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## **CHRISTIAN CHURCHES BUILT DURING THE AGE OF THE HOLY EMPEROR CONSTANTINE AND EMPRESS HELEN**

**Rezumat:** *Constantin cel Mare a fost primul împărat roman care s-a convertit la religia creștină. În timpul domniei sale îndelungate, de peste 30 de ani (306-337), s-a dovedit a fi un om cu o voință impresionantă, un împărat înțelept, un strateg care a adus cel mai mare serviciu Bisericii Creștine – deoarece i-a oferit un statut legal, după o vreme lungă de frământări, cauzate de prigonirile împăraților romani – începând cu Nero și până la Dioclețian. Constantin și mama sa, Elena, au întemeiat un număr mare de biserici în tot imperiul. De aceea, posteritatea creștină îi slăvește, îi venerează și îi tratează ca pe „egalii apostolilor lui Iisus Hristos“. Constantin însuși a fost îngropat într-o biserică construită de el, „Sfinții Apostoli“, din Constantinopol, servind ca exemplu din acest punct de vedere, pentru întreaga creștinătate și, de asemenea, pentru conducătorii romani, care, mai târziu, vor imita exemplul dat de marele împărat Constantin.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Constantin cel Mare, Elena, Biserica, întemeiere, libertate, creștinătate.*

For almost three centuries, the Christians were subjected to innumerable persecutions, sometimes leading to real massacres, from several Roman emperors (ten in number)<sup>1</sup>. The persecutions started under the Emperor Nero, in 64 A.D., and ended under the Emperor Maxentius, in 313 A.D. These persecutions had serious consequences for the Church. During the first centuries, until the Edict of Milan of 313

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1. John B. Firth, *Constantine the Great: The Reorganisation of the Empire and the Triumph of the Church*, New York, 1905, p. 12-39.

given by Constantine the Great (306-337) and even after it in the East – the Church gave the greatest number of martyrs ever, worshipped as saints, up to now.

Origen – an important Christian writer, son of a martyr, who himself had suffered from the persecution of the Emperor Decius – wrote about the persecutions against the Christians: “The more the rulers, the emperor’s officials and people of all classes persecuted the Christians, the greater the Christians’ number and power has become”<sup>2</sup>.

The reign of Constantine the Great is providential, both for Christianity and for the development of Europe and of the whole world, since it will turn the pagan Roman Empire into a Christian one. The Holy Emperor Constantine and Empress Helen have a great place in the Christianity history, both because they put an end to the persecutions against Christians and offered them religious freedom, and because of the reforms, facilities and supporting actions taken afterwards by Constantine the Great, for the development of Jesus Christ’s Church.

The year 312 represented a crucial moment in Constantine’s life. First, he had the well-known vision<sup>3</sup> – retold by the historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his work *Vita Constantini (Constantine’s Life)*, also retold by Lactantius, the Christian apologist, mentor of Crispus – Constantine’s son, in *De mortibus persecutorum (On the Death of the Persecutors)*<sup>4</sup>. The event retold in the two works is the act detailing Constantine’s conversion to Christianity. However, there are some who question the documentary value of the two authors, and especially that of Eusebius. One of the arguments in question would be the fact that the event from Pons Milvius is not retold by Eusebius in *His Ecclesiastic History*<sup>5</sup> of

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2. Origen, *Scrieri alese*, partea a patra, „Contra lui Celsus“, translated by pr. prof. T. Bodogae, în col. „Părinți și scriitori bisericești“, vol. 9, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1984, p. 464.

3. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, translated by Radu Alexandrescu, în col. „Părinți și scriitori bisericești“, serie nouă, vol. 8, Ed. Basilica, București, 2012, p. 102-103.

4. Lactanțiu, *Despre moartea persecutorilor*, Ed. Amarcord, Timișoara, 2000.

5. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Istoria bisericească*, translated by pr. prof. T. Bodogae, în col. „Părinți și scriitori bisericești“, vol. 13, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1987.

324 A.D.; if it had really happened, the author would not have ignored it. Thus, it would be a later interpolation in *Vita Constantini*. However, we must take into consideration the fact that the nucleus of that event was real, even if it suffered some exaggeration, and also Eusebius tells about it in his festive *Speech* – held on the anniversary of thirty years from the beginning of Constantine’s reign (*Tricennalia*)<sup>6</sup>.

