

Trier: Rom des Nordens

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Situated on the banks of the Moselle River among the gently rolling hills of western Germany, Trier is a city that is situated at the intersection of history and faith. Today, the city of nearly 111,000 inhabitants draws visitors from around the globe who come to marvel at the diverse civic architecture, much of which are on the UNESCO list of world heritage sites. These structures provide an outward indication of the unique history of this city that traces a line from the modern backwards into antiquity. Many of the buildings are part of the unique connection between this modern metropolitan center and the Roman Empire, a connection that extends beyond the cultural into the ecclesiastical. From its roots as an Imperial city, Trier's history has become inexorably interwoven into the fabric of the Christian faith. Its unique place within the Roman Empire at the dawn of the Christian age in the 4th century CE has secured its paramount position as that faith has grown and evolved across nearly two millennia of European history.

The area in which Trier is located was originally settled by Gallic Celts around the 4th century BCE. Little evidence remains of this original settlement as the Celts, resulting from the impermanent building methods of the tribesmen, although their legacy is preserved in the name of the modern city. Following the Roman conquest of Gaul by Julius Caesar in 52 BCE, the area around the Moselle was incorporated into the empire. Owing to its proximity to the empire's frontier with the bellicose Germanic tribes to the north, a fortified city was established in 18 BCE, which was named Augusta Treverorum. The first part of the new city's name is in homage to the emperor at that time, Caesar Augustus, under whose patronage the city was established. The second part, Treverorum, is derived from the name of the Gallic tribe residing in the area, the Treveri, and directly translates into the city's modern name.

The Romans were, among many other things, great builders and engineers, and they set about fortifying this new settlement against the incursions of their barbaric neighbors. One of the

modern remnants of this fortification, which was comprised of a stone defensive wall encircling the city, is the Porta Nigra or Black Gate. The gate was an entrance point through the wall into the city proper and could be closed off in the event of attack. Reflecting the military nature of this defensive work, the double set of gates is set below a two-tiered row of arched galleries that would have provided the defenders with clear fields of fire against their would-be assailants. Set in between the double gates is a small courtyard that would have served to entrap the attackers beneath an opening through which the defenders could shower them with all sorts of unpleasantries, ranging from stones to boiling oil. The Porta Nigra has withstood the ravages of time since its construction around 180 CE as well as the assaults of any foes. One effect of note is the dark patina that has accumulated on the sandstone blocks that the gate is constructed from and which gives the gate its name. This patina is the result of industrial environmental pollution, accumulating on the facade over the centuries since the industrial revolution and not an intentional part of its construction.

Among the other remnants of the Roman period lie the ruins of one of the hallmarks of the civilizing influence of the empire. The Roman baths that were constructed in Trier are believed to have been the largest in existence outside of the empire's capitol. Completed in the 4th century CE, these baths would have formed the hygienic and social heart of this very Roman city. The engineering involved in their construction, as well as the great expense, mark the city as being of great importance to the empire. Although the baths have not fared as well as some of the other Roman structures in Trier, their ruins are an indelible reminder that this city, so distant from the empire's capitol, was indeed every inch a Roman city.

Before examining the role that Trier has played in the foundation of Christian Europe, it is necessary to briefly cover the very early history of the church from its foundation in 33 CE

through the first three centuries of the first millennium. Christianity spread slowly across the Roman Empire, benefitting from the trade and transportation networks that radiated out from Rome across the Mediterranean. The Romans, and in fact many early Christians, viewed the new religion as a messianic sect of Judaism, and they extended the same general tolerance to Christians as they did Jews. This tolerance was not long lasting, and the first great persecution of Christians took place in 70 CE following a great fire which swept through Rome. Emperor Nero put down his fiddle just long enough to blame Christian arsonists as the setters of the conflagration, beginning the first great persecution of the religion. Among the countless Christians who were put to death during this wave of reprisals were Saint Peter, leader of the apostles after the ascension of Jesus and founder of the Roman church, and Saint Paul, early theologian and author of many of the epistles included in the Bible. The faith continued to grow and spread despite periods of persecution and Roman attempts at eradication over the next 250 years. The Christian belief in an afterlife, access to which was secured by their faith, made even the threat of execution simply an exercise in evangelization as hundreds went willingly to their deaths rather than renounce their religion. The final great period of Christian persecution was initiated by Emperor Diocletian during the final decade of his reign from 303-313 CE and was no more successful in subduing the faith than had been any of the preceding attempts.

