

## Chapter One

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# One Empire, Under God

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*Between 312 and 330,  
Constantine imposes his will on the Roman empire  
and gives the Christian church a hand with its doctrine*

**O**N THE MORNING of October 29, 312, the Roman soldier Constantine walked through the gates of Rome at the front of his army.

He was forty years old, and for six years he had been struggling to claim the crown of the *imperator*. Less than twenty-four hours before, he had finally beaten the sitting emperor of Rome, twenty-nine-year-old Maxentius, at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Constantine's men had fought their way forward across the bridge, toward the city of Rome, until the defenders broke and ran. Maxentius drowned, pulled down into the mud of the riverbed by the weight of his armor. The Christian historian Lactantius tells us that Constantine's men marched into Rome with the sign of Christ marked on each shield; the Roman\* writer Zosimus adds that they also carried Maxentius's waterlogged head on the tip of a spear. Constantine had dredged the body up and decapitated it.<sup>1</sup>

Constantine settled into the imperial palace to take stock of his new empire. Dealing at once with Maxentius's supporters, he ordered immediate but judicious executions: only Maxentius's "nearest friends" fell victim to the new regime.<sup>2</sup> He dissolved the Praetorian Guard, the standing imperial bodyguard that had supported Maxentius's claim to the throne. He also packaged Maxentius's head and shipped it south to North Africa, as a message to the young man's supporters that it was time to switch allegiances. Then he turned to deal with his co-emperors.

His victory over Maxentius had given him a crown but not the entire

\*Histories of the later Roman empire usually identify its citizens as either Christian or pagan, with "pagan" generally meaning "not Christian." There are two problems with this approach: first, the religious landscape of the early Middle Ages was far more complicated than this simple division implies; second, the label "pagan" has been resurrected in recent years with an entirely different set of associations. I have chosen to avoid the word altogether. Zosimus, often called a "pagan historian," was a follower of the old Roman religion, so I have called him "Roman" instead.

empire. Thirty years earlier, his predecessor, Diocletian, had appointed co-rulers to share the job of running the vast Roman territories—a system that had spawned multiple lines of succession. Two other men currently held parts of the empire. Licinius, a peasant who had risen through the army ranks, had claimed the title of *imperator* over the central part of the empire, east of the province Pannonia and west of the Black Sea; Maximinus Daia, who had also clawed his way up from peasant birth, ruled the eastern territories, which were constantly threatened by the aggressive Persian empire.\*

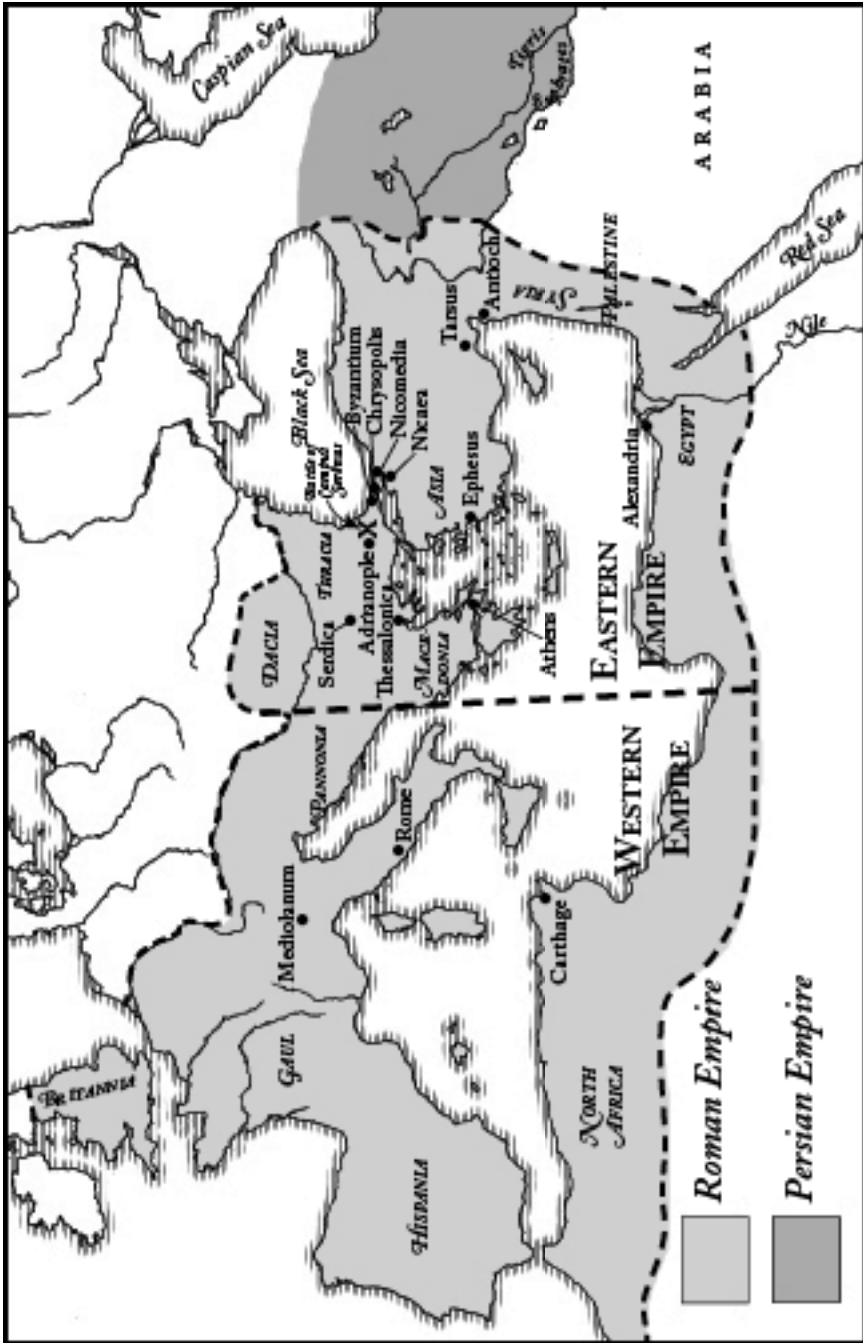
Diocletian, an idealist, had designed his system to keep power out of the hands of any one man; but he had not reckoned with the drive to power. Constantine had no intention of sharing his rule. Nevertheless, he was too smart to open two wars simultaneously. Instead he made a deal with Licinius, who was not only closer than Maximinus but also less powerful: Licinius would become his ally. In return, Licinius, now nearing sixty, would marry Constantine's half-sister, the eighteen-year-old Constantia.

