



Constantine and the Christian Empire

Second Edition

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V

THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN AND CONSTANTINE'S CONVERSION

The emperor saw with his own eyes in the heavens a trophy of the cross arising from the light of the sun, carrying the message, Conquer By This.

Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* I. 28

By the beginning of the year 312, the surviving members of the Galerian tetrarchy and the Herculian usurper of the imperial capital had separated into two political alliances and were making preparations for civil wars. Over the next eighteen months, Constantine and Maxentius would battle for control of the western half, and Licinius and Maximin would fight for control of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Although political ambitions inspired these conflicts, religious positions inflamed them as well. Constantine was the senior partner in his alliance with Licinius, and he had early broken from the tetrarchic policy of persecution and instead adopted a position of toleration in his domains. Maximin was the senior partner in his pact with Maxentius, and he had early followed the Galerian policy of persecution and lately intensified the program to revive paganism. Subjects of the empire might have expected that victories for Constantine and Licinius would result in an end to the Christian persecution and a return to religious toleration. They got more than that. On the march to Rome, Constantine experienced what he thought were revelations from the God of the Christians; he adopted this Deity as his divine patron and defeated his rival behind the sacred talismanic symbols of the Christian religion. His victory over Maxentius in the west and that of Licinius over Maximin in the east resulted in the ending of the "Great Persecution" of Christianity, and the beginning of a partnership between the Christian Church and the Roman state.¹

Though the eastern emperors had come close to conflict as they divided up the domains of Galerius in the summer of 311, the western rulers actually went to war first in 312. Posing as the pious avenger of his father, Maxentius denied imperial recognition to Constantine, overthrew the statues of his rival in his domains, and declared war on the Gallic emperor in 311. Posing

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Map 3 The Italian Campaign of 312.

as the enlightened champion of the oppressed, Constantine accepted the challenge, carried out a *dammatio memoriae* of the treacherous Maximian, and prepared for an invasion of Italy in the spring of 312 (Map 3).²

Maxentius had little support among his subjects and lacked skill as a field commander, but he had far greater military resources than Constantine. High rates of taxation, brutal means of repression, and the exiling of two bishops had led to declining popularity for Maxentius among both his pagan and Christian subjects. He had let his father capture Severus and a prefect reconquer Africa while he had remained behind the formidable Aurelian Walls when facing Galerius. However, he remunerated his soldiers generously; and they were proud of their successful efforts to keep their emperor in power against the attempts of Severus, Galerius, Maximian, and Alexander to oust him. With the Praetorian and Imperial Horse Guards of Rome who had put him in power, the troops he had taken from Severus, and the forces

he had withdrawn from Africa, he had a total of about 100,000 soldiers which he could use against invasions from the north. He stationed many of these in fortified towns across northern Italy – in the west at Susa and Turin to guard against Constantine, and in the east at Verona and Aquileia to watch for Licinius. Meanwhile, he again waited behind the walls of the capital with a strong central reserve of his most loyal troops.³

Constantine had solid support among his subjects and possessed skill as a field commander, but he had far fewer military resources than Maxentius. Military victories on the frontiers, building programs in the cities, and mild rule over his domains had led to great popularity for Constantine among both the pagan and Christian populace of the west. He had made several inspection tours through his provinces, ordering useful rebuilding projects and fostering religious toleration. He had led his troops in person, beating back barbarians, and putting down usurpations. Like the earlier Illyrian soldier emperors, he had formed a strong central corps of mobile field forces, the *comitatenses*, which could move swiftly to endangered areas; while like the more recent tetrarchs, he had placed strong detachments of stationary troops, the *limitanei*, in fortified bases which could guard the frontiers. Although the total numbers of his forces may not have been much below those commanded by Maxentius, he could not risk taking the bulk of his army from the Rhine frontier for the Italian campaign. At best, he could lead 25,000 to 40,000 men over the Alps in a bid to overthrow his enemy and liberate Rome. Maxentius therefore had more military forces and was fighting on more familiar ground; but Constantine had a more diversified army and was leading soldiers with more confidence in their commander.⁴

Maxentius proclaimed the god Mars as his “companion,” and invoked the divine spirit of *Roma* as the “protectress of her city” on the coin motifs minted in his regions – the latter was shown in a temple handing him the globe of world rule within the inscription CONSERV URB SVAE (Ill. 21). The Italian tyrant was accused of using *superstitiosa maleficia* by a contemporary pagan orator; and pagan and Christian sources alike reported him employing every religious ritual available to hex the progress of Constantine. He searched the heavens for omens, examined animal entrails for signs, read the Sibylline oracles for prophecies, and sought the *pax deorum* through temple rituals. Constantine also claimed Mars as a divine patron, but presented *Sol* as his special “companion” on the coin motifs circulated in his domains – the latter was depicted offering him the globe of universal power within the inscription SOLI INVICTO COMITI (Ill. 22). The Gallic ruler was reported as following *divina praecepta* by the same orator who criticized the religious practices of his enemy; and both pagan and Christian sources reported him seeking guidance from the “Divine Mind” or “Highest God” for his Italian campaign. Constantine seems initially to have identified *Sol* as this divinity. However, he cannot have forgotten that the sun god was once the patron of Galerius. The policy failures and wretched death of the latter must have



