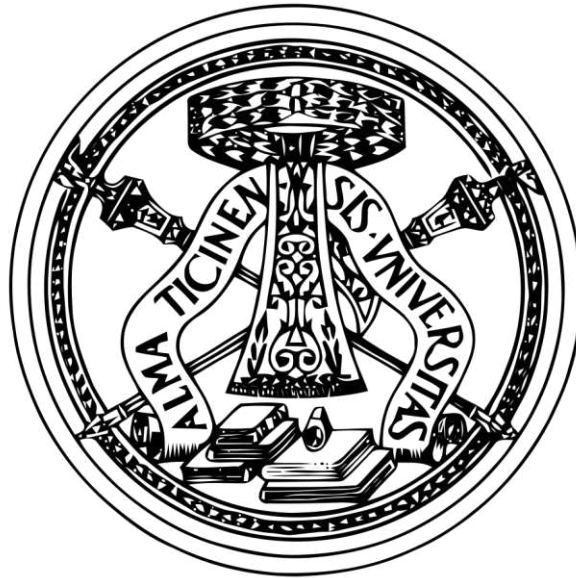




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**Personages of Emperor Maxentius and Their Relationship
to Legitimacy**

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Abstract

Spanning from AD 306 to 312, the reign of Maxentius in Rome has traditionally been framed within the historiography of late antiquity through the lens of the victors—namely, the military triumphs of Constantine I and the subsequent rise of Christianity. This unilateral perspective has frequently reduced Maxentius, who maintained an independent rule in the capital for six years, to the caricature of a "cowardly tyrant" exploiting the city's resources or a "usurper" hostile to the Christian faith. By moving beyond the defamatory image constructed by Constantinian propaganda and early Christian apologists such as Lactantius and Eusebius, this thesis aims to re-evaluate how Maxentius actually forged his imperial authority and legitimacy. It does so through a comprehensive historical analysis encompassing military, diplomatic, and religious contexts. The first section, focusing on military and political history, examines the rise of Maxentius a figure excluded from the Diocletianic Tetrarchy through the crucial support of the Roman Senate and the urban populace. It traces his struggle for survival against the military campaigns of Severus and Galerius, the betrayal by his father Maximian, his political isolation following the Conference of Carnuntum in 308, and the severe grain (*annona*) crises exacerbated by the revolt of the African vicarius Domitius Alexander. Contrary to the claims of ancient sources, his policy of avoiding pitched battles and waiting behind the capital's walls is analyzed not as cowardice, but as a rational defensive strategy dictated by the military realities of the time, supported by numismatic evidence such as the titles *Princeps Invictus* and *Victor Omnium Gentium*. Furthermore, Constantine's northern Italian campaign of 312 and the Battle of the Milvian Bridge are examined as a definitive military collapse precipitated by an emperor who, having lost public support, made a catastrophic decision based on Rome's ancient prophetic traditions (the Sibylline Books).

In the core chapter, "Personae and the Construction of Legitimacy," the study decodes how an internationally isolated Maxentius consolidated his power through urban and religious mechanisms. Anchoring his rule to the legendary origins of the capital, he adopted the title *Conservator Urbis Suae* (Protector of His City) and transformed Rome's topography through monumental building projects, notably the Basilica Nova, the Temple of Venus and Roma, and the archaeoastronomically aligned dynastic complex on the Via Appia. The thesis emphasizes that his conflict with Constantine was far more than a military confrontation; it was a colossal war of propaganda and image, waged through concepts of *pietas* (filial piety), *damnatio memoriae*, and the weaponization of traditional Roman paganism. This research demonstrates that Maxentius's reign was not simply a brief usurpation of the throne. Rather, as evidenced by ancient literary texts, epigraphic findings, archaeological topography, and numismatic data, it was a deliberate and independent political vision striving to restore the empire by placing the Eternal City (Urbs Roma) firmly back at its center, drawing its strength directly from traditional Roman institutions. Maxentius so effectively demonstrated his civic and traditional legitimacy through this monumental statecraft that, following his defeat, Constantine was compelled not to destroy, but to systematically appropriate (*appropriatio*) his architectural and administrative legacy.

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Introduction

Historical Context: The Dissolution of the Tetrarchic Order and Systematic Exclusion

The Tetrarchy, representing the Roman Empire's ticket out of the Crisis of the Third Century, was built upon merit-based "brotherhood" (*fraternitas*) and harmony (*concordia*). By its very nature, however, this system excluded dynastic succession. The process that began with the abdication of Diocletianus and Maximianus in 305 AD evolved into a profound political crisis for Maxentius. Despite being the son of an *Augustus*, his deprivation of the *caesar* title by the new architects of the system positioned him not merely as a sidelined political figure, but as the very antithesis of Tetrarchic ideology.

His proclamation as emperor by the Praetorian Guard and the urban plebs in Rome in 306 was not simply a military uprising; it was an "Urbs Roma" backlash against the peripheralization of the center (the proliferation of Tetrarchic capitals like Nicomedia and Trier). In particular, Galerius's attempt to subject Rome to taxation and disband the Praetorian Guard laid the groundwork for Maxentius to step onto the stage of history as the defender of Rome's ancient privileges. For Maxentius—not only the son of a founding *Augustus* but also the son-in-law of Galerius, the very man who excluded him—this process meant the bankruptcy of Tetrarchic dynastic ties and the merit system, rather than a mere struggle for the throne. Lacking a legal Tetrarchic foundation to legitimize his rule, Maxentius was compelled to cling to Rome's most venerable traditions to fill this void.

Research Problem and Core Questions: The Reconstruction of Legitimacy

The fundamental problem of this study is how Maxentius navigated the label of "usurper" attached to him and what specific "personae" (imperial identities) he constructed to shatter this negative perception. Frequently remembered in literature solely for his military crises or his ultimate defeat at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Maxentius actually orchestrated a highly stratified and strategic project of legitimacy.

The core paradox lies here: How was Maxentius accepted as a "true Roman Emperor" (*Princeps*) by the Roman people and the Senate when there was no "legal" higher authority to recognize him? He derived his legitimacy not from the Tetrarchic bureaucracy, but from the

sentiments of the populace, Rome's religious traditions, and his dynastic heritage. This transformed his rule from a mere military imposition into a conscious process of establishing political consensus (*consensus*), executed in partnership with the civilian elite.

In this context, this thesis seeks to answer three primary research questions:

- Lacking a legal Tetrarchic mandate, how did Maxentius negotiate and construct his legitimacy using traditional Roman values and his dynastic heritage?
- Which specific "personae" (e.g., Protector of the City, dutiful son, patron of traditional religion) did he cultivate to consolidate his power and communicate with diverse audiences, such as the Senate, the army, and the urban plebs?
- How can the "tyrant" narrative fabricated by ancient literary sources be systematically dismantled using the material evidence (coinage, inscriptions and architecture) produced by Maxentius himself?
- How did Maxentius position himself against the exclusionary, military-centric order of the Tetrarchy, and through what tangible mechanisms did he actively demonstrate his legitimacy to the Senate and the Roman populace?

Justification of Sources and Historiographical Approach

The greatest methodological hurdle in Maxentian studies is the classic problem of "history written by the victors." Constantinus's victory in 312 was not only a political triumph but also a war over institutional memory (*damnatio memoriae*). Mainstream contemporary authors like Lactantius and Eusebius demonized Maxentius, portraying him as an inactive tyrant holding Rome captive. Consequently, these literary texts are integrated into this thesis not as objective records of events, but as instruments revealing how Constantinian counter-propaganda was constructed.

Rejecting the "tyrant" construct forged by literary sources, this thesis aims to bring to the forefront the image built by Maxentius himself in his own voice. The primary sources through which we can read Maxentius's ideological messages unfiltered are coins, monumental structures, and the topographical alignments of his civic architecture. Therefore, numismatic evidence bearing the legend *Conservator Urbis Suae*, his construction projects in Rome, and recent archaeoastronomical data regarding his dynastic complex on the Via Appia are positioned at the core of this research as the most tangible proofs of the bond the emperor

forged with the Roman people and the Senate. Regarding secondary sources, the traditional historiography that views the Maxentian period merely as an era of "collapse" has been discarded; instead, this study draws upon the structural analyses of modern historians such as Cullhed, Marlowe, and Hekster, as well as recent interdisciplinary archaeoastronomical surveys.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework: The "Persona" Approach

The methodological backbone of this study rests on the premise that Roman imperial ideology was not solely a military or legal status, but also a process of symbolic and ideological image construction. In analyzing Maxentius's quest for legitimacy, this thesis moves beyond traditional political history narratives and places the concept of "Persona" (Identity/Role) at its center. Here, the term "persona" is used not to imply a superficial mask, but to denote the aggregate of multidimensional political identities that a ruler strategically cultivated to legitimize his power and distinguish himself from his rivals.

To determine how these personae were constructed and circulated, this thesis employs three interdisciplinary analytical methods:

- **Iconographic and Numismatic Analysis:** Coins, the most effective tool of mass political communication in Antiquity, will be read not merely as simple illustrations, but as components of a deliberate ideological discourse. For example, Maxentius's shift from using his father's symbol, Hercules, in his early reign, to adopting Mars - a deity with no place in Tetrarchic ideology - will be examined as iconographic evidence of the construction of an "independent persona."
- **Spatial and Architectural Discourse Analysis:** Maxentius's building activities in Rome (e.g., the Basilica of Maxentius, the Temple of Romulus) will be evaluated not merely as urbanization projects, but as declarations of legitimacy "carved in stone." The manner in which the emperor transformed physical space will be analyzed through architectural topography.
- **Historical Source Criticism:** The texts of authors like Lactantius and Eusebius will be subjected to rigorous historical criticism. They will be analyzed within the context of how Constantinus confined Maxentius to the persona of a *tyrannus* (tyrant) in order to establish his own legitimacy.

Structure of the Thesis

This study, which examines the political personae Maxentius employed in his quest for power and legitimacy, consists of four main chapters:

- **Chapter One** focuses on Maxentius's life before becoming emperor and his relationship with the Tetrarchs. By examining the emperor's personal life, his diplomatic stance, and the general administrative mindset of the Tetrarchs leading up to 306, the structural foundation of the crisis is explored.
- **Chapter Two** investigates Maxentius's rise to power and the dynastic connections he leveraged to establish legitimacy. His bonds with the Senate and the Roman people, alongside his political and military struggles with rivals like Galerius and Constantinus, are presented from a historical perspective.
- **Chapter Three** constitutes the main argument of the thesis and is dedicated to Maxentius's political personae. The emperor's roles as the "Protector of the City," the "Dynastic Heir," and the "Patron of Traditional Religion" are analyzed in detail through coins, inscriptions, and public buildings.
- **Chapter Four** focuses on the period following the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. By examining Constantinus's attitude toward the public structures created by Maxentius and the city of Rome itself, the origins of the "tyrant" perception generated by ancient sources are discussed.

In the Conclusion, the efficacy of these personae in establishing structural legitimacy is evaluated, definitively invalidating the "usurper" narrative to demonstrate how Maxentius functioned as a legitimate Roman emperor whose monumental and administrative legacy was so deeply entrenched that his victor was compelled to systematically appropriate it.

1- Maxentius's life and relationship with the tetrarchs until he became emperor

1.1 His relationship with his father and his personal life

Born around 280 AD, Maxentius was the son of Eutropia, who was of Syrian origin, and Maximianus, who would later become the western *augustus* of the empire. Maximianus held an important position in the imperial administration during both the reign of Diocletianus and the Tetrarchy. Born and raised in the mid-3rd century, Maximianus was part of the soldier-emperor tradition. This inevitably influenced his relationship with his son Maxentius later on, anchoring it in authority and discipline.¹ Maximianus, who used the *signum* Hercules, had a close friendship with Diocletianus, with whom he would later advance in the Tetrarchy system. After receiving the title of *caesar* in 285, he became *augustus* of the West the following year within the dual-headed system of government. Until the establishment of the Tetrarchy period in 293, he fought a series of rebellions in Britain. When he was *augustus* within the Tetrarchy system, he chose Constantius Chlorus as his *caesar*. Although he raised his son Maxentius as a *princeps*, one of the main ideas of the Tetrarchy was to prevent dynastic succession. Tetrarchic order and iconography dissolved individual identities and biological ties within its structure. For this reason, his son Maxentius officially held only the honorary title of *clarissimus vir*, known as the “most illustrious man.”

Before further detailing the relationship between father and son, which developed under the shadow of politics and was marked by distinct phases, I would like to touch upon the environment in which Maxentius grew up, the development of his political character, and how he was raised as the son of an emperor. Being the son of an Illyrian soldier father and a Syrian aristocratic mother meant that Maxentius's education and cultural world were shaped by military discipline, but he also acquired an aristocratic civil demeanor. Maxentius' childhood was mostly spent in Rome due to his father's wars on the frontiers (against the Alamanni and Burgundians), which led him to align more with the identity of a "Roman nobleman" rather than a "frontier commander." One of the most decisive political and personal steps in Maxentius' life was his marriage around 293 AD to Valeria Maximilla, daughter of the

¹ Davenport 2016, 385.

Eastern *caesar* Galerius. The marriage between the son of the western *augustus* and the daughter of the eastern *caesar* was, of course, a sign of a political alliance. Valerius Romulus, the son born of this union, upon whom Maxentius pinned great dynastic hopes, was at the center of his personal and political world. Maxentius's naming of his son after Rome's founder, "Romulus," is an expression of his sense of belonging to Rome's roots and his desire to combine his father's military power with Rome's ancient sanctity.²

Until the retirement of Diocletianus and Maximianus in 305 AD, Maxentius lived a life intertwined with senators and intellectual circles in his estates in Rome and its surroundings, particularly after being excluded from the tetrarchy in his *villa publica* on the Via Appia.³ Maxentius's residence in Rome and his interactions with the senatorial elite have been heavily distorted by later propaganda. Following his defeat, on the side of Constantinus panegyrists (*Pan. Lat.* 12(9).14) viciously attacked his time in the capital, depicting him as a cowardly figure hiding in his palaces, indulging in luxury while real emperors fought on the frontiers. Conversely, modern scholars such as John Curran and Olivier Hekster interpret Maxentius's presence in Rome not as idleness, but as a highly calculated topographical and political strategy. While the Tetrarchs had practically abandoned Rome for frontier capitals like Trier and Nicomedia, Maxentius deliberately filled the power vacuum in the Rome. I will, of course, discuss the impact of his life among senators on his political career later on. However, this period may be understood as a process where Maxentius laid the ideological foundations for the "Rome-centered" model of administration he would later establish.⁴ While his father Maximianus was part of the Tetrarchy, Maxentius gained popularity among the Roman people and had the opportunity to observe firsthand the political discontent caused by the city's neglect.