Licinius accepted the deal with alacrity. In his first gesture of good faith towards his brother-in-law-to-be, he met Maximinus Daia in battle on April 30, 313—six months after Constantine entered Rome. Licinius had fewer than thirty thousand men, while Daia had assembled seventy thousand. But Licinius's army, like Constantine's, marched under the banner of the Christian God. It was a useful rallying point; Maximinus Daia had vowed, in Jupiter's name, to stamp out Christianity in his domains, and the presence of the Christian banner pointed out that the battle for territory had become a holy war.

The armies met on the poorly named Campus Serenus, outside the city of Adrianople, and Licinius's smaller army outfought Maximinus's. Maximinus Daia fled in disguise, but Licinius followed him across the province of Asia and finally trapped him in the city of Tarsus. Seeing no escape, Maximinus Daia swallowed poison. Unfortunately, he indulged in a huge last meal first, which delayed the poison's action. The historian Lactantius writes that he took four days to die:

[T]he force of the poison, repelled by his full stomach, could not immediately operate, but it produced a grievous disease, resembling the pestilence. . . . Having undergone various and excruciating torments, he dashed his forehead against the wall, and his eyes started out of their sockets. And now, become blind, he imagined that he saw God, with His servants arrayed in white robes, sitting in judgment on him. . . . Then, amidst groans, like those of one burnt alive, did he breathe out his guilty soul in the most horrible kind of death.<sup>3</sup>

\*This included the administrative districts of Pannonia, Dacia, Thracia, and Macedonia.



1.1: The Empires of the Romans and Persians

Nor was it the last horrible death. Licinius then murdered Maximinus Daia's two young children, both under the age of nine, and drowned their mother; he also put to death three other possible blood claimants to the eastern throne, all children of dead emperors.

Constantine found it prudent to ignore this bloodshed. The two men met in Mediolanum (modern Milan) to celebrate Licinius's marriage to Constantia and to issue an empire-wide proclamation that made Christianity legal, which was highly necessary given that both men had now wrapped themselves in the flag of God in order to claim the right to rule.

In fact Christianity had been tolerated in all parts of the empire except the east for some years. But this proclamation, the Edict of Milan, now spread this protection into Maximinus Daia's previous territories. "No one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion," the Edict announced. "Any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation. . . . [We] have also conceded to other religions the right 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." Property which had previously been confiscated from Christians was supposed to be returned. All Christian churches were to be turned over to Christian control. "Let this be done," the Edict concluded, "so that, as we have said above, Divine favor towards us, which, under the most important circumstances we have already experienced, may, for all time, preserve and prosper our successes together with the good of the state."<sup>4</sup>

The "good of the state." In Lactantius's accounts, Constantine is a servant of the Divine, and his enemies are brought low by the judgment of God Himself. Eusebius, the Christian priest who wrote Constantine's biography, reflects the same point of view: Constantine is the "Godbeloved," bringing the knowledge of the Son of God to the people of Rome.<sup>5</sup>

Eusebius was Constantine's friend, and Lactantius was a starving rhetoric teacher until Constantine hired him as court tutor and changed his fortunes. But their histories are motivated by more than a desire to stay on the emperor's good side. Both men understood, perhaps before Constantine had managed to articulate it even to himself, that Christianity was the empire's best chance for survival.

