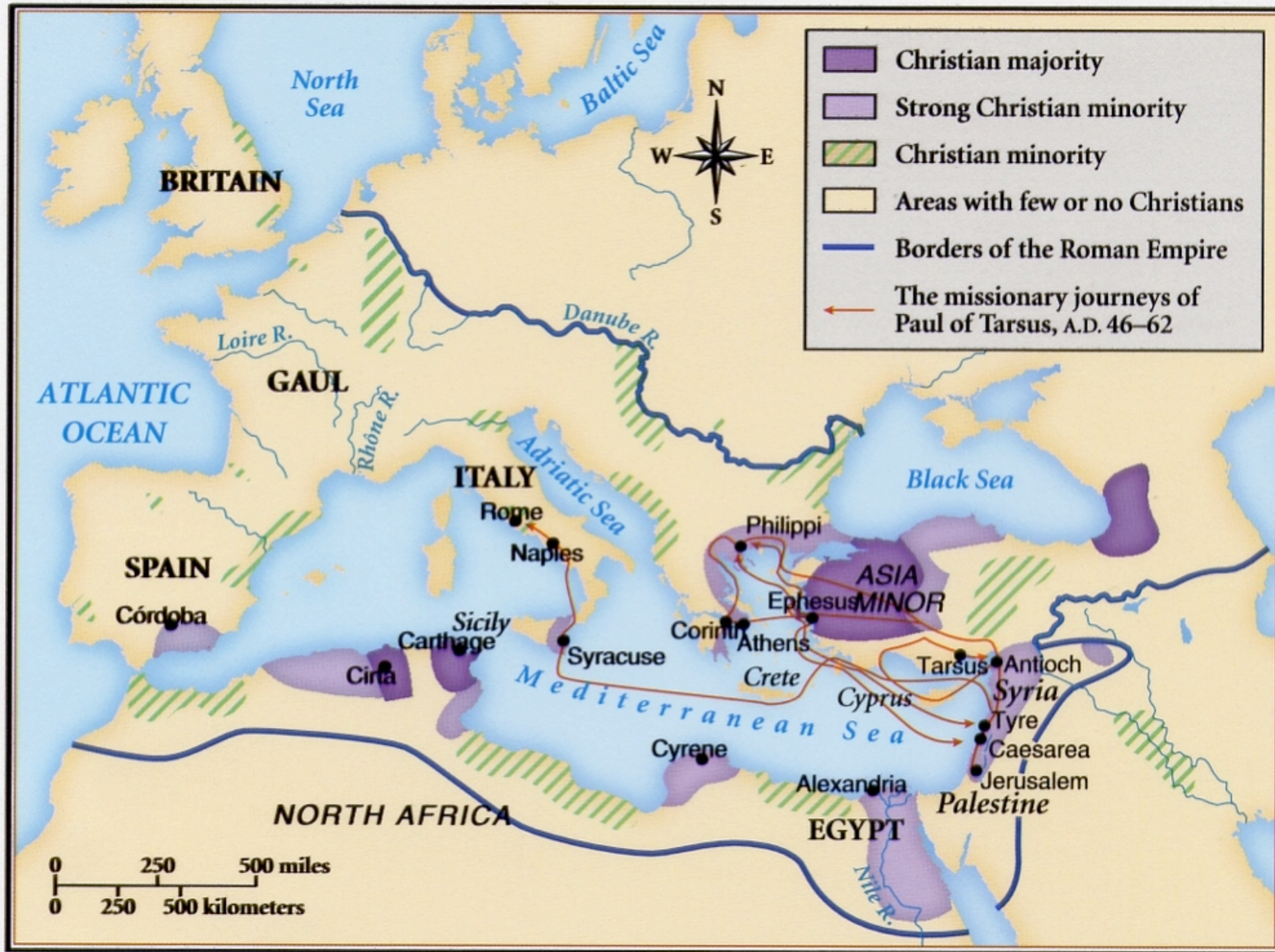


Recall from last time that the 3rd century was a time of crisis in the Roman Empire:

- Military threats along all borders, especially the long European one
- Political instability, with various generals fighting over the position of emperor
- Economic decline & instability (inflation, currency collapse, high taxes)
- Conflicts between local and empire-wide interests

The late 3rd c. was also the time when the number of Christians increased dramatically, constituting the majority in some regions.



MAP 6.3 Christian Populations in the Late Third Century A.D.

Note that it's purple in some of the oldest, richest, most densely populated parts of the empire.

DIOCLETIAN (r. 284-305)

- Began to try to tackle the problem
- Favored dividing the empire into E & W halves, to be ruled by co-emperors
- Secure succession by having junior emperors
- Thus four co-emperors (TETRARCHY)

At the same time, he wanted to revive a feeling of unity across all parts of the empire. Thus, he outlawed Christianity in 303. In 304, he began to compel Christians to sacrifice to the imperial gods, on penalty of death. Many Christians were martyred. Books and churches were also confiscated and destroyed.