After the fight against the Emperor Maxentius, Constantine starts to be aware of the fact that both that revelation<sup>7</sup> and the victories won at Pons Milvius (Vulture Bridge) or SaxaRubra (The Red Stones) in Via Flaminia, at about 10-12 km north-east of Rome, on October 27, 312 A.D.<sup>8</sup>, were due to a divine miracle. Our Redeemer Jesus Christ Himself had appeared to Constantine in his dream, holding a cross – the same Cross that Constantine had seen in the sky, at midday – “commanding Constantine to put the sign shown to him in the sky on his flags, in order to be protected during his fights against his enemies”<sup>9</sup>.

From now on, a radical transformation has occurred in his life, as the emperor – enlightened like Saul on his way to Damascus, long before – understood the providential historical moment, and the Mystery of the Cross. During his reign, the Christianity made its first step on the solid ground of the official recognition. From now on, the old pagan empire was going to gradually become a Christian empire<sup>10</sup>. He had an intuition that the pagan world would not be able to survive and would have to make room to the new one – the only world that would be able to save humanity from its decline. “At that time, the Christianity and the Church were concentrating all the energies of that world, becoming the only reality called to imprint the seal of their spirit on his-

6. Emilian Popescu, *Istoria și spiritualitatea Imperiului bizantin*, curs pentru anul I, secția pastorală, Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă, București, 1993, vol. I, p. 25; Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 299-334.

7. John B. Firth, *op. cit.*, p. 92 sqq.

8. Prof. Ioan Bocioagă, *Personalitatea lui Constantin cel Mare și politica lui socială*, Ed. Moldova S.A.R. pentru Industria Artelor Grafice, Galați, 1935, p. 12.

9. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 103.

10. A. A. Vasiliev, *Istoria Imperiului Bizantin* translated by Ionuț-Alexandru Tudorie, Vasile Adrian Carabă, Sebastian Laurențiu Nazâru, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2010, p. 89; A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and the Pagan Rome*, translated by H. Mattingly, Oxford, 1948, p. 14-15.

tory. The most valuable brains of the pagan society were deserting it, increasing the number of the Christians”<sup>11</sup>.

Origen of Alexandria – the above-mentioned great theologian and writer, had noticed that, paradoxically, the result of the persecutions had been quite the opposite of the one expected, i.e. instead of causing the extermination of the new religion, it had caused its increasing development: “They conspired for the extermination of Christians..., but it was in vain, as the Word of God cannot be forbidden and has become stronger, in spite of all those hardships”<sup>12</sup>.

By the Edict of Milan, promulgated in March 313, along with Licinius, the Emperor Constantine not only nominates Christianity as *religiollicita* (permitted religion) – establishing an equality between Christianity and the other pagan religions recognized by the Roman state – but he also “decrees actions meant to give back to the Christian communities the possessions confiscated from the Christian Churches by the Roman state”<sup>13</sup>; thus, he became the real protector of the Christians, whom he supported in all the situations. From then on, the public Christian religion started developing, organizing itself increasingly well and manifesting itself by means of an increasingly majestic ceremony, meant to attract and impress the masses.

The first Christian churches had been built even from the first century, in the East – in Georgia, Armenia, Syria – in areas where people had been Christianized by the first apostles. They must have been churches with a design focused on their centre, originating in the archaic fake tholos domes. But it was just a timid start. Anyway, after the edict, the Christians – legitimate now – enthusiastically started carrying on the Apostles’ work of preaching the new religion. But they now needed more than the occasional prayer houses: they needed public worship places, with a permanent destination and use, and large enough. It is Constantine the Great who will found holy worship places in almost all the centers and regions of his huge empire. The Christian ritual, previously held in catacombs or in humble prayer houses, some-

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11. Dan Zamfirescu, *Ortodoxie și romano-catolicism în specificul existenței lor istorice*, ed. a doua, revăzută, Ed. Roza Vânturilor, București, 2013, p. 43.

12. Origen, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

13. Prof. Ioan Socioagă, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

times started to be held – in the most important cities – in spaces that were more than large, which were actually really huge. The historians unanimously admit that “during the times of Constantine the Great, the Roman world becomes full of churches, and inside the ever-growing Christian community, an intense theological activity is developing”<sup>14</sup>, encouraged and supported by the emperor. In that action, he was also supported by the initiative and support of his mother, the Saint Empress Helen, who patronized the construction of some splendid and monumental churches in the most important cities of the empire.

By means of official letters, he orders to all bishops and province governors “to do the best they can when it comes to the works to be done in sanctuaries, namely: either they should consolidate or heighten the existing walls, or – where necessary – they should build new ones”<sup>15</sup>.