Constantine could deal with the problem of multiple emperors; he had already eliminated two of his three rivals, and Licinius's days were numbered. But the empire was threatened by a more complex trouble. For centuries, it had been a political entity within which provinces and districts and cities still maintained their older, deeper identities. Tarsus was Roman, but it was also an Asian city where you were more likely to hear Greek than Latin on

the streets. North Africa was Roman, but Carthage was an African city with an African population. Gaul was a Roman territory, but the Germanic tribes who populated it spoke their own languages and worshipped their own gods. The Roman empire had held all of these dual identities—Roman and *other*—together, but the centrifugal force of the *other* was so strong that the borders of the empire were barely containing it.

Constantine didn't put the cross on his banner out of an attempt to gain the loyalty of Christians. As the Russian historian A. A. Vasiliev points out, it would have been ridiculous to build a political strategy on "one-tenth of the population which at that time was taking no part in political affairs."<sup>6</sup> Nor did Constantine suddenly get religion. He continued to emboss Sol Invictus, the sun god, on his coins; he remained *pontifex maximus*, chief priest of the Roman state cult, until his death; and he resisted baptism until he realized, in 336, that he was dying.<sup>7</sup>

But he saw in Christianity a new and fascinating way of understanding the world, and in Christians a model of what Roman citizens might be, bound together by a loyalty that transcended but did not destroy their own local allegiances. Christianity could be held side by side with other identities. It was almost impossible to be thoroughly Roman and also be a Visigoth, or to be wholeheartedly Roman and African. But a Christian could be a Greek or a Latin, a slave or a free man, a Jew or a Gentile. Christianity had begun as a religion with no political homeland to claim as its own, which meant that it could be adopted with ease by an empire that swallowed homelands as a matter of course. By transforming the Roman empire into a Christian empire, Constantine could unify the splintering empire in the name of Christ, a name that might succeed where the names of Caesar and Augustus had failed.

Not that he relied entirely on the name of Christ to get what he needed. In 324, Licinius provided Constantine with the perfect excuse to get rid of his co-emperor; the eastern ruler accused the Christians in his court of spying for his colleague in the west (which they undoubtedly were) and threw them out. Constantine immediately announced that Licinius was persecuting Christians—illegal, according to the Edict of Milan—and led his army east.

The two men met twice: the first time near Adrianople, the site of Licinius's own victory against the former eastern emperor Maximinus Daia, and the final time two months later, on September 18, at Chrysopolis. In this last battle, Licinius was so thoroughly defeated that he agreed to surrender.<sup>8</sup> Constantine spared his life when Constantia pleaded for him, instead exiling him to the city of Thessalonica.

Constantine was now the sole ruler of the Roman world.

HIS FIRST ACTION as solitary emperor was to guarantee the unity of Christian belief. Christianity would not be much help to him if it split apart into battling factions, which it was in danger of doing; for some years, Christian leaders in various parts of the empire had been arguing with increasing stridency over the exact nature of the Incarnation, and the quarrel was rising to a crescendo.\*

The Christian church had universally acknowledged, since its beginnings, that Jesus partook in both human and divine natures: “Jesus is Lord,” as J. N. D. Kelly remarks, was the earliest and most basic confession of Christianity. Christ, according to the earliest Christian theologians, was “indivisibly one” and also “fully divine and fully human.”<sup>9</sup> This was a little like simultaneously filling one glass to the brim with two entire glassfuls of different liquids, and Christians had wrestled with this paradox from the very beginning of their history. Ignatius of Antioch, who died in a Roman arena sometime before AD 110, laid out the orthodox understanding in a series of balanced oppositions:

There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit;  
 both made and not made;  
 God existing in flesh;  
 true life in death;  
 both of Mary and of God. . . .  
 For “the Word was made flesh.”  
 Being incorporeal, He was in the body;  
 being impassible, He was in a passible body;  
 being immortal, He was in a mortal body;  
 being life, He became subject to corruption.<sup>10</sup>

But other voices offered different solutions. As early as the second century, the Ebionites suggested that Christ was essentially human, and “divine” only in the sense that he had been selected to reign as the Jewish Messiah. The sect known as Docetists employed Greek ideas about the “inherent impurity of matter”<sup>11</sup> and insisted that Christ could not truly have taken part in the corruption of the body; he was instead a spirit who only *appeared* human. The Gnostics, taking Docetism one step further, believed that the divine Christ and human Jesus had formed a brief partnership in order to rescue humankind from the corrupting grasp of the material world.† And while

\*The Incarnation is the central doctrine of Christianity: that God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ.

