<sup>245</sup> not due to a difference in theology. Charlemagne pursued unity through this, desiring to play a role in proper orthodoxy and the councils that decided it. However, I would argue that he

---

<sup>244</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 87.

<sup>245</sup> The council took place in Greek, the traditional language of the Eastern Empire, and Charlemagne needed a translation written in Latin, the traditional language of the Western Empire.

unintentionally created disunity between East and West. Since his army protected the city of Rome, popes turned their allegiance from Constantinople to him. Nelson notes that by Leo III's ascension to the throne (December 26, 795): “eighth-century popes no longer notified the Emperor in Constantinople of their election; they notified the Frankish king.”<sup>246</sup>

Like his father, Charlemagne also had a strong relationship with the Islamic caliphate stationed in Baghdad. The ramifications of this were larger than the elephant that he was gifted by Harun, king of the Saracens in Baghdad. This relationship was why Charlemagne ventured into Spain and fought against Baghdad's rival caliphate surviving there. With his favorable relationship with Harun, whose Saracens occupied much of the Middle East, Charlemagne was allowed to support the Christians and churches in the Holy Land. This would prove to be a primary focus of several of his capitularies. Einhard also ascribes his involvement in Saracen lands to his devotion “to supporting the poor ... not only in his own country and in his kingdom but even over the sea in Syria and Egypt and even in Africa, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Carthage.”<sup>247</sup> However, this relationship devolved after his death. Charlemagne was used as a hero for future kings to initiate the infamous Crusades in a significantly less peaceful manner, seeking the possession of the same lands, churches, and peoples for European Christendom.<sup>248</sup>

Charlemagne also showed devotion to unity and the Church by dividing his possessions upon death. The king tried to establish an equitable succession plan in 806, many years before his death. He stipulated that his realm would be divided among his three sons, Louis Aquitaine and Gascony, Pippin Italy, Bavaria, and Charles “the rest.”<sup>249</sup> The intention was to divide the

---

<sup>246</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 360.

<sup>247</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Charles the Emperor*, 43.

<sup>248</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 2–3.

<sup>249</sup> McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 96–7.



responsibility among his sons and have them work together to accomplish the goals of the growing empire. Constantine and Clovis are just two of many examples that would try to split their kingdom among their immediate heirs peacefully, and Charlemagne would even try to initiate this under his supervision as he apportioned to each of his three sons a section of his kingdom as regents. He also developed particular commandments<sup>250</sup> on how these three thrones in the same kingdom should interact, hoping that civil war would not be the eventual outcome if they followed them. This proved insignificant because only one of these three sons would survive. Einhard also describes the other ways he wanted his assets to be divided. Despite completing his initial will in 811, which Einhard himself took to the pope to guarantee his will would be carried out, the historian says that on his deathbed, Charlemagne tried to adapt his will so that “his daughters and his illegitimate sons could be his heirs to some extent.” Still, he had started this work too late and could not complete it. Einhard further notes that the king set aside two-thirds of his riches (money, clothes, and furnishings)<sup>251</sup> to the churches throughout his kingdom, with the final third going to his children. Once again, even in his death, Charlemagne made provision for the Church a paramount concern.

Charlemagne also pursued unity through his often-scheduled assemblies. These assemblies of the important bishops and civil leaders would be the significant meetings where many capitularies would be discussed, agreed upon, and issued. These messages and their spread through his kingdom further illuminate how he led. “Underlying the communication processes

---

<sup>250</sup> These would be called the Capitulary of Thionville from January 806. This is discussed in *King and Emperor* (425–38).

<sup>251</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Charles the Emperor*, in *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, 48.

was a strong purpose, not simply to ensure royal control, peace, stability, and order, but also to create a harmonious and Christian whole of a disparate realm.”<sup>252</sup>

The first aspect worth investigating is the calling of these assemblies. Reading his biography, we see that the king scheduled these annually, would call them more frequently as needed, and invited his kingdom's most important civil and ecclesiastical leaders to attend. He was intentional about where he chose to meet, often using a location that welcomed a newly gained land, supported a local community, or was used to intimidate neighbors. McKitterick points out that some of these assemblies would be called for specific regions to deal with more localized issues.<sup>253</sup> She also discusses the social aspects of these assemblies, concluding that they played the significant role of being “symbols of political cohesion.”<sup>254</sup>

We then see that Charlemagne's “law” was created in these assemblies. The decisions that came out of these assemblies were written down as capitularies. Usually, each was just a few sentences, then spread throughout the kingdom. The capitularies ruled on all facets of Frankish life, organizing state and religious practice. The collation of these capitularies gives us the best understanding of the king and his kingdom at the time.

From these assemblies, Charlemagne sent out his *missi dominici*. This was a pair of leaders, one a lay/civil leader and the other an ecclesiastical leader. This *missi* oversaw spreading these capitularies, collecting taxes and being the judges of issues in their assigned territory. These incredibly important, and revealing positions, were also controlled through a variety of capitularies in which Charlemagne made it known that citizens could report to the king any

---

<sup>252</sup> McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 214.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.* 243–56.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.* 226–7.

misdeeds of their *missi* and the king outlined how the *missi* were required to write down the work they accomplished and the information they gained. Again, his constant action allows him to maintain order and prevent corruption even among these powerful men. McKitterick discusses several. It is also significant that these *missi* were even sent out to foreign lands, like Jerusalem, to share the news/decisions from the king and bring news back to the king.

Constantine and Clovis could not have accomplished such unity without a strong army and intelligent military decision-making. Charlemagne proved a mighty and effective conqueror. It is essential to see that many people Charlemagne conquered ultimately became Frankish and Christian. Clovis's major success was convincing the Gallo-Romans to identify as Franks; Charlemagne's impact and legacy, too, were solidified as he accomplished this unification in his newly gained territories. It is also essential to point out that in all that Charlemagne did, he did not achieve these goals or even try to do so alone. The king successfully utilized many close contacts to build his empire. His strong relationships with popes, cooperation with those gathered in his assemblies, and dependence on his *missi* to carry out his message and judgment reveal a king that listened to, depended on, and learned from others. What makes this quality most significant is that in nearly every major decision we see Charlemagne make, there is an advisor from the Church alongside him, making each decision based on civil and religious interests. Charlemagne's pursuit of unity strengthened his power and influence, as well as added significantly to the power and influence of the Church, as is seen through his protection, and relinquishing of Papal lands, the conversion of newly dominated peoples, and the inclusion of a clergy member in each *missi* partnership,

### Inner Circle

It has already been shown that Charlemagne knew the importance of surrounding himself with robust and influential people. We have seen this with the previous rulers. Constantine had prominent bishops as a part of his camp almost immediately, if not before his conversion; Clovis had his wife who had connected him with several essential bishops that encouraged the adoption and promotion of his new religion. We understand significantly better who Charlemagne chose as advisors and their roles. The men who most directed/impacted the decision-making of Charlemagne can be put into two categories: his court and the popes. His court is made of the men the king selected to have at his side or his most prominent messengers. While many would fall into this category throughout his long reign, some left a significant impact. The popes were much less 'advisors to the king,' than foreign leaders with whom Charlemagne established a strong alliance.

One of the most prominent members of the king's court in France was Einhard. Einhard does not appear to have had an official position in the Church, but he was most assuredly a crucial Christian leader/advisor in the Church, if for no other reason than his position with the king. He was brought into the court of Charlemagne in his early twenties (during the early 790s), leaving him around forty-five years old when his king died. After that, he advised Charlemagne's heirs and, most significantly to history, wrote the king's biography post-mortem. As Einhard relates, he was constantly with the king, who relied upon him as his emissary to Pope Leo III. The advisor was called Bezaleel,<sup>255</sup> implying that he added excellent artistic knowledge and ability to the court. This title indicates his probable significant role in advancing the arts during

---

<sup>255</sup> This is a reference to the biblical person referenced in Exodus 31:1–5 having been “filled with divine spirit of skill and understanding and knowledge in every craft: in the production of embroidery, in making things of gold, silver or bronze, in cutting and mounting precious stones, in carving wood, and in every craft.”

the Carolingian Renaissance. Einhard can also be credited for the detailed work within the palace at Aachen and a variety of substantial engravings that came out of the court of Charlemagne.<sup>256</sup> Einhard brought Roman culture to Charlemagne's court via artwork and historical writing. Charlemagne's cousin Adalhard, a consistent court member, provided a picture of how Charlemagne's court worked. Adalhard, an abbot like Einhard, would be prominent in representing the king in Rome before the pope. The work of Adalhard, surviving only as referenced in the works of Hincmar, gives us the best understanding of what the day-to-day of the Carolingian court looked like, providing extensive knowledge of its interworkings and intentions. His account of Charlemagne was intended to give an example to Charlemagne's heirs.

