

CONSTANTINE.

THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT.

Despite the ponderous but often rhetorical account given by Eusebius of Caesarea and despite the vengeful clamour of Lactantius, it is difficult to imagine the upheaval that was caused in the Roman world by the triumph of Christianity. Our own time has made us familiar with revolutionaries emerging from underground, with condemned men suddenly set free and exiles returning home to occupy the highest posts in the State - their ideas, previously subversive, suddenly becoming the law of the land. In 305, Diocletian had burned the Scriptures, destroyed the churches and executed the bishops in a vain attempt to preserve at all costs the unity of the empire around the Emperors, who modelled themselves on Jupiter and Hercules. Suddenly full civic rights had to be granted to the community which had previously been illegal. It was even granted a kind of primacy. And to assure the unity of the empire it was also necessary, unfortunately, to tighten the unity of the Christians themselves. In 325, at Nicaea, Constantine presided over the first Ecumenical Council - amidst the very bishops who had survived the repression of his predecessor. He himself, victorious through a miracle of Christ, found himself engaged for political but, perhaps, also for intellectual and emotional reasons, in a theological debate. Previously he had hesitated between paganism and Christianity; now he hesitated between the views of his advisers - orthodoxy and arianism. Even on his death bed he was not baptised in the Faith he had proclaimed at Nicaea. The affairs of the Church had become the affairs of the State; theological disputes became a question of conscience for the emperor.

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At first the Christian emperors did not indulge in persecution against paganism; they attacked neither the Gods they had abandoned, nor their believers. In the middle of the 4th Century there was even a revival of hope on the part of the pagans when Julian, a nephew of Constantine and a Greek philosopher, became emperor. Until the end of the century there were Senators in Rome, led by Symmachus, who kept the statue of Victory in the assembly rooms - against the wishes of the Emperor Theodosius and of Ambrose, the formidable Bishop of Milan. But from the beginning the die was cast. Nothing shows this better than the building programme that is associated with Constantine. There were, it is true, the civil basilica of Maxentius in the Forum in Rome and Constantine's 'thermae'. There was the new capital, Constantinople, built on the site of Byzantium, which was to be a new Rome. But the centre of Constantinople was the Emperor's tomb and this tomb was a church, dedicated to the Twelve Apostles and intended to contain their relics. Throughout the world Constantine constructed Christian sanctuaries.

Of course, some of these, such as the Lateran basilica, the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome, or the octagonal church at Antioch, which was probably a Palatine Chapel, do no more than represent the new alliance - the help that the empire gave the hierarchy and the help that, in turn, the empire expected from God. But a great many of these buildings take on a quite different character, expressive of Constantine's attitude to the truth of Christianity.

In Jerusalem, in answer to an appeal by Bishop Macarius and on the advice of his counsellor Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea of Palestine, Constantine gave permission for archaeological excavations to begin. The aim was to discover the tomb of Christ; not in order to weep over the death of

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the Saviour, but to glorify His Resurrection. The monument built on the spot would be called the 'Anastasis', the Resurrection, and the basilica adjoining it would be called the 'Martyrion', the Witness. The Church Triumphant and the Emperor both sought the historical evidence of the Resurrection - the Resurrection without which, according to St. Paul, our faith would be in vain. It was during a second stage that the True Cross was discovered in excavations attributed to Helena, the mother of the Emperor. So Calvary was included in a secondary position in the group of buildings. The Passion found its value in the Resurrection. In Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, was sought and found in a cave in a quarry.

At the summit of the Mount of Olives a monument was built around a rock in which footprints were found that had been left by Christ before the Ascension. Other episodes in the early life of the Saviour were illustrated by the founding of sanctuaries; archaeologists have recently found, on the banks of Lake Tiberias, the sanctuary built to commemorate the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

In Rome searches were made in three places to discover traces of St. Peter and St. Paul. The result was a basilica now dedicated to St. Sebastian, which has retained signs of a local cult of the two Apostles centred around what was probably in the 3rd Century a funerary aediculum (niche). On the Vatican hill, after considerable levelling of the ground, a vast basilica was built around a simple monument that has been discovered in the altar of St. Peter's. S. Paulo fuori le mure is a similar case.

