



A New Portrait of Constantine the Great

A Splendidly Preserved Record of a Prominent Historical Figure

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THE writer is indebted to the courtesy of the Royal Museum of Belgrade, and to the kind offices of the Serbian Legation at London, for several views of a fine bronze head of Emperor Constantine. A native scholar has had the good fortune to discover this treasure at Nisch. That ancient Slavonic stronghold is the Serbian Moscow. It occupies the site of the Roman city of Naissus. It will be recalled that Constantine's father was a plain colonial gentleman of the Illyrian hinterland, and that Constantine himself was born at Naissus. Nisch deeply regrets its forfeiture to the Danubian capital of a relic so intimately related to its own history.

There is little to say of this antique head that our pictures of it do not proclaim. Constantine's own gold, silver and bronze coins are the only safe touchstone to control the resemblance. The Belgrade bronze tallies well with the numismatic profiles. But even this test is fallible. The die-cutters varied their lines, and the Christian emperor had four sons and several nephews who resembled him. Compare the photographs of Emperor Nicholas and King George of England for the physiognomic effect of first cousinhood.

Thus it comes about that four marble statues and one giant marble bust, supposed to represent Constantine at Rome, are questioned likenesses of him. A bust which finishes the series of the Cæsars at the Louvre Museum, one bearing the label "Constantino Imperatore" at Florence, and a fifth Roman head are true portraits of fourth century emperors, but they do not represent Constantine I. The new head at Belgrade is upon the whole perhaps the most surely authentic and contemporary likeness of Emperor Con-

stantine the great which has been found preserved.

Roman sculpture was at a low ebb in the Constantinian age. The Arch of Constantine at Rome, with its superbly carved panels and medallions, which the Senate consecrated to the conqueror of Maxentius in 316 or thereabouts, seems to confute this sweeping judgment. But we know that the Senate despoiled the arch of an earlier emperor to embellish the newer one. The friezes that were chiselled expressly for this monument are poor enough. And so, I may now add, are the Constantinian relief sculptures on the pedestal of the Hippodrome obelisk at Constantinople.

But it is unhistoric to judge either those marbles or the Belgrade head by a Beaux-Arts standard. And a new artistic impulse did go hand in hand with Diocletian's and Constantine's great rehabilitation of the Roman currency on the sound basis of metallic values. Constantine's money recovered something of the Augustan elegance, and there was some revival in the major arts. The Belgrade bronze is in short less barbaric, and more sympathetic in its crudities, than the bronze statue of his predecessor Trebonian in our Metropolitan Museum. Fourth century Roman sculptors exulted in cavernous orbital arches, in big, staring eyes, sheltered by braided eyebrows and flanked by vast listening ears. These exaggerated accents match the inflated Greek and Latin rhetoric of that period. The general shape of his head is still very Roman, however, and the brush and trim of its straight Italian hair is fairly Augustan once more. Trebonian's hair was clipped.

A heavy, linked crown, the copy of a gold one, encircles the emperor's skull. A large medallion sur-

mounts his forehead. In life this was a stately cameo. So much for the Christian emperor's majesty. But the mystic glory, or the character of a religious visionary, is conspicuously absent. The vital features of the statue portray a Constantine of the camp, a victorious captain revisiting his native Serbian mountains in the full flush of his manhood, fresh from his conquest of Italy. This was the general whom his legionaries feared for his severity and adored for his largesses. What did the garrison of Naissus know of the tricky politician whose steamroller commanded episcopal majorities at the Council of Nicaea a dozen years later? But it nursed a warm sentiment for the ruler who had ordered the army to observe the most holy day of the sun, as a weekly holiday.

Constantine's Christian subjects freely forgave or conveniently forgot his treacherous political murders of his wife's father Maximian, or his sister's husband, the exiled pagan emperor Licinius at Salonica, and his own son Crispus. They owed him no less for the edicts of toleration he promulgated in their behalf. We ourselves are compelled to measure Constantine's merits by his success. This man established a tottering state and throne, a new imperial capital, the free coinage system, Sunday observance, the Papacy, and the Christian church itself, amid crucial difficulties. And all these institutions survive him yet, even to the throne of Byzantium. They make him one of us, almost an Anglo-Saxon. His father's British legions proclaimed Constantine emperor at York. New York has ground to be jealous, like Nisch, of Belgrade's prize.