There also was a more general Frankish representation within the court. We see in Charlemagne's will from 811 the presence of his “extended network of close advisors, gathered from across his empire.” There were seven bishops, the four “suffragan bishops ... all of whom had played a prominent role in Charlemagne's ecclesiastical reforms,” with four abbots who played similar significance. There were then fifteen lay leaders from within the empire as well.<sup>257</sup> The role of these men in the king's court was not well-recorded, but their other roles as bishops and abbots of local communities away from Aachen may explain this less-prominent role.

Theodulf, a Spanish Goth who became the Bishop of Orleans, became an essential part of Charlemagne's court in 798. Though he entered the court in the latter stages of the king's life, he had long been writing and pushing the empire toward necessary change, which impressed the king for his mind as a social reformer. Pope Leo III also recognized this and gave him the title of archbishop. Theodulf is praised for his ability to talk to people of all levels of society and his

---

<sup>256</sup> Noble, “Introduction to Einhard,” in *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, 7–18.

<sup>257</sup> McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 99–100.

extant poetry. These qualities and his inclination for change played a significant role in the Carolingian Renaissance and its effectiveness and acceptance in society. Nelson marks Theodulf as the proverbial “signalman” who “laid down the track” determining the direction that ninth-century society followed. Theodulf assisted Charlemagne because he wrote capitularies, provided a reformist attitude, and had experience in the many levels of Frankish society. He also advised the king on how to deal with Leo, suggesting that instead of putting him on trial for the accusations his enemies brought against the pope, they could have him swear an oath, and as the mouth of God, this would be sufficient.

Almost incidentally, Alcuin joined Charlemagne's court in 781 after being sent to Francia by his bishop in York. The king then requested that he stay. His acceptance was essential for the reign of the king because Alcuin was trained in the practice and theology of the Church and because of his intellectual abilities. He assisted in the creation of the *Admonitio generalis*, a series of capitularies meant to organize the Frankish Church. His role in the court was officially “teacher to the king and his family, and to the adolescents in court service,”<sup>258</sup> and as 'teacher to the king' he played a significant role in Charlemagne's development of a nationwide education system offered from the churches, and of the standardization of an official Frankish language. Alcuin was also known for his poetry, the usefulness—to historians—of his many extant letters, and biblical works.

What may be most significant for my purpose is that “in letters to the king and to influential friends [he referred] to a 'Christian authority' or 'Christian empire' which the Frankish

---

<sup>258</sup> Donald A. Bullough, “Charlemagne's ‘Men of God’: Alcuin, Hildebald, Arn,” in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 140.

king exercised or ruled over ... [and] he speaks of Charles's right and duty to restore 'the ruler of the church' to his position of lawful authority in Rome."<sup>259</sup> This played into his encouragement of Charlemagne to deliver Leo immediately from the hands of his assailants in 799, and he was appalled by the treatment of the Pope by the people of Rome. Another significant facet of this support was how devoted Alcuin remained to his people from across the English Channel because it promoted Charlemagne to be a Christian King, which was not limited to the Franks but to all Christian people in the Western Roman Empire. Therefore, Alcuin, with little proof of ambitions of power, proved to be essential in Charlemagne's intellectual growth and the development of his empire, helping the king organize both civil and religious life and education and contributing to the idea of a Christian Empire and the king's ability and even responsibility to rule in both.

Charlemagne had many other influential men in his court. I have included the men above for their diverse backgrounds and influence in the primary areas of this thesis. However, there are a few more worth highlighting. Bullough includes Hildebald and Arn in his list of three "Men of God."<sup>260</sup> Hildebald was an archbishop reigning over much of the Frankish lands from the court of Charlemagne. This position is significant because it is done while in the presence of the king, showing the influence of the court over churches throughout the land, but also as a bishop for the king. Bullough credits Hildebald with doing significant work in this position for local churches as well. Arn was an abbot brought into the court of Charlemagne as a "pastor and administrator of the Salzburg diocese." Then, he was charged to rule over the "extension of Christian belief and ecclesiastical organization" of the newly acquired lands from the Avars.

---

<sup>259</sup> Bullough, "Charlemagne's Men of God," 141.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid. 136–48.

Bullough claims “he was certainly the most energetic” in organizing imperial decrees who “was no administrative bishop,”<sup>261</sup> but another Church leader with significant impact on Charlemagne's political and religious decisions from the heart of his kingdom to its furthest lands. Paul the Deacon was a notable author from Charlemagne's court. He is credited for writing the epitaph for Charlemagne's wife Hildegard after her death, several readings for the Church,<sup>262</sup> and a seminal the *History of the Lombards*. Despite his historical importance, his impact in the court of Charlemagne was limited as he returned to Italy in 786.<sup>263</sup>

One of the most significant impacts these men had was language development.

McKitterick discusses how an official language, or languages, developed under the oversight of Charlemagne and his court.<sup>264</sup> She discusses how the Latin previously spoken in much of his territory “evolved in the course of the ninth and tenth centuries into the Romance form, which subsequently became French.”<sup>265</sup> Charlemagne was not simply dedicated to this Latin language but acknowledged the “need to promote the German language as a means of communication.”<sup>266</sup> McKitterick reminds the reader “that the impetus came from Charlemagne and his scholars.”<sup>267</sup> The culmination of this would be in 813 when church leaders were instructed to give sermons in the “French” and “German” languages spoken by the people instead of the “Old Latin” which came from ancient Christian texts, making sure that the people understood what was being taught. Ultimately, McKitterick explains the importance of these changes:

---

<sup>261</sup> Bullough, “Charlemagne's 'Men of God,’” 147–8.

<sup>262</sup> McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 317 and 345.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.* 348.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.* 315–21.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.* 317.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.* 317.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.* 318.



The political promotion of Latin and literacy in an empire in which both Romance and Germanic languages were current profoundly affected the development of a Frankish cultural identity. Written texts became accessible, which had a lasting impact on patterns of thought, styles of argument, and outlook. Latin provided the means for the Franks to associate themselves with the Roman past in the most fundamental way possible. It became their past, too. The integration of an aspect of the Roman past into the Frankish present is thus explicit, and the models for such a revival, as we shall see, were the Roman texts of classical antiquity and the writings of the early Christian church. Not only did the promotion of Latin literacy give the Franks in Charlemagne's kingdom access to the Latin texts of antiquity and the early Christian church, but they also made them part of their cultural inheritance and an essential foundation for building their Frankish and Christian culture.

The men of Charlemagne's court were significant actors who shaped how Charlemagne, an impressively active king, accomplished so much. He conquered new lands, became heavily involved in 'foreign' lands, including the pope's Italian peninsula, Eastern Roman Empire, and Islamic Caliphates, built a new capital, and reorganized the local religious and civil oversight throughout his land. These men were essential in accomplishing this effectiveness. I believe that each man discussed in his court had his fingerprint on the many capitularies from Charlemagne, and they can be seen to have brought their unique assets into the Carolingian Renaissance.

The most defining relationship between Frankish (and future French) Kings was their relationship with the pope. Not only has this relationship shaped France from the Carolingians until at least the French Revolution, but the French Kings also played a significant role in shaping the Church through this period. Gibbon concludes, "The mutual obligations of the popes and the Carolingian family form the important link of ancient and modern, civil and ecclesiastical, history."<sup>268</sup> Pippin and future kings would use their civil/military power to protect,

---

<sup>268</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 635.

provide for, and, in some cases, manipulate/control the popes. In contrast, the popes would mirror this influence, instead wielding their spiritual power.