Returning now to Trier, which by the time of Diocletian's great persecution had become the capitol of the portion of the fractured Roman empire under the control of Constantius Caesar. Civil war and fractionalization had shattered the once great empire, resulting in it being subdivided and ruled over by what were essentially warlords in a loose federation during a period known as the Tetrarchy. It was Constantius's son, Constantine, who would reunite the empire, albeit temporarily, and bring the persecution of the Christian faithful to a permanent end.

Inheriting his father's position after his death, Constantine waged a campaign to bring the entirety of the Roman world under his authority. It was on the eve of the decisive battle of this war, facing off against his opponent across the Milvian bridge north of the city of Rome, that an event took place that would alter the history of the world.

According to tradition, Constantine was sitting in his tent, planning his strategy for the next days fighting when he received a vision from God. In this vision, he was instructed to have his soldiers replicate on their shields the image that he saw in the sky, which was a Christian symbol. Accompanying this image were the words "In Hoc Signo Vinces" which translate to "In the sign, conquer." The aspiring emperor did as he was instructed, and he vanquished his enemy in the next days battle, his soldiers shield emblazoned with the divine image. There is substantial debate regarding what the actual image was that he saw in the sky. Artists often depict the sign of the cross, although this would not become a widespread Christian icon until after the reign of Constantine as crucifixion was still very much in use as a form of execution in his time. Following this victory, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan which mandate tolerance for Christianity across the empire. Constantine himself became the first Christian emperor, converting and undergoing baptism on his deathbed.

Following his victory, Constantine proceeded to reorganize the newly unified empire. In Trier, the city that had been his father's capitol, Constantine established a court and built a palace complex from which he could administer to the affairs of state. This was not the sole capitol of his new empire, as Rome still retained some of its rapidly fading glory and Constantine, taking a page from preceding emperors, established an eastern capitol which he promptly named after himself. The metropolis of Constantinople would lay claim to the vestiges of the Roman empire until it fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Constantine is also credited with calling for a council

of Bishops to convene at Nicaea in order to clarify Christian doctrine and beliefs in 325 CE. This council established many of the dogmatic foundations of the Christian faith, including the compilation of the books that comprise the bible and the composition of the credo of the Christian faith, the Nicene Creed which is recited as a part of the liturgy at mass to this day.

While Constantine's impact on Christianity was truly momentous, of even greater impact on both the faith and the city of Trier was none other than his mother, St. Helena. She was an early convert to the Christian faith, and it can be surmised that she greatly influenced her son's views on the religion. In many ways, her relationship with her son mirrored the relationship between Jesus and his mother Mary, a similarity that has been noted by generations of theologians and historians. Undoubtedly, the most significant legacy of St. Helena can be found in the numerous relics that she recovered on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem and brought back with her to Europe. The most significant of these tangible artifacts of the faith is the cross upon which Christ was crucified. According to the legend that surrounds her trip to the Holy Land, she was led to the site where the cross was buried by a Jew named Judas. It is certainly ironic that the one who would reveal the instrument of the passion of Jesus to the Christians would share a name with the traitorous apostle who betrayed his lord for to the Pharisees. Included among the assortment of other relics that St. Helena brought back from the Holy Land were the nails that affixed Jesus to the cross, the crown of thorns that the Roman soldiers placed upon his head, and the seamless tunic that he was wearing at the time of his arrest and trial before Pontius Pilot.

It is important to understand the role that relics play in Christianity, specifically the traditions of the Roman Catholic church. A relic is an item that is associated with the life of a saint, such as an article of their clothing or even a part of their body, that carries a special significance for the faithful. The relic is to be used to help to focus the prayers of the faithful

with the intention of asking God for his intercession or aid, as well as offering up prayers of gratitude or penance, depending on the circumstances. The relic being venerated in this fashion is not believed to possess any special magical power, nor is the saint the intended recipient of the prayer. In the Christian belief system, God is the sole deity and the saints act only as intermediaries. That being said, the trade in relics that has its origins in St. Helena's 327 CE trip to Jerusalem grew into a major economic force as Christianity spread across Europe. These relics were placed on display for veneration in churches and cathedrals, which became the destinations for untold thousands of pilgrims who, in their religiously inspired travels, established lasting connections between the cities of Europe during the middle ages.

