

conquests – the Roman confessional state established its Christian identity in contradistinction not to Islam but to “Gentile” or “pagan” Romans. These two expressions referred to Romans who tried to preserve traditional mores, settled ways of life, polytheistic religion, reverence for ancestors, and pride in the historical achievements of Rome. The word *pagani*, originally meaning “country-folk,” came in the mid-fourth century to mean (as the classicist Alan Cameron has argued) something like “outsider,” or simply “non-Christian,” a Latin equivalent to the Christian Greek word *hellenès* in the sense of polytheists or pagans. In the pre-Christian world, the Romans had successfully assimilated most foreign religious cults into their civilization, but not the Christian churches, which refused to succumb to the Romans’ worldly ways. Indeed, to Christians, the expression “the world” signified a hostile jungle full of temptations to evil and demon worship. In the book of Revelation (17:9), the city on seven hills is demonized as the Whore of Babylon.

The Christian cultural revolution eventually swept through Late Antique Rome because Christians persuaded enough of their contemporaries to see the old Greco-Roman culture as morally repulsive and theologically primitive. The Great Persecution, which made a spectacle of the injustice, greed, and cruelty of the old empire, was a pivotal moment. The generosity of the churches, the astonishing bravery of the martyrs under torture, and the holiness of Christianity’s saints, who lived as though they belonged to a different world, doubtless impressed a great many Romans. Christians condemned the pagan world for its addiction to violence and war; its casual cruelty and stonehearted labor regimes; its insatiable thirst for wealth and contempt for the poor; its toleration of marital infidelity, divorce, and the sexual exploitation of the weak. The Christians of the period saw traditional Romans as “men who walked backward,” superstitious idolators following a shameful, outworn, dying way of life. They saw themselves as bearers of a transcendent faith that was going to change the old world for the better and prepare it for the *parousia*, the second coming of Christ in glory, when he would establish his kingdom.

NEW ROME

After Constantine converted to Christianity following his victory at the Milvian Bridge, he did not make it his aim to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity by force or to eradicate paganism. In an empire that was still overwhelmingly pagan, enforcing Christian belief would have required a degree and a kind of tyranny unknown in the ancient world before the time of Justinian. The memories of the Great Persecution’s failure were in any case too fresh, and Constantine

was no tyrant. Rome's official policy, established by the joint decree of Licinius and Constantine known as the **Edict of Milan**, was tolerance. A right was granted * to Christians *and others* "of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases." So much was required for the sake of public order and to bring the favor and benevolence of the Supreme Deity (whether Christian or not was left unspecified) upon Roman rule. With Constantine, it was also a matter of personal conviction that no one should be coerced to embrace the faith. In an open letter to his subjects in 324, just after defeating Licinius, he wrote,

*Let no one use what he has received by inner conviction as a means to harm his neighbor. What each had seen and understood he must use, if possible, to help the other; but if that is impossible, the matter should be dropped. It is one thing to take on willingly the contest for immortality, quite another to enforce it with sanctions.**

(Ernest Cushing Richardson trans.)

In any case, as far as Constantine was concerned, there was little need for Roman power to back the triumph of Christianity. The Holy Spirit was already doing that. Christian missionaries were spreading the empire of the Cross inside the Mediterranean world but also far beyond the reach of Roman power: across Asia Minor into Armenia and the Caucasus, into the lands of the Persian Empire to the east, south into Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, north into the lands of the barbarians. The fourth century, indeed, was one of the heroic ages of Christian missions (see chapter 4, p. 421). Christians formed an unstoppable army of faith, and Constantine must have felt that he had done well to ally Rome's empire with the power of their God. His fellow tetrarchs, who had tried to oppose Christianity's spread, had all come to bad ends, as Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius relished pointing out.

