

"In Hoc Signo Vinctus": Christianity and Imperial Ideology from Constantine to Justinian.

The signal development of Late Antiquity in the Roman world was the reversal of imperial policy towards the Christian religion – namely, from a policy of persecution, to an incorporation so absolute as to result in the persecution of those once doing the persecuting within a span of 79 years (between the issuing of the Edict of Milan (c. 313 AD) and the Theodosian Decrees (c. 389-391 AD)). For the duration of the period between Constantine's incorporation of Christianity into imperial power structures and the transition from Late Antiquity into the medieval era following the last of the Byzantine-Sasanian Wars (602-628 AD) and the subsequent early Islamic conquests, then, despite the best efforts of St. Augustine, Christendom and the Roman world were all but synonymous.

For this period, with admitted friction, imperial and ecclesiastical dynamics evidenced synchronicity. The Arian Christianity of the Visigoths and Vandals was not incidental to their fractious history with the (Nicene) imperial centre, just as it is worth noting the comparative Orthodoxy of the Franks when they underwent Christianisation and its relation to their consistent efforts to claim continuity with Roman structures of authority, as well as their participation in the military. There was no hard separation between matters of Church and state – just as the Sibylline books were treated as matters of state security in the Republic, so too was the Emperor's intervention in ecumenical councils a function of his jurisdiction over the Earthly health of the Empire. Heresy was a both a spiritual and political threat, as partiality to alternate denominations was often synonymous with broader centrifugal forces acting on the imperial centre (see: Sassanid and Islamic successes in 'bargaining' with Monophysite populations vs the Roman insistence on orthodoxy).

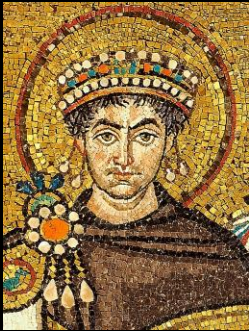
This system – defined by Weber as *caesaropapism* or "[...][the] exercise[...of] supreme authority in ecclesiastic matters by virtue of[...] autonomous legitimacy"[1] - once introduced, was a key element in the evolution of the Roman state, with Constantine's building of Constantinople as both a Christian city and a strategic capital of



[fig. 1.] Chi-rho symbol – inextricably symbolic of both Christian worship and the imperial state as both a symbol of legitimacy through military victory and the divine backing that secured it.



[fig. 2.] - The Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Fresco at the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican by Giulio Romano. Military victory and imperial legitimacy secured by divine sanction – an aesthetic equation of imperial and Christian power.



[fig.3.] - Mosaic of Justinian I, at the Basilica of San Vitale at Ravenna. His reign coincides with the end of the period selected due to his being the last such Emperor whose reign initiated the transition from Late Antiquity to the early medieval in earnest.

[w]hat would become Eastern Rome both furthered a pre-existing synergy between all factors concerned (i.e. the fusion of imperial hard power with a rising Christian faith, the comparative strength of the eastern provinces relative to a weakening West) and embodied it. To an extent, it is difficult to even situate this topic within the scholarly debate for how much of a 'given' it is for the period. Drake discusses the (lack of) difference between the implications and exercise of secular and religious power in this period ("this "religious" prerogative was fraught with profound "secular" implications that make our distinction between "Church" and "State" meaningless"[2] - but in the context of religious violence related to Christianisation. Gibbon's infamously critical take on the Christianisation of the Roman Empire (which, however outmoded, remains inescapable), by contrast, takes a more social view of matters – insofar as the state was affected negatively by its formal embrace of Christianity, this was 'downstream' of that of Roman culture and society (the "puny breed"[3] 'mended' by the barbarian migrations).

Timeline

- 312 AD – Battle of the Milvian Bridge.
- 313 AD – Edict of Milan.
- 324 AD – Beginning of Constantine's tenure as sole emperor (formal reign begins 306 AD).
- 325 AD – Council of Nicaea, establishing principle of caesaropapism
- 330 AD – Constantinople consecrated as imperial capital.
- 361-363 AD – Reign of Julian the Apostate, last pagan Emperor.
- 379-395 AD – Reign of Theodosius I. Edict of Thessalonica, formally establishing Nicene Christianity as the state religion; systematisation of persecution of pagans under the Theodosian Decrees (389-391 AD).
- 412 AD – The City of God written by St. Augustine.
- 431 AD – First Council of Ephesus.
- 451 AD – Council of Chalcedon.
- 527-565 AD – Reign of Justinian the Great. Second Council of Constantinople; building of the Hagia Sofia; Plague of Justinian; Gothic Wars; Lazic War; Vandalic War; etc.
- 629-718 AD – Early Islamic conquests (Roman theatre.)

Bibliography

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