III. 21 Coin of Maxentius with the head and titles of the usurper on the obverse, and the goddess Roma handing him the globe of power in a temple on the reverse (307).



III. 22 Coin of Constantine with the bust and titles of the emperor on the obverse, and Sol holding the globe of universal power on the reverse – with a Christian cross as a mark of issue after the imperial conversion (316).

haunted the thoughts of Constantine as he marched into Italy. The military odds against him, the religious events of recent times, and the psychological stress of a difficult campaign opened his mind to another source of divine aid.⁵

Late in the spring of 312, Constantine marched his army down into east-central Gaul, and south of Vienna (Vienne) he turned east up into the Alps toward the realm of Maxentius. His forces crossed the Cottian Alps via the Mt Cénis pass, and found their route into Italy blocked by the fortified town of *Segusium* (Susa). Rather than be delayed by a siege, the emperor ordered torches thrown at the gates and ladders placed against the walls. His men attacked swiftly and, with flames sweeping through the gates and soldiers leaping over the walls, the garrison and townspeople surrendered quickly. Constantine instructed his troops to suppress the fires and spare the citizens. His aim was to liberate, not to harm, the people of Italy. The major base for the defense of the northwestern region of the peninsula was *Augusta*

Taurinorum (Turin), about 30 miles to the east of Susa where the Dora and Po Rivers converge in the great plain of Cisalpine Italy. The emperor led his men into the plain and found a large body of troops awaiting their approach to the west of Turin. At the center of the enemy army was a wedge of mailed cavalry – called *clibanarii* or *cataphracts* in the ancient sources. With the tactical brilliance of Caesar, Constantine spread out his battle line and let the enemy cavalry ride into the midst of his forces. As his army broadly encircled the enemy lines, Constantine unleashed his horsemen who charged repeatedly at the sides of the rigid *clibanarii* and beat them senseless with iron-tipped clubs. Many of the mailed cavalry were knocked off their mounts into a rising mound of mangled men and armor; others hung helplessly from their saddles as their horses galloped aimlessly across the battlefield. The foot soldiers of Constantine then marched into the fray, and began to cut down the enemy ranks. The surviving Maxentian soldiers fled in disarray toward Turin. The citizens were watching from the ramparts, and closed the great gates of the city against the retreating forces. The victorious Constantinian soldiers chased the remnant of the enemy back to Turin and slaughtered them along the walls as the citizens cheered from above. The huge *Porta Palatina*, the impressive northwestern gate of Roman Turin with its 30-meter-high polygonal towers, still stands as a stark reminder of this Constantinian victory (Ill. 23).⁶

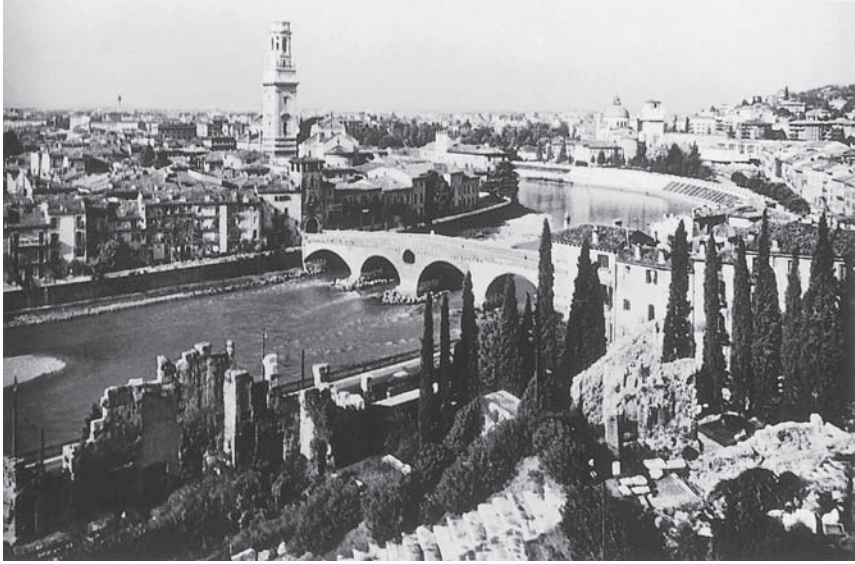


Ill. 23 The *Porta Palatina* of ancient Turin where Constantine defeated Maxentian troops in northwestern Italy.

