Faith Seeking Understanding: God and Philosophy in the Middle Ages

The Fall of Rome and the Early Middle Ages

Dr T. R. Baylor

Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

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Decline of the Roman Empire

- Latin Christendom was built on the ruins of the Roman Empire.
- It is generally agreed that the barbarian invasions of the 5C mark a definitive end to the Empire.
- To understand how that came about, we need to understand a bit of the late Antique context.
- By the beginning of the 5C, the Roman Empire was a shell of itself and had some significant problems.



Economic Problems

- Rome had always had financial difficulties. In the third century it had a massive crisis due to the devaluation of silver in its currency.
- Reforms instituted under Diocletian attempted to stabilise the currency, but inflation continued.
- Rome grew wealthy through conquest and the free labour that slaves provided. But in part because of its dependence on slaves, Rome failed to develop industrial technologies, so there was no need to import/ export.
- Trade took all the money to the eastern side of the empire. Rome ceased conquering new lands in about 200 A.D., and by 400 A.D. trade had declined to about 50% of what it was 200 years earlier (Cantor, *Civ.*, p. 42.)
- To compensate, taxes were raised, which only impoverished more people and slowed economic activity.



Defence Problems

- By the 2C, the Roman frontier was massive and mostly without natural borders.
- It would have required roughly 10% of the population to police it, but middle-class Romans no longer wanted to join the army, and aristocrats couldn't.
- Changes in the climate had been forcing tribes in the North further south, which resulted in a chain reaction of migration and violence (Le Goff, p. 6).
- Since the 2C, Germanic and Gothic tribes had made constant assaults on the northern border. Marcus Aurelius was killed in 180 AD as a result of the barbarian invasions.
- Raiding of border towns shrank communities in the north, lowering population, weakening defences, and strengthening regional military leaders.



Defence Problems

- From the 4C, Rome gave up on defending the border and instead maned outposts from which they might strike out to put down incursions. This was effectively an admission of inability to secure the border.
- The Goth's defeated Gratian at Adrianople when he could no longer wait for support. This was "the thunderclap before the storm" (Le Goff, p. 6).
- Though barbarian tribes to the north were commonly regarded as beast-like, Roman statesmen sometimes offered settlement in the Empire in exchange for military service.
- Roman wars were increasingly fought by low-born peasants, slaves and German mercenaries, many of whom were not the most enthusiastic boosters of the Roman rule. Cantor suggests as many as 50% were German by the 5C (*Civilization*, p. 45).