†A dizzying number of religions and practices can be classified as “gnostic”: generally a gnostic religion is one that requires its followers to search out a high level of knowledge (gnosis) which only a select few can ever truly attain. Interested readers may want to consult Karen King’s *What*

Constantine and Licinius fought over the crown, a Christian priest named Arius had begun to teach yet another doctrine: that since God was One, “alone without beginning, alone true, alone possessing immortality, alone wise, alone good, alone sovereign,” the Son of God must be a created being. He was different from other created beings, perhaps, but he did not share the *essence* of God.<sup>12</sup>

Arius, who served in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, had been gathering followers and vexing his bishop,\* who had finally excommunicated him. This created a potentially serious and major breach, one that might well separate a large group of Christians from the main body of the Christian believers. Constantine, learning of the split, sent a letter to Egypt strongly suggesting that the two men sit down and work out their differences: “Restore me then my quiet days, and untroubled nights, that the joy of . . . a tranquil life may henceforth be my portion,” he wrote.<sup>13</sup>

But neither the bishop nor Arius was willing to yield, and in desperation Constantine called together a council of church leaders to settle the question. He first intended to have the council at the city of Nicomedia, but a severe earthquake unsettled the city while the bishops were on their way to the meeting; buildings collapsed, hundreds died where they stood, and flames from hearths and braziers were flung into the dry frames of the houses, where the blaze spread so rapidly that the city became, in the words of Sozomen, “one mass of fire.”<sup>14</sup>

Such a sudden and disastrous event suggested to many that God was not pleased with the coming council, and the travelling bishops halted in their tracks and sent urgent inquiries to the emperor. Would he call off the council? Should they proceed?

Reassured by the churchman Basil that the earthquake had been sent not as judgment but as a demonic attempt to keep the church from meeting and settling its questions, Constantine replied that the bishops should travel instead to Nicaea, where they arrived in late spring of 325, ready to parley.

Settling theological questions by way of council was not a new development for Christianity; since the time of the apostles, the Christian churches had considered themselves smaller parts of a whole, not individual congregations. But never before had an emperor, even a tolerant one, taken the step of summoning a church council on his own authority.<sup>15</sup> In 325, at Nicaea, the Christian church and the government of the west clasped hands.

*Is Gnosticism?* (Belknap Press, 2005), particularly the first chapter, “Why Is Gnosticism So Hard to Define?”

\*Since the earliest days of Christianity, each Christian church had a senior leader, an “overseer” (*episkopos*) or “bishop” who assumed ultimate responsibility for the flock. By the fourth century, each city containing a Christian church had a bishop who represented all of the Christians in that particular geographic area.

One might wonder why Constantine, who didn't have any trouble reconciling his belief in Apollo with his professed Christianity, cared about the exact definition of Christ's Godness. In all likelihood, his interest in this case wasn't theological but practical: to keep the church from splitting apart. A major breach would threaten Constantine's vision of Christianity as a possible model for holding together a disparate group of people in loyalty to an overarching structure. If the overarching structure cracked, the model would be useless.

Which probably explains his decision to be anti-Arian; taking the temper of the most influential leaders, he realized that the most powerful bishops disagreed with Arius's theology. Arianism essentially created a pantheon of divinities, with God the Father at the top and God the Son as a sort of demiurge, a little lower in the heavenly hierarchy. This was anathema to both the Jewish roots of Christianity and the Greek Platonism which flourished in most of the eastern empire.\*

Directed by their leading bishops and by the emperor himself to be anti-Arian, the assembled priests at Nicaea came up with a formulation still used in Christian churches today: the Nicene Creed, which asserts the Christian belief in "one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible":

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
 the only-begotten Son of God,  
 begotten of the Father before all worlds,  
 God of God,  
 Light of Light,  
 Very God of Very God,  
 begotten, not made,  
 being of one substance with the Father  
 by whom all things were made.

It was a formulation that, in its emphasis on the divinity of Christ, shut the door firmly on Arianism.

And it had the imperial stamp on it. In laying hold of Christianity as his tool, Constantine had altered it. Constantine's ineffable experience of the divine at the Milvian Bridge had proved useful in the moment. But ineffable experiences are notoriously bad at binding together any group of people in common purpose for a long time, and the empire, now tenuously held

\*Platonic philosophy had no place for ranked divinities, all of whom belonged to the divine realm (the realm of the Ideal), but some of whom were less ideal than others.



together by a spider-web linkage, needed the Christian church to be more organized, more orderly, and more rational.

Christians, in return, would have had to be more than human to resist what Constantine was offering: the imprint of imperial power. Constantine gave the church all sorts of advantages. He recognized Christian priests as equal to priests of the Roman religion, and exempted them from taxes and state responsibilities that might interfere with their religious duties. He also decreed that any man could leave his property to the church; this, as Vasilev points out, in one stroke turned “Christian communities” into “legal juridical entities.”<sup>16</sup>

Further tying his own power to the future of the church, he had also begun construction of a new capital city, one that from its beginning would be filled with churches, not Roman temples. Constantine had decided to move the capital of his empire, officially, from Rome and its gods to the old city of Byzantium, rebuilt as a Christian city on the shores of the pass to the Black Sea.<sup>17</sup>

All at once Christianity was more than an identity. It was a legal and political constituency—exactly what it had not been when Constantine first decided to march under the banner of the cross. The church, like Constantine’s empire, was going to be around for a little while; and like Constantine, it had to take care for its future.