It is essential to examine Maxentius' character development in direct proportion to his upbringing for political purposes. Of course, this development was directly influenced by his relationship with his father and the long political path he would have to walk with him, on which he would have to maintain a sensitive balance. His father's position and Maxentius' personality reveal a lot about both the father-son relationship and how this ambitious young man of the empire was perceived from the outside. The panegyric (*Panegyrici Latini*) read in Maximianus' presence on April 21, 289, during the Diarchy period that preceded the

² Hunsucker 2018, 83-88.

³ Wheeler 2013, 24.

⁴ Dumser 2019, 54-55.

Tetrarchy, emphasized the “divine and family-centered” origins of power. In this text, Maximianus was hailed as a figure directly descended from Hercules, and the sanctity of the imperial family was brought to the fore.⁵ This panegyric distinguished Maxentius' character from the image of a “border commander” represented by his father; it positioned him as a “Roman prince” closer to the Roman aristocracy and the city's ancient traditions. However, in the same panegyric, the panegyrist described Maxentius as “born with every talent for the study of the liberal arts.”⁶

This situation is an example of Maxentius preparing himself politically as the emperor's son. At the same time, this aristocratic lifestyle would become a point of ideological friction for everyone who would be associated with him in the future. Although he made moves to maintain political balance, things did not always go as Maxentius planned. He was not the only one who viewed family ties through the lens of political expediency, as he married the daughter of Galerius, *caesar* of the East. On this subject, Aurelius Victor mentions in his *Epitome de caesaribus* that Maxentius was not valued by anyone, not even his father or his father-in-law Galerius.⁷ However, taking this claim at face value would mean ignoring the post-Constantinian historiographical bias aimed at delegitimizing Maxentius. Modern scholarship suggests that this alleged 'unpopularity' was not just a personal failing, but rather a profound ideological clash. Maxentius's aristocratic, Rome-centered civilian persona directly contradicted the militaristic, frontier-oriented ideology of the Tetrarchs. Ancient sources, particularly Lactantius (*De Mort. Pers.* 18.9), retrospectively support this narrative of isolation by portraying the relationship between Maxentius and his father-in-law as one of inherent animosity, claiming Galerius excluded him due to his 'proud and stubborn' nature. However, historians argue that this hostility is largely a post-Constantinian fabrication designed to justify Maxentius's exclusion from the succession in 305 AD. If Galerius truly despised Maxentius, the dynastic marriage to his daughter Valeria Maximilla in 293 AD-and its continuation-would make little political sense. Rather than a victim of personal hatred, Maxentius was likely the victim of changing Tetrarchic priorities. What is more interesting than Galerius himself at this point is that his father also viewed the situation in this way. Galerius sought this marriage to cement his legitimacy and increase his political power.

⁵ Panegyrici Latini X(2); Davenport 2016, 385-386. Although the identity of the panegyrist is given as Mamertinus in the manuscripts, it is debated in modern literature (see Davenport 2016, 386, footnote 34). It should also be noted that the titles *Herculius* and *Jovius* began to be used on coins and inscriptions around 286, before this panegyrist (p. 385).

⁶ Hunsucker 2018, 96; Panegyrici Latini 10(2).14.1.

⁷ Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 40.14.

Similarly, Maximianus also sought to strengthen his own political position. Maxentius, on the other hand, continued to setting the steps of his potential political career with this marriage, as both the son of the western *augustus* and the son-in-law of the eastern *caesar*. However, over the years, he became a figure structurally excluded by his father and father-in-law. At this point, it is possible to view the father-son relationship as a political alliance based on interests rather than a mere kinship relationship. In this context, for Maxentius, family was less an emotional bonds and more a diplomatic area where power games were played.

In this father-son relationship, Maxentius' position within the system can be thought of as that of a sort of heir apparent. One of the turning points in the political careers of both the Tetrarchy, Maximianus, and Maxentius was the abdication of Diocletianus, *augustus* of the East, and Maximianus, *augustus* of the West, on May 1, 305. In the West, Constantius became *augustus*, while Severus became the new *caesar*. In the East, Galerius became *augustus*, while Maximinus Daia became *caesar*. Essentially, Diocletianus forced Maximianus to abdicate. Lactantius records that Maximianus abdicated reluctantly and under pressure from Diocletianus.⁸ Maximianus' reluctance to abdicate can also be seen in his decision to seize the opportunity to re-enter Roman politics in subsequent years. Maximianus's abdication was a turning point for Maxentius; for while his father relinquished the throne, Maxentius's appointment as *caesar* had been blocked by Galerius. Lactantius (*De Mort. Pers.* 18) attributes this exclusion to Galerius's personal animosity, claiming he found Maxentius arrogant and unfit for rule. Yet, a critical reading reveals that this was less about Maxentius's personal arrogance and more about the structural strictness of the Tetrarchy, which inherently perceived any dynastic heir residing in Rome as a threat to its decentralized power. This situation can be described as the first instance in Roman history where close relatives were on purpose overlooked during succession.

Politically, Maxentius had been preparing himself for years within the system for the potential positions of *caesar* and then *augustus*. For Maxentius, his father's passivity and his decision to leave the throne to others (Severus and Daia) constituted a systemic denial of his dynastic rights. This structural deprivation of rights was the first spark that would turn the father-son relationship into political rivalry and, at the same time, political expediency in the years to come. Indeed, Maxentius attempted to combine his exclusion during this period with his father's military legacy and his own civil legitimacy. Maxentius would make use of his

⁸ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 18.1-5.

father's military power in an overt and official effort to establish civil legitimacy both within and outside the tetrarchy system.

When Constantius Chlorus died in July 306, Severus, who was *caesar* at the time, became *augustus* of the West. Maxentius, recognizing that this death presented him with a political opportunity, rebelled in Rome on October 28, 306, and needed his father's military prestige to solidify his legitimacy. This was because Galerius, the *augustus* of the East, did not accept this rebellion and Maxentius' claim to the empire, and sent Severus to suppress the uprising. During this period, Maxentius needed military support more than political support. According to Zosimus, the rebels supporting Maxentius offered Maximianus, who was living a retired life in Lucania, the proposition to become emperor again but the former emperor initially refused the offer.⁹ The dynamics of this usurpation raise a critical historiographical question regarding political situation: Was Maxentius the mastermind of his own rise, or a tool of his father? While Eutropius (*Breviarium* 10.2) strictly sequences the events by stating that the soldiers first declared Maxentius *augustus*, and only then did Maxentius persuade his retired father to return, other contemporary rumors hinted that Maximianus orchestrated the rebellion from behind the scenes. Modern analysis of the early Maxentian period, however, strongly supports Maxentius's ability to act independently.

While Zosimus portrays this just as an opportunistic alliance born of desperation, numismatic evidence reveals a much more calculated ideological strategy. Maxentius's invitation was more a political necessity than an emotional bond. Maximianus, who accepted Maxentius' invitation, made this decision more out of a desire to rule again than to help his son. Father and son had united against a common enemy (Severus and Galerius).

The coin below, dated 306-307 and minted in Rome, clearly shows Maxentius defining himself as *princeps invictus*, or the invincible prince. By choosing this traditional title instead of immediately claiming the *augustus* status, and placing his father's Hercules on the reverse, Maxentius subtly used the Tetrarchic visual language: he borrowed his father's military *auctoritas* while cautiously creating his own independent legitimacy. Again, as an indication that he was using his father's sphere of influence, legitimacy, and military power during this period, Hercules with a lion's skin on his shoulder can be seen on the reverse side of the coin. Hercules is one of Maximianus' symbols of power. At this point, it is clear that Maxentius was

⁹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.10.

receiving significant support from his father while attempting to complete the image of *augustus* and his son.



Maxentius. Gold, Rome AD 306 -307.

Obv: MAXENTIVS - PRINC INVICT

Maxentius Princeps Invictus
Laureate head of Maxentius to right.

Rev: HERCVLI COMITI -AVGG ET CAESS
NN /E /PR

Hercules, laureate and with lion's skin over one shoulder and quiver over the other, standing facing, his head to left, holding club in his right hand and bow with his left.

Fig. 1: Maxentius coin minted in Rome, inscribed with MAXENTIVS-PRINC INVICT and depicting Hercules. Ref: RIC 138; Calicó 5064. Leu auction 87, Lot 112, 6 May 2003.

Relations between these two important figures of the Tetrarchy period were essentially shaped around political and military interests. Their relationship generally developed as an attempt by the emperor's son, who had been raised as a kind of *princeps* seeking to find his place within the pre-imperial system, to benefit from his father's political power, but the situation changed considerably in later years. As we will examine in later sections, the ups and downs of the father-son relationship can be seen when Maxentius became emperor in 306, when his father attempted to dethrone him by military intervention in 308, when Maximianus died in 310, and when Constantinus declared *damnatio memoriae* for Maximianus in 311.

1.2 His relationship with other tetrarchs

Perhaps one of the first figures with whom Maxentius experienced ideological conflict in the network of political relationships he built on his path to the empire was Diocletianus. Diocletianus established a system in which Maxentius's father served as the western *augustus*. In the Tetrarchy, two *augusti* ruled the state together in the East and West, supported by two designated *caesars*. When an *augustus* abdicated or died, their respective *caesar* ascended to the senior role and selected a new subordinate. Within this framework, Diocletianus intended for the empire to be administered by individuals selected on merit rather than by the sons of the *augusti*, on purpose designed the system to prevent the imperial administration from reverting to dynastic succession. This core principle placed the western *augustus*, Maximianus, and his son Maxentius in direct conflict with Diocletianus. Raised as a *princeps* and an aristocrat, Maxentius positioned his eventual elevation to *caesar* and *augustus* as a natural birthright. Therefore, Maxentius's search for legitimacy and his defense of the dynastic principle against the Tetrarchy's claim to meritocracy fundamentally stemmed from his structural inability to find a place within the system.

During the First Tetrarchy, Maxentius was not granted imperial titles such as *nobilissimus* or *caesar*, but was instead treated as a *clarissimus vir* as the son of an *augustus* until 305, he was deliberately not appointed to any active position of authority by Diocletianus.¹⁰ His dynastic claims and the influence of Diocletianus's inner circle provided that Maxentius remained excluded from the Tetrarchy. Diocletianus's determination to keep imperial offspring outside the administration forced Maxentius to spend the majority of his early life in Rome as a civilian. On May 1, 305, during Diocletianus's abdication, Maxentius's failure to be appointed *caesar* became the ultimate manifestation of this systemic exclusion. Lactantius records that Diocletianus was manipulated by Galerius during this process, branding Maxentius as “unfit for office” or, in other words, “arrogant and disobedient.”¹¹

However, Maxentius's usurpation in 306 was not only a reaction to this personal exclusion, but a broader ideological stance against Diocletianus's political and religious policies. While Diocletianus decentralized the empire by moving its administrative centers from Rome to regional centers (such as Nicomedia and Sirmium), Maxentius declared himself *conservator urbis suae* (protector of his own city), strongly defending a Rome-centered ideology.¹² Furthermore, Maxentius softened Diocletianus's harsh persecution policies against

¹⁰ Waldron 2018, 161-64.

¹¹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 18.12.

¹² Dumser 2019, 54-55.

Christians.¹³ In doing so, he reshaped the legal and religious legacy of the founding *augustus* with his own vision of civic peace, assuming the role of a *restitutor* (restorer). By 307, Maxentius's strategic reintroduction of his father into politics effectively rip off the “retirement” rule imposed by Diocletianus in 305. Diocletianus's observation of these developments from his palace in Spalatum (Split), coupled with Maxentius's subsequent elimination of Severus utilizing Maximianus's influence, make an effort a severe blow to Tetrarchic authority.¹⁴

Galerius, who heavily influenced Diocletianus, represented the primary ideological barrier for Maxentius. The dynamic between Maxentius and Galerius was not merely a matter of Tetrarchic hierarchy, but a complex arena where diplomatic marriages intertwined with severe geopolitical rivalry. Although Galerius was Maxentius's father-in-law, he emerged as his most tough opponent on the path to the imperial throne. As mentioned earlier, Lactantius, while describing the pressure placed on Diocletianus, conveys that Galerius hated Maxentius's “arrogant and disobedient” character, viewing his potential rise to power as a direct threat to his own authority.¹⁵ Once again, Lactantius (*De Mort. Pers.* 18.12) relies on character assassination to explain political shifts. Labeling Maxentius as 'arrogant' serves as a useful justification for his exclusion, masking the deeper ideological incompatibility between the two men. Modern scholarship, as analyzed by Byron Waldron (2018) and John Curran (2000), argues that what Lactantius dismisses as arrogance was, in fact, Maxentius's staunch adherence to traditional, Rome-centric aristocratic values. Galerius, heavily invested in the militaristic and provincial nature of the Tetrarchy, recognized that Maxentius's relations in Rome-cultivated among with the senatorial elite-posed a basic ideological threat to the system's new regional capitals. While Galerius sought to consolidate a system based on military force, he viewed dynastic heirs like Maxentius, who were detached from the frontiers but possessed the capacity to mobilize civic power as “Roman nobles,” as a systemic vulnerability.¹⁶

In 306, Galerius's own financial policies unintentionally provided Maxentius with the social legitimacy required to rebel in Rome. Galerius's attempt to subject Rome to the provincial tax census, his plan to eliminate the Praetorian Guard, and the execution of several magistrates in

¹³ Cecini and Serra 2024, 18-20.

¹⁴ Lenski 2006, 62-63.

¹⁵ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 18.12.

¹⁶ Waldron 2018, 161-168.

Rome rapidly accelerated Maxentius's rise to the throne.¹⁷ Galerius's taxation efforts and military restructuring were perceived as a direct assault on the city's centuries-old privileges.¹⁸ Zosimus states this tax burden was the breaking point for the Roman populace and the urban military units, and that Maxentius strategically take advantage of on this unrest by portraying himself as the protector of the city (*conservator urbis suae*).¹⁹ This situation symbolized the triumph of Maxentius's "native/Roman" identity over Galerius's "foreign/invader" administration.

