

STRASBOURG AD 357

The victory that saved Gaul



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ILLUSTRATED BY FLORENT VINCENT

CAMPAIGN 336

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Series editor Marcus Cowper

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ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Gaul (Gallia), even more than Africa, Dacia and Britannia, undoubtedly comprised one of the largest and longest-lasting conquests by the Romans, and the merit goes to Julius Caesar. Its resources and its rapid Romanization allowed the empire to prosper and rely on a geopolitical and economic nucleus beyond the confines of the Italian peninsula. Not by chance, it was only when the Gallic provinces, during the 5th century AD, began to see their territories shrink that the Western Roman Empire was no longer able to halt the decline and defend all its other borders. However, in the time period covered in this volume, the Romans knew how to deal with pressure along their borders consisting of raids, looting or, at most, temporary occupations of the frontier by enemy bands.

The Roman hero of the period under discussion, who led the defence of Gaul for five years, was a man who had never before taken a sword in his hand or fought an enemy on the battlefield. This man was Flavius Claudius Iulianus (Julian), at that time *caesar* over the Western provinces and then later *augustus* (emperor); he later became known as Julian the Apostate by his Christian enemies for his attempt to restore the ancient Pagan cults of Rome.

Roman soldiers hunting a boar and a deer, from a sarcophagus at Arles (Arles), second half of 4th century AD. This sarcophagus, found in 1974 in the Trinquetaille area, shows how hunting was one of the preferred Roman methods for preparing for war. The presence of military belts and *fasciae crurales* (woollen socks laced up to the knee in a cross-garter pattern) mark these hunters as soldiers, probably in the retinue of a general. Note the fur collar worn without a cap, the *alicula*. (Musée Départemental Arles Antique, authors' photo, courtesy of the museum)



The Battle of Strasbourg (Argentoratum), fought in AD 357 between the Roman army under Julian and the confederation of Germanic tribes led by the Alemannic King Chnodomar, was the most striking military masterpiece of this extraordinary man, one of Rome's outstanding emperors. Although numerically inferior, Julian's army gained a complete victory by pushing the Alemanni beyond the Rhine and inflicting heavy casualties on them. The battle, one of the best documented military engagements of the 4th century AD, represented the culmination of the campaigns of Julian between 355 and 357 to drive the barbarians from Gaul and restore the line of Roman defensive fortifications along the Rhine, which had largely been destroyed during the civil war of AD 350–53. Julian himself wrote a book on the battle, which unfortunately remains lost to us, probably because of the *damnatio memoriae* suffered by Julian. There are three fundamental sources for the battle. Firstly, there is the account of Julian's personal historian, his contemporary Ammianus Marcellinus, who wrote his *Res Gestae* around AD 392. Secondly, there is Ammianus' teacher and friend of Julian, the orator Libanius, who wrote his account in AD 365 and thus is closer to the events. Thirdly, there is the account of the historian Zosimus, who wrote his *Historia Nova* in about AD 500. Ammianus has been often criticized by the modern historians, because he was an admirer of Julian and he celebrated his deeds. On the other hand, he was with Julian before the battle and, moreover, he collected additional information on it from his comrades and companion officers. Of course, a clear and complete reconstruction of what happened can only be obtained by reading Ammianus in conjunction with the other two sources and with the modern archaeology.