Constantine was now the supreme patron of the Christian Church, and this

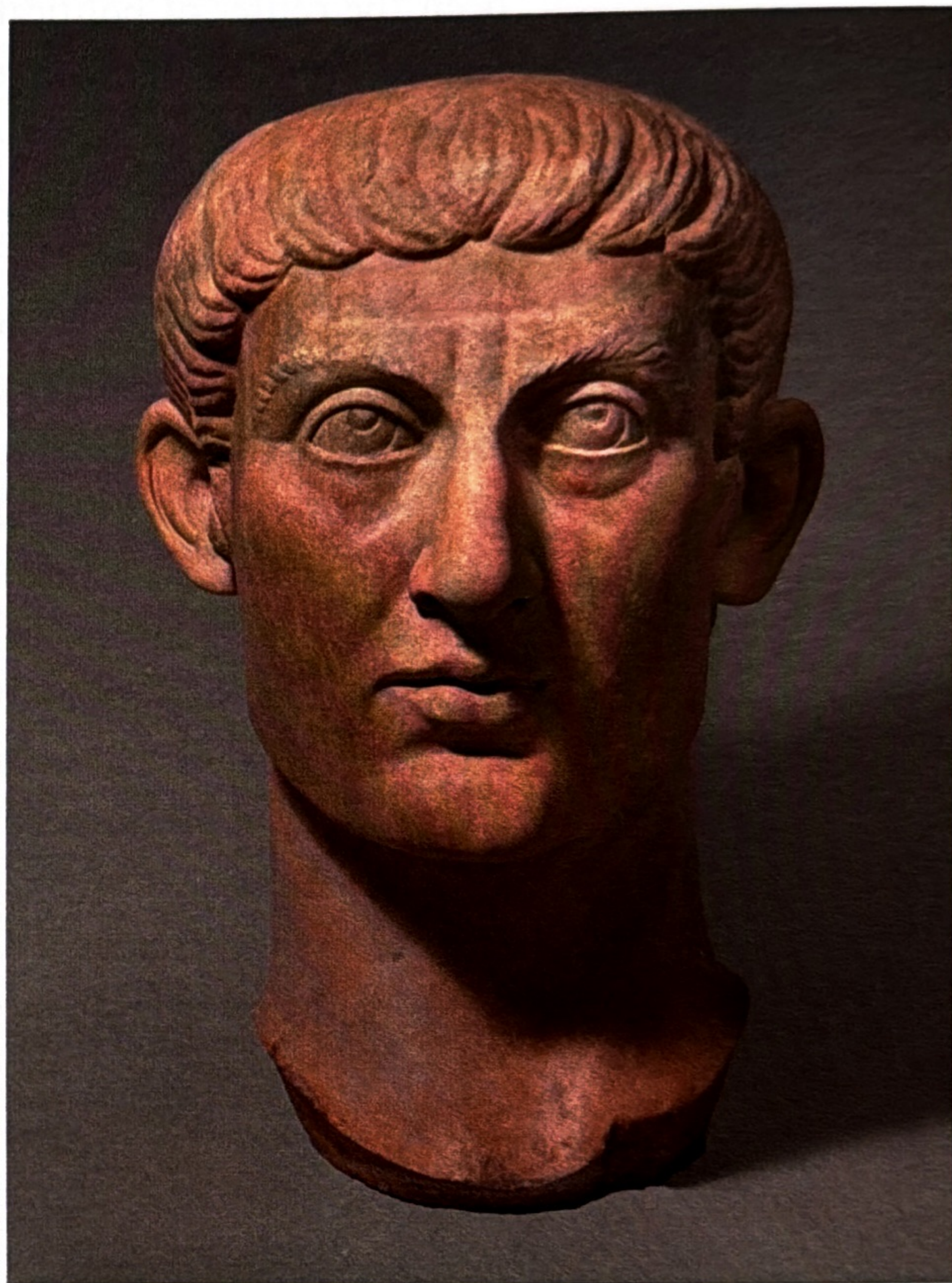


FIGURE 6.8. Marble Portrait Head of the Emperor Constantine I, circa 325–70. Constantine was the first Christian emperor and began the process whereby Rome became a Christian state. He founded the city of Constantinople to be the New Rome, swinging the hinge of history back to the Greek East.