The military conflict of 307 marked the final breakdown of their diplomatic ties. Following Severus's defeat, Galerius personally led a campaign into Italy, where he encountered powerful resistance. Driven by loyalty to Maximianus—who had returned from retirement at Maxentius's invitation—the soldiers in Galerius's army began to defect, forcing the eastern *augustus* into retreat. This failed campaign shattered Galerius's military *auctoritas* and strengthened Maxentius's power.²⁰ The relationship between Galerius and Maxentius, which began as a diplomatic alliance masked by familial ties, finally collapsed under the weight of political friction. Consequently, while Galerius actively prevented Maxentius from integrating into the Tetrarchy and obtaining legitimate titles, his tax demands regarding the city of Rome inadvertently paved the way for Maxentius to seize the imperial mantle.

The historical precedents for Maxentius's rebellion in 306 were not limited solely to the Tetrarchs. Carausius, who served as Maximianus's naval commander prior to the Tetrarchy, offers an effective parallel. Carausius rebelled in 286-287, establishing an independent domain of sovereignty in Britannia and Northern Gaul that he maintained until 293. Originally tasked by Maximianus with clearing out Frankish and Saxon pirates, Carausius usurped the title of *augustus* in Britain after being accused of embezzling spoils and facing a death sentence.²¹ This act constituted a direct challenge to the Diarchy system, the precursor to the Tetrarchy. Although Carausius and Maxentius operated in chronologically different periods, the model of a "separatist but legitimacy-seeking" emperor pioneered by Carausius served as a structural template for Maxentius's Rome-centered regional power. Their connection is best evaluated as one of ideological influence rather than direct continuity. Carausius's success, which lasted for seven years, demonstrated that the empire could indeed

¹⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 26.

¹⁸ Lenski 2006, 62-63.

¹⁹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 26.2-3

²⁰ Odahl 2004, 74-78.

²¹ Odahl 2004, 38; Barnes 1982, 10-11.

be fractured and administrate regionally.²² Yet, as modern scholars such as Raphael Hunsucker (2018) point out, a critical ideological difference must be made between their numismatic propaganda. While Carausius used the *Expectate Veni* legend (e.g., *RIC* V Carausius 554-558) to legitimize a breakaway administration in Britannia, Maxentius's use of the *Conservator* title (e.g., *RIC* VI Rome 113) was profoundly central. He was not carving out a new local area; he was claiming to save the ancient core of the empire itself from the 'foreign' Tetrarchs. In addition, this ideological divergence is evident in Maxentius's deliberate rejection of the Virgilian and Augustan literary traditions that Carausius had so prominently showcased on his own coins.²³

Both leaders required the support of the local citizenry to demonstrate their legitimacy. In a sense, both figures defended local loyalty and “rightful” leadership against the rigid assignment systems imposed by the central administration. The political structure created by Carausius, detached from the center but tied to Roman traditions, served as a critical reference point. Just as Carausius turned Britain into a fortified center of power, Maxentius used Rome's historical tax immunity as a political fortress against Galerius's policy of reducing the city to provincial status.²⁴ While Carausius's rebellion was initially tolerated for a time due to military necessity by Diocletianus and Maximianus out of military necessity, it was promptly suppressed once the balance of power shifted.²⁵ To avoid repeating Carausius's ultimate failure, Maxentius base on his policy and legitimacy not only in military holding power but also deeply in Rome's centuries-old symbols and his father's imperial legacy.

The relationship between Maxentius and Constantius Chlorus-Maximianus's *caesar* in the West was largely characterized by a silent tension regarding the “legitimacy of succession,” extending far beyond any direct military contact. Constantius was Maximianus's indispensable administrative and military partner, notably succeeding in the siege that led to the assassination of Carausius. However, this partnership generated a deep structural inequity at the level of their heirs. During the abdication of 305, as Constantius ascended to the rank of *augustus*, his son Constantinus was held at Galerius's court as a political hostage, while Maxentius was relegated to a strictly civilian status in Rome, confirming the systemic

²² Waldron 2018, 75-78.

²³ Hunsucker 2018, 106.

²⁴ Ziemssen 2011, 71.

²⁵ Eutropius, *Breviarium* 9.21-22; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 39.

exclusion of both dynastic heirs. This situation shows how the tetrarchy system pushed the heirs without military qualifications out of the system.²⁶

The sudden death of Constantius Chlorus on July 25, 306, in Eboracum (York) fundamentally altered the political landscape, creating a “legitimizing gap” that helped Maxentius’s political career. The soldiers’ extralegal proclamation of Constantine as *augustus* effectively invalidated the strict rules of the Tetrarchy, immediately raising the thought in Rome: witnessing Constantius’s son successfully seize power in York, Maxentius felt justified and encouraged to claim the throne for himself, reasoning that his own dynastic legitimacy was far more reasonable.²⁷ In this context, while Constantius Chlorus’s military authority overshadowed Maxentius during his lifetime, his death served as the primary catalyst for the Roman rebellion. While Zosimus (*Historia Nova*, 2.9.1) claims that the rise of Constantine triggered “jealousy” in Rome and that Maxentius could not bear to see Constantine’s good fortune,²⁸ accepting this psychological reductionism means falling into the trap of hostile ancient historiography. Attributing the usurpation merely to ‘jealousy’ (*invidia*) hides the structural crisis of the Tetrarchy. Modern historians, particularly Mariana Bodnaruk (2021) and Noel Lenski (2017), emphasize that the events of October 306 were not a spontaneous outburst of Maxentius’s personal envy. As Lenski points out, it was a highly coordinated political and economic reaction against Galerius’s financial policies, while Bodnaruk highlights the active ‘manufacturing of consent’ involving the Roman Senate, the plebs, and the Praetorians. Maxentius strategically positioned himself as the inevitable figurehead for a city to retain its ancient privileges. Just as Galerius’s taxation demands created a socio-economic opportunity, Constantius’s death provided the essential precedent for Maxentius to claim being emperor.

Although Constantine was proclaimed emperor by his troops, Galerius initially refused to recognize his *augustus* title, granting him only the rank of *caesar*. Instead, Galerius confirmed Severus as the new western *augustus*. Severus’s appointments in 305 and 306 further deepened Maxentius’s systemic exclusion. Given his origins as an Illyrian soldier and his absolute loyalty to the distant Galerius, Severus appeared to the Roman Senate and populace as an illegitimate occupying force. When Severus attempted to enforce Galerius’s tax

²⁶ Waldron 2018, 155-58.

²⁷ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.9.1-2; See also Lenski 2006, 62, for a modern assessment.

²⁸ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.9.1.

collection and disband the Praetorian Guard, the tension between Rome and the Tetrarchic center reached an irreversible point.²⁹

Following the October 306 rebellion, Galerius sent out Severus to suppress Maxentius.³⁰ Their confrontation starkly exemplified the disconnect between the Tetrarchy's theoretical hierarchy and the actual geopolitical reality in Italy. Severus arrived not merely as a political rival, but as an enforcer sent by Galerius to regain control over Italy and Africa. In early 307, Severus marched from Mediolanum (Milan) to besiege Rome. Maxentius countered this threat by granting his retired father, Maximianus, the title of *augustus* and calling upon his military network.³¹ The fact that the majority of Severus's troops remained loyal to their former commander, Maximianus, led to the besieger's defeat. The soldiers' reluctance to attack their former emperor and his son demonstrated the enduring effect of dynastic loyalty over bureaucratic appointments. Severus fled to Ravenna, was later on captured, and eventually executed. This outcome provided proof that an official appointee of the Tetrarchic system could collapse in the face of dynastic *auctoritas*.³² Through this victory, Maxentius successfully used his father's military network, eliminated a legitimate Tetrarchic rival, and fortified his rule in the West. Maxentius subsequently issuing decrees that legally invalidated the military and financial regulations imposed during Severus's administration, part from that consolidated popular support by assuming the *titulus primi nominis*, which granted him the legal authority to invalidate Diocletian's persecutory edicts and issue his own decree legalizing Christianity in his domains.³³

Ultimately, Maxentius's relationships with his contemporary political actors shaped the turning points of his pre-imperial career. Diocletianus's harsh anti-Christian policies provided Maxentius with the opportunity to assume a restorative, founding role in Rome. Galerius's insistence on excluding Maxentius from the succession created the initial rupture, while his aggressive financial policies regarding Rome furnished the direct catalyst for usurpation. Drawing strategic lessons from Carausius's regional rebellion, Maxentius successfully take advantage of his father's legitimacy to neutralize Severus. Every Tetrarch directly or indirectly influenced Maxentius's rise. Even after securing the throne, his diplomatic and

²⁹ Odahl 2004, 74-75.

³⁰ Lenski 2006, 62-63.

³¹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.10.

³² Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 40.7.

³³ Cecini and Serra 2024, 15-19.

military interactions with the remaining Tetrarchs-including his own father-would continue to define the unstable geopolitics of his reign.

1.3 His military and diplomatic stance

The seemingly quiet phase of Maxentius's life leading up to 306 was, in reality, a period during which he sought to establish a foothold both within and outside the Tetrarchy, carefully analyzing the ideological voids within the system. When examined through the lenses of military hierarchy and diplomatic relations, it becomes clear how he transformed his systemic rejection into a "righteous cause." At the core of Maxentius's military and diplomatic posture lay the imperial legacy of his father, Maximianus Herculius. This title did not make Maxentius, who had previously been left in civilian status by his opponents with the title of *classimus vir*, just an honorary figure; on the contrary, he positioned it as representative of a natural, blood-based right of inheritance as opposed to "adoption" (*adoptio*). This status ensured that, even before rising to the throne, Maxentius was perceived by the soldiers and the populace as a legitimate heir. Unlike his rivals, who were defined almost exclusively by their military backgrounds, his predominantly civilian and aristocratic education was viewed at the same time as a vulnerability and a strength.

This civilian growing inherently resulted in a lack of field military experience. Nevertheless, Maxentius adeptly used his father's military authority, as demonstrated during his conflict with Severus. He effectively compensated for his military lack with the diplomatic prowess afforded by his civilian education. Being raised as a leader well-versed in Rome's rhetorical and legal traditions allow of him to navigate his diplomatic engagements with the Roman aristocracy (the Senate) with precision. Maxentius utilized this image of a Roman nobleman as an antithesis to the "barracks-based" authority of the Tetrarchs, based on his legitimacy in Rome's ancient traditions and dynastic rights rather than sheer military merit.

Ancient sources frequently portray Maxentius's reluctance to fight on the frontiers and his decision to remain behind the walls of Rome as a sign of "cowardice" or military insufficiency. For instance, Constantinian-era texts such as the *Panegyrici Latini* (12.14) and Lactantius (*De Mort. Pers.* 27) indicate him as an inactive tyrant, fearful of leaving his palace. However, modern scholars such as Mats Cullhed (1994) and Charles Odahl (2004) categorically reject this fabrication. In their view, Maxentius's avoidance of pitched battles was not a weakness but a calculated defensive strategy, centered on the fortified positions provided by the Aurelian Walls and aimed at exhausting the enemy's supply lines. Knowing

that the massive armies of the Tetrarchs lacked the logistical infrastructure to sustain an extended siege before Rome, Maxentius simply waited, ultimately causing his rivals to collapse from within.

Maxentius's military posture was built not on the field experience of a classical general, but strategically upon the concept of "urban patronage" (*patrocinium*). His authority over the Praetorian Guard and the urban cohorts (*cohortes urbanae*) during his time in Rome formed the structural military foundation of the 306 rebellion.³⁴ Even without an official command, his promise to protect the soldiers' privileges and the organic bond he established with them, combined with his father's status as a Tetrarch, made Maxentius "one of their own" in military circles. His firm stance against Galerius's plans to disband the Praetorians and to tax Rome by reducing it to an ordinary province proves that the concept of "Rome's immunity" was the cornerstone of his military strategy.³⁵ Consequently, his military profile prior to 306 was not a buildup of offensive force, but a preparatory process focused on urban defense and loyalty.

Prior to his emperorship, Maxentius advanced a strong diplomatic agenda to offset his vulnerable military standing. His marriage to Valeria Maximilla, the daughter of Galerius, remains the most complex element of his diplomatic profile. Although initially designed as an instrument of dynastic balance, this marriage evolved into a tool for Maxentius to observe Galerius's policies from the inside. His continuous residence in Rome, distinct from other emperors, constituted the most crucial aspect of his diplomatic strength. Unlike the Tetrarchs who had abandoned the capital, Maxentius pragmatically administered the resulting power vacuum in Rome, securing the loyalty of the civilian elites and thus solidifying his base of power.

The refusal to elevate Maxentius to *caesar* during the abdication of Diocletianus and Maximianus in 305 marked the important turning point in his diplomatic position. This systemic exclusion provided Maxentius with a "righteous cause" against the Tetrarchic order. The period between 305 and 306, marked by apparent silence, was utilized to await the missteps of his rivals (Severus and Galerius). This period of anticipation based on his claim to legitimacy in social base. When Galerius's tax pressure on Italy intensified, Maxentius positioned himself as a savior (*conservator*)-one whose rights had been usurped, yet who stood with the people. This "preparation" provides that the Roman populace perceived him

³⁴ Lenski 2006, 62.

³⁵ Barnes 1982, 38.

not as a "reluctant usurper," but as a "natural and legitimate successor." Such diplomatic maneuvering explains why he faced no internal resistance during the early days of the uprising and why the military-civilian bureaucracy swiftly defected to his side.

Maxentius's diplomatic movements were not confined strictly to the bureaucratic area. Especially, his most effective diplomatic facet prior to his emperorship was his legal and religious diplomacy. The attitude of Maxentius in Rome against Diocletian's persecution policies caused him to attract the attention of the Tetrarchy and to be seen from Tetrarchy as a *hostis publicus*.³⁶ This stance earned him significant social legitimacy. Eusebius attempts to discredit Maxentius's tolerance toward Christians as the intrigues of a hypocritical tyrant seeking to deceive the public.³⁷ "However, the legal analyses of Marco Cecini and Diego Serra (2024) clearly expose these theological biases in Eusebius's account. The subtle 'diplomacy of tolerance' Maxentius established with the Christian community and other layers of civil society reinforced his image not merely as a soldier defending dynastic rights, but as a 'man of law' (*civilis*) who cared for civic peace.³⁸ This posture formed the diplomatic foundation for the decrees of amnesty and restitution he would issue after 306.