For Charlemagne, his experience with the popes began during his father's reign. When “Stephen II took the papal throne, he worried far less about Greeks than about Lombards who now encroached on what had been the Byzantine exarchate, where local elites and their leading officials (dukes) were carving out estates for themselves ... . It did not take Stephen long to become involved in negotiations with the Franks to protect Rome and its territory.”<sup>269</sup> Therefore, Pippin established the Frankish role of protecting the pope, sending strong men to go and carry the pope up to Francia, where the king and pope entered into an essential agreement:

At that moment, Pippin satisfied the blessed pope with an oath that he would make every effort to obey his orders and advice and, following the pope's wishes, that he would restore the exarchate of Ravenna and the rights and places of the Res Publica by every means possible. But as the winter season was pressing, he asked the holy pope to go with all his companions to Paris to spend the winter at the venerable monastery of St Denis. This he did, and he and the Christian Pippin went to that revered monastery; it was the Lord's will that some days later, the lord pope anointed the Christian king, Pippin, with his two sons, by Christ's grace kings of the Franks.<sup>270</sup>

So, Charlemagne was anointed a Christian king by Stephen II and his brother and father, establishing an essential precedent for Charlemagne and his relationship with the Roman See for the rest of his life. Nelson suggests further ramifications stemming from this anointing, claiming that that day, Stephen adopted Pippin's sons as a “spiritual co-father” and that:

This was to remain a relationship *ex officio*, as it were, formally re-created by succeeding popes (Paul I, brother of Stephen II, and Stephen III and Hadrian). It was a good (though short-lived) example of a papal creative experiment elaborating bonds with Frankish rulers. After Pope Hadrian, the practice was abandoned: presumably a sign of responsiveness to changed circumstances and Charles's preference.<sup>271</sup>

---

<sup>269</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 72.

<sup>270</sup> “Vita Stephani II,” eds. Nelson, in *King and Emperor*, 74

<sup>271</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 75–6.

This suggests a deeper relationship between Charlemagne (and his brother) and the pope that is historically unique and carried on between Charlemagne and the other popes of his life.

Charlemagne's personal feelings towards the Papal See in Rome continued to develop, as did his love and appreciation for the men who held the position:

He cherished the church of St Peter the Apostle in Rome, above all other holy and sacred places. He gave its treasury a vast wealth of gold, silver, and precious stones. He sent tremendous and countless gifts to the popes; throughout his whole reign, he considered nothing more critical than to re-establish the ancient authority of the city of Rome by his care and by his influence, and not only to defend and protect the church of St Peter but to beautify and enrich it out of his store above all other churches. Although he held it in such veneration, he only went to Rome to pay his vows and pray four times during the forty-seven years he reigned.<sup>272</sup>

Soon after his ascension to the Papal throne, Stephen III wrote to Charlemagne and Carloman, asking them to take up their father's role and protect the pope, as an episcopal coup removed him. That situation worked itself out before the brothers could respond. However, this was the first of several pleas Charlemagne received from Rome during Stephens' time, representing a dependent relationship before it became personal. Charlemagne's personal/political decisions did cause his relationship with the pope to fluctuate. Charlemagne married the daughter of the Lombard king, Desiderius, as organized by his mother. However, Stephen III, whom Desiderius constantly threatened, disapproved of the partnership, fearing he was losing his protector, and sent Charlemagne a letter warning him not to marry the princess. Bertrada, Charlemagne's mother, would go to the Pope and give him gifts, assuring him that their allegiance still lay alongside the Church. Charlemagne would not take long to undo the situation, as he sent his wife back to her father after just a year of marriage; the episode shows papal insecurity and dependence on the Frankish King and, at this point in his reign, arrogance from Charlemagne.

---

<sup>272</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Charles the Emperor*, 43.

Much more significant in the life of Charlemagne than his predecessor, Hadrian replaced Stephen III upon his death and ruled for the next twenty-four years. The relationship between the two was strengthened early in Hadrian's reign when Desiderius moved into Papal lands. Amidst the Frankish siege of the Lombards, the new pope invited Charlemagne to visit Rome, “but Hadrian could not have been entirely certain of the intentions of the young and ambitious warrior king who led them, especially when— leaving his armies encamped outside the walls of Pavia—he turned south and headed for Rome, ostensibly to pray at the shrine of the apostle, St Peter.”<sup>273</sup> Beyond Charlemagne's defeat of Desiderius, both men accomplished significant personal goals: Charlemagne visited St. Peter's Basilica and was led down to the body of St. Peter by Hadrian, where the king received a blessing from Peter, moments that loomed large in the mind and heart of the king; Hadrian got the official signature of the king on the Donation of Quierzy, guaranteeing the additional Italian lands to the Papal See. This five-day visit of Charlemagne to Rome was a meeting that was impressively beneficial for both, a visit that cemented a strong relationship between the new King and the new Pope.

This was just the beginning of their relationship, one of the most significant in the king's life. Nelson highlights one letter—in which Hadrian is replying to Charlemagne, who asked for artwork from the palace in Ravenna for his new palace in Aachen—which I believe best summarizes the complexities of their relationship:

“We have, with a very great love of Your Excellence, given effect to this assignment, and we have conceded that the mosaics and marbles and other items must be taken away from that palace because the church of your patron St Peter benefits every day from your many

---

<sup>273</sup> Joanna Story, *Charlemagne and Rome: Alcuin and the Epitaph of Pope Hadrian I* (Oxford; Oxford Academic, 2023) 27.

and good and laborious royal efforts so that your plentiful reward will be ascribed in heaven.”<sup>274</sup>

This interaction is symbolically important as it shows the tension and forced agreeableness, a symbiotic partnership, and a co-recognition of powers in a seemingly minute discussion. This shows how Charlemagne relinquished to the pope the ownership of the former Lombard palace in Ravenna, which he conquered. The pope then agreed to send the mosaics to the king for his palace, not because the king conquered Ravenna but because of the gifts the king had already bestowed on the Church. Nelson suggests the use of the word 'must' shows that Charlemagne “was giving orders which Hadrian had to obey,” recognizing the consequences if he were to try to deny the king, but also acknowledging the 'many and good and laborious royal efforts' from the king that St. Peter's 'benefits every day from.'

Beyond minor interactions like these, we also have records of many more significant interactions between the king and the pope. There is the example of how Hadrian assisted Charlemagne in his response to the Second Council of Nicaea, where Hadrian was invited but did not go. Charlemagne was disgruntled at the Franks' lack of an invitation. Much like his own coronation as a young boy, Charlemagne's sons, the four- and three-year-old Pippin and Louis, were anointed by Hadrian as sub-kings of the Franks in Rome. “This rite made Pope Hadrian the *compater* of Charlemagne, a tie of spiritual kinship that was taken very seriously by the popes and the Carolingian rulers, at least on the level of diplomacy,” while also “enhanc[ing] the royal and sacral status of the little boys even more.”<sup>275</sup>

---

<sup>274</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 231–2.

<sup>275</sup> McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 95.

Ultimately, Einhard defined their relationship as “a special bond of friendship.”<sup>276</sup> This friendship can be seen throughout their correspondence, with their work together—in somewhat competitive positions—proving to be both a hindrance and a motivator. The love between the two is shown most clearly at the pope’s death, where the king breaks down and cries upon receiving the news. He then sent an epitaph with a poem carved into black marble to Hadrian's successor, Pope Leo III. This epitaph currently hangs on the walls of St. Peter's Basilica.

This successor, Leo III, held the pontificate for the remainder of Charlemagne's life. The relationship between Leo and Charlemagne would ultimately define the relationship between pope and king for centuries.

Leo observed the relationship that Charlemagne and Hadrian had and understood the importance of Charlemagne's position and of his favor. Leo was elected as the replacement for Hadrian within days of his predecessor's death, which was not the norm for popes. Still, to prevent any consternation from the king, he immediately sent the keys to the *confessio* of St. Peter's to Charlemagne. While this was not the first time a pope sent this gift to the Frankish Kings,<sup>277</sup> it was imperative to Charlemagne. These keys were symbolic concessions of Roman power to Charlemagne.

Three years later, Pope Leo was attacked by a party whose members were loyal to Hadrian questioned Leo's rapid replacement after Hadrian's death and accused Leo of heinous acts unbecoming of someone in his position. Leo survived the attack and sent letters asking the Frankish King for help. The king, preparing for war against the Saxons, did not immediately rescue Leo from Rome. However, Leo was rescued by others and brought to Charlemagne at

---

<sup>276</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Charles the Emperor, in Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, 39.