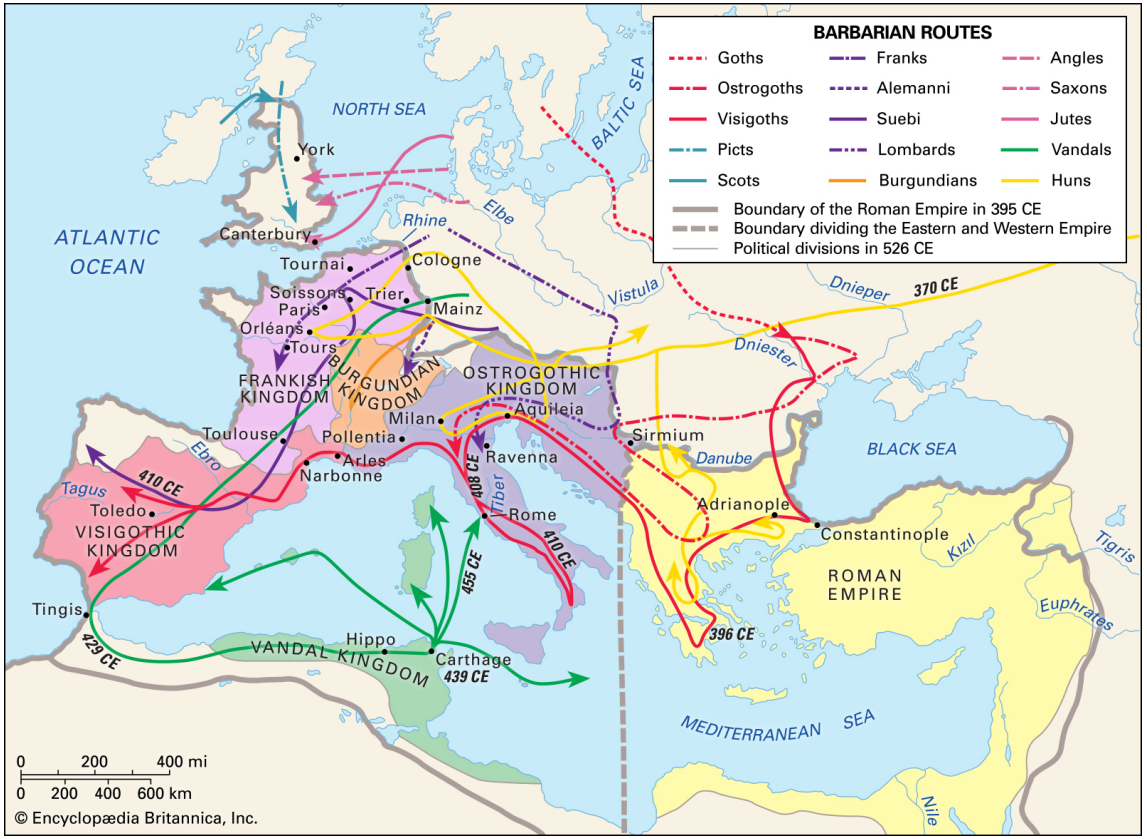
People Problems

- Bouts of plague in the 2-3C lead to steep population decline — perhaps up to 20% (Harper, p. 116).
- In 212 A.D., Carcalla granted the right of citizenship to all inhabitants of the Empire. This was a concession to provinces which had been growing in their political power.
- Classism and injustice was generating discontent, poverty, and famine. Some Romans migrated into Germanic tribes. As Silvian noted, “they prefer to live freely under an appearance of slavery to being slaves under an appearance of liberty” (Le Goff, p. 12).
- As the aristocracy ceased to involve itself with the problems of the state and retreated into wealth, leadership came from other parts of the Empire.
    - Hadrian and Trajan were Spanish.
    - The Severan dynasty was African.
    - Constantine’s father Constantius (right), a peasant from the Balkan’s, became assistant Emperor.



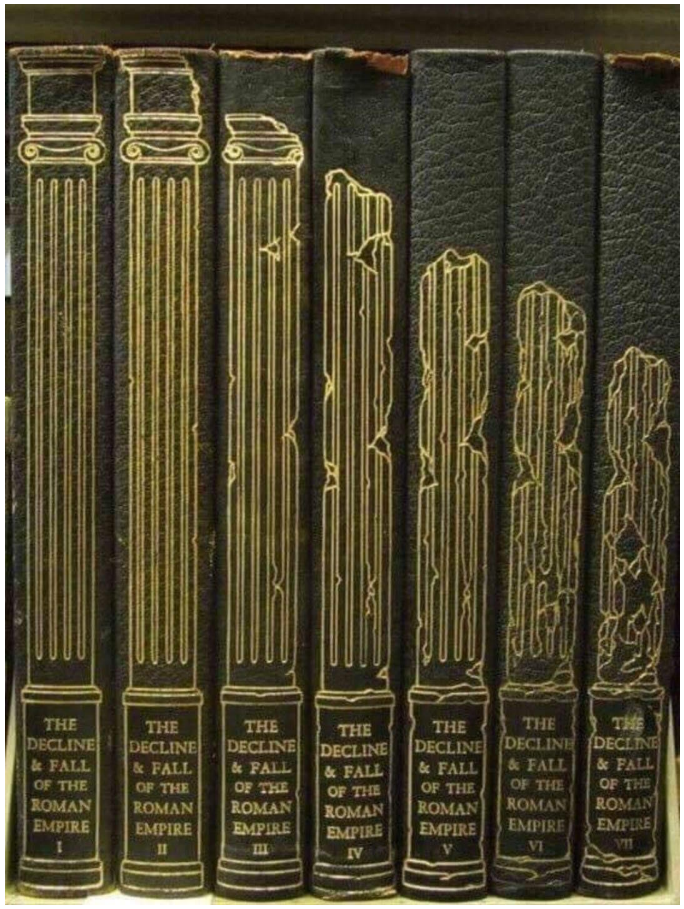
The Fall of Rome

- By the 5C, these problems had become unmanageable and the Empire was very vulnerable.
- In 410 A.D., Alaric and the Visigoths sieged Rome, eventually capturing and plundering it.
- This initiated almost two centuries of conflict that would reshape the map in the West.
- The continual state of conflict would have disastrous effects which would last for centuries shaping Western European economy, society, and culture.