Maxentius set up his power in the heart of Rome rather than in the military camps, relying heavily on dynastic ties and civilian networks. His usurpation in 306 was not coincidental; it manifested a 'hidden legitimacy' carefully cultivated long before his formal rising.

1.4 The general attitude of the tetrarchs during their administration until Maxentius's reign

To fully grasp Maxentius's position prior to 306, one must look beyond his personal and diplomatic ties to analyze the broader administrative and ideological mindset of the Tetrarchy. Diocletianus reflect the Tetrarchic administration not only as a practical division of labor, but as a rigid, theologically defined political system. The administrative ideology of this era was defined by the concepts of *similitudo* (uniformity) and *concordia* (harmony) among four rulers, who reinforced their authority through divine association as Iovius and Herculus.³⁹ Legitimacy was no longer rooted in bloodlines but rested upon an artificial, family structure forged through "adoption" (*adoptio*).

³⁶ Cecini and Serra 2024, 12,18.

³⁷ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.14.

³⁸ Cecini and Serra 2024, 11-12, 17-18.

³⁹ Rees 1993, 183-187,198.

Ancient sources, particularly the *Panegyrici Latini* which reflect the official ideology of the time, deliberately excluded biological ancestry while praising this administrative *ethos*. The panegyrics of 289 and 291 ignore Maximian's ordinary parents, focusing instead on his divine Herculean ancestry and the military courage (*virtus*) tied to his Pannonian roots.⁴⁰ Modern scholar Byron Waldron argues that the Tetrarchy was not a simple administrative division, but rather a "military experiment" designed to prevent regional army rebellions by ensuring an enough imperial presence across the empire.⁴¹ Within this merit-based and theological framework, the administration's stance toward heirs like Maxentius was predicated on systematic exclusion. The system was designed to function flawlessly only if dynastic sentiments were entirely eradicated. Therefore, the Tetrarchic administration viewed Maxentius not as an excluded prince who had suffered injustice, but as a structural anomaly threatening their carefully crafted ideological uniformity—a dangerous relic of the third-century dynastic model.

The most deep and traumatic impact of the Tetrarchs' administrative attitude was felt in the administrative reorganization of the empire. To secure the frontiers and manage the armies more effectively, Diocletianus and other Tetrarchs shifted the administrative centers away from Rome to border cities such as *Nicomedia*, *Sirmium*, *Mediolanum* (Milan), and Trier. Power no longer resided on the Palatine Hill in Rome, but indicated within the emperors' constantly moving military retinues (*comitatus*). Modern historians such as Olivier Hekster acknowledge that the Tetrarchic relocation of the capitals had strict military and logistical necessities, but emphasize that it was also heavily driven by ideological motives to reduce Rome's traditional primacy.⁴² For the emperors to command the massive armies along the frontiers, proximity to the front lines was an administrative rationale. Yet, this military rationality was experienced by the senatorial aristocracy and the urban plebs (*plebs urbana*) as a humiliating disenfranchisement and political emasculation. The administrative attitude of the Tetrarchs in abandoning Rome created a colossal socio-political vacuum in the capital, providing the perfect efficient ground for Maxentius to cultivate his own *Conservator* ideology. While Rome transformed into a nostalgic old capital for the Tetrarchs, it remained an untouched reservoir of political loyalty and legitimacy for Maxentius.

⁴⁰ *Panegyrici Latini* 10(2).2-4; Davenport 2016, 388-391.

⁴¹ Waldron 2018, 75-78.

⁴² Hekster 1999, 5-6

The administrative mindset of the Tetrarchy was not limited to geographical shifts; it peaked in a severe process of financial reform and bureaucratization that permeated every level of the state. Diocletianus's subdivision of provinces to tighten control over the administrative system, and notably his taking off the Italian peninsula of its centuries-old tax exemption to reduce it to the status of an ordinary province, represented the system's most radical step. Lactantius (De Mort. Pers. 7.2-4) criticizes these administrative maneuvers, accusing Diocletianus of creating a massive, greedy bureaucracy where "the number of tax collectors began to exceed the number of taxpayers."⁴³ From Lactantius's Christian and contemporary perspective, the Tetrarchic administration was an oppressive "tyranny" driven by paranoia and an insatiable appetite.⁴⁴ However to provision (*annona militaris*) the colossal frontier armies (*limitanei* and *comitatenses*) and sustain the state, subjecting the entire empire-including Italy-to a systematic census of population and property (*census*) was a financial imperative.

It is precisely at this intersection-between the rhetorical hostility of ancient sources and the structural analysis of modern scholarship-that the political genius of Maxentius's usurpation comes into focus. From 284 to 306, the Tetrarchs managed the empire much like a military-logistic corporation, completely disregarding the ancient privileges of Rome and the traditional and cultural gravity of the Rome. Maxentius recognized that this administrative attitude which Lactantius so criticized, was actually the Tetrarchy's greatest political vulnerability. Maxentius, Rome-centered, and dynastically driven administration, he established the intellectual and social foundation for his becoming emperor in 306.

2- Maxentius's Rise to Power

2.1 The Process of Becoming an Emperor and His Dynastic Connections

Diocletianus created the Tetrarchic system during the 280s which required imperial authority to move forward through achievement and age and adoption instead of following traditional family inheritance patterns.⁴⁵ The simultaneous abdication of senior emperors Diocletianus and Maximianus on May 1, 305, created the first major crisis which revealed the system's weaknesses while bringing traditional dynastic needs from both military and civilian groups into view. The Second Tetrarchy appeared after these retirements when Constantinus and Maxentius--who descended from the system's original founders--were purposefully kept out

⁴³ Lactantius, De Mortibus Persecutorum 7.2-4.

⁴⁴ Lactantius, De Mortibus Persecutorum 7.

⁴⁵ Dumser 2019, 51-22; Van Dam 2011, 228.

of the imperial administrative system. Yet, as explicitly stated in the *Panegyrici Latini* of 289 presented to his father Maximianus, Maxentius had been actively raised with the clear expectation that he would eventually accede to imperial power.⁴⁶

This systemic deprivation primary motivation for Maxentius's strategy. Ancient historians hostile to Maxentius, such as Zosimus (*Historia Nova*, 2.9), deliberately reduce this structural crisis to a narrative of personal envy. By claiming that Constantinus's elevation was an "intolerable" blow to Maxentius's pride, Zosimus attempts to mask the profound ideological rupture within the Tetrarchy and frame Maxentius merely as an ambitious rebel driven by emotion.⁴⁷ In reality, this exclusion was not a matter of arrogance; it was a direct assault on the theology of the system itself. In this order, where Diocletianus represented the Jovian (*Iovius*) line and Maximianus the Herculan (*Herculius*) line, Maxentius was the direct representative of the "House of Hercules" (*Domus Herculia*), which conferred divine legitimacy. For the first time in Roman history, lineage was explicitly bypassed in an imperial succession plan; the passing over of a family member in favor of political allies effectively stripped Maxentius of the imperial power he had expected to inherit.⁴⁸ Rejected by the Tetrarchic center, Maxentius sought his legitimacy not from the distant frontier legions, but directly from the historical center of the empire: the Roman populace and the Senate.⁴⁹

The factor that opened the door to this civil and local legitimacy was the harsh financial policy implemented by the eastern *augustus*, Galerius, toward Rome. His attempt to subject the Roman population to taxation along with his plan to disband the Praetorian Guard, which was the military power symbol of the capital centuries of tradition and caused outrage in the city.⁵⁰ When Galerius attempted to disband the Praetorian Guard, some magistrates were killed by soldiers.⁵¹ This action breaks with tradition irrevocably severed ties.

Among this crisis, Rome's elites, military, and populace actively sought a new leader. On October 28, 306, taking advantage of the opportunity and the awakened fury of the public, the Praetorian guards proclaimed Maxentius as an emperor.⁵² According to Eutropius (*Breviarium*) and Dumser's analysis, Maxentius was proclaimed emperor not in an ordinary military camp, but in a state-owned villa known as the *villa publica*, located at the sixth mile

⁴⁶ McIntyre, 2018, 167, n.20.

⁴⁷ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.9.

⁴⁸ McIntyre 2018, 167-168

⁴⁹ Van Dam 2011, 140-141, 155-156.

⁵⁰ Dumser 2019, 53; Doležal 2022, 265.

⁵¹ Van Dam 2011, 227.

⁵² Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 26; Dumser 2019, 52-53.

of the *Via Labicana*. This underscores his symbolic power based on his imperial lineage.⁵³ More importantly, this declaration of empire was not a localized military attempt; Gaius Annius Anullinus, the serving Urban Prefect of Rome (*praefectus urbi*) and a member of one of the most distinguished senatorial families, formally supported the declaration of the empire. Rather than a tyrant who seized power by force, Maxentius established his legitimacy as a dynastic figure invoked to the throne by Rome's civil aristocracy and military.

Because of his political isolation, Maxentius very much needed the backing of every man in the capital. That need directly affected his religious policy. Despite later Constantinian propaganda calling him a “depraved pagan tyrant,”⁵⁴ Maxentius effectively put an end to the persecution of Christians in the West, at least in the earliest years of his reign. He commanded the restoration of confiscated properties belonging to the Roman Church (through Bishop Miltiades) and the holding of Easter in Rome, and also ordered the building of the Basilica Apostolorum (S. Sebastiano) on the *Via Appia*.⁵⁵ During the initial months of his reign, Maxentius spread these civil and republican sensibilities to the entire empire through highly calculated numismatic propaganda. While the inscriptions on his early coins defined him cautiously as *princeps invictus* (the invincible first citizen), the visual iconography focused directly on Rome's founding myths.

⁵³ Eutropius, *Breviarium* 10.2; Dumser, 2019, 53.

⁵⁴ Varner 2014, 48.

⁵⁵ Jastrzębowska 2016, 511-12.



Maxentius, AR Argentius. Rome AD 307-310 .
20mm, 2,63g.
Obv: MAXENTIVS P F AVG

Facing, draped bust of Maxentius.



Rev: TEMPORVM FELICITAS AVG N

She-wolf standing right, head turned back,
suckling Romulus and Remus.

Fig. 2: Maxentius coin minted in Rome, inscribed with MAXENTIVS P F AVG (MAXENTIVS PIVS FELIX AVGVSTVS) and depicting she wolf with Romulus and Remus. Ref: Cohen 106; RIC VI Rome 191.

The coin above (Figure 2) perfectly summarizes this early legitimization strategy. The obverse a notably uncommon frontal (or slightly turned) bare-headed image of Maxentius, in total deviation from the Tetrarchic visual ideology's strict and uniform profile busts. Maxentius, by taking on the title of *princeps* rather than following the normal pattern of a laureate profile as an *augustus*, presented himself on his coins as a civilian, republican leader rather than a despotic military autocrat. The reverse highlights this local rooting with the iconic founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus suckled by the she-wolf.⁵⁶ Maxentius's use of this imagery was not simply referencing of the city's past but rather with two layers of dynastic referencing. Maxentius put himself forward as Rome's new founder (*conditor*) by placing the legendary founders at the center of his program. Further, he created a direct ideological connection between the city's divine origins and his own biological son, whom he named "Valerius Romulus."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Van Dam 2011, 241-243.

⁵⁷ McIntyre 2018, 170-171; Van Dam 2011, 241-243.



Maxentius, Follis. Ostia AD 309-312.
5.3 g.
Obv: IMP C MAXENTIVS P F AVG

Laureate head of Maxentius to right.



Rev: SACVLI FELICITAS AVG N

Wolf standing left, head turned back, suckling the twins
Romulus and Remus.
Mintmark MOSTQ.

Fig. 3: Maxentius coin minted in Ostia, inscribed with IMP C MAXENTIVS P F AVG and depicting she wolf with Romulus and Remus. Ref: RIC VI Ostia 52, Auktionshaus H. D. Rauch GmbH auction 91, Lot 782, Dec. 2012.

This ideological evolution is captured in his later coinage (Figure 3). Having consolidated his power, Maxentius abandons the modest princeps title and the bareheaded portrait. He now appears in the traditional, laureate profile bust of a fully recognized emperor, bearing the explicit legend IMP C MAXENTIVS P F AVG. Yet, above all, the reverse motif of the she-wolf and the twins remains constant, now accompanied legends such as SAECVLI FELICITAS AVG N (The Felicity of the Age of our Augustus). This transition shows that even as he claimed supreme power, his fundamental legitimizing anchor is Rome. The significance of this independent legitimizing foundation, constructed by Maxentius through the "Romulus" imagery, becomes even more apparent in the following years of his reign. Following the power struggle and breaking off with his father Maximianus in 308, Maxentius would lose the primary external legitimizing to which he owed his initial power. Following this crisis, Maxentius strategically shifted his basis of legitimacy entirely to the origins of the City and the new dynastic vision represented by his son, Romulus. He established a connection between the founding legend and his son.⁵⁸ Maxentius's desire to creation a dynastic persona in his quest for legitimacy will be analyzed in detail in Chapter 3. This

⁵⁸ Curran 2000, 60.

numismatic propaganda, which conflated his own son with the founder of the city, a powerful ideological tool Maxentius developed against the Tetrarchy.

The civil and numismatic legitimacy Maxentius established in Rome soon faced severe military and geopolitical trials. Maxentius's de facto domain was initially restricted to central and southern Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and North Africa.⁵⁹ Within this geographical distribution, the control of the North African provinces was the absolute lifeblood of the Maxentius administration, primarily securing the grain supply (*annona*) for Rome. Controlling Africa ensured his ability to feed the capital's populace, thus sustaining his civil popularity among the Senate and the public.

However, the status of Hispania (Spain) regarding Maxentius's early imperial borders remains a subject of intense historiographical debate. Josef Češka argues that Maxentius ruled Hispania during his early years, suggesting that Constantinus "declared war on Maxentius and seized Spain from him in 309." On the other hand, Timothy Barnes categorically rejects this claim, asserting that Constantius Chlorus had already integrated Hispania into his domain when he became *augustus* in 305; thus, when Constantinus proclaimed his emperorship in 306, he would have directly secured Hispania through "right of inheritance."⁶⁰ This historiographical discrepancy is critical for understanding economy Maxentius was forced to construct: he struggled defied the Tetrarchic armies from a highly restricted geography, entirely deprived of the military and economic resources of Gaul and Hispania.