<sup>277</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 360.

Paderborn. The king and pope recommitted their relationship to one another after Pope Leo swore an oath that he did not do the acts he was accused. After a short stay, the pope returned to Rome, and the king visited about a year later; this visit would redefine the relationship between Church and State for centuries to come.

Charlemagne went to Rome to visit the pope and to hold those responsible for the coup against Leo III. Upon his approach, Leo came out from the city to welcome Charlemagne, much like Charlemagne did for Pope Stephen II almost fifty years before his initial crowning as king. On Christmas Day, 800, Charlemagne entered St. Peter's Basilica to partake in Christmas Day Mass. It was at this mass that Pope Leo placed a crown on Charlemagne's head and consecrated him as "emperor and Augustus."<sup>278</sup> Charlemagne accepted this moniker,<sup>279</sup> though "at first he was so opposed to this that he affirmed he would not have even entered the church that day ... if he had known what the pope was going to do,"<sup>280</sup> and the title passed down for centuries. The significance of 'emperor' is an apparent reference to that of times gone by in Rome but also an acknowledgment that at that time, Constantinople did not have a recognized emperor itself; instead, it was under the *femineum imperium* of Irene.<sup>281</sup> The complicated situation in

---

<sup>278</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Charles the Emperor*, in *Charles and Louis the Pious*, 44.

<sup>279</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 384. From 801, Charles used the title *Carolus serenissimus augustus deo coronatus magnus pacificus imperator Romanum gubernans imperium qui et per misericordiam dei rex Francorum et Langobardorum* ('Charles most serene *augustus*, crowned by God, great peacemaking emperor governing the Roman empire and also by God's mercy king of the Franks and of the Lombards').

<sup>280</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Charles the Emperor*, in *Charles and Louis the Pious*, 44. This is one of the more debated lines of Einhard and as Nelson lays out in *King and Emperor* (p. 382–384) it is highly unlikely, given all the planning, that Charlemagne was not aware of what was going to happen at St. Peter's that day.

<sup>281</sup> Roger Collins, "Charlemagne's Imperial Coronation and the Annals of Lorsch," in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2005), 66.

Constantinople plays an essential role in the acceptance of this title because, as Nelson notes, “once matters were settled with the eastern empire in 812, there were two emperors: one, emperor of the Romans, in Constantinople; the other, just plain emperor, based in Aachen, which had never been among the seats of the ancient Caesars but was, instead, a new place of power.”<sup>282</sup> More significantly, for this study, the greater importance comes from the new and official support of the Church for the ruler. This support was undoubtedly reminiscent of the first Christian Emperor, Constantine. It included the subjugation of the Roman population of the West, which at this time comprised the ecclesiastic society.

The relationship between Charlemagne and his popes would change the Western world. From his first interaction and being anointed king at a young age to his first visit to Rome, where he was allowed to tour the resting place of St. Peter to the defeat of the enemy of Church and State in Desiderius; to the presentation of the Donation of Constantine; to the epitaph made for the deceased Hadrian; all culminating in Pope Leo III crowning Emperor Charlemagne in St. Peters; a new Church and State partnership was created.

Charlemagne built a series of relationships with men who impacted the life and rule of his reign. These men expanded his reach into the modern British Isles, Italy, Spain, Germany, and European Low Countries, but even more importantly, they helped him develop his reach into the Church. These men represent the ultimate partnership between Church and State and show Charlemagne's ability to learn, adapt, grow, listen, and utilize others to make himself and his kingdom the best they could. The fruit of these partnerships is evident as each man benefitted,

---

<sup>282</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 385.



and the Church and Kingdom grew simultaneously. With the apparent influence of each man, Charlemagne ended his reign with the ability to rule in the Church and throughout the Western Roman Empire from his palace in Aachen.

### Bishops in the Empire

Much of what Charlemagne accomplished during his reign was done with some involvement/support of the Church. After opening with an evaluation of the Merovingian Church,<sup>283</sup> McKitterick then evaluates the Carolingian Church. In doing so, she reflects on how essential the bishops of his empire were to Charlemagne's successes:

It was a conscious acceleration of the transition from a pagan to a Christian society; a whole new world picture was elaborated. The context of religion, ethics, law, and social institutions became one in which the Christian element was unequivocally uppermost. Integrating the concerns of faith with those of society was necessary to shape a Christian realm. The procedures of the Carolingians, the definitions and directives contained in their legislation, the bishops' recording and fulfillment of royal and ecclesiastical decrees, and their formulation for the instruction of their clergy, the efforts made to instruct the laity in faith, doctrine, and ethics, suggest that the Carolingians understood this ... . They preserved that personal sense of responsibility for the people that had developed in the Gallo-Roman Church as a vital element in the pastoral role of the clergy. Although their ordination set the *sacerdotes* apart from the people, in apartness stressed by every Frankish writer, each priest's immediate concern remained his small community, the prosperity of the church within it, and the welfare of each baptized Christian ... . The great extent to which the church and Christian faith provided an essential sense of cohesion, unity, and ideological continuity is quite clear.

Indeed, all the material presented here indicates that rather than a concerted enterprise directly initiated and organized from above by the ruler and his circle of leading clergy, there was an individually interpreted, dispersed, and generally uncoordinated undertaking in accordance with the indications and directives contained in royal, conciliar and episcopal decrees, and in direct response to practical exigencies of the time.

Therefore, the enduring successes of the Carolingian achievement can be attributed to the various activities, in their similarity and diversity, of individual bishops, priests, and monks in the Frankish kingdoms ... . The initiative and responsibility for social renewal

---

<sup>283</sup> See page 133 under Frankish Religion.

devolved upon the episcopate ... . It was the clergy who were responsible for the instruction of the people.<sup>284</sup>

This means that Charlemagne, even at the pinnacle of civic power alongside a power-sharing relationship with the Pope, depended on the local bishops of his kingdom to interpret and then implement his reforms. The above quote represents the Carolingian period, in which the rulers' power declined by the end, giving more power to the bishops as the capitularies and local rulings that Charlemagne controlled devolved into localized rule with little centrality. Through the evaluation of his dynasty, we can still see that Charlemagne was passionate about providing personal access to Christianity for all of his subjects. Charlemagne then understood that to accomplish this, he must depend on the local bishops, and thus, he aimed to utilize and empower them.

McKitterick then provides the essential understanding of how Charlemagne aimed to accomplish this feat by highlighting, explaining, defining, and summarizing the decrees and instructions he gave his clergy. In issuing *Admonitio Generalis* in 789, Charlemagne “contributed[ed] to the development of the law as the organizing principle of religion.”<sup>285</sup> As previously seen, he used his closest advisors and the advice from the Pope to do this, in many ways carrying on the legacy and work of Saint Boniface. Depreux states that with this document, “[Charlemagne] se présente comme « *rex et rector* du royaume des Francs, fervent defender et humble auxiliaire de la Sainte Église” (Charlemagne presents himself as king and head of the Frankish Kingdom, fervent defender and humble auxiliary of the Holy Church).<sup>286</sup> The King’s

---

<sup>284</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 207–8.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

<sup>286</sup> Depreux, “Ambitions et limites des réformes culturelles à l’époque carolingienne,” 733.

concentration for the local church leaders focused on their congregation: “The first and most urgent requirement was that the bishops and priests preach the Christian faith to the people.”<sup>287</sup>

Charlemagne brought together many councils where reforms and solutions were discussed, written down into capitularies or mandates, and sent to the many local districts. These specific capitularies, which aimed at policing the bishops, initiated “the transition from primarily royally-initiated to clerically-initiated legislation [which] can be seen most clearly in the so-called 'Reform Councils' of 813.”<sup>288</sup> Nelson echoes McKitterick stating that the *Epistola Generalis*, which was a letter written by Paul the Deacon and the prelude to the *Admonitio Generalis*, was “was Charles’s ‘earliest manifesto’ for a religious reform in which reading-aloud from Scripture was central, and, for the vast majority of Christians, learning came from listening” and importantly states that despite “it [being] so brief ... what comes across, clear and urgent, is the voice of Charles.”<sup>289</sup>

The ultimate outcome of these reforms left a lasting outcome on the whole of the kingdom. Depreux concludes that:

L'éducation dans la foi non plus des seules populations urbaines, mais l'introduction durable du christianisme dans les campagnes, avec un renforcement du rôle des clercs désormais spécialistes de la chose écrite, gardiens et interprètes de la culture savante. Bien qu'elle ne transformât que partiellement l'univers mental de la majorité des hommes, alors considérés à la fois comme « fidèles de Dieu et du roi » l'entreprise de réforme culturelle des viii et ix siècles s'avéra un facteur essentiel de l'histoire européenne par son effort de christianisation de la société occidentale - de la société tout entière.