Religion and Roman Collapse

- Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* argues that Christianity was one of two major reasons for the collapse of Rome. He depicts Christianity as opposed to reason, and drawing attention away from the practical business of Government into other-worldly pursuits.
- Gibbon's work includes a fairly pronounced anti-clerical narrative which was fashionable when it was published (1777), but which runs counter to the facts.
- As Wilken notes, Christians engaged in debate with highly educated pagans like Celsus, Julian, and Porphyry for the better part of three centuries (p. 200). After the fall of Rome, Latin Christianity would be the principal means of mediating aspects of Greek and Roman culture to the West.
- Gibbon's theory also involves a fairly essentialist notion of "roman identity". But in reality, this was somewhat fluid.
- Still many pagans in the 5th century blamed the fall of Rome on Christian impiety.



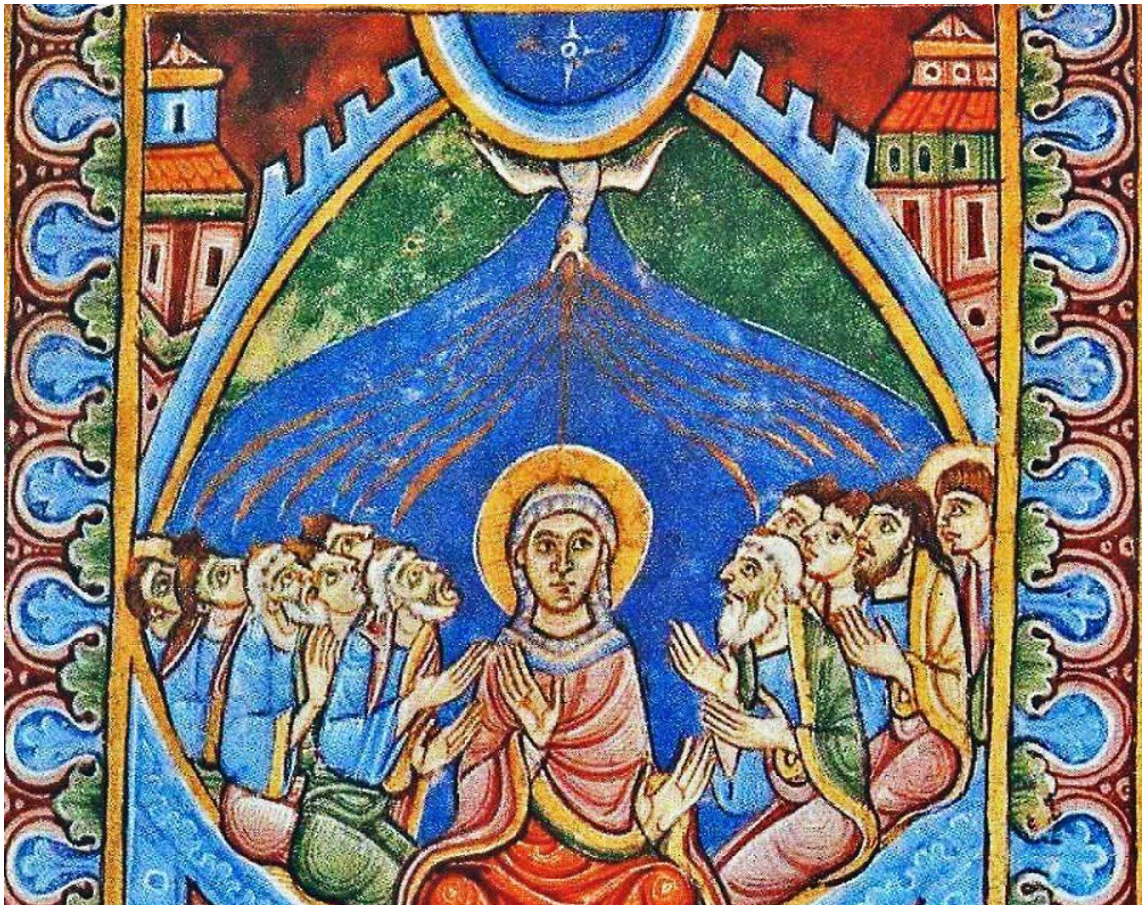
Roman Religion

- Roman religion conceived of divinity as a spectrum — with some gods being more divine than others.
- This kind of polytheism generated a pretty eclectic, non-exclusive religious culture.
- It was widely considered polite to worship regional deities. When travelling, one would commonly offer sacrifices to the god who was the town's patron.
- Provided you worship the Emperor as well, you could worship whatever gods you liked.
- Roman religions also tended to be pretty *worldly*. They were generally about *this* life, e.g., sacrifices were offered to appease the gods, curry their favour, or to curse an enemy.