This restricted power was severely tested by a major crisis in early 307. While Constantinus had been legally recognized as a legitimate *caesar* by Galerius at the end of 306, Maxentius was still institutionally classified as a rebel or in other words usurper.⁶¹ Hopes of official recognition by Galerius, Maxentius refused to accept Severus as consul; instead, keeping the door open for diplomacy, he appointed Galerius himself as consul.⁶² However, Galerius decisively rejected this diplomatic maneuver. Tetrarchy simply did not allow for the simultaneous assignment of a "third caesar" into the system. Furthermore, Galerius deemed him unworthy of the imperial office.⁶³ This diplomatic exclusion completely finished Maxentius's hopes for recognition within the Tetrarchy, directed him to openly adopt the

⁵⁹ Doležal 2022, 266.

⁶⁰ For a summary of this historiographical debate and the opposing views of Češka and Barnes, see Doležal 2022, 268.

⁶¹ Doležal 2022, 268.

⁶² Doležal 2022, 266.

⁶³ Van Dam 2011, 228.

independent title of *augustus*. He started using *augustus* from 307 onwards.⁶⁴ Rejecting compromise, Galerius ordered Severus, the legal western *augustus*, to suppress the rebellion.

As Severus's armies marched on Rome, Maxentius' weakness is lack of field experience became apparent.⁶⁵ To secure the loyalty of the army and resist the approaching force, Maxentius asked his father Maximianus for military support. He recalled his father from his retirement in Lucania, declaring him "Augustus for the Second Time" (*bis augustus*).⁶⁶ Maximianus's return to the politics was far more than a tactical maneuver. By synthesizing the civil legitimacy he had developed (the Romulus strategy) with the universal and divine legitimacy represented by his father (*Domus Herculia*). Maximianus was not just a retired commander; he was one of the important tools Maxentius used to secure his legitimacy. This synthesis merging the Romulus origin embraced by the Senate with the Hercules origin revered by the frontier legions created a deterrent against Severus's armies. Eventually, when the soldiers in Severus' army reached Rome, they switched sides and joined their former commander, Maximianus.⁶⁷

This situation and strategy created a perception of weakness in Maxentius's own leadership. Despite declaring himself *Invictus* (Invincible) on his coinage, Maxentius delegated military command largely to his father, opting to remain secure behind the walls of Rome. This defensive attitude shows the groundwork for hostile contemporary historians to disparage him as a coward unwilling to engage in battle.⁶⁸

Ancient sources detail the impact Maximianus's reappearance had on Severus's army. Zosimus (*Historia Nova*, 2.10) and Lactantius (*De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 26) record that when Severus's army reached the walls of Rome, the soldiers flatly refused to fight against their former commander, Maximianus. While Lactantius emphasizes the troops' reluctance to fight against the family of their former commander, Maximianus, Zosimus notes that Maxentius successfully corrupted the advancing forces with money.⁶⁹ While ancient authors frame these desertions just as the result of bribes or a sudden nostalgia, the event must be analyzed structurally. The disintegration of Severus's army symbolizes the ultimate collapse of Diocletianus's bureaucratic appointment system when confronted with the raw *auctoritas*

⁶⁴ Doležal 2022, 266.

⁶⁵ Van Dam 2011, 247.

⁶⁶ Doležal 2022, 268; Van Dam 2011, 229.

⁶⁷ Van Dam 2011, 229.

⁶⁸ Van Dam 2011, 247-248.

⁶⁹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.10; Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 26.

of a genuine dynastic founder. The dispersal of Severus's army demonstrates the victory that *augustus*, from outside the tetrarchy, achieved against *caesar*, who had come to power through assignment, within the tetrarchy. The switch sides of soldiers show that traditional dynastic loyalty could be preferred to the tetrarchy itself.

With his army dissolving, a desperate Severus was forced to retreat to Ravenna, where Maximianus besieged him and forced him to abdicate in the spring of 307.⁷⁰ Severus was later on brought to Rome as a hostage under the promise that his life would be spared, but was shortly thereafter forced to commit suicide. The death of a legally designated Tetrarchic *augustus* did not just for tactical reasons; it symbolically initiated the rip off the Tetrarchic structure in the West. Following the defeat of Severus, Galerius personally led an invasion of Italy, but he too failed. As John R. Curran emphasize, Maxentius's strategy of remaining secure behind the fortified walls of Rome rendered Galerius powerless, ultimately forcing him into a retreat.⁷¹ During this period, Maximianus traveled to Gaul to conduct alliance negotiations with Constantinus, securing Maxentius's western frontier through the marriage of Fausta to Constantinus (likely occurring on March 31, 307, in Trier).⁷²

While these military and diplomatic victories in 306 and 307 solidified Maxentius's rule over Rome, they simultaneously created one of the problems within the administration. The conflict between Maximianus, who had regained his place in the administration, and Maxentius, gave rise to the power struggle of 308.

2.2 Relationships with the Senate and the Roman People, and His Political Attitude

At the beginning of his reign, Maxentius was able to defend himself against the attacks by both Severus and Galerius, thus gaining a great deal of legitimacy in Rome. Nevertheless, as of 308, the period of calm came to an end and the emperor experienced internal difficulties and fluctuated greatly in terms of his relations with both the Senate and people. The primary factor for this turning point was not a military maneuver by external enemies. It was a conflict of authority with his own father, Maximianus, whom Maxentius had initially deployed as a legitimacy tool. The structural and political roots of this conflict were laid in late 307. When Maximianus traveled to Gaul to form an alliance with Constantinus and arrange the marriage of his daughter Fausta, a *Panegyricus* was delivered in his honor at Trier. The orator

⁷⁰ Doležal 2022, 268-69; Van Dam 2011, 229.

⁷¹ Curran 2000, 55-56; Van Dam 2011, 247-248.

⁷² Curran 2000, 55-56.

attributed the empire's recovery and the Tetrarchy's survival from the Severus crisis entirely to the genius of Maximianus (*bis Augustus*). Maxentius, the actual holder of power in Rome, was on purpose excluded, overshadowed by his father's authority.⁷³ Maximianus, who once again had a say in the administration attempted to position his son not as an independent *augustus*, but just as a proxy under his own authority. This inevitably triggered a severe hierarchical crisis between father and son.

In the spring of 308 (likely in April), Rome witnessed a test of legitimacy that changed the nature of Maxentius's rule. As detailed by Lactantius (*De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 28), Maximianus convened a massive assembly (*contio*) of soldiers and citizens. He publicly blamed his son for the crises plaguing the empire and the city. Suddenly descending from the rostrum, he tore the imperial purple cloak from Maxentius's shoulders.⁷⁴ Thus he attempt to remove his authority and legitimacy. Maximianus thought that the soldiers would side with him, not his opponent, just as they had done against Severus.

But the results were totally unexpected, leading to break in Rome's perception of legitimacy. Soldiers and the people of Rome protected Maxentius and caused Maximianus to flee from the city.⁷⁵ This collective reaction was not just the result of a succession struggle; it was transformation. The people and senate of the city of Rome preferred the emperor who declared himself *Conservator Urbis Suae* (Protector of the City) to the former emperor and the former tetrarch *augustus*.

This event imposed a strategic necessity upon Maxentius. Until that moment, he had defended his administration against the Tetrarchy by leaning heavily on his father's universal Herculus image. With his father's expulsion, that instrument of legitimacy has become dysfunctional. To survive politically, Maxentius placed emphasis on another source of legitimacy, *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (the Senate and the People of Rome). He was now forced to transition from a leader drawing power from a divine dynasty into one based on directly on the consent of the *Urbs* (the City). This necessity became the primary driving force behind his efforts to consolidate the Senate and strengthening his *Conservator Urbis Suae* (Protector of His City) identity for the remainder of his reign. The numismatic evidence below, showing the

⁷³ *Panegyrici Latini* VII (6). For a detailed analysis of the political background of this alliance and how imperial virtues were constructed in rhetoric, see also: Ware 2014, 90-92.

⁷⁴ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 28; Doležal 2022, 270-271.

⁷⁵ Doležal 2022, 271

propaganda of the city's protector, clearly demonstrates how tightly Maxentius clung to this legitimacy following the break with his father.



Maxentius, Copper. Ticinum AD 307.
5,93 g, 27 mm, 6 h

Obv: MAXENTIVS P F AVG

Maxentius Pius Felix Augustus
Laureate head of Maxentius to right.



Rev: CONSERVATORES VRBIS SVAE

Roma, draped, seated front, head left, in hexastyle temple, holding globe in right hand and sceptre in left hand; as acroteria, knobs; in pediment, wreath.

Fig. 4: Maxentius coin minted in Ticinum, inscribed with CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE. Ref: RIC VI Ticinum 84a; Drost, Maxentius, 7. Kunsthistorischen Museum Wien, Münzkabinett, RÖ 81179

The coin above (Figure 4) materializes this ideological pivot. Minted a short time ago when the conflict between Maxentius and Maximianus and the critical period when Maxentius was legally excluded by the Tetrarchy in Carnuntum. The reverse explicitly broadcasts the legend CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE (Protector of His City). The inscription surrounds a hexastyle temple—commonly identified as the Temple of Venus and Roma, a monument Maxentius carefully restored. By framing the seated goddess Roma within this architectural and sacred space, Maxentius visually articulated his new reality. His administration power not just longer derived from, divine dynasty, but was also based on the temples of the capital. This numismatic propaganda shows that Maxentius wanted to keep his ties with the Roman senate and people strong. While Maxentius was creating the basis of legitimacy, there were different variables outside, especially in the tetrarchy. In view of the banishment of Maximianus from Rome, the entire Tetrarchy system seemed to be completely immobilized through overlapping claims and usurpation attempts. In order to re-establish the disintegrated

system and curb the increasing volatility of the Western provinces, Galerius, who was the senior eastern Augustus, organized an imperial conference in Carnuntum (*Pannonia*) on November 11, 308.⁷⁶ This was no ordinary diplomatic gathering. To save the system's collapsing prestige, Galerius personally invited Diocletianus to return from retirement and preside over the conference.

The true significance of the Carnuntum Conference for Maxentius and the city of Rome lay less in its military decisions and more in its legal and ideological weight. The conference forced Maximianus into permanent retirement and demoted Constantinus back to the rank of *caesar*. Maxentius's status, however, was not even opened for debate. Galerius and Diocletianus legally erased Maxentius's existence, directly appointing Licinius as the new western *augustus* to replace the deceased Severus.⁷⁷ Licinius's sole military and political mandate was to invade Italy and obliterate the administration in Rome at any cost.

This diplomatic exclusion meant exact legal isolation for Maxentius. The most interesting aspect of this ruling was that it bore the signature of Diocletianus himself, Maxentius was officially pushed out of the tetrarchy by the founder of the system. Stripped of any hope for recognition, Maxentius's regime was pushed into total isolation against the Tetrarchy.

Yet, this absolute exclusion made by the Tetrarchy provoked an unexpected reaction within Rome's inner politics, elevating Maxentius's relationship with the Senate to a new dimension. The decrees of Carnuntum did not just condemn Maxentius; institutionally, they reduced the Roman Senate and the city's civil components—who had elevated and supported him—to the status of rebels. The assignment of Licinius revealed that Rome's status would be crushed under the tetrarchy. Faced with this existential threat, the Senate did not abandon a leader legally branded a "public enemy." Instead, they were forced into a pact of mutual survival with him.⁷⁸

Following Carnuntum, Maxentius embraced the *Conservator Urbis Suae* ideology with a depth of thought that went beyond mere propaganda. He showed to the Senate and the populace that he was the only person capable of defending Rome's *aeternitas* (eternity) against the administrative impositions of the Tetrarchy. This alliance between an excluded

⁷⁶ Doležal 2022, 271.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Betjes & Heijnen 2018, 9, 17 n. 120.

leader and an institution on the verge of losing privileges was a survival strategy for both parties.

This mandatory alliance between Maxentius and the Roman aristocracy soon faced from socio-economic crisis originating in the empire's south. In late 308 or early 309, an independent rebellion erupted in the North African provinces-the most critical region under Maxentius control-led by the *vicarius Africae*, L. Domitius Alexander.⁷⁹ Alexander's self-proclamation as *augustus* was not just a military threat; it was a direct strike at the demographic existence of the capital. Due to its sheer size, the Italian peninsula could not feed itself. It remained absolutely dependent on the *annona* (state-subsidized grain supply) provided by the *classis Africana* (African grain fleets) for centuries.

Loss of Africa and cessation of grain imports resulted in famine and hyperinflation in Rome. Prices for basic foodstuffs in the capital's markets burst to high levels, while starvation and disease plagued the populace. To resolve the economic problems caused by the disruption of grain supplies, Maxentius was forced to demand taxes from the people and the Senate.⁸⁰ This economic collapse was the heaviest blow to Maxentius's patronage (*patrocinium*). The leader who had saved the city from Galerius's taxes in 306 was now reduced to a figure incapable of protecting his capital from starvation. The famine rapidly eroded the civil consensus between the Roman plebs and the regime.

The crisis had its most destructive impact on Maxentius's relationship with the Senate. To organize a massive military and naval campaign to retake Africa and keep the administration, Maxentius required immediate cash. Confined to the restricted geography of the capital, the emperor was forced to turn to the civil aristocracy with whom he had allied. Sources like Zosimus and Aurelius Victor frame Maxentius's demands for forced "voluntary contributions" (*aurum oblativum*) and his confiscation of dissenting senators' properties as sheer "tyranny and greed."⁸¹ From a modern historical perspective, however, this was not an act of personal cruelty, but a necessity of the war economy. At the same time, the fact that Maxentius-who had ascended the throne in 306 by rebelling against Galerius's taxation-was forced by 309 to impose heavy taxes for the regime's survival transformed the nature of his relationship with the Senate from mutual consent to enforcements. The socio-economic depression effected by starvation and the war economy soon ignited violent on the streets of the capital. Ancient

⁷⁹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.12; Doležal 2022, 271-72.

⁸⁰ Van Dam 2011, 230-31.