The swift and clement capture of Susa and the decisive and brutal victory at Turin convinced *Mediolanum* (Milan) and many other towns in the north-central plain to send envoys to Constantine, and to offer supplies and support for his campaign. He was welcomed warmly at Milan, and his army was able to rest there in the middle of the summer of 312.⁷

Northeastern Italy was still held by Maxentian troops. The Italian usurper had stationed a strong garrison in the northeastern plain to guard against invasions through the eastern Alps, and another one at the top of the Adriatic Sea to block the coastal route from Illyricum. He had appointed his new Praetorian Prefect, Ruricius Pompeianus, to be the commander of this sector. Constantine had to overcome these forces before he could turn south and face Maxentius. Thus, he left Milan in late summer, and marched his army eastward. About 50 miles away, he encountered a cavalry contingent blocking the road near *Brixia* (Brescia). He ordered his own horsemen to charge the enemy, and quickly broke their ranks and put them to flight. They fled back to the major base for the defense of the northeastern region of the peninsula at *Verona*, about 40 miles to the east along the Adige River. The topography of this ancient Roman city presented special difficulties which severely tested the strategic ability and tactical agility of Constantine. The Adige flows south out of the Alps until just to the southwest of Verona it makes a radical bend and flows back up toward the northeast; it then turns east for a short distance beneath some high hills; and then again makes a radical bend and flows back to the south before finally turning east and running off to the Adriatic. The river thus formed the pattern of a horseshoe running up the western, around the northern, and down the eastern sides of ancient Verona, which was strategically located within it. Since a great defensive wall had been constructed across the open southern section of the city in the days of Gallienus, and the one bridge leading over the northern curve of the rapid and swirling river could easily be blocked, the city was a nearly impregnable fortress.

Clearly recognizing the problems confronting him, Constantine decided to surround and besiege the city. He sent a small detachment of soldiers north, and had them cross the river where it was fordable; he then had them come back south, and take control of the high ground above the northern end of the city inhibiting escapes over the bridge or through the river. Meanwhile the emperor moved the bulk of his army to the south of the city, and began setting up siege lines before the walls. The enemy came out and gave battle; but the Constantinian troops drove them back, and completed the siege works along the ramparts. Somehow Pompeianus had escaped before the ring was complete; and he rode eastward for reinforcements. He soon returned with a large force and threatened to surround Constantine's lines. Like Caesar at Alesia, Constantine divided his army, having part continue the siege of the garrison in the city, and having part attack the reinforcements in the field. He led the charge against the latter himself,



Ill. 24 Roman Verona set in a bend in the Adige River where Constantine besieged Maxentian troops in northeastern Italy.

cutting a bloody path through the middle of the enemy lines, and inspiring a heroic effort from the troops under his command. Pompeianus was killed in the *mêlée*, and his army decisively defeated. After witnessing the battle, the Verona garrison lost hope, and swiftly opened the city to Constantine (Ill. 24). After hearing of this victory, the forces at *Aquileia* sent envoys to offer their surrender; and the rest of the towns in northeastern Italy joyfully saluted their liberator.⁸

By the autumn of 312, Constantine controlled Cisalpine Italy from the western Alpine passes to the eastern Adriatic ports and from the northern peaks to the Po River – a 300-mile-wide and 100-mile-deep area of Roman Italy. Maxentius had unwisely left the regions between the Po and Rome largely undefended. The cities in Venetia, Etruria, and Umbria proclaimed for the cause of Constantine, and made it known that they would assist the passage of his army through their areas on the 300-mile march to the capital. A panegyrist compared the speed with which Constantine moved his forces southward with the rapidity of movement employed by Scipio and Caesar in their historic republican campaigns. However, this panegyrist, along with other ancient sources, recorded the sense of foreboding which Constantine felt as he crossed the Apennine Mountains by the Flaminian Way and approached Rome. His arduous summer campaign in the north had been victorious, but Maxentius had held about half his army in reserve

in Latium, leaving the military odds still around two to one against Constantine. Maxentius appeared to be using the same strategy which had defeated Severus and Galerius – remaining behind the Aurelian Walls and offering bribes to enemy troops. Constantine was so respected by his soldiers that he did not need to worry much about desertions from his troops. Yet, his military forces were strongest in mobile horse cavalry and most suited for open field combat. If Maxentius stayed within the Aurelian Walls, investing the 18-kilometer circuit of Rome would be most difficult. Moreover, the information Constantine had about Maxentius, including intimate details from his wife Fausta, had made the Gallic emperor aware of the superstitious proclivities of his opponent, and of the religious enchantments he would be employing against him. If even the formidable Galerius, with all his reverence for the Olympian gods and with all the power of his eastern troops, had not been able to defeat Maxentius, Constantine could not have helped but worry about his own chances of success as he moved closer to Rome.⁹