* The sentiment echoes Tertullian (see chapter 5, p. 522).

meant dramatic changes to the status of Christians within the empire. When Constantine was first acclaimed as *imperator* by his father's troops in 305, the empire was doing its best to eradicate Christian belief; by his death in 337, Christians held key positions in the imperial elite. The imperial palace had long been the center of political patronage, and Constantine himself had further centralized and monopolized its powers of appointment. Ambitious careerists soon learned that, for men without high social connections, the best avenue for advancement went through the doors of the Church. Diocletian had done his best to keep Christians out of the army; Constantine, with the help of accommodating bishops, now opened the gates wide. After defeating Licinius, his aim, indeed, was to make Christianity the public religion of the empire, the chief cult of the Roman state. It would take the place of the failed imperial cult of the Sun, favored by the Tetrarchy, which had never succeeded in attracting much of a popular following. To this end, laws were passed exempting the Christian clergy from taxation, and Constantine approved the transfer of endowments from pagan temples, many of them now deserted, to Christian churches. He built enormous Christian edifices in Rome, in Jerusalem, and in his new city on the Bosphorus, soon to be named Constantinople.

In his readiness to make far-reaching, historic decisions, Constantine was the boldest emperor since Augustus. After his resolve to transform Christianity from an outlaw religion into the most favored cult in the empire, his next boldest decision was to found a new capital for the empire on the site of a small Greek city, Byzantium, thereby demoting Rome, which had been the center of the Roman world for well over a thousand years. This New Rome, founded in 324, just after Constantine had made himself sole emperor, became the center and symbol of Christian political power for more than eight hundred years. By the fifth century, it was being understood as a New Jerusalem as well as a New Rome. Just as Jerusalem had been the capital of God's first Chosen People, the Jews, Constantinople was the holy city of his new Chosen People, the Romans. It was the earthly icon of the Heavenly Jerusalem described in the book of Revelation. It stood as the chief citadel of Christian peoples down to the late eleventh century, when European kings began to displace the Eastern Roman Empire as the principal shield of Christendom against Islam. In the Western imagination, it became a kind of Minas Tirith, the second capital of Gondor in J. R. R. Tolkien's epic novel. Time and again, the city was assaulted by enemies of Rome and the Cross, by the Persians, by Islamic jihadis, and by seemingly endless horseback armies flooding into the empire's lands from the barbarous steppe regions of central Asia. It survived them all. When the city did finally fall to an invader in 1204, it was, by a sad irony, fellow Christians from the West, a Crusader army, that breached its defenses and sacked the city.

Constantine's choice for the site of his New Rome proved to be a wise one. The empire's principal antagonists during the previous century had threatened it on two main fronts. In the northeast, the Goths and other barbarians continually struck down into the Danube river basin, rich in agricultural wealth, and ravaged the Balkans. Constantine would also have known of the seaborne Gothic raids of the Black Sea coastlands and the Aegean during the Crisis of the Third Century. To the south and east, Rome faced off against a great empire like itself: the Sassanid Persian Empire that dominated the old Seleucid lands east of the Mediterranean littoral as far as the Hindu Kush. The ancient city of Rome in Italy, by contrast, was of relatively little use from a military standpoint. Its environs did not produce anything like the taxable wealth of the East. It was a strategic backwater, difficult to defend, too far from the sea, and no longer a significant source of manpower. The backbone of Rome's armies and much of its officer corps had for well over a century been recruited in Illyria, not Italy. Constantinople stood guarding the principal route an army might take from Asia to Europe: the straits of the Bosphorus, which the Persian king Darius and his army had crossed via pontoon bridges eight hundred years before. The Bosphorus was the principal trade route connecting the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmora and was thus the gateway to the Aegean and the Mediterranean. Constantinople also stood at the juncture of the Roman East's two main military highway systems,