⁸¹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.14; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 40; cf. Curran 2000, 62-63.

sources record clashes between the starving Roman populace and the Praetorian guards-Maxentius's greatest pillar of support-resulting in the massacre of thousands of civilians.⁸²

Deploying his trusted Praetorian Prefect Rufius Volusianus with a select few forces, Maxentius managed to crush the uprising of Domitius Alexander in 310.⁸³ As the rebellion came to an end with the capture of Carthage and control of the African provinces, the supply of grain to Rome continued, thus putting an end of famine. But such a victory did not mend the wounds which suffered internally. Yet heavy taxes exacted from the Senate and the blood of civilians spilled damaged the *liberator* image Maxentius had cultivated in 306. By 310, the princeps whose early reign relied on civil consensus had drifted into the position of an authoritarian *dominus* (master) whose survival depended entirely on military force.

Aware that the relationship between the Senate and the people had been damaged, Maxentius simultaneously tried a different approach to maintain his image as *Conservator Urbis Suae*: public buildings and urban architecture. As will be explored in detail in later chapters concerning his urban and architectural personas, Maxentius practically rewrote the topography of Rome. He constructed the massive Basilica Nova in the center of the Forum Romanum, restored the Temple of Venus and Roma, and built a dynastic complex on the *Via Appia* (featuring a circus and the mausoleum of his son, Valerius Romulus).⁸⁴ This monumental program was not born of just aesthetic reason. It was an effort by an emperor, ostracized by the Tetrarchy and facing a fragmented civil consensus at home, to prove to the Senate with his public buildings that he was the emperor of Rome and the protector of the city. He aimed to compensate for his politically damaged civilian support with the monuments he built and repaired in the capital.

During the summer of 310, while Maxentius was struggling to transform topography of the capital, a startling development occurred in Gaul which brought a new angle to his diplomacy. The death of his father, Maximianus, who was killed at Massilia (modern-day Marseille), after rebelling against Constantinus.⁸⁵ Although father and son had been enemies since the betrayal crisis of 308, Maxentius turned this death into a massive political and ideological opportunity. Ignoring his conflicts and differences with his father he used the image of a pious and loyal son (*pietas*) in Rome. He officially deified his father (*Divus Maximianus*) and

⁸² Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.13; Chronography of 354 (MGH 1, 148); cf. Curran 2000, 66.

⁸³ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.14; Doležal 2022, 276.

⁸⁴ Curran 2000, 57-61; Coarelli 2014, 9, 95-99.

⁸⁵ Van Dam 2011, 156.

minted commemorative coins, reviving the narrative that he was the sole heir of the Domus Herculia. This maneuver was driven by strategy, not traditional mourning. The father's death signified the formal violation of the diplomatic pact established with Constantinus through Fausta's marriage in 307. Maxentius used the discourse of avenging his father, turning it into the most legitimate and moral justification (*casus belli*) for the war against Constantinus.⁸⁶

After this dynastic crisis in the West and after the ties are broken with Constantinus, Maxentius's this time, in May 311, received new news from the east. Galerius, one of the powerful figure of the Tetrarchy and Maxentius's rival, had died.⁸⁷ His death completely upended the balance of power.

By the end of 311, while Maxentius managed to reclaim control of Africa, solidify his control of Italy, and prepare Rome with fortifications, he realized that he had no one to ally with politically. To the North was Constantinus, who ruled all of Gaul and Britain without rival, and to the East was Licinius, who ruled the Danubian provinces, who had decided to put aside their differences and form an alliance, strengthened by a marriage engagement. Maxentius, who had already made enemies among the Roman aristocracy and Senate because of economic problems, had to facing the combined might of the Tetrarchy. For the Maxentius administration, which had attempted to overcome internal crises through monumental architecture and military enforcement, the era of political negotiation had closed.

2.3 Struggle with Constantinus and his other rivals

From the moment he became emperor on October 28, 306, until the massive diplomatic rupture of 311, Maxentius's six-year reign was a period of absolute encirclement. For this reason, Maxentius policies different from the empire's traditional expansionist policies and were shaped by an instinct for defense and survival. Historically and militarily, the reign of Maxentius encapsulates a struggle for survival waged not on distant borders, but directly in Italy and the imperial heartland of Rome. He successfully repelled successive invasions by two legitimate *augusti* (Severus and Galerius). He survived a coup attempt orchestrated by his own father, the empire's founding figure, Maximianus. He withstood being a public enemy by the entire Tetrarchic at Carnuntum. After all, he crushed the African usurper Domitius Alexander, whose rebellion had subjected the capital to starvation. This chain of crises

⁸⁶ Doležal 2022, 278.

⁸⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 33-35; Doležal 2022, 278.

structurally forced Maxentius's military and political doctrine into an inward-looking, defensive attitude.

Constantinus era's propaganda and later Christian historiography came to view this tactical concentration not simply an error of strategy, but a moral fault. Panegyric texts-in particular the *Panegyrici Latini* presented in Constantinus' honor at Trier in 313, and Nazarius's later speeches-took up the refrain that Maxentius was a coward (*ignavia* or *vecordia*) who skulked behind walls, afraid to confront his foes on a battlefield.⁸⁸ Christian authors like Lactantius and Eusebius by repeating this narrative, presenting his defensive military doctrine as the manifestation of his tyranny and moral corruption. However, when contemporary historians such as John R. Curran when examined the conflict, he find that this seemingly desperate and one-sided war of attrition was the only sane military reaction to the Tetrarchic armies. At this point, Maxentius devised a defensive strategy, placing his trust in the walls of Rome and choosing to strengthen the city's defenses.⁸⁹ To flood one's adversaries with logistical problems in the Italian peninsula, to hide behind the powerful Aurelian Walls, and not to expose oneself to the risks of pitched battles was not cowardice. It was a well-considered, geography-based strategy of a defense. Constantinus era historiography purposefully framed this defensive stance as moral decay to de-legitimize the defeated Maxentius administration.

Maxentius exerted serious ideological effort to ensure that the civil and military elite did not perceive this structural defensive attitude as a weakness. His most potent counter-narrative spread through coinage, the most effective tool of political propaganda and communication in antiquity. On issues struck at the mints of Rome and Ostia, Maxentius was consistently demonstrate with the title *Princeps Invictus* (The Invincible Prince), despite never having led a military expedition outside of Italy. Although only victorious generals who defeated their enemies on the battlefield were usually called Imperator in the Roman military vocabulary, Maxentius changed this meaning. To his administration is invincibility a symbol of the city and more than this, it was a defensive idea that could resist all attacks and that the capital never surrendered.

This numismatic propaganda reached an even more radical dimension with coins bearing the legend *Victor Omnium Gentium* (Conqueror of All Nations). The coins shown below (Figure 5), which were primarily minted during the later years of Maxentius's reign, seemed to

⁸⁸ *Panegyrici Latini* XII (IX), 3.4, 14.4; Omissi 2010, 125-27

⁸⁹ Curran 2000, 56.

contrast the military realities of the time, yet they carried a profound ideological message. Maxentius was not a outsider who forcibly invaded Rome. On the contrary, he was an emperor who preserved Rome's existence and achieved victory for that purpose. In line with this concept of divine politics, genuine triumph(*victoria*) was not about just acquiring new lands; it was more of protecting the *Aeternitas* (eternity) of Rome, the everlasting hub of the world.



Maxentius. Gold, Ostia AD 308-312.
4.88 g.
Obv: MAXENTIVS P F AVG,
Laureate head of Maxentius to right.



Rev: VICTOR OMNI-VM GE-NTIVM AVG N
Maxentius, draped cuirassed, standing right, receiving Victory on globe from Mars with right hand and holding spear in left hand; Mars, offering globe and holding trophy; between, prostrate figure

Fig. 5: Maxentius coin minted in Ostia, inscribed with VICTOR OMNI-VM GE-NTIVM AVG N and depicting Victory and Mars. Ref: RIC VI Ostia 6, Vincent Drost, Le monnayage d'or de Maxence à l'atelier d'Ostie, RN 2008, s. 288, No: 3.

Thus, between 306 and 311, Maxentius's rule functioned less like an expansionist power defended by weapons and more like a fortress defended by walls, granaries, and ideological rhetoric. While this Rome-centered defensive mindset provided Italy with a degree of stability after the structural collapse of the Tetrarchy, the existing situation was vulnerable to any external shifts in the balance of power.

In May 311, an event occurred that changed the existing complex state of Rome's politics. Galerius, the senior augustus, the last legitimate of emperor the Tetrarchic system as well as Maxentius's enemy, passed away in Serdica (Sofia). Galerius' death was far more than end of

an emperor. As David Potter emphasizes, the departure of the senior emperor left imperial authority entirely to the hand of four leaders-Constantinus, Maxentius, Licinius, and Maximinus Daia-who now shared absolutely no legal or hierarchical bonds.⁹⁰ From this moment onward, any illusion of restoring the system was discarded. It was replaced by a based on struggle for absolute hegemony, driven by the goal of *totius orbis imperium* (rule over the whole world).

Realizing the vacuum of power that could lead him into trouble, Constantinus launched himself into diplomacy in order to support up his defenses against Maxentius' strong hold in Italy. He formed alliance with Licinius, who held control over the Balkan territories and those of the Danube region. As per Timothy Barnes's observations, the principal aim behind this alignment was diplomatic. Constantinus aimed to prevent Licinius and Maxentius from uniting against him. Furthermore, Constantinus realized that if Maxentius were eliminated by Licinius, his hopes of ruling the entire empire would end, so he preemptively invaded Italy before Licinius could act.⁹¹ In this way, when Constantinus decided to attack Maxentius in Italy from Gaul, Licinius would protect his eastern flank and eliminate Maxentius's chance of escaping or receiving reinforcements from the Balkan territories. The commitment of Constantinus to such an alliance was evident from the fact that he tied his family relations through marrying Licinius to his half-sister, Constantia. The entire northern border of Italy was now enveloped by coalition.

But instead of surrendering to this geopolitical vise, Maxentius again used the diplomatic tactics that had marked his early reign. When he realized that the Constantinus-Licinius alliance had trapped him in two-front encirclement, Maxentius secretly sent envoys to the most extreme eastern emperor, Maximinus Daia, and succeeded in forming an alliance with him. Since Maximinus Daia who controlled Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor was equally worried by Licinius's dominance in the Balkans as was Maxentius, this is how their desire to unite came about. In describing this alliance, Lactantius emphasizes that Maximinus Daia, whom he identifies as one of God's enemies, acted out of jealousy and malice, while Maxentius, under the pretext of avenging his father, eagerly embraced this offer as if it were 'a divine intervention' in the war he initiated.⁹² As Timothy Barnes points out, Maximinus Daia, the pagan emperor of the East, acting in his own interests, recognized Maxentius as the

⁹⁰ Potter 2013, 133-135.

⁹¹ Barnes 1981, 41.

⁹² Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 43.

legitimate emperor and formed an alliance with him, in opposition to the alliance between Constantinus and Licinius.⁹³ This diplomatic polarization did not prevent war; it expanded it from a localized suppression operation into a military reckoning that would engulf the entire Mediterranean.

This tension, which sliced the imperial geography into two massive camps, quickly transcended physical borders and erupted into a symbolic war. The anticipated military struggle was coming over statues. As mentioned earlier, Maxentius had used his father's death in the year 310 for political gain by declaring him as the divine figure, Divus Maximianus. As a consequence to this act by Maxentius, Constantinus pronounced *damnatio memoriae*, or condemnation of memory, against his father-in-law where all images and inscriptions relate to Maximianus were destroyed.⁹⁴ This assault on his father's memory handed Maxentius the perfect *casus belli*. He retaliated instantly, ordering the obliteration of all monuments, statues, and depictions belonging to Constantinus in Rome and throughout the Italian provinces under his control.⁹⁵ This situation indicates that diplomatic ties have been severed and war is about to begin.

Maxentius's management of this crisis stands as a cleverly stroke of propaganda. He framed the impending conflict not as a territorial dispute, but as a holy war of vengeance. Maxentius quickly erased any public memory of his father's failed coup against him in 308. Instead, he presented himself as the respectful and devoted son (*pious filius*). Through making the concept of *pietas* (duty towards family and gods) one of the main principles of the state, Maxentius disguised the war as a just and righteous one.

Furthermore, establishing this ideological foundation was a vital necessity for Maxentius' domestic survival. The starvation caused by the Domitius Alexander rebellion, compounded by the heavy taxes later on extorted from the Senate, had severely fractured the Roman aristocracy's consent for Maxentius. The taxation and the rebellion damaged relations with Roman populace. Convincing people to fight a defensive war against a battle-hardened Gallic army was no simple task. The war was no longer just about protecting Maxentius's throne; it was about defending the Rome itself. With this ideological groundwork laid, Constantinus initiated his military descent from Gaul into Italy.

⁹³ Barnes 1981, 41.

⁹⁴ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 42.1-2; Doležal 2022, 278.

⁹⁵ Odahl 2004, 84-85.

Constantinus' invasion of Italy in the early spring of 312, the point of no return had been reached through diplomacy. While contemporary panegyrics inflate the size of his army to mythical proportions, modern historians suggest that to avoid leaving the Rhine frontier defenseless, Constantinus brought only about a quarter of his forces-roughly forty thousand highly experienced veterans.⁹⁶ Maxentius used the demographic and economic advantages of Italy, had amassed an army vastly superior in numbers. Instead of taking a risk on this strength in one single battle, he chose to adopt a policy of defense-in-advance. He placed his forces at heavily garrisoned cities in Northern Italy, based along the Turin-Milan-Verona-Aquileia line, and placed all military responsibility upon the shoulders of his best loyal officer, the Praetorian Prefect Ruricius Pompeianus.⁹⁷

This defensive suffered its first heavy blow against Constantinus' lightning-fast advance. Pouring into Italy through the Mont Cenis pass, Constantinus struck Susa (Segusio), Maxentius's frontier garrison. Constantinus, who took the city, didn't waste time changing his war methods into diplomatic means. He ordered his soldiers for no one to be allowed to rob the city, which was a very strong way of getting the message across to the people: he was coming not as a barbarian invader, but as a merciful savior (*clementia*).⁹⁸

The first significant armed conflict took place on the plains of Augusta Taurinorum (Turin) between forces of Maxentius and Constantinus. The Roman contingent consisted, in part, of the maximum level of elite troops, being heavily-armoured cavalry (*clibanarii/cataphractii*).⁹⁹ Maxentius hoped to end Constantinus' objective by sending a charge (of the cavalry) against his opponent and destroying them. However, Constantinus employed tactical manoeuvre by creating an intentional gap in the centre lines of his forces to entice Maxentius's heavily-armoured cavalry to penetrate deep into his formation. Once Maxentius had committed troops to the charge, Constantinus quickly closed the flanks of his formation to isolate the heavily-armoured and slow-moving units of Maxentius place them in a tactical double enveloping or encircling and systematically destroy them. The military loss at Augusta Taurinorum also resulted in the city of Augusta Taurinorum opening its gates to Constantinus and a large contingent of troops from other major centres, including Mediolanum (Milan), switching sides.