The Early Christian Church

- Christianity first emerged as a Messianic movement with Palestinian Judaism of the first century.
- In contrast with the Romans, Jews and Christians were monotheistic: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4).
- Divinity is not a spectrum with the gods on one end and humanity on the other (and a number of mediating ‘heroes’). The Jews believed in the unity, simplicity, and absoluteness of God.
- By its nature this has a kind of “universalising” effect. “God” does not name a *genus* of things but the highest reality — that which has no genus, because it exists of and by itself.
- Though Roman law required sacrifice be made to the Emperor, the Jews had been exempted from this law, conferring on Judaism a recognised status.



The Early Christian Church

- Christians were monotheists, and their beliefs and practices were rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- But Christians worshiped Jesus as the eternal Son of God. And they did not keep Jewish law, believing it to have been superseded by the coming of Christ. Consequently, they were kicked out of the synagogues.
- Within 30 years of its founding, the Romans were aware of a Jewish sect following a man named “Christus”. By 64 AD, the Christians were notable enough for Nero to blame them for burning Rome (Grant, p. 78).
- Christianity grew quickly. Jenkins suggests 40k in AD 150, 250k before AD 200 (0.36% of the total population of the Empire), and 1.2M by 250.



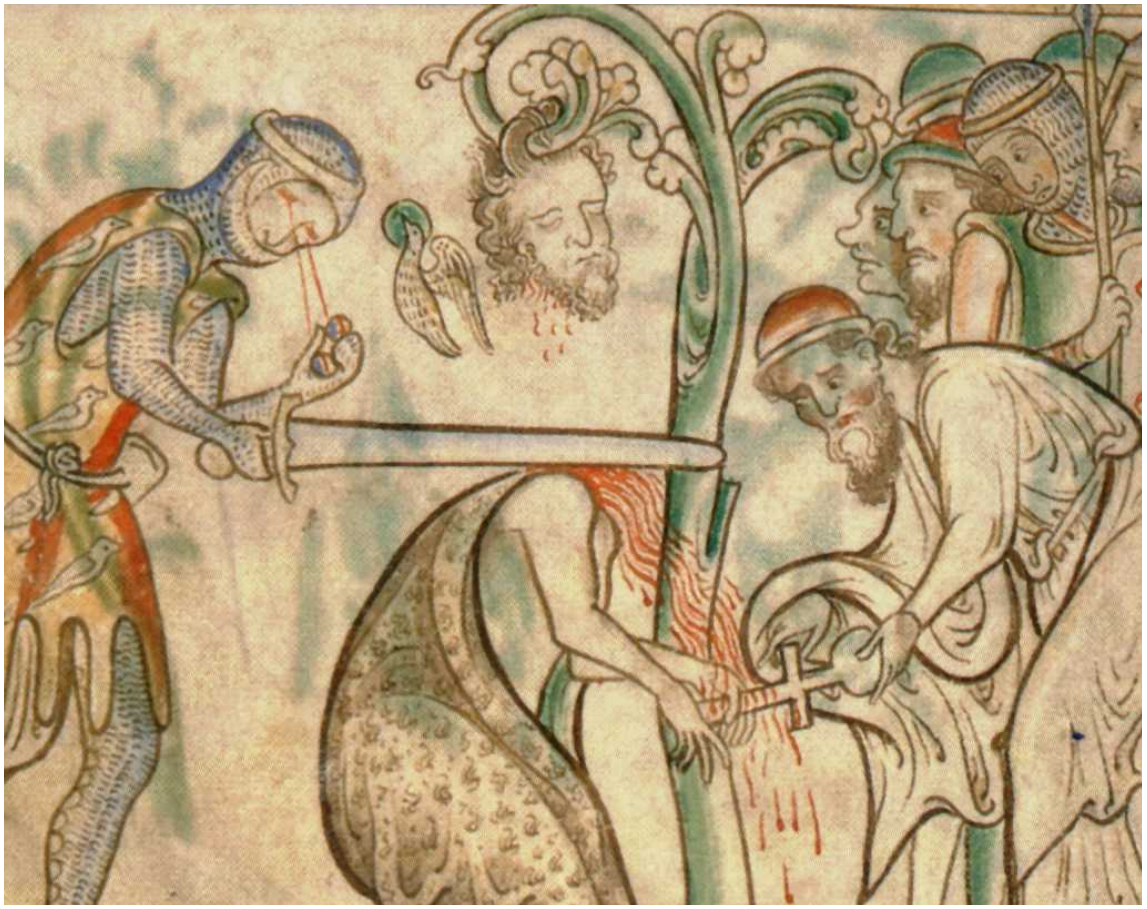
The Early Christian Church

- Christian religious rituals were secretive, and rumoured to be evil and seditious. They were thought to be cannibals because of their Eucharistic meal, in which they feast on Christ's body and blood.
- The Romans initially considered legalising Christianity to weaken Judaism (which had caused them trouble), but instead had it outlawed as a *superstitio* (impiety).
- "Because Christianity had no homeland and did not belong to one people or nation, its traditions . . . could make no claim to antiquity. The one nation to which they could make any claim, Israel, the Christians themselves had repudiated" (Wilken, p. 202).