The education was no longer only for the urban populations but the lasting introduction of Christianity in the countryside, with the reinforcement of the bishop's roles as specialists in the written words and guardians and interpreters of the scholarly culture. Although this would not transform the minds of all men, then favor those who still

---

<sup>287</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 5.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>289</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 251.

remained ‘faithful to God and King,’ the system of cultural reform in the eighth and ninth centuries were essential factors in European history through its effort to Christianize Western Society—of the entire society.<sup>290</sup>

This shows how Charlemagne’s societal reforms stretched to every piece of his territory. His educational reforms were not limited to the cities, where historically, the education systems solely resided, but through monasteries and the education of all bishops, all had access to an education. This education also revolved around Christian teaching, instilling in the hearts of all men their dedication to both Charlemagne and God—though it is not likely all men were truly educated. According to Depreux, it was this complete cultural reform that solidified Christianity in the West.

Charlemagne also promoted the worship of his local people by providing for the local churches and monasteries. This was seen most clearly in his support of St. Peter's Basilica and his building of the Palace at Aachen with its attached cathedral. However, looking at this from a less prominent viewpoint for this conversation is essential.

McKitterick, in her essay “Town and Monastery in the Carolingian Period,” discusses how these local communities changed during the times of Charlemagne. This essay provides a deeper insight into how Charlemagne supported the local churches through reforms but also through donations. She uses the town of Centula-St. Riquier to encapsulate all the king had done. This town had a previously founded monastery, but Charlemagne donated and oversaw the use of many resources for the city’s growth, specifically its church. Charlemagne sent, from his court, Angilbert, to restore the monastery and build a Carolingian abbey there. The king provided for the town a significant gift of silver craftsmen to work in stone, glass, marble, stucco, and wood; he ordered bases, columns, and moldings from Rome, as well as the provision of relics

---

<sup>290</sup> Depreux, “Ambitions et limites des réformes culturelles à l’époque carolingienne,” 752-3.

that “included relics of the True Cross, of the Virgin Mary, and saints Peter, John the Baptist, Stephen, Dionysius, Rusticus, Eleutherius, Richarius, Laurence and Martin.”<sup>291</sup> The addition of the many relics and the four new churches that held them promoted this town as a place of pilgrimage, of which it remains. Angilburt oversaw the creation of these buildings and their ceremonies while he was present. This example is also important because the abbey came to control much of the local town; McKitterick iterates the imperially organized practice for these local clerics and the leadership role they played in the greater civil life of the kingdom. It is essential to see Charlemagne as the progenitor of these changes—churchmen being the local rulers, rather than civil magistrates—instead of the Gallo-Roman Bishops who established in themselves, because of a power vacuum void of strong competitors, the civil rule of their land before and after the life of Clovis.

The various capitularies of Charlemagne’s court defined the organization, limits, and practice of the ecclesiastical and civil leaders, local and national. The *missi* organized, set the boundaries for, and established the practice of these roles and promotions of the local churches. Several more facets of these commandments should be acknowledged. The first is scope. Charlemagne started writing the capitularies early in his reign, primarily to establish that his father’s actions were what he would continue to do. This shows Charlemagne's understanding of civic duty and organization from the beginning of his rule. Still, it also represents the nature of a capitulary, that they are easily changed if the ruling party deems it necessary. These capitularies were often nationwide but were, at times, region-specific. As discussed previously, Charlemagne also saw that the liturgy of the priests was significantly outdated and that the congregations could no longer understand the Latin used by the masses. So, Charlemagne, through his councils and

---

<sup>291</sup> McKitterick, “Town and Monastery in the Carolingian Period,” 100.

his regulations, adapted the liturgy these bishops used so that the people of his kingdom could genuinely understand.

Charlemagne united his lands and joined the organizations that ruled the lives of his people, namely, the Catholic Church and the Frankish throne. He led this by surrounding himself with advisors gathered from both inside and near his kingdom. He pursued a symbiotic relationship with the popes in Rome, where he supported and protected their position, and they, in turn, crowned him Roman Emperor and Augustus. I think the most effective step that the King took toward unity and reform was his organization, provision, and direction of the local church leaders, which potentially played the most significant role in the lives of his ordinary people. We have extensive collections of the commands that he sent out in the hands of his trusted *missi*, a pair of trusted regents made up of a lay and a church leader. We have recorded many of these extensive and detailed regulations that Charlemagne used to legitimize, organize, and provide for the local leaders. We may view these vast regulations as overbearing and overreaching, but I believe this was done for the benefit of the individual subject.

I believe that we can see a king who is most concerned for the well-being of his people. We can see this through adapting the liturgy and making church teachings and education accessible to all its people. We can see this as he did not try to enforce Christianity or his regulations on any outside of his jurisdiction and accepted baptism as a sign of subjugation to this throne. We can see the use of experts within his court that provided skills and expertise that Charlemagne did not have. We can also see this through the regulations and reforms of the *missi* he sent out after hearing of this abuse from specific individuals. Finally, I believe that we can see

his focus on the well-being of his people through the distribution of resources, which guaranteed each local body was provided with all the necessary resources to carry out his decrees.

Ultimately, what we see is Charlemagne building on the successes, the structures, and the relationships that had been made for the last 500 years between the church in Rome and the civil leader of Roman Gaul. For Charlemagne, there was no struggle of conversion, no obvious transition into a new man; instead, like his inherited territory, he took an established civic and religious identity and made decisions based on what was best for both institutions. He does not appear to be a man with two halves struggling to make decisions, as if being pulled in two different directions. Still, he seems to be a leader where these essential aspects of his identity formed into one unified entity, working in such a cohesive manner that they naturally work together for the common good. Charlemagne utilized his resources—military, territory, treasures, advisors, and foreign relations—to take a flailing Francia, which his grandfather took over, and give it a re-birth, forming the foundation of a Christian Europe.

### Reflection

The relationship between Hadrian and Charlemagne should be considered one of the most important in the French State and Papal relationship. There is no more excellent representation of this than the epigraph the king sent to Rome to commemorate the pope after his death. Story's *Charlemagne and Rome* concentrated on this gift, mainly as a symbol of the growth of the Frankish king and Papal See in the near quarter of a century their rule coincided. The epitaph reflects Charlemagne's Renaissance and how it began from his court: a return to the arts, Alcuin's poetry, and Einhard's craftsmanship. The very stone that Charlemagne used, rare and most likely

from near his court in Aachen, shows respect for the fallen friend and the significance of the king's new palace. Then, the gifting and mourning of the king led to the strength and importance of the long interdependent relationship.<sup>292</sup> The current location within St. Peter's Basilica, which held a place of special adoration and faith in the king's heart, was a perfect resting place for Charlemagne's donation. Still, for the modern visitor to the Church, it shows the permanence of what the two established.