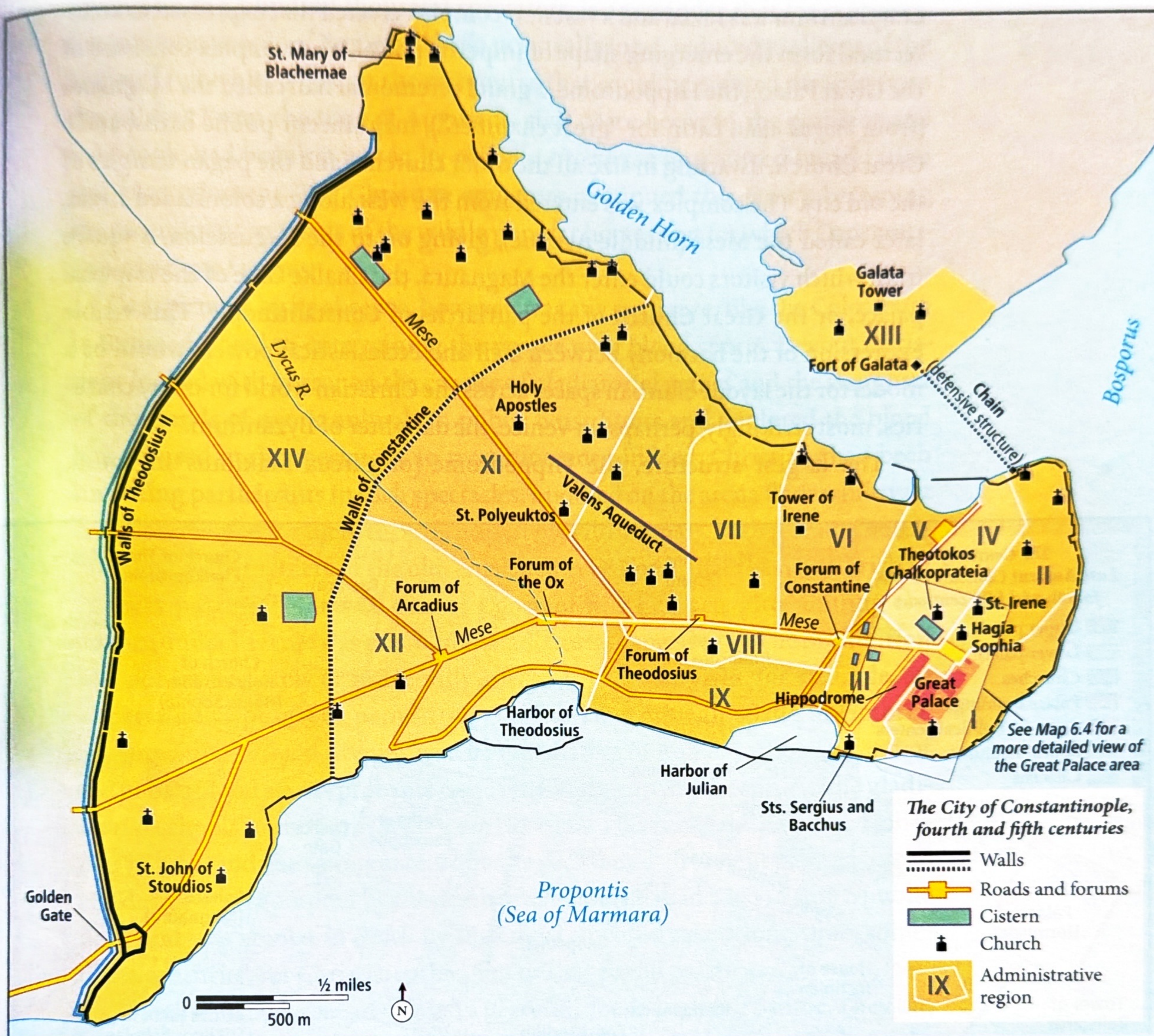
FIGURE 6.9. Walls of Constantinople, fifth century. The Theodosian Walls, built during the reign of Emperor Theodosius II in the early fifth century to provide a layer of protection in addition to the Constantinian Wall, were begun in 324. Theodosius built three connected walls, the first and second separated by a moat.



MAP 6.2. The City of Constantinople and Its Environs, sixth century. The City, as Eastern Romans called it, was strategically placed to control the Bosphorus, the waterway connecting the Black Sea with the Aegean via the Propontis, as well as the roads connecting Europe with Asia. From Constantinople, the emperors were able to project the armed might of Rome by both land and sea.

the Via Egnatia, which linked Thrace, Macedon, and Illyria with the Adriatic and Aegean Seas, and the roads leading east across Asia Minor to Mesopotamia and south to Antioch, the key to Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.

