

Roman history [312] By [Myles Hudson](#) • [Edit History](#)

Battle of Milvian Bridge, (October 28, 312 CE), major battle in a Roman [civil war](#) between [Constantine I](#) and [Maxentius](#). After the collapse of the [Roman Empire](#)'s Second Tetrarchy, Constantine and Maxentius [asserted](#) competing claims to the imperial throne. At Maxentius's goading, Constantine invaded the [Italian Peninsula](#). A lightning campaign saw Maxentius killed in battle at the Milvian Bridge on the outskirts of Rome. Constantine's victory confirmed his role as ruler of the Western Empire. According to ancient sources, Constantine converted to [Christianity](#) just before the battle, which likely affected his decision to end Christian persecution and establish Christianity as the most favoured religion within the Roman Empire.

Context: The Roman Empire at the start of the 4th century CE was turbulent and factional. In 286 the emperor [Diocletian](#) had split the empire into Eastern and Western halves ruled by himself and [Maximian](#), both coequal *augusti* (emperors). In 293 the realm was further subdivided, with each *augustus* appointing his own *caesar*, or deputy, to govern part of their *augustus*'s territory. Known as the Roman Tetrarchy, this system of government was intended to end the wars of [succession](#) that had roiled the Roman Empire for the better part of the 3rd century.

Constantine I

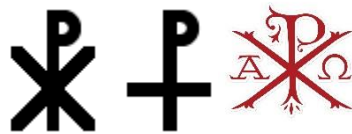
In 305 there was a bloodless transfer of power from Diocletian and Maximian to their respective *caesares*, [Galerius](#) and [Constantius I Chlorus](#). With new *augusti* came Galerius's picks for the next *caesares*: [Maximinus Daia](#) and [Flavius Valerius Severus](#). Galerius and Maximinus Daia ruled in the East, while Constantius and Severus oversaw the West. Unfortunately, Constantius's untimely death in 306 upset the balance of the tetrarchy. Constantius had died while campaigning in [Britain](#), and his legions in Eboracum (now [York](#)) proclaimed his son, Constantine, the next *augustus*. Constantine eventually settled for recognition as *caesar* by Galerius, who made Severus *augustus* of the West. In Rome, though, Maximian's son Maxentius believed that he should have been named *caesar*. His father had already passed him over once for the title, and he did not intend to lose it again. The [Roman Senate](#)—and, crucially, the [Praetorian Guard](#)—proclaimed Maxentius emperor (*augustus*), although he then called himself merely *princeps* (first citizen) to avoid provoking other claimants to the senior imperial title. In 307, however, he openly took the title *augustus*, which provoked Galerius into sending Severus to lead Maximian's former army against Maxentius. Maxentius killed Severus in 307 and recognized Constantine as *augustus*, who in turn recognized Maxentius as [consul](#). However, Galerius did not approve of Maxentius's ambition and Maximian's murderous actions. In 308 he gathered with Diocletian and Maximian at Carnuntum to declare Maxentius a usurper, denying him a place in the [legitimate](#) tetrarchy. Galerius then forced Maximian back into retirement; the disgraced former emperor would soon die by either suicide or murder. Finally, Galerius announced a new *augustus* in the West: [Licinius](#), an old friend from the military. Constantine would serve under him as *caesar*. While Licinius was formally the Western emperor, Maxentius still held the Italian and African provinces, [relegating](#) the Western *augustus* to his quarters in [Pannonia](#), an Eastern province. Constantine still governed his father's lands in Britain, [Gaul](#), and [Spain](#). He was, for the moment, content with them. Thus the empire maintained a fragile peace. Then, in 311, Galerius died of an aggressive illness. The tetrarchy was again thrown into [chaos](#). While in eastern Europe, Licinius had come into conflict with Galerius's *caesar*, Maximinus Daia, who was then campaigning in [Asia Minor](#). Maximinus Daia was technically now the Eastern *augustus*, but his tensions with Licinius threatened to turn into a bloody contest over control of the East.

In the West, Constantine began to make overtures to Licinius regarding a family marriage. The young *caesar* had long hinted at his ambitions to dominate the entire empire but had shrewdly stayed his hand. With Licinius as an ally in the East, he could focus on taking Maxentius's provinces in Italy and Africa before striking at Licinius's territory. But rather than allowing Constantine to move first, Maxentius declared war on his enemy in 311, blaming him for the death of his father. Maxentius likely

anticipated an attack from Licinius's [legions](#) in Pannonia, so he stationed an army in [Verona](#), located in northern Italy. However, the usurper's gravest danger lay to the west with Constantine. Constantine's invasion of Italy began in the early campaign season of 312, likely as soon as the winter snow began to melt. He crossed over the [Alps](#) and into the peninsula with an army of nearly 40,000 men. He quickly captured Augusta Taurinorum (now [Turin](#)) and the Western imperial capital of Mediolanum (now [Milan](#)). Constantine then besieged Maxentius's army in Verona. The commanding prefect was able to summon reinforcements, but Constantine subdued both the relieving army and the city itself. Having seized every major city in northern Italy, Constantine could now descend on [Rome](#) with [impunity](#). Maxentius's resolved to wait out his rival behind Rome's ancient walls. As Constantine advanced southward, Maxentius cut off all bridges into the city, but civil unrest only grew with Constantine's looming siege. Maxentius thus decided to take the battle to his enemy. On October 28 his men built a [pontoon bridge](#) across the [Tiber River](#). Maxentius had consulted the [Sibylline](#) books, whose storied portents saw the death of a Roman enemy that day. October 28, 312, happened to be exactly six years since the Senate and the Praetorian Guard had proclaimed him *augustus*. Maxentius knew then that he was destined to stamp out Constantine's ambition for good.