### Conclusion

The development of the temporal lordship of the papacy in central Italy ran parallel to the emergence of the Carolingian dynasty as a political and landowning force in Francia. In some respects, the two phenomena were symbiotic. However, modern studies see the connection as less direct and less synchronous than earlier scholarship, which perceived an intimate link between the birth of the papal Republic and the dawn of the Carolingian monarchy in the 750s. Nevertheless, the accrual of land, plus the power and wealth that came with it, was a fundamental component of the diplomacy that brought the Franks and the papacy onto parallel tracks in the eighth century. It was a topic raised frequently in correspondence between the two. All this secular pragmatism ran alongside the efforts made by successive eighth-century popes to nurture and strengthen a 'sacred alliance' with the Carolingian dynasty.<sup>293</sup>

Charlemagne proved to be a critical lynchpin in the history of the West. He was energetic, powerful, and pious, which he used to promote the Church and State and earn the titles of emperor and *Augustus*, who would later become the Holy Roman Emperor.<sup>294</sup> The impact of his dynasty, as seen in the quote above, is undeniable. The growth of the Frankish Kingdom and the Catholic Church during his lifetime, I would argue, would not have happened without Charlemagne's support and direct involvement in both. We see the king expand his territory by defeating the likes of the Lombards and Saxons, amongst others, while governing this territory

---

<sup>292</sup> Story, "Black Stone: Materials, Methods, and Motives," in *Charlemagne and Rome*, 226-56.

<sup>293</sup> Story, "Introduction," in *Charlemagne*, 5-6.

<sup>294</sup> This is not the title that Charlemagne is called in his lifetime, but his position would later be given this title. As the eventual heirs of his position took this title, Charlemagne would eventually become known as the first Holy Roman Emperor.



with detailed organization and oversight. He also conceded lands to the Church and gave many gifts to Saint Peter's Basilica and the popes. Through these actions, he intertwined both entities as he promoted conversion, utilized churchmen as his closest advisors, regulated church practice in his kingdom, and dipped into Church affairs throughout the known world.

However, his legacy is not this simple. His story is nearly impossible to organize with all the movements, emissaries, and relationships he pursued. The context and scope of his reign contained complex relationships with a variety of powers: the Eastern Empire proved to be essential for his legitimacy, a rival, a member of the catholic Church,<sup>295</sup> friend, and manipulator of the West; the Church in Rome was his closest foreign ally, with the popes being dependent on the king and promoted him to his most significant position, while both can be said to have manipulated the other;<sup>296</sup> and further complications existed in the relationships with several Caliphates, the Saxons, and even his brother and his brother's family.

Gibbon, whose goal is to record the whole, highlights the relationship of Charlemagne and the popes. Following the Second Council of Nicaea, Gibbon points to the reaction of Rome as the official split between East and West. He does not, however, attribute this wholly to theological differences. This “separation of Rome and Italy” handed over the “empire to the less orthodox Charlemagne” because “they were compelled to choose between rival nations: religion

---

<sup>295</sup> This is an intentional differentiation between catholic, meaning universal, against the Catholic, or Roman Catholic Church, that brings unique complexities to the discussion of the Church up to this point, during this era, and will be an official differentiation between the Eastern and Western Churches within two centuries of Charlemagne's death.

<sup>296</sup> The papal manipulations are primarily seen through the Donation of Quierzy and of Constantine, with Charlemagne reacting inconsistently to papal cries for help. Both also gain great power from the relationship, of which many would argue was the true intent of the relationship, rather than genuine piety or partnership.

was not the sole motive of their choice.”<sup>297</sup> Gibbon paints a picture of a corrupted prince in Charlemagne, who brings a “bigger sword” than Constantinople, and therefore, he protects or somewhat subdues the Catholic Church. He points to this power as being the only reason why the Church in Rome would choose, or even be able, to separate themselves from the Roman Empire that Gibbon grieved.

Gibbon continues his scathing rebuke of Charlemagne. He acknowledges 'the great' and 'saint' moniker of Charles. Still, he attributes it not to what the king accomplished but because he sufficiently contrasted to the heinous barbarian kings of the Merovingians. Gibbon, looking at Charlemagne as a king, points to his removal of Carloman's sons and the beheading of thousands of Saxons in reaction to one of their many rebellions, and as a man, to Charlemagne's many wives and concubines, which the latter's “bastards... he bestowed on the church,” while enforcing the “long celibacy” of his daughters despite their “licentious manners”; as reasons for calling praises of the king’s morality misjudgments. Gibbon attributes military success to Charlemagne's superior forces—in number and skill—over the “savage or degenerate nations, who were incapable of confederating for their common safety” and argues the king “might behold with envy the Saracen trophies of his grandfather.” He claims the king's busyness is just “a vagrant life of a Frank” and also minimizes his vast annals as “a series of occasional and minute edicts,” but does acknowledge “he wished to improve the laws and character of the Franks,” which “deserves praise.” Gibbon blames Charlemagne for Louis's eventual failure because the empire's “union and stability” depended on him. When he died, the bishops had been given so much power that they “stripped and degraded” Louis. While acknowledging his vast education reform

---

<sup>297</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 645.

and introduction of arts, Gibbon criticizes the king's intellectual ability. However, on this acknowledgment, Gibbon does conclude:

The curiosity of the human mind must ultimately tend to its improvement, and the encouragement of learning reflects the purest and most pleasing luster on the character of Charlemagne. The dignity of his person, the length of his reign, the prosperity of his arms, the vigor of his government, and the reverence of distant nations distinguish [him] from the royal crowd, and Europe dates a new era from his restoration of the Western Empire.<sup>298</sup>

However, Gibbon's ultimate criticism of Charlemagne shifts to Emperor Charles IV.

Gibbon portrays the story of Charles IV—who was nearly equidistant from Charlemagne as Charlemagne was to Constantine—by painting the picture of a relatively minor king being illegitimately crowned by a pope, not from but rivaling Rome. Even then, Charles IV was only king by default as he was the only primary option for the pope who did not die in the Hundred Years War. Gibbon, the lover of Classical Rome, points to the ornate king “who concealed his weakness under the mask of ostentation” to Caesar Augustus, “who disguised his strength under the semblance of modesty.”<sup>299</sup> He ultimately uses Charles IV to represent the position of Holy Roman Emperor—a position first attributed to Charlemagne and would then cease after the Napoleonic Wars shortly after Gibbon's death—as a farce.

There are many ways in which Gibbon's analysis is correct. Charles was chosen as the protector of the Church in Rome instead of Constantinople, which, in Gibbon's eyes, created a long-suffering separation between the Eastern and Western Roman Empires. Charlemagne then took upon himself the protector of the whole West, and from Aachen, he would send out both civil and ecclesiastical edicts with perceived freneticism. He had multiple wives; some died while others he removed from his presence, ignoring the political implications, and he did have

---

<sup>298</sup> Ibid. 645–6.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid. 648.

numerous concubines. The difficulty of this is compounded when you also consider there is no record of correction from any Christian leaders and biblical scholars surrounding him. The weakness of his heirs allowed the statutes within Charlemagne's capitularies to then be manipulated by the clergy, which Gibbon uses as a way to discredit Charlemagne's legacy. McKitterick points this out by looking at the *Admonitio Generalis* and how these regulations transformed the role of the bishops who, instead of having the king define their role in society, "now took it upon themselves to explain the role of the king."<sup>300</sup> In the continuation of a Holy Roman Emperor, weakness was not always a problem. It did not take long for this system to be corrupted by the Emperor and Pope, with the strife between the civil and Church leaders becoming common occurrences in the European political landscape for at least the next nine hundred years.

Despite the weakness of his heirs and the imperfections of Charlemagne, Gibbon's criticism cannot be entirely accepted. Charlemagne strongly loved the Church and was dedicated to doing all he could. Constantinople was being run by an emperor who was, until she removed him and established her own rule, a puppet emperor of his mother. He did not always rush to the aid of the pleading popes, but Rome also maintained significant stability under his rule. When greater Italy revolted, he moved swiftly to keep the peace. In many ways, the Western World was united under his singular role, but this is not something he chose to handle by himself; he surrounded himself with and relied on many significant people inside and outside the Church. The failure of his heirs to maintain his stature was partially due to his sons, who showed more significant potential and died before Charlemagne, so the whole power and system that Charlemagne aimed to establish had fallen into the hands of his weakest son. McKitterick also

---

<sup>300</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 15.

points out in her discussion on the *Admonitio Generalis* that what made Charlemagne's rule successful was his creativity in facing problems, so when his heirs tried to replicate him instead of innovating themselves, they could not repeat his effectiveness.<sup>301</sup> With this, we also cannot attest to Charlemagne's weaknesses and the sins of his heirs. Ultimately, we see the king's heart and desire for his household, kingdom, and Church through how he organized the division of his possessions upon his death.