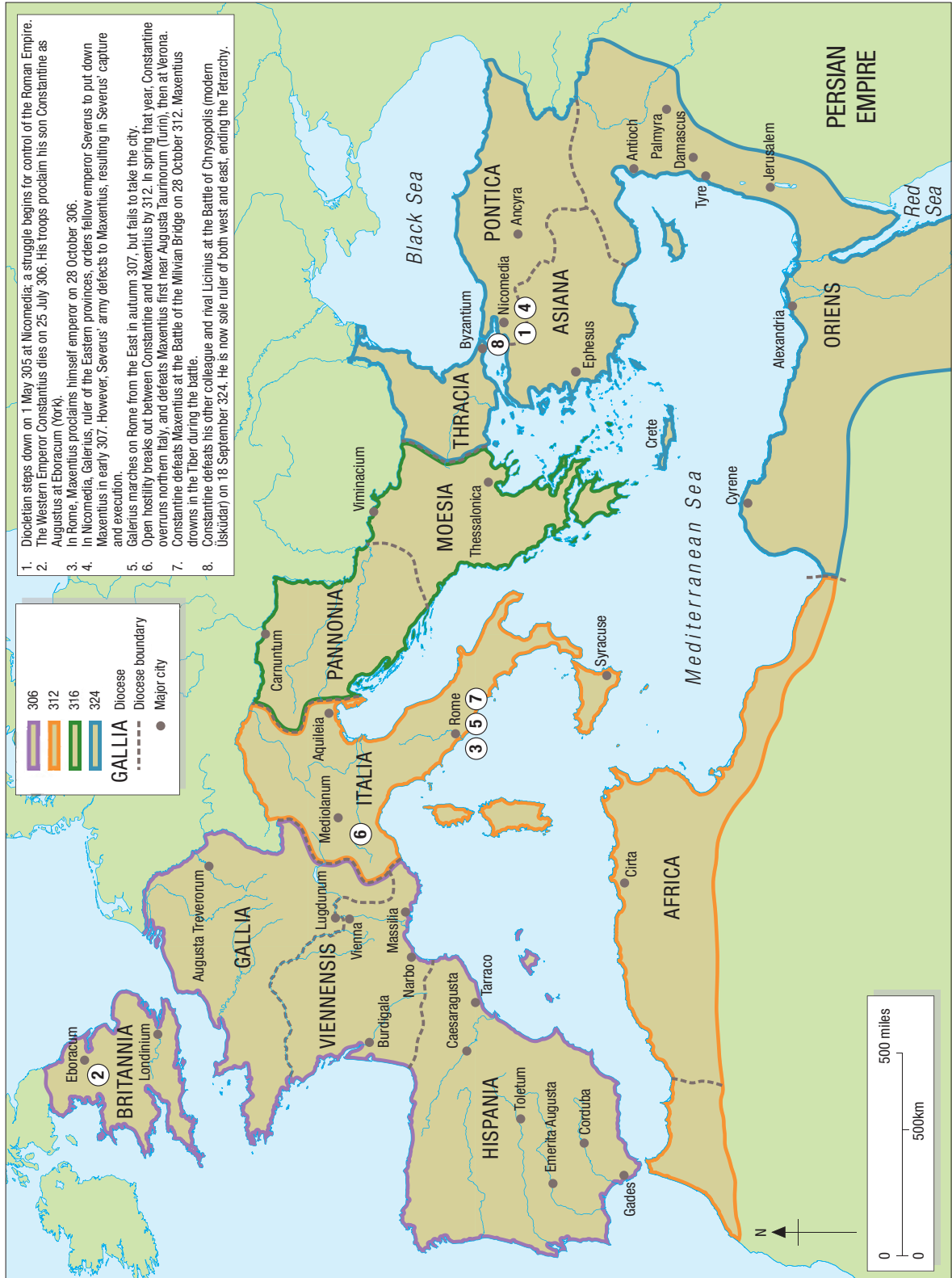


A Late Roman lord out hunting with soldiers and servants, Villa Romana del Tullaro, Sicily. (Dipartimento dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana; authors' photo)

THE RHINE FRONTIER

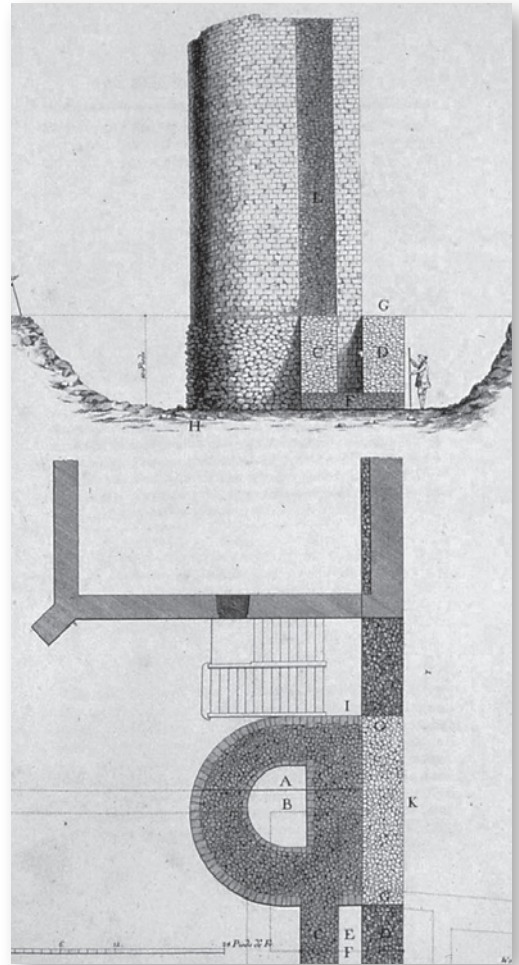
The tireless activity of Constantine the Great (AD 306–37), first as usurper, then as *caesar* and finally as *augustus*, restored a certain degree of stability on the Rhine frontier during the first half of the 4th century AD. A relative period of peace longer than any witnessed over the course of the previous century followed, although pressure continued from the Germanic tribes. The marked institutional and economic crisis into which the empire had fallen before the advent of Diocletian and the Tetrarchy, which witnessed 22 emperors across a 50-year timespan, had undermined Roman defensive emplacements along both its western and eastern borders. Whilst along the Euphrates Rome had to deal with the similarly structured kingdom of the Sassanid Persians, in Europe pressure was exerted by dozens of different tribes, occasionally acting as a confederation, but more often than not led by individual rulers who did not always respect any stipulated treaties (*foedera*) agreed with the current Roman emperor or his predecessors.

