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I

# The emergence of Ravenna as the imperial capital of the West

In the centuries before Rome adopted Christianity as its official religion, the Eternal City served as a symbol of world domination imposed by vigorous military leaders and efficient civilian administrators. Within its vast fortifications, along its famous streets, among its magnificent public buildings, emperors proclaimed their victories over distant foreign rulers in triumphal processions, statues and inscriptions. The Roman Senate commemorated those displays of power and the Roman populace joined in the celebrations, an essential element of the imperial policy of 'bread and circuses'. The imperial court, based in the great palace on the Palatine hill, processed appeals for judgment, military reports, tax returns and news from the frontiers, while priests attached to the temples ensured divine support for the empire through their sacrifices and prayers. It was to Rome that ambitious young men and women, talented poets, sculptors, merchants, mercenaries and entertainers, came to seek the patronage of Roman aristocrats and to make their fortunes. The city was the centre of the known world and all roads led to Rome.

Yet during the third century rulers no longer resided there permanently. An increasing number of emperors from military backgrounds based themselves in other, more strategically significant cities, and wherever the emperor went the court and part of the administration had to accompany him. In the ancient capital the Senate continued to appoint a prefect to govern the city and had responsibility for providing grain supplies for the urban population. On I January every year it bestowed the highest honour of the consulship on two individuals, nominated by the emperor, who gave their names to the year and thus established a dating system. The consuls were also expected to finance extravagant popular entertainment in the form of horse and chariot

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races, wild beast fights and displays of dancers, mimes and acrobats. While the Senate remained the power base of aristocratic families who had traditionally provided well-educated sons to govern the provinces, command the armies and protect the legal system, the shift away from Rome as the sole centre of empire created a novel style of imperial rule: a more direct attention to frontier security, increased military efficiency and supplies to combat hostile attacks. The reign of Diocletian (284–305) marked a distinct break, with changes that inaugurated a new era. During this period Ravenna emerged from its insignificant beginnings to become an imperial capital.

#### The Reforms of Diocletian

Diocletian was a military leader from Dalmatia who was acclaimed emperor by his troops in 284 and set out to reverse the economic and political decline characterized by modern historians as 'the crisis of the third century'. He began by reinforcing the empire's northern borders, threatened by Sarmatian and Germanic forces, and reorganizing its administration. In a dramatic shift, in 286 he moved the imperial court from Rome to Milan, and appointed a military colleague, Maximian, as his co-emperor with authority to rule in the western half of the empire. Diocletian made his own capital in Nicomedia (modern-day Izmit in north-western Turkey), a city from which he could protect the empire from the threat of Persian invasion more effectively. This initial division of imperial authority was followed in 293 by the appointment of two junior emperors, called caesars, who would inherit full power after a fixed period. In this way, Diocletian tried to introduce a system for orderly succession that would prevent the wars frequently generated by rival claimants to the imperial title.

While the two emperors constructed palaces and administrative buildings in their new capital cities, Nicomedia and Milan, the two caesars set up their courts in bases closer to the borders: Antioch in northern Syria and Trier in the West. Other centres, such as Serdica (modern Sofia in Bulgaria) and Thessalonike (in Greece) were also used, producing new 'imperial' capitals that symbolized the extension and consolidation of Roman power far from Italy. From Milan major routes to central Europe and the East, and to transalpine Europe, the

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North and West, established a more northerly communication system that partly replaced the centrality of Rome. Between 337 and 402 emperors from Constantius II to Honorius made Milan their preferred residence, and courtiers and imperial officials constructed elegant villas there for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Diocletian's rule of four, the 'tetrarchy', designed to exert stronger control over frontiers very distant from Rome, was accompanied by drastic reforms to imperial government. Civilian administration was separated from military and was overhauled to increase the efficiency of tax collection. Fortifications, factories (for weapons as well as uniforms) and roads were built, while taxation in the form of food supplies for local armies was introduced, all designed to assist military success. Many provinces were divided into smaller units, which acquired a distinct hierarchy of officials under a governor and a salaried judge. As part of this process, in 297 Ravenna became the capital of the province of Flaminia, the coastal section of north-east Italy.