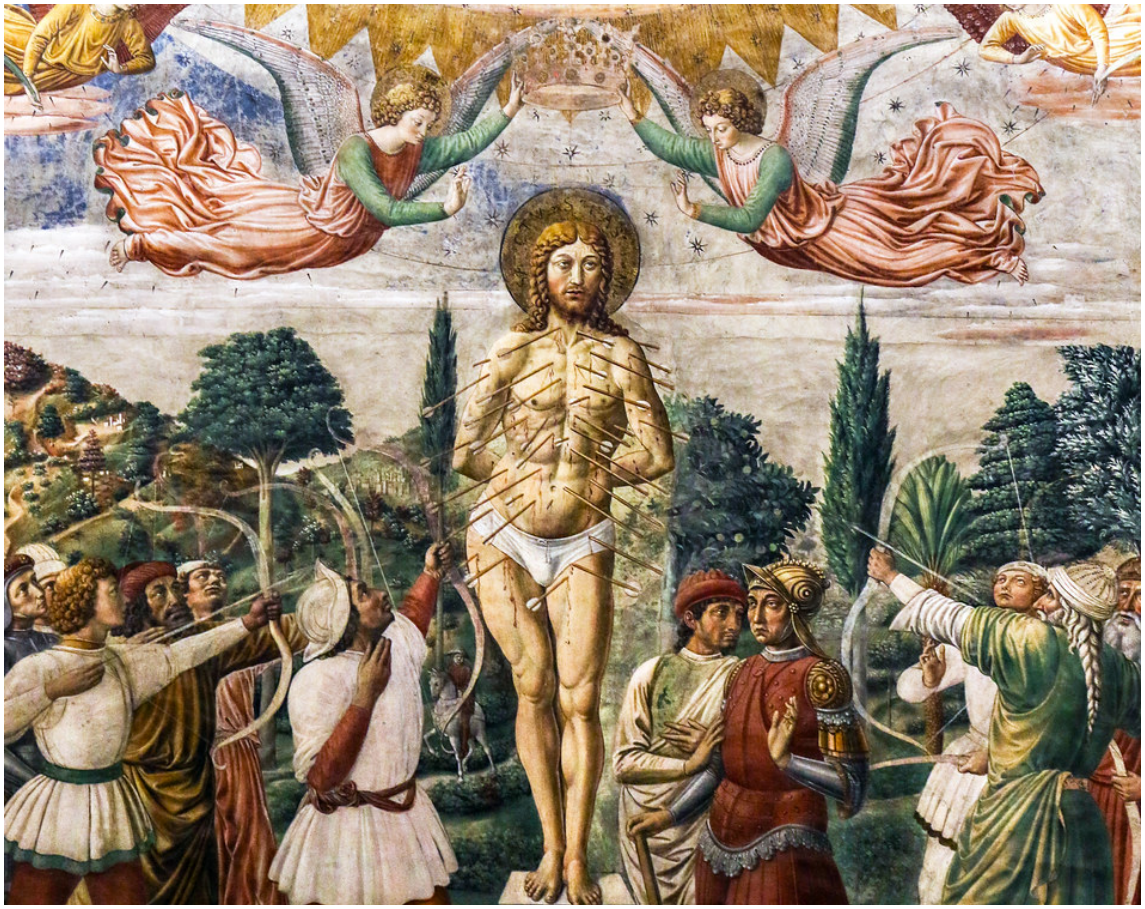
Persecutions of the Church

- Persecutions were not consistent, but in places they were intense.
- With the millennial anniversary of Rome's founding, Emperor Decius (249-251 AD) sought to Make Rome Great Again by ordering mandatory sacrifices to the Roman Gods checked against the census data. Diocletian (right) re-instituted the same order in 298.
- Christians who refused to comply were sent to work in mines, tortured, or killed (Grant, p. 230).
- In February of 303, Diocletian issued an edict that forbade Christian worship, deprived noble Christian men and women of their rank, ordered the destruction of churches, and the confiscation of Bibles.
- This largely ended by December 304, but imprisonment and beatings continued until Galerius's edict of toleration in 311. Many escaped, fleeing to "Barbarian" lands.



St Sebastian

- Patron saint of soldiers, athletes, and those who desire a saintly death.
- Possible officer of the Imperial Guard, he was discovered to be a Christian in 286.