After his condemnation at the Council of Nicaea, Arius took to his heels and hid in Palestine, in the far east of the empire. Arianism did not disappear; it remained a strong and discontented underground current. In fact, Constantine’s own sister became a champion of Arian doctrines, rejecting her brother’s command to accept the Nicene Creed as the only Christian orthodoxy.<sup>18</sup>

She may have been motivated by bitterness. In 325, within months of the Council of Nicaea, Constantine broke his promise of clemency to her husband Licinius and had him hanged. Unwilling to leave any challengers to his throne alive, Constantine also sent her ten-year-old son, his own nephew, to the gallows.

Four years later, he officially dedicated the city of Byzantium as his new capital, the New Rome of his empire. Disregarding the protests of the Romans, he had brought old monuments from the great cities of the old empire—Rome, Athens, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus—and installed them among the new churches and streets. He ordered Roman “men of rank” to move to his new city, complete with their households, possessions, and titles.<sup>19</sup> He was re-creating Rome as he thought it should be, under the shadow of the cross. The emblem of Daniel in the lion’s den, the brave man standing for his God in the face of a heathen threat, decorated the fountains in the public squares; a picture of Christ’s Passion, in gold and jewels, was embossed on the very center of the palace roof.<sup>20</sup>

By 330 Constantine had succeeded in establishing one empire, one royal family, one church. But while the New Rome celebrated, the old Rome seethed with resentment over its loss of status; the unified church Constantine had created at Nicaea was held together only by the thin veneer of imperial sanction; and Constantine's three sons eyed their father's empire and waited for his death. Chapter Two

T I M E L I N E I

ROMAN EMPIRE

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Diocletian</b> (284–305)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Maxentius</b> (306–312)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Licinius</b> (308–324)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Constantine</b> (312–337)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Battle of Campus Serenus (313)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Council of Nicaea (325)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Maximinus Daia</b> (308–313)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Edict of Milan (313)</p>
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# Seeking the Mandate of Heaven

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*Between 313 and 402,  
the Jin cling to the Mandate of Heaven,  
while the northern barbarians aspire to seize it*

**A**S CONSTANTINE WAS UNITING his empire in the west, the eastern empire of the Jin\* was disintegrating. Its emperor, Jin Huaidi, had been forced into captivity and servanthood. In 313, at the age of twenty-six, he was pouring wine for his masters at a barbarian feast, and his life hung by a thread.

The Jin empire was a young one, barely fifty years old. For centuries, the old Han dynasty had held the Chinese provinces together in one sprawling and unified whole, the eastern parallel to the Roman empire in the west. But by AD 220, the Han had fallen to rebellion and unrest. The empire fractured apart into thirds, and the Three Kingdoms that took over from the Han—the Cao Wei, the Shu Han, and the Dong Wu—were unstable, shifting and battling for control.

The northernmost of the Three Kingdoms, the Cao Wei, was controlled by

\*The Jin dynasty is sometimes transcribed “Chin”; “Jin” is the Pinyin transcription. As in the first volume of this series, I have chosen to use Pinyin transcription for Chinese characters unless another transcription for a particular name is so familiar that use of the Pinyin might cause confusion (i.e., the Yangtze river becomes Chang Jiang in Pinyin, but I have chosen to retain the better-known romanization for clarity’s sake).

I have also used only one name for each emperor. Typically, a Chinese emperor was known by his birth name until his accession, when he took an imperial name. He was then awarded a posthumous name, and after the Han dynasty, emperors were often given a temple name as well. Some emperors were also known by courtesy names (adopted later in life to indicate maturity). This is confusing for the general reader, so in most cases I have chosen to use the imperial name to refer to each emperor even before his accession. For clarity’s sake, I have given each emperor his dynasty’s name for a prefix, even though this is not customary for some of the dynasties and emperors we will encounter later. Emperor Huaidi of the Jin dynasty thus appears as Jin Huaidi; Emperor Ruizong of the Tang dynasty will be referred to as Tang Ruizong.



2.1: *The Three Kingdoms*

its generals; the kings who sat on the Cao Wei throne were young and easily cowed, and did as they were told. In 265, the twenty-nine-year-old general Sima Yan decided to claim the Cao Wei crown for himself. His entire life he had watched as army men pulled the puppet-king's strings. The commanders of the Cao Wei army, including his father and his grandfather, had led in the conquest of the neighboring kingdom of the Shu Han, reducing the Three Kingdoms to two; Cao Wei dominated the north, but its generals remained crownless.