The authenticity of these discoveries is of little importance here. Scientific scrutiny comparable to that of our time, cannot be expected of this early period and a dream held to have been inspired, provided the best minds

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with a guarantee that may be, for us, worthless. The Holy Sepulchre, as we know from a reference made by Eusebius, owed its discovery to a dream and St. Ambrose found through a dream the tomb of St. Gervase and St. Protase. These monuments illustrate the great work of Eusebius, the first history of the Church. What is important here is that the Christian Emperor and his advisers sought to place in time and space the earthly life of Christ and to verify and glorify the original^s of Christianity.

CONSTANTINIAN CHURCH BUILDING.

The help of the Emperor was indispensable to any such programme - first of all because of the land question. In the small towns of Africa and elsewhere it was extremely difficult to erect a vast new basilica in the midst of a concentrated mass of urban building; the Christian community houses did not cover a large enough area of ground and were not necessarily in the town centres. The churches of the 4th Century are near the outskirts of their towns. This was the price they paid for being able to develop without undue hindrance, with all the ancillary activities that the community life entailed. Similarly in Rome, the monuments to the Apostles and also the 'Martyria' of other cities, were built over the cemeteries where they were buried, which were, naturally, outside the walls. The Lateran cathedral was built on a large estate bordered by Aurelian's wall, which was given to the Bishop by Constantine and nearby was the church of Sta. Croce in Gerusalemme.

In the East the churches were more determined to give expression to their triumph. In Constantinople the church of the Holy Apostles, the church of Divine Wisdom

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(H. Sophia) and the church of Divine Peace (H. Irene's) were all built within the new city; but this was, of course, an easy thing to do since they could be included in the original plans. At Antioch or Jerusalem such a privilege involved considerable demolition. Yet a site has been found in the Syrian capital very near the Imperial Palace rebuilt by Diocletian, on the island that formed part of the monumental centre of the city. In Jerusalem the tomb of Christ was discovered under the pagan temples in the centre of Aelia Capitolina, the city Hadrian had built on the site of Jerusalem after the destruction; it was near the 'tetrapyle' that marked the principal crossroads.

A major difficulty was the levelling of the ground necessitated by the proposed building. The tomb of Christ was of a subterranean type well known in the East at the time and was closed by means of a heavy, circular stone (which the holy women feared they would not be able to push back on the morning of the Resurrection). It was transformed into an 'aediculum', around which the sanctuary was to be built. The level of the ground was lowered by at least twelve feet, which was a major operation involving considerable excavation. The rock of Calvary, which was like a cube-shaped block, was 300 feet south east of the tomb and was included in the sanctuary complex. The top of this rock, in which the Cross had been fixed, was preserved, but the sides and surrounding area were cut straight down to the lowered level of the ground and a courtyard was formed with this outcrop in the angle; even so the complex remained at a higher level than the street. At Bethlehem fewer alterations were needed because the Grotto of the Nativity was kept in its natural form. A hole was made in the rock ceiling and this circular 'oculus', or small window, occupied the centre of the commemorative octagon; the pilgrims stood on

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a raised surround to look down, over a circular railing, into the natural crypt, where the incarnation had taken place.

In St. Peter's Rome, excavations have shown that the Constantinian monument had been organised around an early, very simple, 'aediculum' - two small columns and a horizontal stone slab placed in front of a niche hollowed out of the wall. This structure, which was similar to certain funerary monuments in Rome and Ostia, was situated over a rich pagan cemetery of a much later period than the Saint himself. In order to build the basilica, this cemetery had to be fitted in. Moreover, the summit of the hill (now the Vatican hill), on the slopes of which it was built, had to be levelled off. All this involved an enormous amount of work among the splendid mausoleums of the necropolis, including the building of stone substructures to support each of the columns of the sanctuary. The extent of this work shows how the builders submitted the entire construction of a sanctuary to the monument it commemorated. The results of archaeological research limited the architect and the glorification of the relics imposed expense on the client which could not be avoided. Whether in Jerusalem or Rome, the holy relics were enclosed in marble surrounded by columns, railings and lamps.