- He was handed over to Mauritanian archers and shot until he was full of arrows “as an urchin is full of quills”.
- The legend has that he was nursed back to health by St Irene, and later confronted Diocletian.
- Diocletian ordered his arrest. He was beaten with clubs until dead and his body was thrown in a sewer. A Christian woman collected his body and buried him in the catacombs.



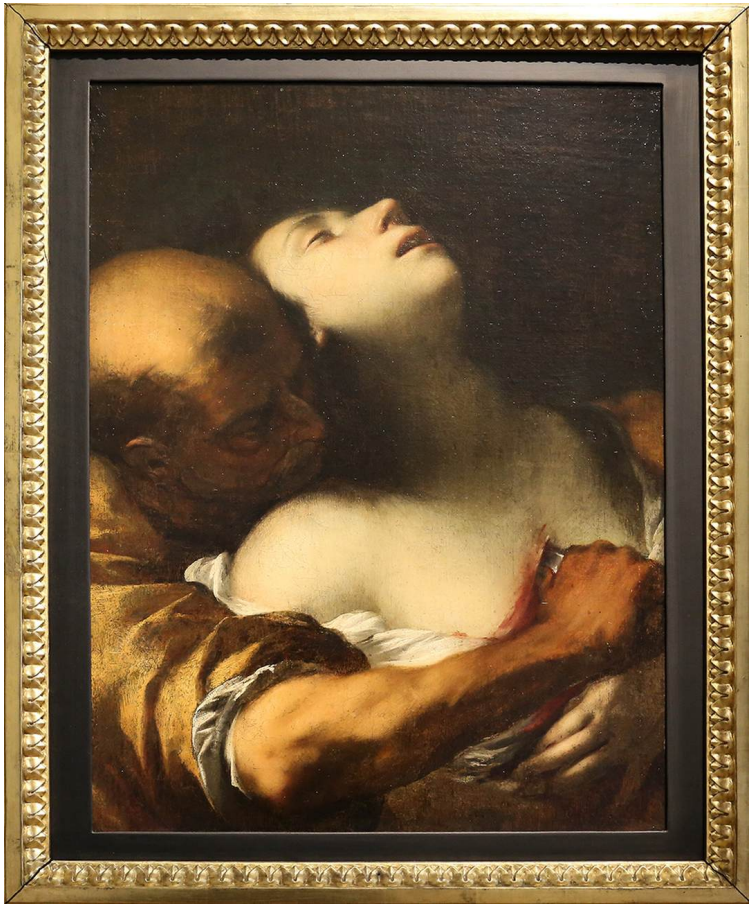
St Euphemia

- A martyr at Chalcedon in 304, Euphemia was the youngest of a small enclave of Christians that refused the order to sacrifice to the gods. She received no trial but was tortured.
- On some accounts, she was pinned to the wheel, but her executioners could not move it.
- She was then thrown into a fiery furnace, which did not burn her. Finally, in frustration, she was thrown to the lions in the arena. But they would not eat her — they simply licked her feet!
- Finally, Euphemia prayed that she would be counted worthy of martyrdom. She is said to have died of a small wound on her leg inflicted by a bear.