Today, Diocletian is generally remembered for his persecution of the Christians from 303 to 311, and his attempt to standardize prices by the Price Edict of 301. Neither policy succeeded and both were reversed by his eventual successor Constantine. His vast palace at Split marks a megalomaniac ambition that included the adoption of Persian regalia, such as wearing a crown and specifically imperial costume, and ceremonial that required visitors to bow low before his throne.<sup>3</sup> Although he and his co-emperor Maximian retired in 305 as planned, the peaceful transfer of power proved elusive. Military forces often refused to accept the designated caesar and instead promoted their own commanders as emperor. Constantine I was one of those, acclaimed by his troops at York in 306. He fought his way across the length and breadth of the Roman world, eliminating all rivals, to become sole emperor in 324.

#### The Innovations of Constantine I

In 330 Constantine inaugurated a new capital city in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, giving it his own name, Constantinople, the city of Constantine, and a Christian identity. By the late fourth century it became known as the ruling city (basileuousa) or queen of cities, basilis ton poleon, also basilissa polis. In recognition of the Christian faith,

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Constantine also endowed large, prominently sited churches in major cities; ordered bishops to convene in councils over which he presided; and issued Christian regulations that were incorporated into imperial law. The emperor granted toleration to the Christians and stabilized prices by minting a reliable gold currency. Evidence of his building activity remains in Trier, which had developed into a magnificently fortified centre that protected the Rhine frontier of the empire for over a century, until 395. There he built the massive basilica, baths and palace decorated with frescoes, now painstakingly restored. In his new capital on the Bosporus, he established a New Rome, a name that both imitated and challenged its predecessor. Although the ancient aristocratic families who formed the Senate remained in charge of Old Rome's civic routines, republican traditions and polytheistic cults, their power was gradually weakened by Constantine's creation of an eastern senate in his new capital.

The extent of Constantine's adoption of the faith is much disputed. While Christian authors followed Eusebius in insisting on his conversion prior to the battle of the Milvian bridge outside Rome in 312, Constantine continued to promote an emperor cult in association with specific pagan gods. Nonetheless, one year later, in a decree known as the Edict of Milan, Christianity was accorded the same privileges as other cults, provided that all its followers prayed to their god for the well-being and triumph of the Roman empire, as every other group was obliged to do. Although the Christians constituted a minority and were by no means united, the emperor's patronage promoted their dominance, which was celebrated at the council that took place at Nicaea in 325. The emperor summoned all the bishops of the Roman empire and instructed them to determine a definition of Christian belief - the creed – and to resolve problems of clerical discipline. The meeting identified the doctrines elaborated by Arius, a deacon of the church of Alexandria, as unorthodox and heretical. It was later commemorated as the first Universal (Oecumenical) Council, its definition became the Nicene Creed and its supporters can be identified as Catholic Christians.

Constantine abolished the Praetorian Guard of Rome for opposing him at the Milvian bridge, and built several major churches in the city; he donated a large basilica, which became the Lateran palace, to its bishop, while his mother, Empress Helena, supervised similar building in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Rome.<sup>4</sup> On his deathbed Constantine © Copyright, Princeton University Press. No part of this book may be distributed, posted, or reproduced in any form by digital or mechanical means without prior written permission of the publisher.

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requested baptism from the bishop of Nicomedia and was the first Roman emperor to be given a fully Christian burial, in a sarcophagus in the mausoleum he had constructed for himself and his family, a rotunda attached to the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople.<sup>5</sup> After his death in 337 his sons fought each other to succeed to his position as sole emperor, but gradually a de facto division of the empire developed by which the senior emperor, who resided in Constantinople, normally appointed a junior colleague to rule in the West.<sup>6</sup>

In the course of the fourth century, the two halves of the Roman world gradually became less balanced. Under Constantine's dynasty the new capital of Constantinople increased in prestige as Rome waned; the transalpine western provinces remained poorer than the East, where power was more effectively exercised. On the death of Emperor Julian in 363, army officers took charge of the imperial position. One year later Valentinian, a general from Pannonia in the western Balkans, was acclaimed by the leading military and civilian officials, and he promoted his younger brother Valens as co-emperor. Both new leaders were obliged to deal with military threats, which took Valentinian to Trier and, later, Milan, while Valens settled in Antioch to deal with the Persians. Both were Christians, though Valens favoured the Arians.