Unlike them, Sima Yan did not intend to spend his career as puppet-master. He already had power; what he craved was legitimacy, the *rightful* power to command—the title that accompanied the sword.

According to the *Three Kingdoms*, the most famous account of the years after the fall of the Han, Sima Yan buckled on his sword and went to see the emperor: the teenager Wei Yuandi, grandson of the kingdom's founder. "Whose efforts have preserved the Cao Wei empire?" he asked, to which the young emperor, suddenly realizing that his audience chamber was crowded with Sima Yan's supporters, answered, "We owe everything to your father and grandfather." "In that case," Sima Yan said, "since it is clear that you can't defend the kingdom yourself, you should step aside and appoint someone who can." Only one courtier objected to this; as soon as the words left his mouth, Sima Yan's supporters beat him to death.

The *Three Kingdoms* is a romance, a fictionalized swashbuckling account written centuries later; nevertheless, it reflects the actual events surrounding the rise of the Jin dynasty. Wei Yuandi agreed to Sima Yan's plans; Sima Yan built an altar, and in an elaborate, formal ceremony, Wei Yuandi climbed to the top of the altar with the seal of state in his hands, gave it to his rival, and then descended to the ground a common citizen.

That day the entire body of officials prostrated itself once and again below the Altar for the Acceptance of the Abdication, shouting mightily, “Long live the new Emperor!”<sup>1</sup>

The ceremony had transformed Sima Yan into a *rightful* ruler, a divinely ordained emperor, holder of the Mandate of Heaven. Wei Yuandi, stripped of the Mandate, went back to ordinary life. He died some years later in peace.

Sima Yan took the royal name “Jin Wudi” and became the founder of a new dynasty: the Jin. By 276, he was confident enough in his grasp on his empire to launch a takeover bid against the remaining kingdom, the Dong Wu.

The power of the Dong Wu had been dwindling under an irrational king who had become unbearably cruel; his favorite game was to invite a handful of palace officials to a banquet and get them all drunk, while eunuchs stationed just outside the door wrote down everything they said. The next morning he would summon the officials, hungover and wretched, to his audience chamber and punish them for every incautious word.<sup>2</sup> By the time the Jin armies arrived at the Dong Wu capital of Jianye, his subjects were ready to welcome their conqueror.

This story, which comes from the Jin’s own official chronicles, probably tells us more about Jin Wudi than about his opponent. Jin Wudi, desperate for legitimization, knew his history. He knew that for thousands of years, dynasties had risen through virtue and fallen through vice. Emperors ruled by the will of Heaven, but if they grew tyrannical and corrupt, the will of Heaven would raise up another dynasty to supplant them. Jin Wudi wanted a greater justification than force to help him dominate the Dong Wu.

Nevertheless, force brought him into the city. The Jin armies, planning on making the final push into Jianye by river, found their way blocked by barriers of iron chain. So they sent flaming rafts, piled high with pitch-covered logs, floating down into the barriers; the chains melted and snapped, and the Jin flooded into Jianye.<sup>3</sup> The tyrannical emperor surrendered. The era of the Three Kingdoms was ended; by 280, all of China was united again under the Jin.<sup>4</sup>

This was the empire which lasted barely half a century.

Jin Wudi died in 290, leaving as heir an oldest son who was, in the words of his disgusted subjects, “more than half an idiot.” Unwisely, he also left behind twenty-four other sons (he had overindulged himself in wives and concubines), all of whom had been awarded royal titles of one kind or another.<sup>5</sup> At once, war broke out. Wife, father-in-law, step-grandfather, uncles, cousins, and brothers all jockeyed to control the half-wit who sat on the throne.

The chaos that swallowed up the Jin empire from 291 to 306 was later known as the Rebellion of the Eight Princes. In fact, far more than eight royal relatives were jockeying for control, but only eight of them managed to rise

2.2: *The Jin*

to the position of regent for the idiot emperor, a position that gave them the crown de facto. In the middle of all this, the emperor himself survived until 306. Finally, an unknown assassin brought his miserable life to an end with a plateful of poisoned cakes.<sup>6</sup>

After his death, a faction supporting his youngest half-brother managed to get its candidate crowned. The new emperor, Jin Huaidi, was an intelligent, educated, and thoughtful young man, not particularly interested in self-indulgence or tyranny. But he was fighting against rough odds. The Rebellion of the Eight Princes had moth-eaten his empire into fragility, and various claimants to the throne were still lurking nearby, with their own personal armies behind them. There was also danger to the north, where a slew of tiny states ruled by warlords aspired to conquer the greater kingdom below them. The Chinese to the south gave these the collective name “Sixteen Kingdoms,” although their number was fluid.