St Agnes

- Agnes was a beautiful girl of the Roman aristocracy who was martyred in 304. Ambrose reports that the son of the Prefect of Rome fell in love with her and proposed marriage but was rejected when she claimed to be espoused to Christ.
- The Prefect Sempronius had her stripped naked and dragged through the city to a brothel, where she was condemned to live. Legend has it that, at this, her hair miraculously grew to cover her whole body.
- When the prefect's son advanced on her at the brothel, he is said to have been struck dead, but was revived by Agnus's prayers.
- She was tried and condemned to be burned, but when the flames did not consume her, she was stabbed in the chest.
- She is the patron saint of girls, often depicted with a lamb (Latin: *agnus*), a sign of her innocence.



Constantine the Great

- After the death of his Father Constantius, Constantine was hailed as Emperor by his army in the city of York. Coming from the poorest part of the Empire, to claim the throne, he would have to return to Rome, crossing the Alps, and defeat Maxentius, whose army considerably outnumbered his own.
- Before crossing the Alps, he is said to have seen the sign of Christ in the sky with the phrase, “Under this sign conquer.”
- A the Battle of Milvian Bridge he would defeat Maxentius, who drowned in retreat.
- He claimed the throne in the West, and later would claim the eastern Empire from Licinius in 324 AD.



Defender of the Faith

- Constantine's conversion seems to be sincere. He regarded himself as a patron and defender of the church, placing Christian symbols on his coins and imperial standard.
- The Edict of Milan (313 AD) established religious toleration for Christians and other religions so that the "*summa divinitas*" might be worshipped freely (Grant, p. 236).
- He would provided financial support and tax exemption to churches. He and deputised bishops to perform official functions.
- He also built many churches, many on holy sites.
    - Basilica of St Peter (Rome)
    - Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Jerusalem)
    - Church of the Nativity (Bethlehem)
    - Hagia Sophia (Constantinople)



Defender of the Faith

- Though he ended state financial support for the pagan temples, because of the influence of the pagan aristocracy, he continued to use language and symbols of pagan religion for political benefit.
- He minted coins with images of the Unconquerable Sun (*Sol Invictus*) on them, traditionally the Roman Sun god, the cult of which was taking precedence at the end of the 4th century.
- His official work often refers to the "*summus deus*", a phrase open to Pagan or Christian forms of monotheism.
- He appears to have seen this merely as the pragmatics of his vocation as "bishop to those outside the church" [but within the empire] (Cantor, p. 49).
- On the whole, he endeavoured to set the empire on the foundation of the church.



Arianism

- In the 5th century, the largest threat to the unity of the church was Arianism, a Christian heresy originating in Alexandria with a priest named Arius who was excommunicated in 318 AD, initiating a wider controversy over the deity of Christ.
- Arianism held Jesus to be a divine figure revealed in the flesh, but who was not of the same being as the Father (*homoousios*), but of a *similar* being (*homoiousios*). Jesus was the first and greatest of God's creatures, but is neither co-equal nor co-eternal with God.
- In essence, it was Christianity that understood Jesus as a sort of "Hero-figure" in the Roman pantheon.