Constantinople's site allowed the Romans to dominate the seas as well as the land. Rome had been and remained for centuries the greatest naval power in the Mediterranean, and Constantinople proved to be an ideal base for the Romans to project their power overseas via a system of lesser naval bases. The city had a fine natural harbor, the Golden Horn, which was protected against enemy ships by a great chain that stretched for half a mile across its entrance. It was surrounded on three sides by water, and on the fourth, landward side, the Romans under Constantine and Theodosius II constructed two powerful sets of defensive walls, so massive and well designed that they were never breached until the age of gunpowder. The educated elite of Eastern Rome knew well the old adage of Thucydides, that "men, not walls or ships, make a city," but in the age that lay



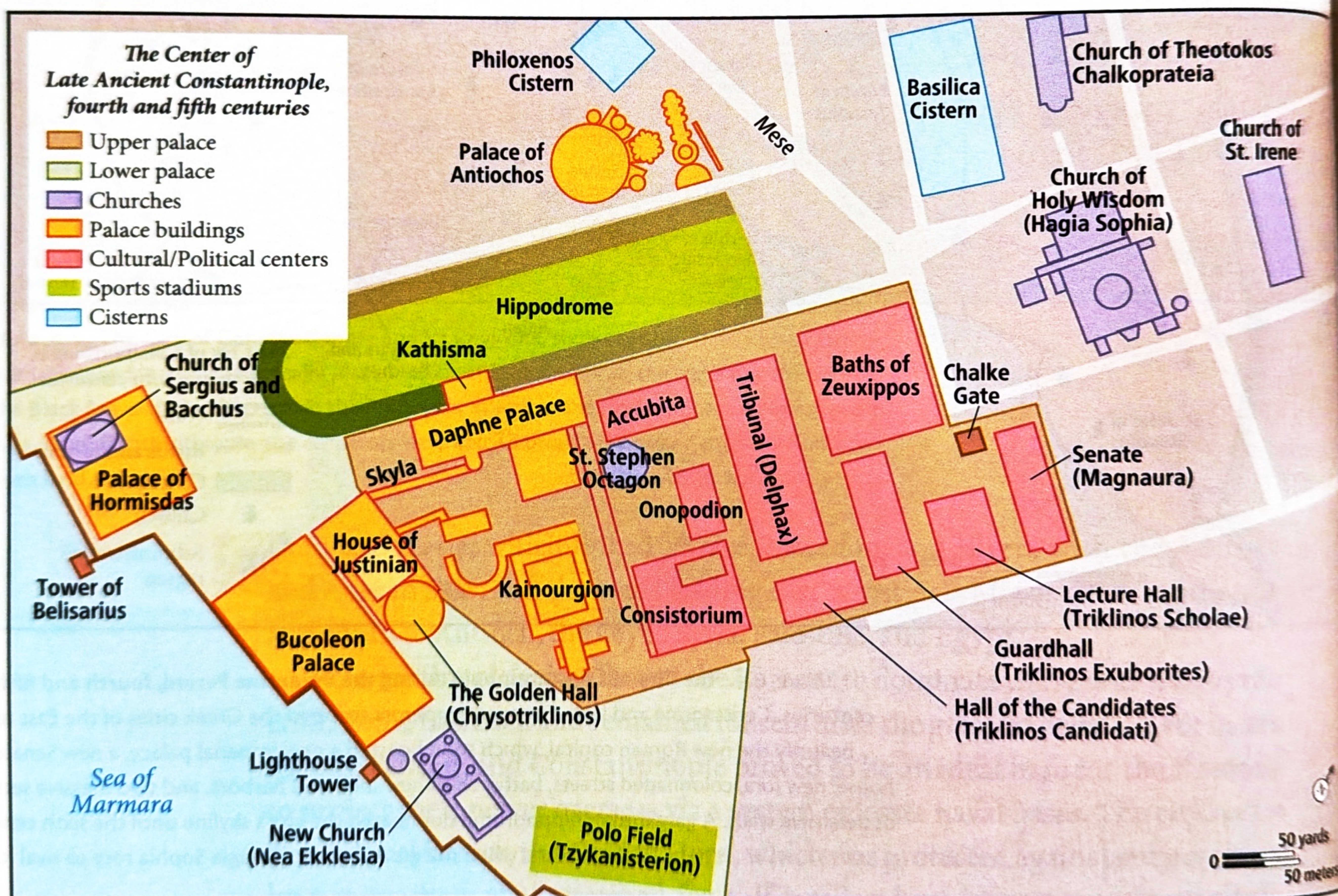
MAP 6.3. The City of Constantinople during the Byzantine Period, fourth and fifth centuries. Constantine and later Christian emperors stripped the Greek cities of the East to beautify the new Roman capital, which soon boasted a new imperial palace, a new Senate house, new fora, colonnaded streets, baths, churches, sheltered harbors, and two massive sets of defensive walls. A gargantuan hippodrome dominated the city's skyline until the sixth century, when the great church of Hagia Sophia rose to rival it.