The emperor paid a particular attention to the former prayer houses of the Christians, which had been confiscated during the persecutions. Not only does he give those buildings back to the Church, but he also improves and adorns them and he turns the old pagan temples into worship buildings. To that respect, he issues a “law by which he commands that the walls of the prayer houses should be higher, and God’s churches should be larger, both in length and in width, than anything else”<sup>16</sup>. In the accomplishment of that mission, the emperor himself had gotten directly involved, by allotting subsidies and investing large amounts of material goods for the building and ornamentation of the holy worship places, so that anyone could notice how “he plentifully enriched God’s churches, by his own means and by enlarging the prayer houses, making them look great and decorating the most important sanctuaries of the church with innumerable votive gifts”<sup>17</sup>. The emperor “founded churches arousing great respect”, and “Saint Helen adorned them with precious adornments and vessels”<sup>18</sup>.

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14. Paul Lemerle, *Istoria Bizanțului*, translated by Nicolae Șerban-Tanașoca, Ed. Universitas, București, 1998, p. 24.

15. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 148.

16. *Ibidem*, p. 147.

17. *Ibidem*, p. 110.

18. Episcop Gherasim Timuș, *Dicționar aghiografic cuprinzând pe scurt viețile sfinților*, București, 1898, p. 236-237.

### 1. Christian Churches Built in Rome

The first Christian basilica-type worship place, built by Constantine is the basilica of Lateran (today, Saint John Lateran), started in 313 – a year after he had won his victory against the emperor Maxentius. On that occasion, in 312, he had given the imperial palace to the bishop of Rome, as an Episcopal residence. Here, Pope Melchiod summons a synod in 313. Unfortunately, there are hardly any architectonic remains of the former Constantine basilica, on whose bases we could imaginary reconstitute the original plan of the building. The historians assert that the basilica used to have a grand transept and baptistery, and was adorned with mosaics of “beautiful compositions covering the free areas of the walls, in general, and particularly the apse curves”<sup>19</sup>.

The other Christian basilicas and constructions are *Martyria*, built over the tombs of the Saints Peter and Paul, the Apostles, and of other Christian martyrs, or *mausolea* belonging to different members of the imperial family. The *martyrium* – basilicas built during the Constantine’s reign are smaller in size, having three naves; such basilicas were constructed over the tombs of the Saints Laurentius and Agnes<sup>20</sup>. Also, through the Emperor Constantine’s support and initiative, the following worship places were built in Rome: the Basilica of St. Paul, the Apostle (over his tomb), called today *San Paolo fuoridemura*, located on via Ostiense, burnt during the fire of 1823 and rebuilt according to the old plans; Basilica *Apostolorum* of the San Sebastiano catacomb, in via Appia, where – in the third century – the holy relics of Saints Peter and Paul, the Apostles, were temporarily hosted, and the Basilica of Marcellinus and Peter, the martyrs, on via Labicana.<sup>21</sup>

Saint Peter’s Basilica of Rome – whose construction started about ten years after the basilica of Lateran and which took up to the middle of the fourth century to complete – is chronologically

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19. Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *Constantin cel Mare*, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1982, p. 79.

20. *Ibidem*, p. 102, 305-308.

21. *Liturgia, encyclopédie populaire des connaissances liturgiques*, publiée sous la direction de l’abbé René Aigrain, 1943, p. 638.

considered the first *martyrium* – basilica, in the true meaning of the word. It used to be a large basilica, with a transept, five naves, one apse to the west and an atrium with four porticos to the east, where the entrance was.<sup>22</sup>

## **2. Christian churches built in Constantinople**

On May 11, 330 A.D., on the banks of the Bosphorus Strait, the Emperor Constantine inaugurates his new capital city – namely Constantinopolis<sup>23</sup> or ΝέαΡομη, the New Rome – which it endowed with gorgeous palaces and numerous public constructions. Three of the churches built in his imperial residence are more representative: the basilica dedicated to the Divine Wisdom (Saint Sophia), which then became a palatine chapel and an Episcopal church; the basilica dedicated to the Divine Peace (Saint Irene), built on the old acropolis of the city, and the basilica dedicated to the Holy Apostles.

The Saint Sophia Church had the shape of an elongated rectangle on the outside and, on the inside, the cross shape given by the rows of columns dividing its interior. Being built of beams and rafters, the church was divided into five naves<sup>24</sup> and had a library and a very large baptistery, so that it provided the possibility of hosting synod meetings<sup>25</sup>. The Church will be a model for the worship places of the next period.