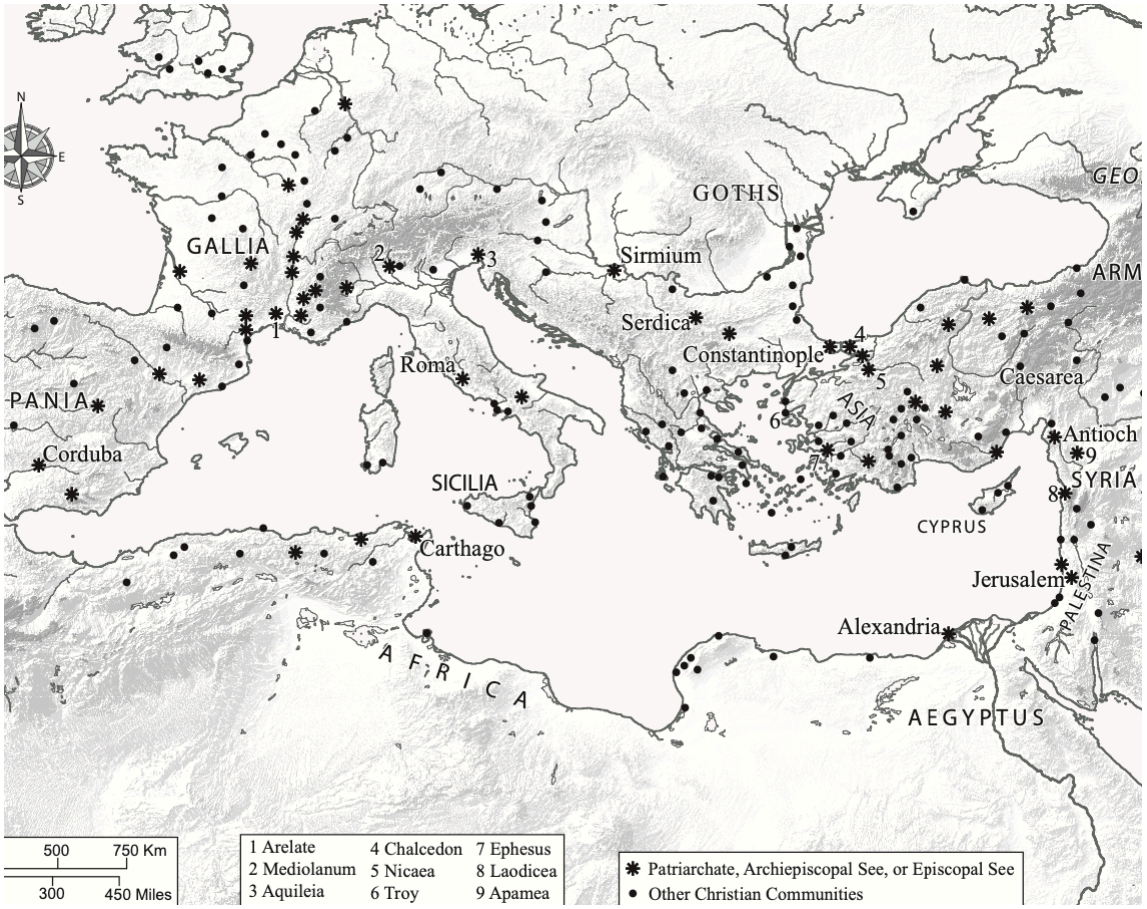
The Council of Nicaea

- In 324, following his defeat of Licinius, Constantine takes an interest in the controversy and calls an ecumenical council to unify the church.
- The Council of Nicaea, held between May and June 325, drew 300 bishops, predominantly from the East, to consider the issue.
- It formulated a statement in the Nicene Creed which affirmed the full divinity of the Son as “consubstantial with the Father”, and thus condemned Arianism as heresy.
- Instituting a statement of faith summarising orthodoxy belief is itself remarkable, signifying a new era not only in the Church but also in Western religion generally, which tended to focus more on ritual than belief.
- This by no means put an end to the issue — the controversy raged on for centuries.



After Constantine

- Constantine died in 337. While the church was fixed across the Roman Empire (right), outside of certain pockets, it still was not the dominant religion.
- Paganism rebounded throughout the 4C. Pagan philosophy developed a kind of Platonic monotheism in this period.
- "Julian the Apostate" (361-363), Constantine's nephew, rejected his Christian upbringing for paganism, which was firmly entrenched in the Roman aristocracy. Julian rebuilt Roman temples, persecuted Christian clergy, and prohibited them from education.
- Paganism survived until Theodosius the Great (383-395), who would outlaw pagan rituals in 392 AD. Roman aristocrats would stage a coup under Pagan military leadership, but this was defeated.



Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*

- When Rome was sacked in 410, many blamed Christianity, arguing the Christian God did not protect the Roman Empire.
- In his *City of God*, Augustine argued that Christian faith aims for a good that transcends any culture. It is like a pilgrim bound for heaven — it cares about "the peace of Babylon", but only because this affords space to pursue "heavenly peace".
- Political society, as such, is *temporal* and, insofar as it is corrupted by sinful human desires, will always fail to deliver justice and equity.
- The church, then, has ends above those of political society. It cannot be identified with one people or culture. It is *universal*.



Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*

- "Thanks largely to Augustine, the Christian Church of the fifth century made the difficult decision to be a universal institution. Had it decided otherwise, it might not have survived the next five hundred years. The church had to absorb the great lump of German barbarism into Christendom, and after five centuries of struggle it did succeed in converting most of Europe to Latin Christianity. This conversion was accomplished only because churchmen went into the world and lived and struggled with violent people. Many monks did not retire to the cloister; they carried Christianity to the frontier. Augustine did so himself, believing that the church (like Jesus) had to suffer with the world in order to save it . . . This willingness has been the glory of Roman Catholicism, and Augustine was largely responsible for its tradition of service." — Cantor, p. 78.



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