ahead, Constantinople's impregnable defenses would give it an advantage, time and again, against numerically superior forces.

In the course of the fourth and early fifth centuries New Rome gradually became the main political, cultural, and religious hub of the Christian empire and easily the most beautiful and impressive city of its time. The old city center

of Byzantium was razed and a vast new complex erected that expressed in architectural form the emerging shape of imperial power. The complex consisted of the Great Palace, the Hippodrome, a grand ceremonial hall called the Magnaura (from *magna aula*, Latin for “great chamber”), magnificent public baths, and a Great Church, dwarfing in size all the other churches and the pagan temples of the old city. The complex was entered from the west along a colonnaded street, later called the Mese (Middle Avenue), giving on to the Augusteion, a square from which visitors could enter the Magnaura, the Chalke Gate of the imperial palace, or the Great Church of the patriarchs of Constantinople. This visible expression of the harmony between civil and ecclesiastical powers would be a model for the layout of urban spaces across the Christian world for many centuries, most strikingly, perhaps, in Venice, the daughter of Byzantium.

The largest structure, the Hippodrome (or Circus Maximus in Latin),



MAP 6.4. The Center of Late Ancient Constantinople. The heart of Constantinople was the great square in front of Hagia Sophia, which linked the residence of the emperors; the Magnaura, where the Senate sat and the emperor received foreign visitors; and the principal areas of public recreation. Water was supplied by a system of massive, underground cisterns. The central road through the city to the walls on its European side was called the Mese or Middle Avenue.

seating up to a hundred thousand spectators, is a reminder that for centuries, the common people of Rome had been politically inert, reduced to clients of the emperor (who had a box on the racecourse that could be entered directly from the palace). From the time of Augustus, civil peace between the emperor and the people had been cemented by *panem et circenses*, a guaranteed bread ration and entertainment. The Christian emperors continued this policy, becoming the preeminent sponsors of the wildly popular horse races for which Constantinople became famous.

Conspicuous by its absence, however, was any structure, like the Colosseum in Rome, devoted to entertaining the people with blood sports. Devout Christians looked with horror on the cruelty of gladiatorial games and the slaughter of thousands of exotic animals in public beast hunts and deplored the blood lust aroused in the spectators. In recent memory, indeed, Christians had been unwilling participants in such spectacles, huddled on the arena floor while vast crowds screamed for them to be torn apart by wild animals. Such forms of entertainment were markers of the old, cruel, bellicose Rome that the new Christian age was putting behind it. One of Constantine's first acts after uniting the empire under his rule was to prohibit gladiatorial games (325). The prohibition was not immediately or universally effective. There survives, for example, an imperial rescript of 335 permitting gladiatorial combat in Spello in Umbria. St. Augustine's friend Alypius watched gladiators in Rome in 380. The end of the public blood sports probably came only in the early fifth century. The gladiatorial schools in the Latin West were closed by a decree of the emperor Honorius in 399, and the same emperor finally prohibited all violent games in 404. His decree was prompted by the death of a monk who had tried to stop a public fight and was stoned to death by the crowd. It could take a long time, sometimes centuries, for Christian principles to alter pagan practice.