In the end, it was one of the Sixteen Kingdoms, the Hanzhao, that brought the frayed Jin empire down. Hanzhao armies pushed constantly south, raiding Jin land. By 311, they had reached the walls of the Jin capital Luoyang itself.

Luoyang, stripped and wrecked by civil war, was not well equipped to withstand siege. The Jin armies fought a dozen desperate engagements with

the Hanzhao invaders outside the walls; but the people inside were starving, and the gates were finally thrown open. Jin Huaidi fled, hoping to reach the city of Chang'an and take refuge there. Instead, he captured on the road and hauled back as a prisoner of war to the new capital city of the swelled Hanzhao kingdom, Pingyang.<sup>7</sup>

There, the Hanzhao ruler, Liu Cong, dressed him as a slave and forced him to serve wine to officials at royal banquets. Jin Huaidi spent two miserable years as a palace slave, but visitors to the court were shocked to see the man who held the Mandate of Heaven forced into servitude. That the Mandate had come to him by way of threat and manipulation made no difference; its mantle still covered him. An upswell of feeling that Jin Huaidi should be freed began to trouble Liu Cong's court. Liu Cong, who had already proved that his sword was stronger than Jin Huaidi's mandate, responded by putting the Jin emperor to death.<sup>8</sup> Three years later, he marched down to Chang'an, where the surviving Jin court had gathered, and conquered it.

The brief dominance of the Jin had ended. But the Jin name itself survived. Sima Rui, another Jin relative, was in command of a sizable Jin force quartered at the city of Jianye. He was the strongest man around, and in 317, after a gap in the Jin emperorship, his soldiers pronounced him emperor. He took the imperial name "Jin Yuandi," and although his reign was short, he was succeeded by his son and grandsons in an unbroken imperial line that ruled from Jianye over a shrunken southeastern domain.\*

Neither the Hanzhao nor any of the other Sixteen Kingdoms tried to bring a final end to the Jin, possibly because the land south of the Yangtze didn't lend itself to fighting on horseback (the preferred method of northerners, inherited from their nomadic ancestors). As far as the Jin were concerned, the river now marked the boundary between *real* China and the northern realm of the barbarians. Despite the short history of their empire, the Jin emperors attempted to prove that the Mandate was theirs by keeping the torch of ancient Chinese civilization burning. The court at Jianye modelled itself on the old traditions of the Han, bringing back rituals of ancestor worship that had faded during the chaotic decades of civil war and playing host to Confucian scholars who taught, in the traditional manner, that the enlightened man was he who recognized his duties and carried them out faithfully. Holding on to Confucius's promise that a virtuous ruler will gain more and more authority over his people (moral authority, Confucius taught, would roll out from the righteous ruler like wind, bending his subjects to obedience as wind bends

\*Jianye is also known as Jiankang. The Jin dynasty held power from 265 to 420; the latter half of the Jin rule, when Jin power was pushed to the southeast, is known as the period of the Eastern Jin (317–420). Sometimes the earlier part of the dynasty (265–316) is called the Western Jin to distinguish the two eras.

grass), the Jin emperors struggled to live rightly and follow the ancient rituals. “Guide the people by virtue,” the *Analects* had promised, “keep them in line by rites, and they will . . . reform themselves.”<sup>9</sup> The promise that virtuous government would always triumph held the Jin court together, even in the face of defeat by the northern barbarians.

“BARBARIAN” was a moveable term; the harder the Jin fought to distinguish themselves from the uncivilized warriors to the north, the more those uncivilized warriors wanted to be just like the Jin.

In the latter half of the fourth century, the most ambitious of the northern “barbarians” was Fu Jian, chief of the Qianqin. Fu Jian had aspirations to be truly Chinese. He had founded Confucian academies in his state and had reformed the government of his kingdom so that it was run along Chinese lines; his capital city was the ancient Chinese capital of Chang’an; his chief minister, the ruthless Wang Meng, was Chinese.<sup>10</sup>

As soon as he inherited the rule of the Qianqin, in 357, Fu Jian began to launch attack after attack on the nearby Sixteen Kingdoms. After twenty years of fighting, he had absorbed most of them, almost uniting the north of China under a single crown; and he intended to absorb the Jin as well.

In 378, the northern army of the Qianqin marched south against the Jin borders. The Jin emperor, Jin Xiaowudi, fought back, but over the next few years he lost his border cities, one at a time. By 382, Fu Jian of the Qianqin was ready to make a final assault. He marched south with an enormous force: according to the chroniclers of his day, 600,000 foot-soldiers and 270,000 cavalry, historical hyperbole that nevertheless points to an army of unprecedented size.<sup>11</sup>

With a much smaller force, Jin Xiaowudi came north to meet him and put up a desperate defense of the core of the Jin empire. The armies clashed at the Fei river (now dry), in an epic encounter that became one of the most famous in Chinese history: the Battle of the Fei River. “The dead were so many,” says one account, “that they were making a pillow for each other on the ground.”<sup>12</sup>