The Holy Apostles Church remains, par excellence, the most magnificent of all the churches built in the centre of the capital city. “After having built this church as the words cannot say, Constantine covered it from its basement to its roof in coloured-stones, catching your sight; he divided its upper part into narrow strips and entirely

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22. A. Grabar, *Martyrium. Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, I-er volume „Architecture“, Paris, 1946, p. 293-305.

23. Charles Diehl, *Istoria Imperiului bizantin*, translated by Carmen Roșulescu, Ed. Scorilo, Craiova, 1999, p. 21.

24. Stelian Brezeanu, *O istorie a Imperiului bizantin*, Ed. Albatros, București, 1981, p. 11.

25. Dr. Badea Cireșeanu, *Tezaurul liturgic al Sfintei Biserici Ortodoxe de Răsărit*, tomul III, Ed. Gutenberg, București, 1912, p. 108, 153.

gilded it. Over it, he added – as a safe guard against rains – a copper roof, but not with tiles; yet, the copper roof also shone of so much gold that anyone could see its flashes shining brightly in the sun light, even from afar”<sup>26</sup>. In this famous church, they sheltered the holy relics of the Twelve Apostles, laid in twelve sarcophagi, and in the middle of those, his body was to be laid, in a sarcophagus got ready for Constantine, and placed in the central part of the mausoleum, so that he may be guarded by six Apostles on one side and by the other six on the other side, as he considered himself to be the thirteenth apostle<sup>27</sup>. The porphyry sarcophagus, believed to have sheltered the Emperor Constantine’s body, is still preserved in the museum of Constantinople. It is for the first time that an intra-muros mausoleum (within the walls of the citadel) was built, against the prescriptions of the Roman laws of that time, which stipulated that tombs should be placed outside the city. This time, the mausoleum of Constantine and of other emperors who were to be buried inside this worship place, beside the Holy Apostles, were to be an example to follow for the whole Christian world and, last but not least, for the Romanian rulers, who would imitate the example of the great emperor Constantine.

In the new capital city of his empire, Constantine also founded great churches dedicated to the worship of several martyrs, probably no other than the ones mentioned by a great Romanian historian, namely: the Church of the St. Martyrs Serge and Bacchus; St. George Church; St. Archangel Michael Church, St. Agatonicus Church, St. Procopius Church, St. Acacius Church, St. Philemon Church and St. Eudoxius Church, as well as the churches founded by his mother – Helen, namely those built in honour of St. Theodore and Ss. Karpos and Papylos<sup>28</sup>.

The Saint Irene Church – Holy Peace (Αγία Ειρήνη) – was originally a dome-basilica, incipiently prefiguring the later byzantine style. The Saint Irene Church was built on the location of an old pre-Christian temple. It is known as the first church built in Constantinople. In this

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26. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 240-241.

27. *Ibidem*, p. 241; Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 49, 82.

28. Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria vieții bizantine*, Ed. Enciclopedică, București, 1974, p. 76.



church, the meetings of the second Ecumenical Synod were held, in May and June 381 A.D. The Ecumenical Synod of Constantinople – 381 A.D. – completed the “Nicene Creed”, giving it the form used up to now in the Orthodox and the Oriental non-Chalcedonian Churches. The Emperor Justinian reconstructed it in 532, giving it a more imposing form, by adding two domes<sup>29</sup>.

### ***3. Churches built in the Holy Land***

After Rome and Constantinople, the emperor’s attention turned to the holy places of Palestine, in whose provinces he set up new churches, much thinner and more brilliant than the old ones. “During the first years of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., says a French historian, when the success of Christianity allowed the free research of the holy places of its beginnings, Jerusalem and its surroundings became full of churches. Basilicas were built everywhere: on the place of the Holy Sepulchre, found by Saint Helen, on the Olive Mount consecrated by our Saviour’s Ascension, in the place that the tradition will show as the Cenacle («the upper room», the site of the Last Supper), in the house of Saint Ann, or on the grave of the Virgin Mary. And the Christian sovereigns of the future centuries, Eudoxia, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and Justinian, during the following century, continued this pious work”<sup>30</sup>.