The Christian emperors wanted a peaceful, docile common people. They did not want soldierly plebeians like those of republican Rome; like the barracks emperors, they preferred to recruit their soldiers in the harsh mountains of Illyria or from barbarian tribes. Thus the populace of New Rome comprised imperial dependents from the start. According to the fourth-century pagan historian Eunapius, Constantine, by "emptying other cities," imported a whole new population into his New Rome – a "drunken multitude" – then arranged to feed them by means of a subsidized bread ration for eighty thousand people. This had the effect of making the city dependent on cereals delivered by sea. New Rome's senatorial class was equally synthetic: it was lured into the city from other Greek cities with promises of landed property and senatorial status. The orator Themistius, put in charge of recruiting senators in the 380s, claims to have increased their number from three hundred to two thousand.

PROCOPIUS ON CIRCUS FACTIONS

PRIMARY SOURCE 6.1

The passage illustrates what the pure spirit of partisanship looks like when disconnected from any higher purpose.

In every city the population has been divided for a long time past into the Blue and the Green factions; but within comparatively recent times it has come about that, for the sake of these names and the seats which the rival factions occupy in watching the games, they spend their money and abandon their bodies to the most cruel tortures, and even do not think it unworthy to die a most shameful death. And they fight against their opponents, knowing not for what end they imperil themselves, but knowing well that, even if they overcome their enemy in the fight, the conclusion of the matter for them will be to be carried off straightway to the prison, and finally, after suffering extreme torture, to be destroyed. So there grows up in them against their fellow men a hostility which has no cause, and at no time does it cease or

disappear, for it gives place neither to the ties of marriage nor of relationship nor of friendship, and the case is the same even though those who differ with respect to these colors be brothers or any other kin. They care neither for things divine nor human in comparison with conquering in these struggles; and it matters not whether a sacrilege is committed by anyone at all against God, or whether the laws and the constitution are violated by friend or by foe; nay even when they are perhaps ill supplied with the necessities of life, and when their fatherland is in the most pressing need and suffering unjustly, they pay no heed if only it is likely to go well with their "faction"; for so they name the bands of partisans,... so that I, for my part, am unable to call this anything except a disease of the soul.

Procopius, *History of the Wars* I.1.24.1-6
H. B. Dewing trans.²

The Hippodrome, while it showcased the emperor's generosity and public support, could also become a venue for the expression of popular discontent and even for rioting, as well as for a kind of disguised political factionalism. The latter took the form of associations, in the city and elsewhere in the Roman world, that supported different teams of charioteers, identified by their team colors (Blues and Greens, Whites and Reds). These had their roots in the factions of the old Roman Circus Maximus, but they soon developed into rivalrous subcultures that could have political significance in unsettled times – or just slip into senseless hooliganism.

The Magnaura, built in basilican form, was a place cloaked in legend. Many scholars believe it was used as a senate house, or at least was intended for the use of Eastern Rome's senators, a body vastly inferior in influence to the old Roman Senate. The vestigial authority of New Rome's senators – given the title *clari* (distinguished) rather than *clarissimi* (highly distinguished), the title used for

the senators of Old Rome – is hardly surprising. During the Principate, as we saw in chapter 4, the Senate had a long history of acting as a check on imperial power, but the monarchy of New Rome had no desire to create institutional rivals. By the early eighth century, Constantinople's senators had been stripped of their last substantive powers and were left with purely advisory and ceremonial functions. Emperors might use them to garner support among the aristocracy for particular policies or appointments, but they had long lost their powers to appoint *praetors* (judges) or pass laws. In New Rome, the monarch's will was always executed primarily by the imperial bureaucracy, trained in the law.

One of the Senate's ceremonial functions was to announce imperial proclamations in the Magnaura. The emperor, too, used the vast chamber to address the people. Divided into three apses, it was designed to impress the populace and visiting dignitaries with the power, religious authority, and cultural superiority of the Roman Empire. In its central apse stood Solomon's Throne, mounted by six steps and flanked by lions. This sculptural assemblage was modeled on the Throne of Solomon as described in 1 Kings 10.