## The Theology of Arius

Despite the creation in 325 of the Nicene Creed to be recited at every church service, Constantine failed to settle the debate over Arianism. Some Christians thought that the insistence on one god (monotheism), which gave their faith such a different character from the cults of the ancient gods and goddesses (polytheism), was compromised by belief in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some insisted that it was improper for the Father not to take precedence over the Son, as fathers naturally created their sons. In the early fourth century, Arius had developed this objection to the equality of the three forms of God in a detailed theological argument that influenced much later thinking. His definition was countered by the Catholic assertion that all three members of the Trinity shared the same substance, essence and nature that predated the birth of Jesus, the son of God, as recounted in the Gospel stories. The Arians contended that the Son could only be of *similar* 

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nature to the Father (in Greek *homoios*, hence the name Homoian attached to this theology). In spite of Arius' condemnation in 325, Constantine's successors observed this Homoian theology as orthodox and used missionaries to spread it among Germanic tribes. The Arians succeeded in founding a rival church that won the loyalty of fourth-century emperors and set their own 'orthodox', or 'catholic', definitions of correct belief, against those of their Catholic opponents, who claimed exactly the same terms.<sup>7</sup>

In Constantinople the Arian clergy drew considerable support from military commanders of Germanic and Gothic origin. The Goths had been converted to Arian Christianity as the official 'orthodox' faith, and their founding bishop, Ulfila (341-81), had devised a written alphabet for his people and then translated the Bible and liturgical texts into Gothic so that they could worship in their own language. In conjunction with the support of Constantius II (337-61) and Valens (364-78), Arianism extended to the West, notably to Milan, then capital of the western half of the Roman empire. The city's Christian population was divided into two rival factions, supporters of Arius and opponents who remained loval to the ruling of the Council of Nicaea. In 355 a local synod held in Milan imposed the pro-Arian view and appointed Auxentius, a disciple of Ulfila from the East, as bishop.8 Despite many attempts to unseat him, he remained in control of Milan for twenty years sustaining the doctrines of Arius, which continued to generate violent clashes as recorded by Ambrose, Catholic bishop of Milan (374-97).

In contrast, Arianism made less impact in Rome, still dominated by a largely pagan Senate. The Christian community, led by bishops who traced their line back to St Peter, had emerged very gradually from the city's profoundly embedded polytheistic cults with their impressive temples on the Capitol, where imperial sacrifices were made, and throughout the Forum where the Vestal Virgins sustained the sacred flame at the hearth of Vesta. Emperors very rarely went to Rome; the ceremonial visit of Constantius II in 357 was exceptional and was not repeated until Theodosius I made the same journey over thirty years later. The fate of the empire, however, was being decided on distant borders far from the immediate concerns of the Roman Senate or the city's bishop, by Germanic military forces that had embraced Arian Christianity.

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A telling weakness of the entire Roman administration can be traced to the increasing numbers of non-Roman mercenaries in the army. Often recruited in Balkan regions and commanded by their own leaders, who were paid for each campaign in which they participated, some pursued their ambition to occupy imperial territory as federate allies of the emperor, others merely threatened to invade and destroy. As the influence of these auxiliary troops grew throughout the fourth century, they began to dominate the Roman army and spread their adherence to Arian Christianity. Their Germanic and Gothic generals gained senior military posts, deepened a serious division within the army, and promoted the rival form of Christian belief that was often shared by hostile groups beyond the empire's frontiers. The reduction of imperial fighting power became clear at the disastrous battle of Adrianople in 378, when Gothic forces killed Emperor Valens together with many of his generals in an unprecedented and total rout.