⁹⁶ Barnes 1981, 41; Odahl 2004, 86.

⁹⁷ Doležal 2022, 288.

⁹⁸ Panegyrici Latini XII (IX), 5-6; Odahl 2004, 88.

⁹⁹ Odahl 2004, 88.

After the western and central area collapsed, Verona was heavily fortified and provided the last line of defense for Maxentius' forward defense system under the command of Ruricius Pompeianus. Because the Adige River provides natural protection, besieging Verona is extraordinarily difficult. Pompeianus performed a breakout from Verona, and he returned with reinforcements that he gathered from eastern Italy to attempt a large counter-offensive to lift the siege.¹⁰⁰ After a daylong battle, which was an exceptionally hard-fought battle throughout the entire campaign, Pompeianus was defeated and killed in the ensuing conflict; Verona later on surrendered.¹⁰¹ The fall of Verona and the death of Pompeianus signified more than a military loss; it marked the absolute collapse of Maxentius's entire forward defense architecture in Northern Italy. Once Aquileia and Mutina (Modena) fell, the Via Flaminia was completely opened to the approaching legions of Constantinus. The war had reached to Rome. Approaching Saxa Rubra in late October 312, Constantinus advanced along the Tiber's edge just north of Rome, yet the balance of armed strength clearly leaned toward Maxentius. Though outnumbered, Constantinus pressed forward while his opponent held troops - the Praetorians - stationed inside the capital. Supplies flowed regularly from African provinces, enabling endurance through extended conflict. Moreover, Rome itself was shielded by the towering Aurelian Walls, difficult to breach under any assault. The danger however, not beyond the walls, but within the city. The arrival of News reports detailing the defeats in the north had created unrest in the city. Maxentius' image as the Conservator Urbis Suae was shattered, dragging Rome into civil disobedience.

The clearest example of this situation in the city occurred during the chariot races held at the Circus Maximus to celebrate the sixth anniversary of Maxentius' reign (*dies imperii*). In Antiquity, arenas were the sole political spaces where the public could directly interface with the emperor. Lactantius (*De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44.7) records this historical breaking point: "The populace suddenly cried out with one voice against Maxentius, mocking him by shouting that Constantine cannot be overcome (*Constantinum vinci non posse*)."¹⁰² To be openly and collectively rejected by his own people, in his own capital, marked the absolute breaking point of his political authority.

Chants echoing through the Circus Maximus forced a radical alteration in Maxentius's military strategy. In 307, he had defeated Severus by taking advantage of loyalty of the

¹⁰⁰ Odahl 2004, 88.

¹⁰¹ Doležal 2022, 288; *Panegyrici Latini* XII (IX), 9-10.

¹⁰² Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.7.

Roman populace, within the safety of the walls and by enemy soldiers switching sides. A siege defense, however, is only viable if the internal civil will remains loyal to the emperor. When Maxentius understood that the people had turned against him, the danger of being overthrown by his own people from inside the city was high if he just hid behind the walls. Thus, it was not going to be him who would choose to fight the enemy outside the walls taking the initiative, it was a military necessity.

Ancient sources claim Maxentius succumbed to blind superstition and hubris. According to Zosimus (*Historia Nova*, 2.15) and Lactantius (44.8), Maxentius consulted the Sibylline Books (*Libri Sibyllini*) and was emboldened by an ambiguous prophecy: "On that day, the enemy of the Romans will perish."¹⁰³ Believing "that day" referred to his anniversary on October 28, and the "enemy" was Constantinus, Maxentius marched out. However, historical reality indicates that Maxentius did not base this monumental decision merely on a prophecy. The political pressure generated by the fractured urban consensus forced his hand; the pagan prophecies just provided the ideological and sacred cover for a military necessity. This strategic deviation sealed Maxentius's fate at the Milvian Bridge.

While Maxentius moved his army beyond the Tiber, a historical breaking occurred in Constantinus' camp that would alter the psychology of the war. Lactantius (*De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44.5) records that Constantinus received a dream instructing him to mark his soldiers' shields with the "heavenly sign of God" (*caeleste signum dei*) the Christogram (Chi-Rho).¹⁰⁴ Regardless of its theological reality, this new symbol process an unprecedented motivation within Constantinus' ranks. The armies that clashed at the *Pons Milvius* (Milvian Bridge) on the morning of October 28, 312, represented two fundamentally different political theologies. Christian teleological historiography interpreted Maxentius's decision to abandon the walls not as the result of strategic pressure, but as divine effect. Eusebius (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, 9.9.4) framed Maxentius's military maneuver as a trap set by the Christian God: "God dragged the tyrant, as if bound in chains, far outside the gates."¹⁰⁵ This Christian narrative purposefully transformed Maxentius's tactical mistakes into the manifestation of divine judgment, thereby manufacturing absolute legitimacy for the Constantinus' reign.

From the perspective of military strategy and tactics alone, the Milvian Bridge battle cannot be considered a divine intervention but rather one of the deadliest logistical errors in the

¹⁰³ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.15-16; Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.8.

¹⁰⁴ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.5.

¹⁰⁵ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9.9.4-5.

history of ancient warfare. Modern analyses show that Maxentius deployed his huge army almost right at the riverbank, thus completely losing the option of maneuvers and safe retreat. The main stone bridge was so damaged partly for tactical reasons that a pontoon bridge made of boats was set up next to it. When the battle started, the tough Gallic cavalry of Constantinus struck very hard at the flanks of Maxentius's army. After the flanks were routed, the very center of Maxentius's infantry gave way to constant pressure.

Trapped in a narrow space and strongly pushed back toward the river, mass panic consumed Maxentius's ranks. Upon the order to retreat, thousands of terrified soldiers simultaneously surged onto the fragile pontoon bridge. According to Eusebius and Zosimus, the structure simply could not bear the immense weight; the connections snapped, and the bridge collapsed.¹⁰⁶ Countless retreating soldiers, dragged down by their heavy armor, drowned in the waters of the Tiber. Even the desperate, last-stand resistance of Maxentius's most loyal Praetorian guards on the riverbank could not alter the battle's way. During this stampede, Emperor Maxentius plunged into the river with his horse. Pulled to the bottom by the multitude pressing on him, he drowned.¹⁰⁷

The following day, on October 29, 312, as Constantinus triumphantly entered Rome, Maxentius's lifeless body-dragged from the shallow waters of the Tiber-was displayed as a trophy of war. His head was severed, mounted on a spear, and paraded through the streets of the capital. It was later sent to the African provinces that had previously rebelled against Maxentius as undeniable proof of victory and that Maxentius's reign had ended.¹⁰⁸ This gruesome act was the physical and political declaration of the absolute collapse of an independent regime that had drawn its legitimacy from the soil of Rome and the heritage of the Domus Herulia. While Maxentius's head on a spear signaled the end of the military struggle, Constantinus' greatest battle was just beginning: the massive process of *damnatio memoriae* and legitimacy-building, wherein he would usurp, rewrite, and transform Maxentius's political vision, urban projects, and religious legacy for his own glory.

¹⁰⁶ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9.9.5-6; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.16.

¹⁰⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.9.

¹⁰⁸ Van Dam 2011, 250; Doležal 2022, 295-296

3. Maxentius's Political Personas and Their Use in Different Forms of Propaganda

3.1 Maxentius's Consideration of the Concept of Political Persona

Analyzing the complex power struggles of Late Antique Roman history, particularly the Tetrarchic period, requires more than reading imperial authority just through military strength or the sheer existence of a legal title. In the ancient Roman state tradition, power is not a legal status or simply military force. It is a relation shaped by the mutual expectations between the ruler and the ruled. The concept of political *persona*, positioned at the center of this study to decode Maxentius's struggle for power, located precisely at the center of this relations and process of political communication.

Etymologically derived from the masks (*persona*) worn by actors in ancient Roman theater to project their characters on stage, this term does not mean a superficial deception, a lie, or political hypocrisy within the context of Roman political philosophy. Cicero defines this concept in his *De Officiis*, as the individual's personal role based on their unique physical and mental abilities, and states that just as an actor chooses the play best suited to his talents, a person must adopt the role in life that best aligns with his own natural disposition.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, in ancient political thought, a *persona* is the public identity strategically established by a ruler to communicate with various social groups, fulfill their historical expectations, and legitimize their own existence. The most successful historical manifestation of this identity construction is the *primus inter pares* (first among equals) model forged by Octavianus (Augustus), who established a new order from the ruins of the Republic. To obscure his *de facto* military administration, Augustus constructed the *persona* of a civil, law-abiding *princeps* (first citizen) in harmony with the Senate. Roman state administration produced legitimacy through this civil administrator facade for centuries.

Reading this conceptual and historical foundation of the political *persona* through the figure of Maxentius is crucial for understanding the nature of the crisis in 306. The Tetrarchic system, designed by Diocletianus to overcome the Third Century Crisis, had fundamentally altered the imperial *persona*. The accessible civil administrator *persona* of the early empire was entirely abandoned. In its place, a bureaucratic *dominus* (master) *persona* was created. Inspired by Persian court traditions, this new model surrounded itself with bureaucratic walls against its people. Power was no longer shared with Rome's civil aristocracy; it was an absolute dictate imposed from top of a divine hierarchy.

¹⁰⁹ Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.107-114.

Excluded from this new order system following the abdications of 305, Maxentius was proclaimed emperor on October 28, 306, by the Praetorian guards and the Roman *plebs*. Yet he held no approval (*auctoritas*) to legitimize him. Under Roman legal tradition and the Tetrarchic order, he was not a legitimate emperor but a usurper (*usurpator*) who had taken up arms against the system. This legal situation meant that Maxentius needed an ideological tool, in addition to military force, to maintain his power. He needed an entirely new political *persona*. The power of the army might suffice to temporarily hold the capital. However, to ruling to an extensive geography, collect taxes, secure the Senate's consent, and prevent the Roman populace (*plebs urbana*) from rebelling during provisioning crises, he had to produce an urban consensus (*consensus*) that appealed to the historical codes of the masses.

Countering the distant and bureaucratic *dominus persona* of the Tetrarchy, Maxentius had to play the traditional *princeps* role. He had to emerge from within Rome, demonstrate knowledge of the city's ancient traditions, respect the civil aristocracy, and should have been prioritized the welfare of the public. Aware that he could not take his legitimacy from the hierarchical assignments of the system, Maxentius was compelled to establish his power from the bottom up, utilizing this local and Roman *persona* presented to the masses. Thus, for Maxentius specifically, the political *persona* was not an ordinary public relations. In the absence of a legal document (*de jure*), it was the *de facto* acceptance forged in the streets of the capital, in the Senate buildings, and within the temples. It was the very embodiment of a vital political reflex.

Our approach to the concept of political *persona* in this study directly confronts one of the entrenched methodological problems in Late Antique historical research, the historiography of the victors. Constantinus' military triumph in 312 marked not only a change of power but also the beginning of an era in which the past, place, and social memory would be reconstructed. The primary agents of this discursive order, Constantinus supporter Christian authors, on purpose ignored the urban legitimacy meticulously process by Maxentius. Instead, they fabricated a diametrically opposed, defamatory counter-*persona*.

In his church history, Eusebius presents Maxentius as a cruel tyrant (*tyrannus*) who made the capital, which was taken over by him, a slave, practiced pagan magic, and tormented the people of Rome. Lactantius, in his *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, describes him as a coward (*ignavus*) who ran away from the battlefield and afterward was living a non-active and pleasure-loving life just behind the thick walls of his palace.

Consequently, use of the biased texts of ancient authors as transparent sources to decode Maxentius's true political intentions is a severe methodological error. These texts do not reveal how Maxentius thought or how he managed society; rather, they demonstrate how the *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory) policy enforced by Constantinus operated within the literary area.

Modern art historians like Elizabeth Marlowe emphasize the necessity of examining Constantine's monuments within their specific urban contexts, rather than relying solely on the internal narratives of literary sources. Drawing on this emphasis on physical evidence, our thesis separates the political persona from the literary fictions of Christian statements.¹¹⁰ Coins, the most pervasive political communication tool of Antiquity, along with the monumental structures into the capital's topography, serve as primary evidence of how Maxentius immortalized his political *persona* through space.

The *persona* Maxentius constructed through architecture was powerful and affected the Roman public, that upon capturing Rome in 312, Constantinus was forced to usurp these buildings and adopt them in his own name rather than destroying them. The renaming of the massive Maxentius Basilica (*Basilica Nova*) in the Forum Romanum, and the strategic placement of the Arch of Constantinus directly along Maxentius's routes and upon his architectural language, prove the existence not of a weak tyrant claiming the throne, but of a formidable political rival possessing monumental legitimacy. The political *persona* we are examining is not limited to the writings of authors opposed to Maxentius; it also forms a cohesive whole encompassing coin iconography, legends, inscriptions, and public buildings.

Focusing on how the political *persona* was established through this material culture reveals that the process was not a random ideological program, but a pragmatic response to the structural crises the emperor endured. While formulating his own local persona, Maxentius on purpose distanced himself from the administrative framework of his rivals; some scholars argue that he effectively refrained from referring to the Tetrarchic system altogether in his official representations.¹¹¹

As detailed in the first chapter, the Tetrarchy had stripped Rome of its ancient privileges by shifting the administrative center of gravity to the imperial peripheries (Nicomedia, Trier, and Mediolanum). Excluded from the system established by his father, Maxentius's rise to power

¹¹⁰ Marlowe 2006, 223.