Trier is not without its own relics, many of which are maintained in the religious heart of this Catholic city, the Trierer Dom. Known by its full name, the High Cathedral of St. Peter, it is one of the oldest cathedrals in Europe. The foundations of the cathedral were laid down atop the remnants of the imperial palace once occupied by the Emperor Constantine himself. It shared a similar fate as the rest of Europe when it was destroyed by Viking raiders seeking plunder in the mid-9th century. The faithful of the city were quick to begin the reconstruction and restoration of the high church, a process that was completed in 1196. The rebuilt cathedral is classic example of Romanesque architecture, with its sturdy columns and fortress-like façade. The interior of the structure is a mixture of style ranging from the medieval to the baroque, all of which is intended to reflect the splendor of the heavenly kingdom and the significance of the cathedral as the seat of the Bishop of Trier.

There are two relics of note that are kept within the walls of the Trierer Dom that span the centuries from the days of the late Roman Empire to the modern world of the 21st century. The first of these, in a piece of theological irony, is the skull of St. Helena herself. The great relic

huntress of antiquity has now become a relic herself, and the focus of public adoration as the reliquary housing her cranial remains is on public display in the cathedral's crypt. Also secured at the cathedral, although not on regular public display, is the seamless robe of Jesus that St. Helena brought back from her pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Known as the "Heilige Rock", this garment was first put on public display in 1513 and was shown most recently in 2012. Like many relics of incomplete provenance, there is some dispute among scholars and the faithful if this is, in fact, the robe that Christ wore at the time of his passion. There are at least two other robes that are believed by their adherents to be the true robe of the savior. Unfortunately, a 19th century attempt at preservation has left the Trier robe unable to have its age verified through the use of carbon dating, the well-intentioned preservationists of the Victorian era having coated the garment in a rubberizing solution. Regardless of the verifiable provenance of the relics, they do serve their purpose to focus the prayerful meditation of the faithful on the virtues and values of the church, whether that be in Trier or around the globe.

For German Catholics, the supreme test of their adherence to the fundamental principles that are taught by their faith, the foundations of which were laid down by the example and sacrifice of Christ himself, was found in the crucible that was the second world war. The policies of the Nazi regime were often in direct contradiction of church teaching, and many of the German church's senior leadership made their opposition to these policies known from the pulpit. In Trier, Bishop Bornewasser, in a series of sermons delivered in 1941, added his voice to the Catholic outcry against the state murder of the disabled under the program bearing the innocuous title of T-4. Excerpts from this, and other sermons from senior clergy in Germany, were illegally published and have been cited as helping to inspire resistance movements within wartime Germany against the Nazi regime. While many individuals, both clergy and lay, worked

against the Nazi policies towards the Jews, the German church as a united entity failed utterly to speak out against the systematic murder of Europe's Jewish population. The churches teachings about the value of human life are unambiguous; each and every life is sacred and must be preserved from conception until natural death. The failing of the church to officially decry what was known to be occurring in the death camps remains the darkest chapter in the history of the church. The failure of the church proper to act is only intensified by the sacrifices of so many of the faithful who chose to aid their fellow man and paid for their adherence to the principles of their faith with their lives, just like so many of their forbearers had done under the oppression of the Roman persecutions.

As Christianity enters into its third millennium, Trier continues to be a city that connects the present with the past. This connection reinforces the timeless values and virtues of a faith that has shaped the course of European and global history. The structure and ruins which remain as tangible reminders of the long and storied history of this city also serve to remind those who gaze upon their edifices of the arc of human history that they represent. The importance of the relics housed within the vaulted walls of the cathedral are not found in the tangible matter that composes them, but in the actions of those who life they are drawn from. Likewise, the story of the future of this city on the Moselle will not be comprised of the fragments of a long and often tumultuous past, nor from the actions of the all to flawed people who populate the pages of its history. Instead, let it be hoped that the future of Trier will be shaped by those who place virtue above vice, who value the teachings of their faith above its trappings, and who recognize all as the children of God.

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