# The Achievements of Theodosius I (379–95)

As a result of this devastating defeat, the young western emperor, Gratian, had to call on Theodosius, a disgraced Roman general who had retired to Spain after his father's execution, to save Constantinople from the Goths. Theodosius duly set out on the long journey from Spain to the East. His progress was interrupted by confrontations and then negotiations with the Goths over their determination to settle within the empire on the richer land south of the Danube. After battles with Sarmatians near Sirmium in the Balkans, Theodosius was acclaimed emperor by his victorious troops, and Gratian made his appointment official on 19 January 379 (Plate 1). Theodosius then settled a large number of Gothic families on imperial territory as federate forces, obliged to fight for the empire. His long reign constituted another major turning point in imperial history, marked by his successful campaigns against hostile forces, his promotion of Christianity as the official religion, and his decision to install his two sons as emperors, which marked the division of the East from the West.

In the history of Ravenna Theodosius is especially important as the father of Empress Galla Placidia, who ruled as regent in Ravenna from

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425 for thirteen years. The emperor had married his wife Flaccilla in Spain and they had a son, Arcadius, born before 379, a daughter Pulcheria, who died young, and in 384 another son, Honorius. Theodosius also adopted his niece Serena, when her father died; he made her legally his daughter and married her to his leading general, Stilicho. After Empress Flaccilla died in 386, Theodosius negotiated a second marriage to Galla, a princess of the dynasty of Valens, which was celebrated in Thessalonike in 387. From this second marriage the only child that survived to adulthood was Galla Placidia, half-sister of the young princes Arcadius and Honorius.

Theodosius was not only a most pious Christian, strongly anti-heretic, but he also firmly opposed the polytheist cults and issued laws against their celebrations and sacrifices. Following the example of Constantine I he summoned another Universal Council of bishops to Constantinople in 381, where they repeated the condemnation of Arianism and agreed a slightly revised version of the Nicene Creed of 325. The council also issued several canons - ecclesiastical laws - including one that elevated Constantinople to a status equal to Rome. 11 Bishops of Rome considered this deeply insulting to St Peter (Petrus) the rock, petra, on which Christ had founded his church and which they claimed gave them superior authority. While the canon became a source of much rivalry between Old and New Rome, Theodosius had given legal standing to the emergent new civilization of early Christendom. Like Constantine, Theodosius campaigned throughout the entire Mediterranean world; he paid only one ceremonial visit to the ancient capital, in June 389 to celebrate a major victory. In Constantinople/New Rome he erected an Egyptian obelisk on the Hippodrome, mounted on a base that describes his achievements and portrays both the erection of the monument and the emperor receiving homage and bestowing victory wreaths to competitors in the races.

In 394 after victory over his western rival at the Frigidus, Theodosius went to Milan and summoned Serena, who was looking after his youngest children following the death of Empress Galla. Leaving Arcadius, then aged seventeen, in Constantinople, Serena duly travelled from the eastern capital with Honorius, aged ten, and Galla Placidia, about three, and all their staff, and arrived in Milan just in time to witness the emperor's death on 17 January 395. As decreed, his two sons assumed imperial power under the dominant influence of their military

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guardians, Rufinus in the East and Stilicho in the West. Theodosius had probably arranged for their baby half-sister to be brought up in the imperial household of Serena and Stilicho, where Galla Placidia lived for the next seven years. In planning the division of the empire, Theodosius may have hoped to prevent his sons from quarrelling over their inheritance, but rivalry between the two courts in Constantinople and Milan hampered any intended co-operation, especially when the nominal rulers were so young and inexperienced.<sup>12</sup>

### The Child Emperor Honorius

In January 395 the ten-year-old Honorius thus became emperor of the western Roman Empire at the court based in Milan (Plate 2), where his guardian and very successful general (*magister militum*) Stilicho assumed effective control. With his wife Serena, an imperial princess in her own right, Stilicho had three children, Maria, Eucherius and Thermantia, who were all employed in advantageous marriage alliances. In 398 Maria, then about twelve years old, was married to the young Emperor Honorius, aged thirteen, and Eucherius was betrothed to Galla Placidia, integrating the orphaned imperial princess into Stilicho's family plans. It was a typical Roman betrothal of young children, though it did not lead on to marriage and the anticipated birth of a new generation. Nor did Honorius and Maria have any children before she died in about 407/8. Stilicho then persuaded the emperor to marry his second daughter, Thermantia, trying to ensure his own family's place within the ruling dynasty.