The rise of Constantine the Great, AD 306–24



Rome's long-standing strategy had been to inflict exemplary defeats on her Germanic enemies and then incorporate any prisoners into the imperial army as auxiliary troops, or deporting them in order to repopulate deserted territories, making them *devoticii* (settlers), *laeti* (foreigners who were permitted to settle on Roman territory as long as they provided recruits for the Roman military) or *auxilia* (non-citizen Roman military). The aim was to transform them into allied populations settled along the empire's borders and acting as a forward line of defence against pressure from other more aggressive populations. The first documented *foedus* comes from the time of Marcus Aurelius – although the authenticity of the fragmentary evidence remains under discussion – between the Roman Empire and a band of barbarians, notably Vandals. While their families were held hostage by the Governor of Dacia, these barbarians fought against other ethnic groups, and their surviving members were allowed to settle in the territories in which rebellion had been eradicated. Over time, the barbarians were not only recruited into the auxiliary formations but also filled the manpower gaps that had appeared in the ranks of the legions, due to the increasing difficulties experienced by the authorities in sourcing recruits from within the empire. This changed the ethnic composition of these units, which became ever more varied, to the point that, by the 4th century AD, the term *barbarus* had become synonymous with 'soldier', and the allocation of military expenses had become known as the *fiscus barbaricus*.

Constantine had managed to tame the ambitions of the Franks by making them subject to Rome, but the Alemanni, another great confederation, remained under arms more often than they were at peace. The name itself (meaning 'all men') indicates their highly heterogeneous composition, which included tribes such as the Suebi, Quadi and Teutoni, who had played roles in previous conflicts between Romans and barbarians, and other lesser known ones such as the Charudes and Eudusii. The Alemanni originated from the aggregation of the tribes formed in Agri Decumates, the salient conquered by the Romans at the time of the Flavians to reduce the border area between the Rhine and the Danube, and the first emperor to confront them was Caracalla, who defeated them on the Main in AD 213. However, just half a century later they managed to push south of the Alps, as far as Mediolanum (Milan), before they were roundly defeated by Probus and forced to settle in the lands along the Neckar River. From that point onwards, they made repeated attempts to cross to the left bank of the Rhine, into Alsace, and into the territory around Lake Constance; their initial motives of capturing slaves and looting were subsequently replaced by the search for lands to be colonized. This was especially notable during the Roman civil wars, which sucked Roman military resources to the centre of the empire and stripped the frontier areas of military manpower.



One of the Roman towers from the walls of Argentoratum (Strasbourg), by Silbermann, 1753. The third and final wall built at Argentoratum was made of sandstone. It was probably built in phases, at the end of 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century AD. It abutts directly to the earlier limestone wall. The new wall featured semi-circular towers spaced at 20–40m, with wider round towers at the four corners. Archaeological work has revealed a total of 17 semi-circular towers, whose diameters vary between 4.7m on the north-east section, 7.6m on the south-west section and 6.5m on the north-west section. The tower shown here no longer survives. (Public domain/Wikimedia Commons)



Reconstruction of one of the helmets found at Koblenz (grave 1), with a Chi-ro christogram and metallic crest, dating from the second half of 4th century AD. From the time of Constantine the Great, many Christian soldiers displayed christograms on their weapons and armour. Constantius II was a deeply committed Arian Christian, continuing his father's policy of promoting Christians to the high offices of state. (Dr Christian Miks)

CONSTANTINE'S DYNASTY

After the deep crisis of the 3rd century AD, the empire had recovered a precarious stability with the advent of Diocletian. Emerging victorious from the umpteenth civil war, and a usurper himself, the great emperor realized that the Roman Empire had become too big for a single man to succeed in stifling the ambitions of the provincial governors and to curb the pressure of the barbarians and the Persians. The empire was a territory extending thousands of miles from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Euphrates, from Hadrian's Wall to the Atlas Mountains. Therefore, Diocletian devised a complicated institution, known as the Tetrarchy, according to which four men – two emperors (*augusti*) and two deputy emperors or caesars (*caesari*) – ruled the empire. Diocletian and his colleague Maximianus would have been the *augusti*, with Constantius Chlorus and Galerius as the *caesari*; after 20 years, each *augustus* would retire and his *caesar* would take his place, accompanied by the election of two new *caesari*.