Conversion and battle

At some point before Maxentius marched out of Rome, Constantine is said to have [encountered](#) an omen of a different sort. Two 4th-century Christian writers, [Lactantius](#) and [Eusebius of Caesarea](#), provide slightly different accounts of this event. According to Lactantius's *De mortibus persecutorum* ("On the Deaths of the Persecutors"), on the night before Maxentius sallied out to meet him, Constantine had a dream in which he was commanded to use the sign of the [cross](#) to defend against all enemies. In the morning he ordered his soldiers to paint on their shields the Chi-Rho, a sacred [monogram](#) incorporating the first two letters of ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, meaning "Christ" in Greek.



Chi-Rho monogram. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

Eusebius's two accounts of the battle, in the *Historia ecclesiastica* and the *Vita Constantini*, differ both from Lactantius's and among themselves. The *Historia ecclesiastica*, the earlier of the two works, provides a [perfunctory](#) description that does not mention a divine dream but does assert that God protected Constantine's army that day. In the *Vita Constantini*, at some point on their march, Constantine and his army saw a vision of the Christian symbol of the cross hovering above the sun. It bore the Greek inscription *En toutō nika*—"In this, conquer." Eusebius then describes a divine dream similar to Lactantius's account. According to the *Vita*, the next morning Constantine consulted those familiar with the Christian God to inquire about his dream. They confirmed that it was Christ who had appeared to him. Upon hearing this, Constantine converted to Christianity and vowed to oust Maxentius from his throne. The ancient accounts differ about the actions that Constantine took before the two men clashed at the Milvian Bridge. According to *De mortibus*, Constantine instructed his soldiers to paint the Chi-Rho on their shields, while the *Vita* states that he ordered his men to carry the [labarum](#), a battle standard bearing the same sacred monogram.

Eusebius's account in *Vita Constantini* is more exhaustive than his and Lactantius's earlier works, but it is also his most problematic. Eusebius wrote the text after Constantine had died, and, although Constantine is said to have confirmed its [veracity](#) before his death, the vision's absence from both *De mortibus persecutorum* and *Historia ecclesiastica* has caused some scholars to cast doubt on its occurrence. Furthermore, Eusebius does not date either the vision or the dream to October 27–28, 312, raising questions about when they might have occurred on the march to Rome.

Despite these discrepancies, both authors agree on the major points of the engagement that took place on October 28. Constantine's army was north of Rome, advancing southward along the Via Flaminia, which crossed the Tiber at the Milvian Bridge en route to the city. Maxentius had cut that bridge and

other Tiber crossings to slow Constantine's advance. Upon deciding to fight Constantine before he reached the city, Maxentius had a pontoon bridge built across the Tiber some distance from the Milvian Bridge, and he and his troops used that temporary structure to confront Constantine's forces on the far side of the river. After Constantine's army broke Maxentius's, remnants of the latter, in their confused attempt to flee back over the Tiber, overloaded the pontoon bridge, causing many men, including Maxentius, to fall into the river and drown.

Aftermath

Casualties at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge are unknown for both sides. Nevertheless, it is clear that Maxentius's army was [annihilated](#). The following day Constantine was welcomed into Rome with open arms. Civilians gave him what amounted to a military [triumph](#). At the end of his march, Constantine rebuffed tradition and declined to make a sacrifice at the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the most important pagan temple in Rome. Maxentius's body was then dragged out of the Tiber, his head mounted on a spike, and sent to [Carthage](#) to tell Maxentian loyalists of their emperor's fate. The African provinces promptly surrendered to Constantine.

Constantine's [conversion](#) to Christianity before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge would prove instrumental in reversing the fate of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Although some scholars have doubted the genuine nature of his pre-battle conversion, it is almost certain that Constantine's victory over Maxentius confirmed his belief that the Christian God had protected him and would continue to guide him. In 313 Constantine met with Licinius to issue the [Edict of Milan](#), which enacted a policy of Christian toleration throughout the Roman Empire after intense persecution under recent emperors. Constantine also permitted the conversion of pagan basilicas in Rome to serve Christian purposes and granted new plots of land to the city's Christian clergy.

The Battle of the Milvian Bridge may have concluded Constantine's civil war with Maxentius, but it was not his final battle. In the East, Licinius conquered his rival Maximinus Daia's lands. However, he held them only briefly before Constantine invaded, first in 314 and again in 316. A lightning campaign in 324 saw Licinius's downfall within a year. Constantine was now the undisputed ruler of the entire Roman Empire. As thanks for his good fortune and proof of his [conviction](#), he would make Christianity the state's most favored religion. But Constantine would also abandon the city whose conquest had cemented his conversion. The capital would be relocated east to the city of Byzantium (renamed Constantinople, modern [Istanbul](#)). Rome would be left to crumble, and with it the Western Empire.