But at the turn of the fourth century Stilicho and the imperial court in Milan received news that Alaric, chieftain of the Visigoths, had ravaged Greece and was threatening to invade Italy. By 401 he had crossed the Julian Alps (at the far east of the range) and laid siege to Aquileia. He moved on to besiege Milan in the winter of 401–2 as well as capturing many cities. Stilicho defeated the Goths in the summer of 402 (although Alaric escaped with most of his cavalry), and then advised Honorius that it might be wise to move the court away from Milan to a safer centre. This was the moment when Ravenna was selected as a suitable residence for the rulers of the western half of the Roman Empire.

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#### Ravenna, Imperial Capital

They chose the city of Ravenna partly because it was considered impregnable and partly because of its large port at Classis. The city was well served by river connections to the wide valley of the Po, rich in agricultural produce that could be stored inside the city if it was ever besieged, yet protected by treacherous marshes and lakes.<sup>13</sup> Built in the second century BC on sandbanks that protruded from the surrounding waters, Ravenna followed a typical square garrison pattern, the quadrata romana. It was considered a secure city where distinguished hostages or refugees could be accommodated. Bato of Pannonia, who had been forced to march in Emperor Tiberius' triumph, was confined in what was in effect a glorified prison; similarly, the wife of Arminius of the Cherusci brought up her son there. In AD 43 Emperor Claudius constructed a ceremonial entrance to the city, the Golden Gate, dated by his inscription. 14 The monument was demolished in the sixteenth century but drawings preserve an idea of its grandeur and a few fragments of the elegant sculptural decoration remain in the National Museum. The area around Classis also housed a school for training gladiators, who were said to benefit from the sea air. As naval challenges declined, the harbour at Classis was gradually adapted for the transport of goods across the Adriatic and throughout the Mediterranean. Shipbuilding, sailmaking and related maritime skills continued to be commemorated on funerary monuments, such as the second-century stele to Publius Longidienus, 'FABR.NAVALIS' (shipbuilder).<sup>15</sup>

Water-management was clearly necessary in the region where so many tributaries of the Po river descended towards the sea. Two major channels, the Padenna and the Lamisa, flowed around and into the city, creating a wide moat outside the city walls and a series of canals within them. In the sixth century Procopius described this:

This city of Ravenna ... is so situated as not to be easily approached either by ships or by a land army ... A land army cannot approach it at all; for the river Po ... and other navigable rivers together with some marshes, encircle it on all sides and so cause the city to be surrounded by water. 16

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The Po's heavy silt also meant that the canals and river outlets were regularly blocked, and boatmen on barges stirred up the sediment with their poles as they punted around in the marshes. Visitors commented on the ubiquity of water but the lack of drinkable supplies, which was relieved by Emperor Trajan in the early second century when he ordered the construction of a major aqueduct, 35km long, to bring water from the Apennines. Even so, floods and earthquakes in 393, 429, 443 and 467 caused buildings to sink with serious damage.

The three intimately linked settlements - Ravenna, Caesarea and Classis – already commanded the attention of fourth-century emperors as an important location for watching naval and commercial activity in the Adriatic, Indeed, Honorius had visited the city in 399, and in that year, he united the province of Flaminia with neighbouring Picenum, a coastal region to the south. Thus enhanced as the seat of a governor, Ravenna acquired a full array of Roman administrative and cultural buildings, as well as some impressive villas such as the *Domus dei Tap*peti di Pietra (house of stone carpets). In the circuit of its old city walls the Golden Gate made a particularly monumental, triumphal entrance that led to the heart of the city past an area associated with Hercules (perhaps a temple), the theatre and other urban facilities. The combined settlements were capable of housing and supporting a large additional force, such as the detachment of 4,000 soldiers, sent from Constantinople in the early fifth century, that remained in Ravenna. Like all Roman cities, Ravenna was governed by a local council (*curia*) of officials elected annually to collect taxation, provide basic services and maintain the city's walls and public buildings, though the council was under the ultimate authority of the commander of the fleet.