The emperor’s special attention turns, as it was natural, to the place of Jesus Christ’s Passion, burial and resurrection, which he decides to adorn with monumental worship places, meant to impress the Christian posterity through their proportions, charm and value, consequently perpetuating over the centuries the commemoration and celebration of the crucial events in the history of mankind’s redemption. In order to turn this ideal into action, the emperor asks for the help of the high officials and governors of the provinces and first of all of the bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius. Constantine sends a letter to Bishop Macarius in the year 326, by means of his mother, asking

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29. Pr. prof. Petre Vintilescu, *Arhitectura religioasă bizantină*, în „Biserica Ortodoxă Română”, LXXXIV (1966), nr. 5-6, p. 592.

30. Charles Diehl, *Călătorii istorice și de artă*, translated by Ion Herdan, Ed. Sport-Turism, București, 1984, p. 215.

him to support her in her ample action of restoration of the churches ruined by the pagans and in the cleaning of the holy places profaned by idolatrous altars and sacrifices.<sup>31</sup> The main goal pursued by the emperor was the building of a great church over the Holy Sepulchre of our Lord, a mission entrusted to his pious mother, aged 80.

Arriving at the Holy Places, Saint Helen diligently looked for the Holy Cross on which our Saviour had been crucified, making the necessary diggings on the Hill of Golgotha, where our Lord's tomb had been and where, in the year 119, the emperor Hadrian (117-138) had built a pagan temple in honour of the goddess Aphrodite. "After having seen the place where the [Lord's] Passion for the salvation of us all had taken place, she ordered that the defiled pagan temple should be immediately torn down and the ruins be taken away from there. After the tomb, which had been hidden until then, came to the surface three crosses emerged, covered in earth, near the Lord's tomb; everybody was convinced that one of these crosses was that of our Lord Jesus Christ, while the other two belonged to the thieves nailed to their crosses along with Him. Yet, they could not tell the cross which had touched the Lord's body and on which the drops of His holy blood had dripped. Then, the most wise and truly holy elder (bishop) of Jerusalem City, Macarius, removed the doubt as follows: each of these crosses was touched with fervent prayer, by a noble woman, who had been ill for a long time, and the redeeming power of the Cross was known, as, immediately after having touched the woman's body, it removed that serious disease and restored her health"<sup>32</sup>. Saint Helen divided the redeeming cross into two. She sent a part of it to Constantinople to her son, Constantine, for him to keep it into his imperial residence, and, for the other part, she made a box out of silver and gave it to the city bishop, commanding him to keep for the future generations the things that recall our salvation.

On the place of the Lord's Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Emperor Constantine builds a magnificent complex of holy

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31. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 184-185.

32. Teodoret, Episcopul Cirului, *Istoria bisericească*, translated by pr. prof. Vasile Sibiescu, în col. „Părinți și scriitori bisericești”, vol. 44, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1995, p. 62.

sanctuaries, which Eusebius calls the New Jerusalem predicted by the prophets.<sup>33</sup>

The most imposing edifice in this complex is the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, called *Martyrion* as it had been placed on the place of our Lord's crucifixion and burial, for which reason it was also called the *Great Martyrion*. This holy sanctuary was built in the year 335, in the presence of the Emperor Constantine, being sanctified on September 13; on September 14, Bishop Macarius presents the wood of the Holy Cross to the crowd that had gathered for the celebration, lifting it in front of everyone, an event in whose memory the Church ordained the celebration of the Ascension of the Holy Cross (or Holy Cross Day).<sup>34</sup>

This basilica was also called the "Church of the Resurrection", as the emperor had had it built in the memory of the redeeming Resurrection, taking care that it may be extremely beautiful from all sides, with truly royal expenses and glory.<sup>35</sup> It is here that Saint Cyril of Jerusalem († 386) instructed his catechumens, often reminding them in his catecheses that "this building of the holy church was built on our Lord's blessed sepulchre, through the Christ-loving desire of the Emperor Constantine the Great", who "had this holy church of our Lord's Resurrection built, dressing it in silver and covering it with gold, and adorning it with holy objects made of silver, gold and precious stones"<sup>36</sup>. The basilica had five naves and was built out of polished stone, with a roof made of lead and with inner walls covered in colourful marble, which had in the east, where the entrance was, an atrium with four porticos (porches). Westwards, the basilica continued with another atrium, which made the connection with the apse (vault) that closed the grotto containing our Lord's tomb. The apse represented the most important part of the architectural complex, being endowed with a circular belt made up of 12 columns (according to the number of the Holy Apostles) and capitels decorated with large silver vases. Out of

33. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 186.