To the shock of both kings, the smaller Jin force triumphed. With that defeat, Fu Jian’s bid to reunify China was over. His fledgling Chinese-style government had never been firmly established; his empire was held together with the sword, and each war of conquest strained the existing government a little bit more. “You have had so many wars lately,” one of his advisors had warned him before the invasion of the Jin, “that your people are becoming dissatisfied, and hate the very idea of fighting.” Once defeated, Fu Jian began to lose territories to rebellion and revolt, one at a time. Two years after his loss at the Fei river, Fu Jian was strangled by one of his own subordinates.<sup>13</sup>



The strangler was named Tuoba Gui. Like Fu Jian himself, he was of northern stock; his ancestors were nomads of the Xianbei tribe, and the Tuoba family name testified to his “barbarian” origins. His own native state, the Dai state, had been conquered by Fu Jian ten years earlier; his grandfather had been its prince until Fu Jian annexed the state as part of his growing northern empire.

Now Tuoba Gui declared Dai’s independence. He changed its name from the Xianbei “Dai” to the Chinese “Bei Wei,”\* and he changed his own family name from the Xianbei “Tuoba” to the Chinese “Yuan.” With his Chinese identity firmly in place, he then began his own campaign to conquer and unify the north.

Meanwhile the Jin army faced another challenge on its other frontier. Around 400, a pirate named Sun En began to recruit a navy, finding his crew among the sailors and fishermen who lived along the coast.<sup>14</sup> For two years, the pirate fleet sailed along the shore, raiding, burning, and stealing, earning the name “armies of demons” from the shore-dwellers. The Jin emperor put the duty of crushing the rebellion into the hands of his generals, who managed to defeat the demon army in 402—and who, in the process, gained more and more power for themselves.

The weakness of the eastern Jin throne, the increasing chaos along its northern frontiers, and the constant shifts in power in the north: China was in constant flux. A monastic movement began to gather force, giving those who followed it a way to remove themselves completely from the disorder that surrounded them.

The monastic impulse in Buddhism went all the way back to the Buddha himself, who is said to have established the first community of monks so that the “path of inner progress” could be followed without distraction.<sup>15</sup> The monasticism of the early fifth century was centered around the teachings of the newly developed Amitabha sect. By 402, two revered monks—the native Hui-yuan and an Indian monk named Kumarajiva—were spreading teachings of the Amitabha, the “Buddha of Shining Light,” who lived in the Western Paradise, the Pure Land, “a sphere without defilement where all those who believed in the Buddha were to be reborn.”<sup>16</sup>

Compared with the nasty uncertain present, the Western Paradise was a particularly lovely place; and just as the Western Paradise was far, far away from the battling northern kingdoms and the failing Jin, so the monastic communities that began to grow in the early fifth century were far, far removed from any involvement in court politics. To join a monastic community was to renounce the world and give up all ownership of private property: to cut all

\*Or “Northern Wei,” to distinguish it from an earlier kingdom also known as “Wei.”

ties of interest and ambition that bound you to the culture, the society, or the kingdom on the outside of the monastery. But monasticism also provided a refuge. You might give up the chance of bettering yourself—but in exchange, you gained peace.

The followers of the Amitabha had nothing to do with earthly power; Hui-yuan rarely even left the monastery, and his students joined him in escape from the world.<sup>17</sup> Their practice was entirely different from that of the Christians in the west. There, Christianity had begun to serve the needs of the emperor; but in the land of the Jin, Hui-yuan argued, successfully, that Buddhist monks should be exempt from the requirement to bow to the emperor. They had chosen to exist in a different reality, where neither the battles in the north nor the warring in the south had any real importance.

T I M E L I N E 2	
ROMAN EMPIRE	CHINA
	Fall of Han (220)/Rise of Three Kingdoms: Shu Han, Cao Wei, Dong Wu
	<b>Wei Yuandi</b> (260–265) Destruction of Shu Han (263) Fall of Cao Wei/Rise of Jin (265) <b>Jin Wudi</b> (265–290)
	Destruction of Dong Wu (280) Unification under the Jin (280–316)
<b>Diocletian</b> (284–305)	Rebellion of the Eight Princes (291–306)
<b>Maxentius</b> (306–312) <b>Licinius</b> (308–324)	<b>Jin Huaidi</b> (307–313) <b>Liu Cong</b> of the Hanzhao (310–318)
<b>Maximinus Daia</b> (308–313) Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312)	Fall of unified Jin (316) <b>Jin Yuandi</b> (317–323)
<b>Constantine</b> (312–337) Battle of Campus Serenus (313)	<b>Fu Jian</b> of the Qianqin (357–385)
Edict of Milan (313)	Battle of the Fei River (383)
Council of Nicaea (325)	Rise of Bei Wei (386) <b>Tuoba Gui</b> of the Bei Wei (386–409)