

Christianity In The Roman Empire.

As the Roman Empire got bigger and new lands and people were taken into it, the conquered people added their Gods or religion to the Roman **Pantheon** (the name for the multitude of Roman gods). One such new religion was **Christianity**.



Source A

The very wealthy owner of the villa at Hilton St Mary in Dorset was a Christian. The mosaic in the main room in his house had this picture of the head of Christ as well as the **Chi-Rho** symbol. Chi and Rho are the first two letters of the name Christ in the Greek alphabet.

X- Chi.

P- Rho.

Jesus Christ was born in Palestine, then part of the Roman Empire. In about 26 A.D. he began to preach, telling people that he was the son of God. Around 29 A.D. Jesus was killed by the Romans for inciting rebellion against Rome. He was crucified, which was a common and gruesome death. The followers of Jesus were soon given the nickname "Christians". Christianity went through several changes in fortune from popular following to

terrible **Persecution** (being picked on or bullied for religious or racial reasons or for thinking differently). Unlike many other religions at the time the Christians talked about "Peace" and "Forgiveness", not the usual "Anger" and "Punishment" of the Roman Gods.

The ideas of Christianity spread and the organisation of the Roman Empire helped this in several ways.

1. It was relatively easy to move around the Empire. The Romans built excellent roads with were safe from robbers.
2. There were common languages in the Empire, Latin and Greek. This made the spread of the new ideas quick and easy.
3. The Roman army never had units of soldiers based in their home country, so as not to call the loyalty of the men into question, many of the units based in Britain were from the Middle East and so Christianity spread to Britain quite quickly.



In the summer of 64 A.D. there was a very large fire in Rome that burnt uncontrollably for weeks. At this time there was a lot of bad feeling towards the Christians. The Romans were angry at the fact that the Christians said that only they would go to heaven. The Christians upset many others with "depressing" talk of the world and all non-believers being

evil and should change their bad ways. The Christians refused to worship the Emperor as a god and this was against the law. The Christians were tortured to make them worship the Roman gods and the books of scripture were burned. The Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the fire of

Source B

"Their executions became sporting entertainment... they were covered in wild animal skins and torn apart by dogs"

Tacitus. A Roman historian

Rome and began to persecute them. Many were sent to the games to be torn apart by wild animals for the entertainment of the people of Rome. 600 of them were even arranged around the top of the colosseum in Rome to be set fire to and act as floodlights!!

Attacks on the Christians went on for a very long time with them taking the blame every now and then when it was convenient to blame them for some problem. The leaders were crucified and the Christians driven to worship underground, in **Catacombs** so as to avoid persecution. Christians did gain some toleration in the later Empire but it was not until the Emperor Constantine (who was crowned in York) that Christianity was truly accepted.

Just before a crucial battle in A.D. 312 Constantine said that he had a dream where he was told to paint the Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers. He did this and won the battle! He later in A.D 337 decided that in thanks he would allow the whole Empire to worship any religion freely, including Christianity. The future of Christianity was assured when Constantine converted to Christianity the



#4 Nearing the Empire's End

Source C

Modern day picture

Temples of the old Roman Gods were left to decline or began to be converted to new Christian

Source D

Constantine did not always behave like a Christian. For example in A.D. 326 he killed his wife by having her boiled alive in a bath and then killed his son too.

Adapted from a modern text book.

churches. As you might expect the old religions didn't disappear all at once, but they were increasingly driven underground by Christian persecution. Even

the persecution and killing in the Roman arena continued to some extent under the Christians.

It could be said that without the Roman Empire Christianity would not have spread so quickly, perhaps not spread at all! The Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire and continues in the form of Roman Catholic Church that has its heart in Rome's Vatican City and a Holy Roman Emperor in the form of the Pope which comes from the Latin **PAPA** for Father. Catholic masses are still performed in Latin, the language of the Roman Empire. Some Roman buildings are still in use today as churches when most of the others have fallen into ruin.

Questions.

1. Put the title **Christianity and The Roman Empire.**
2. What was the Roman Pantheon?
3. What does persecution mean?
4. In what ways were the Christians persecuted?
5. Look at source A. How do you know that the owner of the house was a Christian? Explain your answer fully.
6. What helped the spread of Christianity?
7. Look at source C. Why do you think that Constantine had the troops paint the emblem on their shields?
8. Make a list of things that have remained the same since Roman times in the Roman Catholic Church.
9. Which of the sources are primary and which are secondary? Explain your answer fully.
10. What does source A tell you about the spread of Christianity?