34. Petru Lebedew, *Liturgica sau explicarea serviciului divin*, translated by Nicolae Filip, București, 1899, p. 311.

35. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 188.

36. Sfântul Chiril al Ierusalimului, *Cateheza a XIV-a*, translated by prof. Dumitru Fecioru, în vol. „Cateheze”, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 2003, p. 231, 239.

this architectural complex built by Constantine, which continued to exist almost unchanged until the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there remain only a few columns and a fragment of the apse wall.

Through the endeavours and fervent dedication of the Empress Helen, it is also now that two more “holy, imposing, beautiful and forever memorable worship places” were built, “being endowed in a kingly manner with his gifts and through his mother’s endeavours with (a lot of) silver and golden vases and colourful tissues”<sup>37</sup>: the Church of the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ (the Holy Place Church) of Bethlehem, situated on the place of the cave where our Saviour was born, and the Church of our Lord’s Ascension on Eleon Mount, also known as Olive Mount, from where our Saviour ascended to heaven and where, according to a tradition, there was a cave in which the Godly Rabbi had initiated His disciples, introducing them to His mysterious and ineffable teachings. The Emperor honoured and gifted these holy worship places as well. The Emperor Constantine is also attributed the Oak of Mamre Basilica, where the Holy Trinity had made itself known to father Abraham in the guise of three travellers (Genesis 18:1-16). The Christian hagiographers state that Empress Helen built 18 more churches, adorning them with all the ornaments possible and making them heirs of great riches.<sup>38</sup> These churches were built in the places where the most important acts and miracles put down by the biblical history and the Christian tradition occurred, such as: the tomb of the Gethsemane Garden, where the immaculate body of the Holy Virgin Mary was buried; Lazarus’ tomb of Bethany; the side of the Jordan River, in the area where our Saviour Jesus Christ was baptized; the border of the Sea of Galilee (Lake of Tiberias), where our Saviour had made the miracle of the bread multiplication and wonderful fishing; the place of Mary Magdalene’s house; and the area of the house in which Peter’s mother-in-law had lived; the top of Mount Tabor, where our Saviour’s appearance had changed; in the city of Nazareth, where the archangel Gabriel had announced the Holy Virgin that she would give birth to our Lord Jesus; in Cana of Galilee, where our Saviour had turned the

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37. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 189.

38. *Viețile sfinților pe luna mai*, Ed. Episcopiei Romanului, Chișinău, p. 403.

water into wine; on the summit of Mount Zion; on the pasture where our Lord's angel had announced the shepherds of the birth of the Messiah foretold by the prophets; in the former yards of the bishop Caiaphas; near the Pool of Siloam, where the blind from birth was cured; in the Valley of Prophet Jeremiah<sup>39</sup> etc. All these worship places were endowed with precious gifts and valuable religious objects.

#### **4. Churches built in other regions of the Roman Empire**

Such churches were the one in Nicomedia, built on the place of the old one destroyed during Diocletianic persecution (285-305), and the one in Antioch, "unique for its beauty and guarded from all sides by strong walls, in the middle of which the worship place itself, octagonal in shape – stood up unimaginably great, surrounded from all sides by (two stories of) rooms, some on the ground level, others on top of them"<sup>40</sup>. For the richness of the architectural adornments, this basilica of the Oriental metropolis was called *Domus Aurea* and it is considered to have been the model of the well-known San Vitale from Ravenna, and of other similar churches<sup>41</sup>. Being a cathedral, this sanctuary included a baptistery, as the one in the Resurrection Church from Jerusalem.<sup>42</sup>

In Phoenicia, at Heliopolis, on the site of the pagan temple dedicated to goddess Aphrodite, where debauchery and orgiastic parties used to take place, the emperor "put in that place the foundations of a great church, as a worship place for prayers. And this is how, for the first time in history, from the beginning of all the ages, the city of the idolatrous worshipers was considered worthy of receiving as a gift a bishop sanctified for the Almighty God, to lead the people to Him"<sup>43</sup>.

It is also in Phoenicia, in the city of Tyre, that the Bishop Paulinus had a great church built in the year 314, which he "adorned with

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39. *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Teodosie*, translated by Academician Gheorghe Mihăilă, Ed. Roza Vânturilor, București, 2010, p. 76-77.

40. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 193.