This was the largest assault the Christians had ever faced from the Roman authorities. It was hugely terrifying.

Remembered as “The Great Persecution.”

CONSTANTINE (r. 306-37)

Constantine was another of the sort of generals, and the son of a general and co-emperor, who had long vied for power. He felt the solution to the stress of empire was reunification. He also determined to ally with the Christians. His was, in other words, the opposite political calculation of Diocletian.

Moving south from his base in Britain, with his own loyal army, Constantine determined to eliminate the other co-emperors and take power for himself.

By 312, he had conquered Gaul, eliminated the Western Emperor and was poised to take control of Rome.

Approaching Rome, in Feb. 313, Constantine fought and won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

It is before this battle, according to later Christian tradition (starting with Eusebius--the passage in your coursepack), that Constantine famously experienced a vision telling him that:
a) he'd be victorious with the One God on his side; and b) that his army would win with the cross as their sign.

Eusebius would also have Constantine converting to Christianity himself at this time. He did certainly convert, but when exactly is unknown--except that it was most likely not as early as Feb 313.

However, immediately after the victory, he did issue the EDICT OF MILAN, which made Christianity and all other religions legal.

The Edict of Milan did **not** outlaw non-Christian beliefs, practices, temples, etc. Nor did it make Christianity the official religion of the Empire.

However, Constantine had clearly determined to ally himself with the Christians, most especially their bishops--who in large cities with significant Christian populations (like Alexandria and Antioch) could be quite powerful. He was, in essence, determined to secure his own power, and thus the stability of the empire, by building a new power base in the Christian community, to counter the endlessly unstable politicking of generals and their armies.

Constantine never outlawed pagan practices. But he threw all the resources of imperial patronage--both personal and governmental--toward Christianity (and more or less withdrew them from the older temples, priests, etc. that had been publicly supported).

His patronage included a massive building program, most especially of churches in Jerusalem (the church of the Holy Sepulchre), in Rome (St. Peter's), and Constantinople.

The result was a huge change in the status of Christianity in the Empire: from outlaws to officially supported. Constantine thus looms very large in subsequent Christian memory and history. He ended Diocletian's terrible persecution, and changed the status of Christians and Christianity forever.

Because Constantine was determined to rule a unified empire, he became concerned with the lack of unity within the Christian church.

Although local Christians had long since established leadership, with bishops and their deacons serving the community as both teachers and providers of charity, no hierarchy determined the relationship between bishops of different communities. And while the wider community of Christians had agreed on the canonical gospels of the “New Testament”, there were minor differences in their beliefs--most especially about Jesus’ status as the son of God.

In some places, like Alexandria, tensions ran high between groups who held firmly to particular views and disputed the validity of others. Some questioned the bishop’s authority. Some fought in the streets.

This was no good for Constantine’s program of unity and stability, especially in the largest, wealthiest cities of the empire.

He therefore, in 325, summoned all Christian bishops to the COUNCIL OF NICAEA. The aim was to come to agreement on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. (More on this in a later class).

220 bishops attended, mostly from the eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Empire.

Three outcomes:

- 1) a short statement of the core tenets of Christian belief (ultimately, the “Nicene Creed”)
- 2) the outlawing of Arianism (i.e., those who couldn’t agree with what the creed said about Jesus)
- 3) the elevation of four bishops above the others, “patriarchs”: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Rome

N.B. Constantine was present and in charge of the council, often compelling them to come to agreement!

One last deed of Constantine's that would have a massive effect on the future of the empire:

He moved the capital from Rome to a brand new city (named after himself)

CONSTANTINOPLE

On the upside, the aim was to be closer to the more populous, Greek-speaking, rich tax base in the eastern part of the Empire.

On the downside, the whole ideological underpinning of the Roman Empire had hinged on the special destiny of ROME, the city itself deified.

Constantine's successor, Julian, was an adherent of pagan beliefs who attempted to revive them and pull imperial patronage away from the Christians. (Hence he is usually known, following Christian writers, as "Julian the Apostate".)

However, ALL emperors subsequent to Julian were Christian.

Although it would take a very long time for all the inhabitants of the Empire to become Christians, or in some areas even the majority, after Constantine:

ROMAN EMPIRE = CHRISTIANITY



MAP 7.2 The Spread of Christianity, 300-600

From Chadwick and Evans, *Atlas of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Andromeda Oxford Ltd., 1987), 28. Reproduced by permission of Andromeda Oxford Limited.

We'll take up Augustine on Monday.