In view of the expense involved in the preparation of these sites, the buildings themselves might have been constructed more solidly. But it has been observed that Christian architectural forms were established at a time when other types of buildings were constructed with elaborate technical methods such as in the basilica of Maxentius in the Forum. These methods were first used in the 'thermae', or public baths - a very large hall covered by three concrete groined vaults, supported on both sides

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by lower vaults containing the pillars. It was much more like a frigidarium than like the pillared, wood-covered buildings that formed the basilicas of the original Forum or even those of Trajan. Confronted with the needs of the Christian Church, the architects were unable to exploit these innovations, so they returned to the traditional methods, adopting styles that were less complex, perhaps because they were cheaper. Constantine was building a capital which was to take up a considerable proportion of the funds available and the rebuilding of churches that had been destroyed in the persecution, together with the enlargements and improvements that were found necessary, required an enormous financial programme. Even when the Emperor asked Bishop Macarius to make plans for as magnificent a sanctuary as possible for Jerusalem, it is probable that the money given for the work was somewhat limited. The destruction caused at Constantinople by the Nika revolt at the beginning of the reign of Justinian does not provide adequate explanation for the total disappearance of Constantine's capital - perhaps it was just not built solidly enough. In Rome St. Paul's was destroyed by fire; the ancient St. Peter's had to be razed to the ground before Michelangelo could build a new church; the Lateran basilica was enlarged and altered several times. No trace has been found of the Octagon at Antioch; ~~with~~ and with great difficulty attempts are being made to find pieces of the walls of the original Holy Sepulchre beneath the plasterwork and rebuilding of the Crusaders, Hardly anything remains except the fine collonade of the Sanctuary at Bethlehem; the octagon that was constructed over the grotto was replaced under Justinian by a trefoil, a treble apse, and the mausoleum at Rome of one of the Emperor's daughters, Constantina, became the church of Sta. Costanza.

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The discussion about these vanished monuments is never-ending and controversy is increased rather than diminished by the most methodical excavations.

Andre Grabar has shown that although these commemorative monuments were of very different types, the intention was the same; to serve as a shrine for some holy place, to enable the masses to come as pilgrims and contemplate it without harming it and to assemble nearby for communal prayer. The spectators used to arrange themselves in concentric circles around a single point. The monuments were, therefore, either circular or polygonal and resembled the imperial mausoleums which had a similar purpose. This was why the mausoleum of Constantina, which was classified as one of the imperial tombs, could also be classified among the Constantinian 'martyria'. It includes an internal circular portico, as later did the sanctuary of the Ascension and the rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre. There is a development here from the round mausoleum to the concentric sanctuary, but this type of building could not be developed indefinitely; in fact, even with its internal colonnade, the diameter of the rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre is no larger than the unbroken diameter of the dome of the Pantheon in Rome. The architects were, therefore, led to combine the circular structures with the great colonnaded rectangular halls. The two forms could be juxtaposed, linked only by porticos which integrated them into a single composition, as in the churches of the Holy Sepulchre and of the Holy Apostle at Constantinople. They could also be combined, as was the case at Bethlehem, where the colonnades opened directly on to the octagon.

The ecclesiastical needs that determined the design of St. Peter's, Rome were the same; a monumental in which

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a crowd could be assembled around the tomb of the Apostle and which would glorify Christ, whose first witness in Rome he had been. But the architect went further; he added to the basilica a transept, separating it from the apse, in front of which the monument of the Apostle was placed at the centre of the three huge radiating areas. The basilica with transept was to have a long future, especially after the second half of the 6th Century, when an altar was erected by St. Gregory the Great over the tomb of St. Peter; that is to say, when the difference finally disappeared between the church as community house and the commemorative monument. Several Greek basilicas and most of the churches in the West were then to become basilicas with transepts. Later the fusion of the two types of buildings chosen by the Constantinian architects, the rotunda and basilica, was to result in the basilica with dome, which became the accepted type of church in the East.

It might be said that as early as the first half of the 4th Century the first architects to deal with the requirements of the Christian Church chose or created definitive solutions or prepared the elements of them, the basilica, the rotunda and the basilica with transept. The influence of the plan of the Holy Sepulchre, or that of St. Peter's, was to be perpetuated because of the fame of the sanctuaries and the artistic prestige of the architectural solutions. Throughout history they were to serve as models. Constantine himself may not have played much part in their choice, but it was he who initiated the commissions and set the architects to work.

Things really begin with him.