In this situation, the mind of Constantine turned to religion and the eyes of the emperor looked to the heavens. With the military forces and religious rites arrayed against him, Constantine became convinced that he needed “some more powerful aid” than human troops and pagan deities offered. He recalled how his pagan predecessors had put their trust in the many gods of Olympian polytheism and had used all the powers of their offices to destroy the Christian religion; they had failed in their aims and suffered unhappy ends. He remembered how his father had honored the “God supreme above all” and had refused to enforce the worst persecution edicts against the Christian faithful; he had ruled successfully and died happily. So, he decided to call upon this “Highest Deity,” and seek his aid and power in this time of trial.¹⁰

The emperor raised his eyes to the sky and implored the *Deus Summus* to reveal his identity and to proffer his help. Constantine later confided to Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea what followed, and he swore by an oath that his story was true. He said that just after midday “he saw with his own eyes in the heavens a trophy of the cross arising from the light of the sun, carrying the message, Conquer By This” (*Hoc Signo Victor Eris* in the original Latin of Constantine, but TOUTO NIKAI in the Greek translation of Eusebius).¹¹ The emperor did not completely comprehend the meaning of this apparition; but that night he had a dream in which Christ appeared to him and admonished him to use the sacred sign of the Christian faith as a defensive talisman for his army.¹² As Constantine had been a protector of Christian believers in his domains, there were Christian clergymen traveling in his entourage and praying for the success of his campaign. He questioned them on the meaning of his revelations and on the sacred signs of their religion. They responded that the cross was the symbol of the victory over death won through the saving act of Christ. They probably informed him that Christian *fideles* were marked with the sign of the cross at baptism, and were told

to invoke the name of Christ whenever they felt endangered by demonic forces. The emperor learned that the *crux et nomen Christi* were potent apotropaic signs which could be used against the forces of evil. Constantine probably remembered the famous incidents when the failure of an *haruspex* at Antioch to find any signs in a sacrificial animal had been blamed on the hexing of the sacrifice by a Christian palace worker marking his forehead with the symbol of the cross; and when the failure of the Oracle of Apollo at Didyma to utter prophecies was blamed on the existence of the *iusti*. The emperor must have reasoned that if Christian signs were more powerful than pagan rites, the Christian Divinity would be the *Deus Summus*, and the sacred symbols of Christ would overcome the superstitious magic of Maxentius. At this moment, Constantine converted to the Christian God. His conversion was not the final decision in a long internal search for moral regeneration and personal salvation; but it was not a momentary act of pure political expediency either. Solar syncretism had made him a seeker of the "Highest God." Cultural toleration had opened him to Christian influences. Superstitious religion had made him a believer in talismanic symbols. His revelatory experiences convinced him that the God of the Christians had answered his sincere prayers, and that the *signa* of their cult would meet his dire needs.¹³ The following morning he summoned his workmen, and directed them to fashion a new battle standard known as the *Labarum* – it was a gold spear crossed by a bar holding a banner with the imperial portrait, and topped with a monogram made out of the first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek, the letter Chi traversed by the letter Rho (☩). It therefore combined the two potent apotropaic symbols of Christianity. Constantine communicated his religious revelations to his soldiers, and ordered them to mark their shields with the *caeleste signum Dei*, the monogram of Christ, which would serve as a safeguard against the enemy. If this personal account of his conversion experience had not been preserved in the *Vita Constantini* by Eusebius, something similar to it would have to be assumed based on the references to prayers, dreams, divine inspiration, and sacred *signa* found in other written sources, and on the use of crosses and Christograms seen on Roman imperial coins.¹⁴ Suffice it to say here that Constantine did not just tell this story to his biographer, but he also related it to his family and friends, and that it became common knowledge in late antiquity. When a usurper tried to overthrow his heirs a dozen years after his death, his daughter Constantina and his son Constantius II reacted by issuing bronze coins invoking the divine vision of their father and the divine institution of their dynasty – the coin depicted an angel crowning Constantine as he held a *Labarum* marked with the monogram of Christ within the inscription HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS, the celestial message of his vision. The Theodosian Dynasty later issued bronze coins recalling Constantine's use of the Christogram on his shields – it depicted an angel marking a shield with the Christogram within the inscription SALUS REIPUBLICAE (Ills. 25 and 26).¹⁵