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A Divided Empire

The Roman Empire was one of the world's first **superpowers**. During its peak, it controlled parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. In the first century, nearly 54 million people lived in the Roman Empire. Rome, the capital, was one of the largest cities in the world.

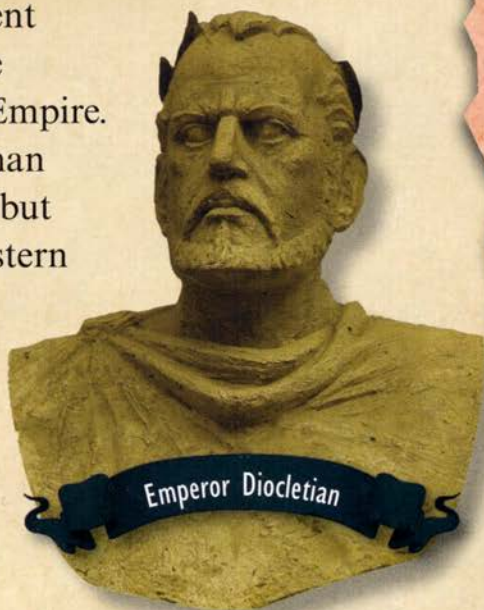
By the end of the third century, the empire was in trouble. Powerful invaders threatened its borders. The economy was weak. Many leaders were **corrupt**. This came to be known as the Crisis of the Third Century.



the Roman Empire in the third century

Emperor Diocletian (dahy-uh-KLEE-shuhn) made an important decision. He split the empire in two. He hoped this would make it easier to rule. Diocletian ruled the Eastern Roman Empire. A different emperor ruled the Western Roman Empire. The Western Roman Empire survived, but not well. The Eastern Roman Empire became strong and powerful. Diocletian had laid the **foundation** for the future.

The Eastern Roman Empire is known today as the Byzantine (BIZ-uhn-teen) Empire. Under leaders such as Constantine (KON-stuhn-teen) and Justinian I, the empire flourished. The Byzantines preserved the treasures of the ancient world. They created a **unique** culture. Lasting for over a thousand years, the Byzantine Empire shaped the world.



Too Many Emperors

The Crisis of the Third Century lasted from AD 235 to 285. One of the problems during this time was leadership. During the crisis, there were over 20 different emperors. Most of these emperors ruled for just a few months.

Rule by Four

Diocletian believed that four rulers would be better than one, so he created a *tetrarchy* (TEH-trahrk-ee), or “rule by four.” The Eastern Roman Empire had an Augustus, or senior emperor, and a Caesar (SEE-zer), or junior emperor. The Western Roman Empire had an Augustus and a Caesar, too. Diocletian hoped that four rulers could hold the empire together.

Emperor Constantine

Attacking the West

Diocletian was worried about choosing a **successor** to take over as the new emperor. He did not think that sons should take over leadership from their fathers. And at the time, no one considered women to be fit leaders. Diocletian thought emperors should be chosen based on their ability to lead. He decided that when an emperor stepped down, the Caesar would become the new Augustus. Then, a new Caesar would be chosen. But, this plan did not work.

Diocletian's successor died in 306. The successor's son, Constantine, took over as emperor instead of the Augustus. That same year Maxentius (maks-EN-tee-uhs), the son of a former emperor, wanted the power that Constantine claimed. When Maxentius's father died, Maxentius took the role of emperor even though he was not the Caesar.

the Battle of the
Milvian Bridge





Constantine sees a vision in the sky at Milvian Bridge.

In 312, Constantine decided to attack Maxentius. He wanted to control the Western Empire. The two armies met in Rome at the Tiber River by the Milvian (MIHL-vee-uhn) Bridge. Even though he was not a Christian, Constantine prayed to the Christian God for victory. He had his men make banners bearing the Christian cross. Constantine's men carried the banners into battle and won. His decision to fight under the banner of Christianity would change the course of world history.

In Hoc Signo Vinces

There are many stories about Constantine and his decision to fight under the banner of Christianity. One story states that Constantine saw a vision of a cross in the sky. That night he dreamed that God spoke to him and said, "*In hoc signo vinces.*" This Latin phrase meant "conquer by this sign." Constantine believed God had told him how to win the battle.

Roman or Byzantine?

People who lived in the Byzantine Empire did not call their empire by that name. They thought of themselves as Romans. It was not until the 18th century that the term *Byzantine* was used to describe the empire.