Charlemagne left an impressive legacy. He has been referred to as “the Father of Europe,” he is given credit for his very own Renaissance, would be called the Holy Christian Emperor, and today there is the Charlemagne Prize. Beyond these titular references, he can be credited with the initiation of an education system in Europe<sup>302</sup> and the opening of liturgical understanding to the laymen. Regarding the Papal See, Charlemagne did much to establish and expand the pope's role in Europe, as he officially assigned them the possession of Italy and partnered with them as the most prominent European ruler of the time. Charlemagne could not have done this alone, but he accomplished these feats by building relationships with some of his time's greatest thinkers and powers, which should be considered an addition to, not a detraction of, the greatness of his legacy. Regardless of the weakness or manipulation of the men who would later inherit his land or title, Charlemagne worked to improve the Church and State simultaneously, using each one to benefit the other.

---

<sup>301</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms*, 789-95.

<sup>302</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 263.

## A Christian West

While studying in Italy, I was first introduced to Constantine and Church History as a field of study in the final semester of my undergraduate religious degree. My first impression/encounter with this emperor who converted to Christianity was not positive. I saw a pagan ruler taking on the name of a Christian but not behaving like one. I studied the heroes that made up the cult of martyrs and then saw their religion get manipulated by the masses as they prioritized pleasing the king. When my class visited Rome, I saw Vatican City with Saint Peter's and the Vatican Museums, full of riches and a focus on human skill and beauty, not the glory of God, as well as the Roman Pantheon converted into the Catholic Basilica of St. Mary and the Martyrs. I was distraught by what appeasing the masses had done to religion, knowing the stories of those who have given their lives for the religion to see their names on churches with riches and pagan gods they fought against.

This is some variation of how many post-modern thinkers view the Christian Church. The governmental support of Christianity, starting with Constantine, has tied the religion to civil power and the decisions these leaders make. This is a significant reason why, since the Enlightenment, many observers have criticized the Church and the state institutions that have directly or indirectly supported religion. While I believe many of these criticisms are entirely legitimate regardless of one's perspective, I also acknowledge that we cannot evaluate the authenticity of an individual's religion, including these significant historical characters.

I say this not to summarize my views or aim in the project but to reveal how the topic has long been a personal passion of mine. My research has been to understand better how these Church and State relations have developed and how essential the relationship has been in

forming our modern world. The work that these men did, though I believe they each did so for personal reasons, transformed the world that we live in.

In this study, we see the creation of three heroes of their time and the generations to come. Clovis is called the New Constantine, a sign of his greatness, by his primary historian, Gregory, Bishop of Tours. Pope Hadrian would push Charlemagne to “imitate and revive the name of the great Constantine.”<sup>5</sup> Hadrian's allusion to Constantine is accompanied by the writing of the apocryphal *Donation of Constantine* and is symbolic of the growth of the relationship between Church and State.

The *Donation of Constantine*, presented to Charlemagne by Hadrian, aimed to get the king's support for the papal powers in the lands that Constantine had left behind when he moved his capital to Constantinople. Hadrian presented a letter that Constantine had supposedly written to Pope Sylvester. Nelson summarizes its content:

After beginning in the manner of a decree, the text swiftly became a lengthy doctrinal statement or Creed (cc. 1–5), then turned into Constantine's autobiographical account of being struck down by leprosy, the pagan priests' suggestion that bathing in the blood of innocent children would cure his sickness, his compassion for the grief of the children's mothers, and his refusal of the 'remedy' (c. 6). Saints Peter and Paul then appeared to Constantine in a dream, told him to seek Pope Sylvester, who had fled the emperor's persecution, and promised that baptism by Sylvester would cure the emperor's leprosy. Awakening, Constantine summoned Sylvester, who imposed penance on him. Constantine renounced paganism, was baptized by Sylvester, cured of leprosy, and given the post-baptismal anointing. Sylvester explained to Constantine the power Christ gave to St Peter, and the emperor accepted Peter and his deputies as his intercessors with God (cc. 7–11). The following section consisted of Constantine's forged decree, which I summarized: The pope shall have supremacy over Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and all the churches of God in the world. The holy law shall rule where St Peter was martyred. Constantine built a church within the Lateran Palace with a baptistery to be the head and summit of all churches. He has also constructed the churches of Saints Peter and Paul. He has conferred on these churches to provide lights, estates in the east and west, and various islands to be administered.<sup>6</sup>

In this letter, Constantine also supposedly specifies the powers and allowances his bishops in the West would enjoy after he departs from Rome/Italy and the end of his direct rule over it. Hadrian draws on his lineage, traced back to Sylvester, and acknowledges the respect of Charlemagne for the empire, establishing Charlemagne as Constantine's heir. Hadrian's letter and the supposed gift of Constantine aimed to establish a grander set of powers than the ones. Hadrian had already received from Charlemagne in his Donation of Quierzy. Still, it would be a less grand inauguration than what Pope Leo did on Christmas Day, 800.

Nelson defined the importance of this moment by stating, "The Donation crystallized the idea of a dual regime, of papal power backed by (and thus heavily influenced by) imperial power. This was to assume visual form in the later 790s and would continue to have an immense impact in later centuries."<sup>7</sup> Even though the documents presented would be proved to be forgeries later in the Middle Ages as tensions between Church and State grew, for Charlemagne and Hadrian, it was essentially a power-sharing agreement that specified their respective jurisdictions.

Clovis does not play a role in the story of the *Donation*, which is symbolic of his role in the larger significant story. Clovis did not have jurisdiction over Italy; instead, he needed to stay away from the Lombards that separated him from Rome. Clovis was given official recognition by Constantinople but not by the Roman Church; however, the Church would recognize later Merovingians. These Merovingians would solidify the power that Clovis established, and as they slowly ceded power to the Carolingians, they would become less Germanic and more Roman. This allowed Charlemagne to have the relationship with the popes that he had and allowed him to be Germanic and Roman, making him a suitable heir to Constantine.



Therefore, what we see in the story of the *Donation of Constantine* is the evolution in the West of the Roman government, the Church, and their relationship. Under Constantine, the Roman government was moved from the West, and the Church was promoted, being unofficially given previously unforeseen power, while both civil and religious authorities supported one another. After that, Clovis, the unmentioned and underappreciated king, becomes the leader who can unite the ruling kingdoms (Germanic) and the local magistrates (the bishops) north of Italy. This unification allowed the regrowth of culture and religion in the land, forced into a mode of mere survival as the Roman governmental structure collapsed. Building on this basis, the Carolingians could rule with power and pursue expansion goals. In this dynasty, Charlemagne, its greatest ruler, re-established the Roman empire's militaristic success and educational achievements while supporting and being supported by the popes. Hadrian valorized his attainments and their partnership by holding up an idolizing mirror of the relationship of their proverbial forefathers, Sylvester and Constantine, to establish a similar *modus operandi* that cedes rule to the bishops with the Roman emperor at the helm of the empire.

This story also represents the difficulties and criticisms brought upon this relationship. Primarily, we see the manipulation of this relationship. Each ruler would gain political power and new support from the bishops and Christians in general, though to varying degrees. The two rulers who converted from paganism did not entirely give up their previous religious practices, at least not immediately. It is also worth noting that their promotion of religious leaders, in many ways, replaced the rule of civil leaders who had previously disrupted the monarch's power through their use of their military influence/power. The *Donation of Constantine* highlighted the perception of imperial governance and how they used the bishops. Even though the document would prove illegitimate, it would still reflect the outcome of Constantine's decisions. On the

other hand, the bishops would also use these relationships to their advantage. What Hadrian presented to Charlemagne was a document that ceded control and civic duties to the Church. The pope could argue that this was a biblical role of the bishops over their congregations; they could not legitimize this power over any state entity through biblical terms. The Catholic Church claimed tradition to justify their actions. It could point to the times since Constantine to verify the position they played in the time of Charlemagne. Still, the representation of such a document manipulated this argument from an argument of tradition to an argument of official documentation, which was wholly an untruth. This argument, combined with the falsification of the record, would then prove to future generations that this whole ordeal was a gross manipulation by Pope Hadrian.