41. A. Grabar, *op. cit.*, p. 214-227.

42. Dr. Badea Cireșeanu, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

43. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața lui Constantin și alte scrieri*, p. 164, 199-200.

beautiful thrones in honour of the high bishops and with orderly and adequate benches and lecterns for the priests, as it is normal. Then, he put in the middle of the holy altar the holy mysteries, which, in order to remain protected from the crowd, were surrounded with a finely worked wooden grid, to provide the onlookers with the most beautiful view”<sup>44</sup>.

According to the architectural model of the basilicas from Palestine, the Emperor Constantine also had a Christian double basilica built in Trier<sup>45</sup> (Augusta Treverorum), situated in the West of today’s Germany, former capital of the Roman province Gallia Belgica.

“In Dobrogea, the Christian cities and churches built by Constantine the Great are numerous, in all the market towns and cities, and even in many Roman villages of Dobrogea”<sup>46</sup>. On the right side of the Danube, Piatra Frecăței (the antique Beroe, near Ostrov Commune, Tulcea County), a cemetery basilica was discovered, which seems to have belonged to the time of Constantine the Great, being the oldest in SE Europe.

**5. The involvement  
of the Holy Emperor Constantine and Empress Helen  
in delineating a Christian art and architecture  
– the basilical style**

Because, during the period of freedom, the number of the Christians had increased a lot and – along with this phenomenon – the sacerdotal needs and demands had also intensified, many of these buildings were given by the Emperor Constantine the Great to the Christians for the celebration of the divine services.<sup>47</sup> They were transformed into worship places, with small structural changes and with the preservation of the same denomination of *basilica*, which, in its new condition and with its new destination, no longer represented the home of the

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44. Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Istoria bisericească*, p. 373.

45. Ioan Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

46. Vasile Pârvan, *Începuturile vieții române la gurile Dunării*, Ed. Cartea românească, București, 2000, p. 162.

47. Dr. Badea Cireșeanu, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

earthly king, but the worship place sanctified by the glorification of the heavenly King, in which the believers come together to commune from the gifts and the truths of salvation. The name of this style comes from the term *basilica*, derived from the Greek βασιλική, which means kingly abode. Originally, the Roman basilicas were public edifices endowed with large rooms, meant for citizen and political reunions, trading businesses and courts, where princes and magistrates were inquiring the defendants and applied the sentences in the name of the emperor.

The oldest shape of the Christian churches of this period is elongated or rectangular, concluded in the east by a semicircle called apse, in the way Noah's ark had been designed, and just as Solomon's temple had been built. This shape is described in the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*. Generally, most of the sanctuaries built during this period maintain the shape of ship, in order to symbolically show that the church is the spiritual ship saving the Christians from the tormented waves of this life and leading them to the shore of salvation. Another peculiarity of the basilical style is the separation of the inside into three or five sections called naves, delimited through longitudinal series of columns, or in some cases the replacement of the rectangular shape by the external shape of cross, by adding transversal naves, a procedure inaugurated by king Constantine the Great himself, in testimony to the fact that he had received the cross as a sign of victory and as a defensive shield for the empire and for Christianity.

The great sovereign Constantine the Great offered to the Church some pagan temples as well, yet they no longer matched the requirements of the new area of deployment of the Christian divine cult, as the Christian sanctuaries begin to stand apart through their exquisiteness, brilliance and artistic beauty and, for this reason, the Christians put them down and, with the materials resulted from them, they built larger and more comfortable sanctuaries, in agreement with the spirit of the newly revealed religion. In contrast to the pagan temples, "the internal decoration of the Christian temples enjoyed the greatest attention"<sup>48</sup>. While during the first three centuries A.D.,

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48. Dr. P. Constantinescu-Iași, *Arta și creștinismul*, Chișinău, 1926, p. 16.

the ecclesiastic painting had a deeply symbolical and allegorical character, as the researchers deduced analyzing the religious scenes from the catacombs, beginning with the age of Constantine the Great, this painting starts depicting images from the history of Christianity. During this age of freedom, we witness a process of spectacular development of the Christian art, characterized by a new program of image typology: "Nowhere as in the Christian Church was the painting as suitable on the inside. New subjects from the two biblical cycles serve as an admirable auxiliary to the divine service. The internal frescos make up a talking Bible for those who cannot read, as well, being as instructive as the sculptures of the future Gothic art. Each part of the Church has its own painting, according to the divine service; the artist is free, only the choice of the subject depends on the believers' intelligence"<sup>49</sup>.