Here also were displayed the famous *automata*, devices powered by water or compressed air. They were said to have been designed by Leo the Mathematician, the most famous Byzantine scientist, who lived in the ninth century and ran a school at the Magnaura. The *automata* included the Throne of Solomon itself, which could be lifted high into the air; mechanical singing birds with fluttering wings, perched in a golden tree; mechanical roaring lions; and (an item reported in a Chinese source) a golden human figure that struck a bell when the hour changed.

The city of Constantinople was built as the capital of a Christian empire, but

PRIMARY SOURCE 6.2

The last lines of a famous poem by William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium" (1926), allude to the automata of the Magnaura palace. The poem contrasts the permanent, golden art desired by an aging poet with the sensual life of the young, who neglect "monuments of unaging intellect."

YEATS: "SAILING TO BYZANTIUM"

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"³



FIGURE 6.10. Principal facade of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, Carlo Ponti, circa 1860–70. Here the original horses can be seen as placed on the *loggia*.



FIGURE 6.11. Bronze Horses of St. Mark's, third century B.C. The Horses of St. Mark's Basilica were brought as booty to Venice after the sack of Constantinople by Latin Crusaders in AD 1204. They were originally part of a monument forming a *quadriga*, a four-horse chariot used for racing, the most popular event in the Hippodrome. Once in Venice, they were installed on the facade of St. Mark's in 1254, where they remained until 1797, when Napoleon's forces removed them and sent them to Paris. In Paris, they were installed on the top of the small Arc de Triomphe in the Place du Carrousel (1806–8), across from the Louvre palace. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the Byzantine *quadriga* was returned to Venice and reinstalled. In compensation, the French placed atop the arch another sculpted *quadriga* (1828) being driven by an allegorical figure of Peace, which commemorated the restoration of the House of Bourbon.

it by no means abandoned the rich heritage of pagan Greek culture. Constantine left the few remaining temples of the gods intact, and the Capitolium, attributed to his patronage, had a pagan character. The Baths of Zeuxippus, adjacent to the palace grounds and right across the Augusteion from the Great Church, were built by Septimius Severus for Byzantium but decorated by Constantine, who adorned them with mosaics and statues depicting cultural heroes of classical Greece and Rome, including Homer and Hesiod, Plato and Aristotle, Julius Caesar, Demosthenes, and Virgil, as well as gods and heroes. Constantine

and his successors plundered the whole of the East to enrich the new capital, “practically stripping other cities bare,” as St. Jerome caustically remarked.

Among the pieces that survive today, amazingly, are the Horses of St. Mark, a bronze sculptural group that once stood over the entrance to the Hippodrome but now adorns the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice.

Still standing in Istanbul today – the new name for the city Muslims used after their conquest of Constantinople in 1453 – is the obelisk of Theodosius. The obelisk commemorated the reign of Thutmose III (1490–1436 BC), the Egyptian pharaoh who conquered Syria and Palestine near the end of ancient Israel’s patriarchal period. Nearly two millennia later, emperor Theodosius I brought it to Constantinople and set it up in the Hippodrome, thus creating a pair with another obelisk brought to Rome in 357 and placed in the Circus Maximus. Around the base of the obelisk a relief sculpture was created depicting Theodosius in his imperial box in the Hippodrome, celebrating a victory before a united state: emperor, senators, and people.

It was the soldier-emperor Theodosius I who solidified the position of



FIGURE 6.12. Obelisk of Theodosius on the Square of Istanbul, fourth century. Emperor Theodosius I is depicted in the center of this relief carving at the base of an Egyptian obelisk brought from Egypt to Constantinople. He is offering the traditional laurel of victory to the winner of the races. The base also bears two inscriptions, one in Greek and one in Latin. The Greek is translated as “This column with four sides which lay on the earth, only the emperor Theodosius dared to lift again its weighty burden.... Proclus was invited to execute his order; and this great column was stood up in thirty-two days.”



FIGURE 6.13. Obelisk of Theodosius, fourth century. The obelisk of Theodosius in the Square of Istanbul is graven with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs celebrating the pharaoh Thutmose III.