I believe these manipulations and their multiplication through the Middle Ages have cast a shadow over the decisions of these three rulers. We can see through their actions, even when they were advantageous and did not wholly subscribe to standard Christian practice, that they built a relationship with the Church that established an effective partnership. The relationship worked because their power existed on two separate plains, the physical and the spiritual, so they could usually rule together without competing. This was a shift from the previous regimes: in Rome, the Senate had lost its ability to control the emperor. Instead, it became the man with the most vital support from the military who would rule, and they would only lead as long as they held onto this support; in the Germanic West, it would be the most vital member of the strongest tribe. And even in what the Merovingians would fall into, the competition between three thrones limited the power of any single man. The partnership with the Church that each of these three men established allowed both Church and State to grow in accordance with one another, promoting and keeping the other in balance, a truly symbiotic relationship.

## Bibliography

### Primary

Anonymous, "Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca," in *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine Views, A Source History*, edited by Lieu and Montserrat, 96–142. London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1995.

Anonymous. "The Origin of Constantine: The Anonymous Valesianus Pars Prior (*Origo Constantini*)." Translated by Jane Stevenson; annotated by Samuel N. C. Lieu. In *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine views—A source history*, edited by Samuel N. C. Lieu and Dominic Montserrat, 39–62. London, and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Anonymous. "The Panegyrici Latini" In *Praise of Later Roman Emperors*. Translated with introduction and commentary by C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994.

Athanasius. "Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria." in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series. Volume IV*. Translated under the supervision of Henry Wace and Philip Schaff. New York; Charles Scribners Sons. 1907.

Augustine. *The City of God*. Translated by Marcus Dods. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2013.

Boniface. *The Letters of Saint Boniface*. Translated by Ephraim Emerton and American Council of Learned Societies. New York: Norton. 1976.

Eihnhard. *Life of Charles the Emperor*. Translated in *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious: Lives by Einhard, Notker, Ermoldus, Thegan, and the Astronomer*. Translated by Thomas F. X. Noble, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.

Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*. Translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

Eusebius. *Church History*. Translated by Paul L. Maier. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007.

Gregory of Tours. *The History of the Franks*. Translated by Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin Books. 1974.

Julian. *The Works of Emperor Julian*. Translated by Wilmer C. Wright. Loeb Classical Library 13. Volumes I-III. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913.

Lactantius. *De Mortibus Persecutorum*. Edited by Kevin W. Katz. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013.

Murray, Alexander Callander, ed. *From Rome to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Notker the Stammerer. *The Deeds of Emperor Charles the Great*. Translated in *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious: Lives by Einhard, Notker, Ermoldus, Thegan, and the Astronomer*. Translated by Thomas F. X. Noble. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.

Scholz, Bernhard Walter. *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories*. Translated by Bernhard Walter Scholz, with Barbara Rogers. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1972.

Zosimus. *New History*. Translated by Ronald T. Ridley. Canberra, Australia: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982.

### Secondary

Allard, Paul. *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/eastcarolina/detail.action?docID=6899885>.

Awoa, Andre Cyrille. "Audientia Episcopalis as a Form of Exercising Authority in the Ancient Church. Reconsideration of Augustine's Experiences / Audientia Episcopalis comme Forme d'exercice du gouvernement dans l'église antique. Une relecture de l'expérience d'Augustin." *Kościół i Prawo* 6, no. 2 (2017): 9-21.

Bardill, Jonathan. *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*. New York: Cambridge, 2012.

Barnes, Timothy. "Constantine and the Christians of Persia." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985): 126–36.

Barnes, Timothy. "Emperors, Panegyrics, Prefects, Provinces, and Palaces." *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 9 (1996): 532–552.

Barnes, Timothy. *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*. Somerset: Wiley, 2011.

Barnes, Timothy. *From Eusebius to Augustine*. Aldershot, UK, and Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1991.

Barnes, Timothy. *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Barrett, Graham, and George Woudhuysen. "Remigius and the 'important News' of Clovis Rewritten." *Antiquité tardive* 24 (2017): 471–500.

Boojamra, John L. "Constantine and the Council of Arles: The Foundations of Church and State in the Christian East." *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 43, no. 1–4 (Spring, 1998): 129-141.

- Brown, Peter. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003.
- Claussen, M. A. *The Reform of the Frankish Church: Chrodegang of Metz and the Regula Canoniorum in the Eighth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Costambeys, Marios, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean. *The Carolingian World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Daly, William M. “Clovis: How Barbaric, How Pagan?” *Speculum* 69, no. 3 (1994): 619–64.
- Davies, Wendy, and Paul Fouracre. *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe*. New York: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Davis, Jennifer R. *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Depreux, Philippe. “Ambitions et Limites Des Réformes Culturelles à l’époque Carolingienne.” *Revue historique* 304, no. 3 (2002): 721–53.
- Drake, H. A. “Eusebius and the True Cross” in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36, no.1 (1985): 1–22.
- Drake, H. A. *Constantine and the Bishops*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Drake, H. A. *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Edwards, M. J. *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Fouracre, Paul. *Eternal Light and Earthly Concerns: Belief and the Shaping of Medieval Society*. Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2021.
- Geary, Patrick J. *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Gibbon, Edward. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, edited by D. M. Low. New York; Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960.
- Hen, Yitzhak. *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, AD 481– 751*. Leiden: Brill, 1995.
- Hen, Yitzhak. *Roman Barbarians: The Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West*. New York: Palgrave, 2007.
- Hen, Yitzhak. “The Uses of the Bible and the Perception of Kingship in Merovingian Gaul.” *Early Medieval Europe* 7, no. 3 (1998): 277–89.
- Hen, Yitzhak. *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Jones, A. H. M. *Constantine, and the Conversion of Europe*. London: The English Universities Press, 1948.

- Lenski, Noel Emmanuel. *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Lenski, Noel Emmanuel. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*. Revised Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010.
- Lieu, Samuel N. C., and Dominic Montserrat. *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine views—A Source History*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Mattingly, Harold. “Jovius and Herculius.” *The Harvard Theological Review* 45, no. 2 (1952): 131–4.
- McKitterick, Rosamond. “Constructing the Past in the Early Middle Ages: The Case of the Royal Frankish Annals.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, no. 7 (1997): 101–29.
- McKitterick, Rosamond. *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- McKitterick, Rosamond. *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.
- Meyer, Marc A. *Culture of Christendom: Essays in Medieval History in Commemoration of Denis L. T. Bethell*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003.
- Moore, Michael Edward. *A Sacred Kingdom: Bishops and the Rise of Frankish Kingship, 300–850*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011.
- Moorhead, John. “Clovis's Motives for Becoming a Catholic Christian.” *Journal of Religious History* 13, no. 4 (1985): 329–9.
- Nelson, Janet L. King, and Emperor: A New Life of Charlemagne. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019.
- O’Dahl, Charles “Constantine's Epistle to the Bishops at the Council of Arles: A Defence of Imperial Authorship.” *Journal of Religious History* 17, no. 3 (June 1993): 274–89.
- Parry, Nathaniel. *How Christmas Became Christmas: The Pagan and Christian Origins of the Beloved Holiday*. Jefferson, NC; McFarland & Company, 2022.
- Pohlsander, Hans A. *The Emperor Constantine*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York; London: Routledge, 2004.
- Potter, David. *Constantine the Emperor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Raymond Van Dam, “Constantine's First Visit to Rome with Diocletian in 303,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 11, no. 1 (2018): 6-41.
- Schott, Jeremy M. *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Shanzer, Danuta. “Dating the Baptism of Clovis: The Bishop of Vienne vs. the Bishop of Tours.” *Early Medieval Europe* 7, no. 1 (1998): 29–57.
- Stephenson, Paul. *Constantine: Unconquered emperor Christian Victor*. London: Quercus, 2009.

- Story, Joanna. *Charlemagne and Rome: Alcuin and the Epitaph of Pope Hadrian I*. Oxford; Oxford Academic, 2023.
- Sullivan, Richard E. *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What did it Signify?* Boston: Heath, 1959.
- Wallace-Hadrill, J. M. *The Frankish Church*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1983. Wallace-Hadrill, J. M. *The Long-- Haired Kings*. London: Methuen, 1962.
- Wood, I. N. *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751*. New York: Longman, 1994.
- Wood, I. N. "Gregory of Tours and Clovis." *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 63, no. 2 (1985): 249–272.