



Thomas Cole, "The Course of Empire: Destruction", 1836

A Marriage Made in Hell

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.
Matthew 10.34

†THE CONVERSION of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity in the year 313 AD was one of the most fateful turning points in all of world history.

Nothing is more compatible with a military empire than a religion which demands strict obedience and docility. Constantine organized the Church's hierarchy—already largely modeled on the Roman state—to mirror its most authoritarian faction: the imperial army. The resulting fusion of Roman despotism and Christian intolerance would prove to truly be a marriage made in Hell.

Emboldened by Constantine's opportunistic endorsement, Christians

throughout the empire began a ruthless and relentless campaign against pagans and other non-Christians—as well as, ironically, against their own renegade Christian brethren.

In 325, Constantine promulgated the *Nicene Creed* in an effort to impose a semblance of unity, but it failed to stop the rampant infighting among rival Christian sects, leading one despairing bishop to lament, "*Tearing one another to pieces, we have been the cause of each other's ruin.*"

Successively harsher imperial edicts spawned a Christian reign of terror against pagans and other 'heretics' which far exceeded the repression previously endured by the Christians themselves.

Over the following decades, entire cities were razed and thousands of magnificent pagan temples and monuments like the Library of Alexandria and the Parthenon were destroyed, their priests rounded up and enslaved, stoned to death, or burned alive.

The Oracle of Apollo at Didyma, whose counsel Diocletian had sought regarding the 'Christian problem' only two decades earlier, was sacked in 324, and its pagan priests tortured to death. In 359, accused heretics from throughout the empire were brought to Skythopolis, a site near Christ's purported birthplace of Nazareth, to be tried and executed in mock tribunals reportedly involving "numbers without end."

The carnage paused briefly in 361, when emperor Julian attempted to restore classical ideals of morality and religious tolerance. Julian had reverted to paganism after the murder of his family in the power struggle which followed the death of Constantine. Although he maintained the right of Christians to practice their religion, Julian abolished many of the special privileges that Constantine had bestowed on the clergy.

Julian was killed in battle after only eighteen months in power. Although there is scant evidence for the story that he was assassinated by his own (Christian) troops, there is little doubt that his death met with rejoicing throughout the Christian world.

With the death of Julian, the entire apparatus of the Roman state was now directed against what had formerly been the official, state sanctioned religion. The destruction of classical civilization reached its zenith in 381 with Theodosius I, who issued the first of fifteen edicts outlawing all non-Christian religions, declaring their adherents "loathsome heretics, stupid, and blind." Henceforth, only Christianity and Judaism would be legal religions, and merely gazing upon the few remaining pagan monuments was a crime punishable by death.

In 393, Theodosius banned the ancient Greek Olympics, citing their pagan origin. (Founded according to legend by the god Zeus himself, they would not be reconvened for another fifteen centuries.)

The following year, the College of the Vestal Virgins—long considered fundamental to the security and continuity of the empire—was outlawed, and its sacred fire, assiduously guarded for over a thousand years, was unceremoniously extinguished.

In 415, the revered mathematician, astronomer and philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria, one of the most brilliant minds of the ancient Hellenic world, was falsely accused of practicing witchcraft in order to influence the local governor in his political dispute with the Orthodox bishop Cyril.

Returning home one evening, Hypatia was kidnapped by a mob of fanatical Christian monks and forced into a nearby church, where she was stripped naked and skinned alive with shards of broken tile. Her body was then hacked to pieces, the dismembered parts paraded through the streets and dumped in a place called Cinaron, to be burned in a bonfire along with her books.

The ruthless purging by Christians of pagans and their cultural heritage would continue for another two centuries.

In 380, a mob of fanatical Christian monks attempted to lynch Nestorius, chief priest at the temple of the goddess Demeter and a prominent advisor to Emperor Julian. Escaping with his life but forced to abandon the temple's millennium-old rites, the 95-year old Nestorius declared "the descent of mental darkness over the human race."

He was not exaggerating.

In their zeal to foist their 'one true faith' upon the entire Roman world, many historians believe Christians were in large part responsible for the onset of what we now call the Dark Ages.

Even as many solitary monks were helping to preserve ancient culture—transcribing manuscripts in remote monasteries far from papal control—the Church fathers in Rome were hell bent on destroying it.