Due to the direct involvement of the holy Emperor Constantine and Empress Helen, "most of the artists from this whole large empire were working for the glory of the new faith"<sup>50</sup>. "In Jerusalem, in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, whose Churches had to exert a deep and long-lasting influence, the artisans and artists were from ancient Mesopotamia, where, among the elements of the old art from there, in these Hellenistic civilizations had to penetrate the vast cupola *à trompes d'angle*"<sup>51</sup>.

Concerning the design, the shape and the style of the new churches of Constantine's epoch, we need to notice, from the very beginning, the fact that they were generally imitating the Greek-Roman architecture of the respective times, naturally adapted to the demands and the spirit of the new religion. The architectural features of such a church are reflected in the shape of the Greek-Roman or Hellenistic basilica, usually called Latin basilica, due to the historical context in which it took shape and evolved: they represent a symbiosis of the Roman and Hellenistic art, in whose content the defining elements did

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49. *Ibidem*.

50. Egon Sendler, *Icoana, imaginea nevăzutului, elemente de teologie, estetică și tehnică*, translated by Ioana Caragiu, Florin Caragiu și monahia Ilie Doinița, Ed. Sofia, București, 2005, p. 19.

51. Nicolae Iorga, *op. cit.*, p. 74.



not annihilated one another, but remained distinct, the result of this combination being the basilical style, characteristic for all the churches built in the time of Constantine the Great.<sup>52</sup>

The Christian ritual, taking place inside, sometimes began to request, in the bigger and more important cities, areas more than just large, actually really magnificent areas. Yet, such areas came with a difficult technical problem: their roof – an issue that the followers of the new religion, with their preoccupations, were not at all ready to face.

Fortunately, the Roman technical genius had created until then two major structures for public uses – the circular building covered with a cupola, like the Pantheon, and the basilica, a tripartite longitudinal building – both just perfect to be taken over now and to be adapted to the new needs. Their two types of design, central and longitudinal, were also going to be the two roads that the sacramental architecture would follow, in Europe and around it.

Regardless of their type of design, the architecture of the paleo-Christian churches had a common feature, explainable from the perspective of the theological mentality. This common feature refers to the special importance given to the inner area, to its spectacular aspect, to the atmosphere of flamboyant greatness and richness. As soon as he stepped beyond the entrance portal, man had to feel compelled by the sensation that he had entered another world, one of a spiritual quality that is infinitely higher compared to that of the outer world – a world of vanity. The outer size of the church was only a result of the large inner area and of the technique used for providing stability to the building. The churches of the early Christianity were sober and not very interesting artistically on the outside, despite the fact that they dominated the site through their dimensions and eventually through their location.

The architectural means used to create the mystic atmosphere were the generous size and the specific lighting. The external light, penetrating through the narrow windows, cut into very thick walls, took the shape of almost material spots of light and was significantly directed. The artistic-decorative means were nevertheless luxuriantly

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52. Pr. prof. Petre Vintilescu, *op. cit.*, p. 584.

magnificent, especially in Byzantium. Bright mosaics, lavishly coloured adornments, sculptures in wood, paintings, chandeliers and others were reinforcing the inspiring sensation of “other-worldliness”.

The ecclesiastical institution was to be the strongest and the Christian cult architecture, namely the Church, was going to be the main architectural program for about 14 centuries from now on. During the entire Middle Ages, the art of building meant the capacity to cover large areas, especially belonging to cathedrals.

To conclude, the paleo-Christian architecture expresses the almost exclusive attention given to the church buildings. In order to create an architecture of their own, the Greek experience was used, and also especially the Roman one. Hellenism was always open to the Oriental influences<sup>53</sup>. Moreover, the shapes were saturated with symbols. The beneficiaries' intention, highlighted by the builders, was to create an overwhelming sensation, by the inner area and by the illusion of dematerialization of its limits. Two factors contributed to this illusion: the rich adornments of the opaque surfaces and the manipulation of the light spots. The result was a glamorous world, in the light of spiritualization. Through their message and technique, this variety of original artistic topics and shapes were meant to serve the Christian idea, expressing the plenitude of the truths of faith and predisposing the believers to collectedness, interiorization, prayer and an authentic living of the evangelical teaching.

For his merits and services in support of Christianity, the Church honoured Constantine the Great among the saints, along with his mother, Helen, calling them “equal to the Apostles”. Saint Constantine the Great is considered to have happily combined Solomon's wisdom and David's kindness.

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53. Charles Diehl, *Manuel d'art byzantin*, tome I, Paris, 1925, p. 101-102.