In addition to the governor and the naval commander, the city also had a bishop, whose status was rather lowly in comparison with the established sees of Milan and Aquileia. Severus is the first officially recorded bishop who attended a church council held at Serdica in 343 (Plate 52). The earliest references to a Christian presence in the area appear at Classis, which also claimed to house the relics of several early Christian martyrs, notably St Apollinaris who was later identified as the founding bishop of the city. It's quite likely that the earliest bishops resided there, but the episcopal centre was moved to Ravenna as soon as the imperial court was established, and the first cathedral building was probably begun in the early fifth century. Over the winter of 402–3,

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as this tripartite settlement on the Adriatic coast welcomed the emperor and his court, it took on its new role as the imperial capital of the West.

No contemporary writer provides a description of this process and how Honorius was received by the city. But we can imagine that he rode in through the Golden Gate, accompanied by his personal guards, to be acknowledged by the naval commander, the provincial governor and the bishop, cheered by the local inhabitants. The bulk of the court's equipment, furniture, records and supporting staff probably arrived by river transport along the Po from Milan. In December 402 the emperor's presence at Ravenna is confirmed by laws issued there and coins struck in his name at the new mint he established. 18 Like other capital cities created in the third and fourth centuries, Ravenna now experienced a major expansion as new and more substantial accommodation was rapidly constructed to house the court, part of the army, the imperial government's larger bureaucracy, officials and their families, Christian clergy, merchants and craftsmen, who followed the court to its new base. Transforming a fairly small Roman city with a large port into the leading centre of the western half of the empire was only achieved by substantial large-scale investment, which probably remained in the hands of the emperor and his immediate circle of officials; the city council may have found its power somewhat reduced from the full autonomous control normally exercised by such bodies. By the midfifth century, when fragmentary records of its activity are preserved, its role appears to be focused on the maintenance of civic archives, rather than raising taxes.

Not all the ruling elite of the western empire approved of the choice of Ravenna: some members of the Senate hoped that the emperor would return to live in Rome; other military advisers suggested that Arles should be made the new centre of government. Honorius was clearly sensitive to the disappointment of the Roman faction and made a point of visiting the ancient capital frequently, in marked contrast with his father's neglect. Late in 403 he celebrated an imperial entry (adventus) at Rome to mark Stilicho's military victory over Alaric at Pollentia (modern Pollenza), which had protected the city and the emperor from the Gothic leader's invasion of Italy (401–3). Following the formal ceremonial of his arrival, Honorius retired to the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill, and at New Year the Senate nominated him as one of the consuls for 404. Assuming the office of consul involved more

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choreographed processions in the palace and the Forum, culminating in the emperor presiding over military parades, games and chariot racing in the Circus Maximus, funded by him in his capacity as the new consul. These ceremonies, on which senators often spent vast sums in order to ensure the promotion of their sons, symbolized the status associated with honorific titles, as well as Roman traditions of lavish popular entertainment.<sup>20</sup>

While Ravenna could not compete with these ingrained traditions, Honorius returned to the task of creating facilities for the imperial court and administration in his new capital, the provision of grand churches for the Catholic population and the beautification of the city. Leaving Stilicho to manage military defence and to appoint civilian administrators, Honorius appears to have given up any ambition to rule in the manner of previous emperors. His move to Ravenna, however, ensured the survival of the Theodosian dynasty and provided his half-sister Galla Placidia with a stable court environment in which she grew up. Under his patronage, which she later continued, the city was endowed with the first of a series of extraordinary buildings that signalled its position as the new capital of the western Roman Empire.

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