This new institution was inspired by the golden age of Rome, that of the Adoptive Emperors (the Nerva–Antonine Dynasty of AD 96–192), which had produced sovereigns such as Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. The Nerva–Antonine Dynasty had worked because, in the absence of any direct heirs, each emperor had been forced to choose the best possible successor. During Diocletian's time, however, it was the direct heirs, who had been excluded from the succession, that undermined the system. Among them, the most skilful, ruthless and unscrupulous was Constantine who, excluded from the first succession despite being the son of the *augustus* Constantius Chlorus, took advantage of the premature death of his father to replace him and forced the other members of the new Tetrarchy to accept his status. Then he acted, plotted and began a series of wars that eliminated all his rivals and left him as sole administrator in the West while his brother-in-law Licinius, who had already been made *augustus* before him, ruled the East. But half of the Roman Empire was not enough for either of them and, after two further civil wars, in AD 324 Constantine emerged as the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

Although under Diocletian and the Tetrarchy the empire had undergone important transformations especially in administrative, institutional and financial areas, Constantine imposed further deep-rooted changes to religious and military practices. In AD 313 in Milan, shortly after his victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, Licinius and Constantine issued an edict that confirmed the one issued by Galerius two years earlier, making the Christian religion *licita* (i.e. free to be practised); Christians had been fiercely persecuted by Diocletian and also by Galerius. From that point onwards, Constantine increasingly favoured the ecclesiastical hierarchy, to whom he granted privileges and tax advantages and made financial donations.

In the military field, Constantine completed the process of clearly differentiating between mobile and static forces, mainly located at key



Two golden *solidi*, the one on the left showing Constantius II, while the right-hand side coin depicts Julian. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; authors' photo, courtesy of the museum)

points along the frontiers, through the distinction between the *Limitanei* or *Ripuari* (soldier-settlers anchored to a particular frontier territory) and the *Comitatenses* (forces quartered in cities). The latter formed the mobile troops who could accompany the emperor in a campaign or reach the most threatened sectors of the empire's frontier, in collaboration with the border troops. Under his rule, defeated barbarians were integrated into the army, offering many Germanic warriors the opportunity to forge a career in the imperial forces and even reach the highest command ranks. On the other hand, it must be remembered that it was an Alemannic king, Crocus, who raised Constantine up onto the shields of his warriors – the *Auxilia* of the army of Constantius Chlorus – and proclaimed him emperor in the aftermath of his father's death.

The succession of Constantine was simultaneously determined by dynastic needs and by the same administrative requirements that had led to the establishment of the Tetrarchy. It seems that the great emperor did not leave any precise instructions regarding the hierarchy, nor any rules relating to the government of the empire; at his death, in AD 337, Rome found itself with five rulers: his sons Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans, and his nephews Dalmatius and Hannibalianus. But the army in Constantinople, probably on the instigation of Constantius II, quickly got rid of the two nephews and left the empire in the hands of Constantine's three direct heirs. Only two children were spared the great purge in Byzantium that exterminated relatives and collaborators of the deceased emperor: Gallus and Julian (the former because he was unwell, the second because he was only a child). They were the sons of Constantine's half-brother, Julius Constans.

The tripartite division of the empire among the new *augusti*, however, did not endure for long. Constantine and Constans soon fell out and the former paid the price, falling in an ambush in AD 340 during an attempt to invade Italy, an area that was under his brother's control. From that moment, Constans, who was not yet 20 years old, assumed sovereignty over the entire West. Constantius, engaged in the East against Persia, could not challenge the land annexations that followed the death of his other brother. The young man proved to be a valiant general, and in the next ten years of his reign he achieved a series of victories against the barbarians who were pressing against the borders along the Rhine and in Britain. However, Constantius was a poor administrator, exacting and rapacious, scandalously immoral, and above all impatient with the demands of the army. This last point would have been enough to result in the fall of any emperor, and in the year AD 350 a

The Roman Empire, AD 337–53