¹¹¹ Oenbrink 2006, 169-204 (cited in Betjes & Heijnen 2018, 6, n. 3).

in 306 was not a standard garrison revolt. In a sense, this was a rebellion of the old capital against the provincial-centric order. Right at this moment of crisis, Maxentius began to forge his political *persona*, deriving his legitimacy not from tetrarchy assignments but from the Roman populace and the Senate.

In Roman state philosophy, legitimacy is the convergence of the *de facto* power held by the military (*imperium*) and the moral authority bestowed by the Senate (*auctoritas*). Maxentius' intentional choice to initially mint coins identifying himself as *princeps invictus* (the invincible prince) rather than immediately declaring himself *augustus* was a significant move of conciliation extended to the Senate. Against a system that disregarded the Senate, he tried to maintain his legitimacy and power by relying on the city of Rome and Senate.

Even when he was excluded by the entire member of Tetrarchy system at the Carnuntum Conference, he did not abandon this stance. He recreated the legitimacy he lacked in a legal context through traditional values and urban consensus (*consensus universorum*). For the Senate, he was a venerable *princeps* reviving ancient traditions. He was considered a generous patron (*patronus*) by the Roman people as he solved provisioning crises and offered games at the Circus Maximus. It was from the city walls that he drove out the armies of Severus and Galerius, becoming the protector of his city (*conservator urbis suae*).¹¹² *Conservator urbis suae* has been one of the important pillars of support for his political persona and propaganda.

In Maxentius's circumstances, the construction of a political *persona* and the search for legitimacy had become inseparable phenomena. While Tetrarchic rules dictated that legitimacy was bestowed from above through bureaucratic assignments by senior emperors, Maxentius entirely inverted this established order. He built the source of his legitimacy from the civic base, within the historical borders of Rome. A leader who secured the welfare of the Roman public, legislated in tandem with the Senate, built temples to ancient gods, and fortified the city's walls was, in practice, a legitimate emperor through the political consent he generated, even if he lacked formal Tetrarchic recognition.

In the following sections, the practical application of this theoretical framework will be analyzed in detail, exploring how the emperor materialized his *personae* as the protector of the city (*conservator urbis suae*), the dynastic *persona*, and the religious *persona* through urban topography and iconography.

¹¹² Cullhed 1994, 45-48.

3.2. Protector of the City

The most vital practical manifestation of the political *persona* Maxentius designed to fill the ideological void left by his lack of formal Tetrarchic approval was the title *conservator urbis suae* (protector of his city). The nature of this *persona* must be examined through how it was reflected across different social strata via the capital city's institutions. The primary civil and legal instrument of this *persona* was, of course, the Senate. As noted in the first chapter, Maxentius's status as a *clarissimus vir* wielding an invisible authority among the Roman senatorial aristocracy shaped his future administrative style and political decisions. Unlike Galerius or Constantinus, the new rulers of the Tetrarchy who spent their formative years in frontier military camps or eastern court bureaucracies, Maxentius was exactly within the civil and cultural ambiance of the Roman aristocracy. Therefore, the approach he took to relations with the Senate after becoming emperor in 306 was not simply political tactics. This approach comes from an organic connection with the urban populace and a deep mastery of aristocratic customs.

In contrast to Diocletian's and other representatives of the tetrarchy's policies that excluded Rome and removed the Senate from decision-making power, Maxentius placed the senatorial elite directly at the center of his administrative apparatus. Maxentius continued the old Roman traditions and appointed the urban prefect (*praefectus urbi*) of the capital from among senators belonging to distinguished families.¹¹³ This is one of the most concrete indications of the civil *consensus* he aims to establish with the Senate.

Senators belonging to Rome's most ancient aristocratic families were entrusted with the administration of the capital, beginning with Gaius Annius Anullinus, the civil leader who legitimized the initial uprising in 306, and followed by figures such as Attius Insteius Tertullus, Aurelius Hermogenes, and Gaius Ceionius Rufius Volusianus. Volusianus's political trajectory was particularly indicative of this administrative strategy.¹¹⁴ Maxentius initially gave him a military assignment as praetorian prefect (*praefectus praetorio*) to suppress the rebellion of Domitius Alexander in Africa. Following his victory, the emperor elevated him to the highest civil magistracies within the capital, designating him as urban prefect (*praefectus urbi*) and consul (*consul*).¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Van Dam 2011, 241.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Van Dam 2011, 241-242

This strategy transformed the Senate from an excluded entity into a militarily and administratively participatory one. By restoring administrative authority to the traditional aristocracy of the city, Maxentius cultivated his political *persona* not as a military autocrat (*dominus*) who usurped the throne by force, but as a *civilis princeps* serving as the protector of senatorial prestige (*dignitas*) and ancestral customs (*mos maiorum*). However, the assumption that this senatorial alliance progressed entirely without conflict contradicts historical reality. When the African blockade triggered severe economic contraction and the impending threat of Constantinus necessitated immediate military funding, Maxentius was compelled to exact mandatory financial contributions from the senatorial elite under the guise of free gifts, as well as confiscating the estates of wealthy individuals.¹¹⁶ This reality demonstrates how severely the civil *princeps, persona* was tested by the demands of a Late Antique war economy, requiring constant renegotiation with the Senate to maintain the administration's foundation of legitimacy.

The military backbone of this framework of urban legitimacy consisted of the Praetorian Guard. As discussed in the first chapter, Galerius's attempt to submitted the Roman populace to a tax *census* and disband the Praetorian camp (*Castra Praetoria*), the city's sole remaining symbol of military prestige, sparked an existential crisis for the soldiers. Take advantage of this concern of eradication, Maxentius elevated the Praetorians' loyalty into a founding pillar of his order. The strength of this military loyalty and the protective *persona* was tested in a critical political crisis in the spring of 308. As detailed by Lactantius, Maximianus, Maxentius's father and the former founding *augustus* of the Tetrarchy, attempted to control power by publicly tearing the imperial purple from his son's shoulders before an assembly of soldiers and citizens.¹¹⁷ Despite Maximianus representing the founding and divine authority of the Tetrarchic system during this confrontation, the Praetorian Guard and the Roman populace decisively sided with Maxentius, expelling Maximianus from the city.

This event was actually rejection of the Tetrarchy's *dominus*, imposed from above, by Rome's local military and civil dynamics. For the Praetorians, Maxentius was far more than an abstract ideal of the *Domus Herculia* (House of Hercules); he was the guarantor protecting their existence and Rome's historical privileges. Following his father's betrayal, Maxentius lost all external ties of legitimacy. Yet, this military loyalty proved that the *conservator*

¹¹⁶ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.14.

¹¹⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 28.

persona was not just propagandistic rhetoric. It was anchored in a concrete military consensus from the urban base.

To design this vision of legitimacy, cemented by the Senate's approval and the Praetorians' military might, to the wider public and rivals, Maxentius used numismatic propaganda with systematic precision. The bronze *folles* struck with increasing frequency at the mints of Rome, Ostia, and Aquileia after the dynastic breaking of 308 serve as the numismatic manifestos of this political *persona*. The reverse iconography of these coins predominantly displays a grand hexastyle temple, representing the Temple of Venus and Roma, the spiritual center of the city. Within this architectural circumstances, a representation of the goddess Eternal Rome (*Roma Aeterna*) is shown in her holding a globe. Framing this visual element is the clear legend: CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE.¹¹⁸

The coins of the Tetrarchic emperors generally portrayed highly abstract, impersonal, and universal motifs such as the genius of the Roman people (*Genius Populi Romani*). In contrast, Maxentius's coins explicitly added the possessive pronoun *suae* (his / his own), showed a break in the ideology. With this specific term, the emperor established a strong, personal, and localized bond of belonging with the city. A careful analysis of the iconography reveals that these issues were a serious statement of legitimacy directed primarily at his competitors. With this iconography, Maxentius exposed the Tetrarchs' structural excluded of Rome, achieved by establishing imperial seats in distant provincial centers such as Trier, Sirmium, or Nicomedia. The message conveyed to the urban populace was clear: the center of the empire did not reside in frontier military camps, but rather with the goddess *Roma*, depicted seated within her temple. Consequently, Maxentius positioned himself as her sole, proprietary protector.

¹¹⁸ RIC VI Rome, no. 194-196.



Maxentius AE Follis, Aquileia. AD 309-310.
25 mm, 6.17 g.
Obv: IMP C MAXENTIVS PF AVG

Laureate head of Maxentius to right.

Rev: CONSERV-VRB SVAE

Roma seated facing, head left, in hexastyle temple, holding globe and sceptre, knobs as acroteria; crescent in pediment.

Fig. 6: Maxentius coin minted in Aquileia, inscribed with CONSERV-VRB SVAE and depicting with Roma. Ref: RIC 121a; Sear 14983. Münzzentrum Rheinland auction 177, Lot 517, Sept. 2016

However, the legitimacy building of a Late Antique emperor could not be confined solely to the consent of the senatorial aristocracy and Praetorian officers. The legitimacy created by this *persona* needed to be recognized and accepted by the Roman people, and this sense of belonging had to be maintained. However, as mentioned above, some problems arose due to the rebellion in Africa. Domitius Alexander's revolt in Africa interrupted the grain supply line (*annona*) to Rome, resulting in a service failure and famine that devastated the city. This disaster resulted in a significant public unrest which escalated into the street fighting.¹¹⁹

How Maxentius's *conservator urbis suae persona* was perceived beyond the capital's borders, particularly in rebellious provinces, and how his legitimacy collapsed in the periphery is demonstrated by surviving epigraphic evidence from North Africa. Domitius Alexander's revolt was ruthlessly crushed by Maxentius's praetorian prefect, Rufius Volusianus. Maxentius's punitive stance towards the province after this rebellion contradicted the protective *persona* he had worked in Rome. A limestone statue base inscription (CIL VIII, 18261), found near the Great Temple in the forum of Lambaesis in Numidia, directly documents this contradiction and the emperor's tyrannical conduct in the provinces.

¹¹⁹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.13.1

Likely erected in dedication to Constantinus following his victory in 312, this epigraphic text condemns the destructive consequences of the Maxentian era in the region with the following Latin hexameter: *nam ponit ille cruces et proelia saeva tyranni* (for he [Constantinus] brings an end to the crosses and savage wars of the tyrant).¹²⁰ The term *cruces* (crosses) is not a metaphor. It refers directly to the penalty of crucifixion, which Maxentius inflicted upon both common soldiers and local elites who supported the rebellion in Africa. John Granger Cook emphasizes in his analysis, crucifixion was a traditional punishment normally reserved for slaves or the lower classes (*humiliores*). By inflicting this severe penalty on high-ranking provincial rebels, Maxentius entirely forfeited his civil legitimacy among the regional populace, confirming his status as an absolute tyrant (*tyrannus*).¹²¹

The epigraphic significance of this inscription within the context of legitimacy and the construction of political *persona* are critical. While Maxentius was improving his protective *persona* (*conservator*) through the construction of the Basilica Nova in Rome and his efforts to secure senatorial approval, the crucifixions he inflicted upon provincial subjects in Africa severely undermined his civil legitimacy across the wider empire. As clearly evidenced by the the Lambaesis inscription how Constantinian propaganda systematically used these punitive actions, depicting Maxentius as a *tyrannus* who enslaved provincial populations and imposed the penalty of crucifixion. As a result, as the *conservator persona* was reflected beyond the borders of Italy, it collapsed under the weight of this tyrannical conduct, providing Constantinus with the precise epigraphic and ideological foundation required to construct his own *liberator persona*.

Actually aware of this urban instability and his damaged civil *consensus*, Maxentius realized that the civic bond with the populace could not be repaired just through emergency grain distributions. He initiated an extensive architectural program designed to embed his protective *persona* directly into the city's topography. This monumental construction program was not a series of aesthetic urban renewals or monuments of personal aim. It functioned as a large-scale economic intervention, providing essential employment for a Roman populace left destitute by the famine. Furthermore, this architectural initiative strengthened his senatorial alliance on a spatial level. As John R. Curran emphasizes, the construction of the Basilica Nova structure that redefined the city's appearance was managed directly by urban prefect

¹²⁰ CIL VIII, 18261. For an epigraphic examination of the emperor's measures against the rebellion in the Lambaesis inscription, see Cook 2014, 192-205.

¹²¹ Cook 2014, 192-205.

(*praefectus urbi*) Attius Insteius Tertullus, who was appointed as the site overseer (*praepositus fabricae*).¹²² Consequently, Maxentian architectural initiatives were far more than physical structures. They stood as tangible monuments to the administrative partnership with the Senate, the economic security guaranteed to the urban populace, and the title *conservator urbis suae*, all actualize across the Roman topography.

The primary medium through which the numismatic and administrative rhetoric of Maxentius's *conservator urbis suae persona* integrated with physical reality, rendering it visible to the urban populace, was this monumental architectural program. The title *conservator urbis suae* was not just an abstract ideological slogan; it was inextricably linked to this urban building program. Through these monumental constructions, Maxentius actively sought to re-establish Rome as the definitive center of the empire, thereby utilizing urban topography to legitimize his own claim to power against the Tetrarchic order.¹²³

Within the context of Late Antique urban topography, an emperor's construction activities cannot be evaluated only as ordinary civic infrastructure. Architecture serves as an enduring propagandistic expression of power, embedding claims of legitimacy directly into the physical landscape. As Elizabeth Marlowe demonstrates in the context of late antique Rome, the strategic construction and urban placement of imperial monuments were used to articulate complex political and ideological messages to the masses.¹²⁴ During the Diocletianic era, the systematic administrative neglect by the Tetrarchs had relegated the city's monumental center, the *Forum Romanum*, into a state of ideological irrelevance. One of the Tetrarchy's most notable public investments in the city Five-Column Monument erected for the vicennalia celebrations of 303.¹²⁵ Apart from monuments like these, they haven't given the city the attention it deserves, and they had effectively reduced Rome to a static repository, a mere architectural backdrop for past military glories.

Upon seizing power in 306, Maxentius initiated an extensive architectural program intended to reverse this neglect. He transposed the monumental scale of the administrative complexes constructed by the Tetrarchy in provincial centers directly into the topography of Rome, the empire's ancient core. According to this, every public structure rising along the axis of the *Forum Romanum*, the Velian Hill, and the *Via Appia* served as a tangible monument of

¹²² Curran 2000, 58.

¹²³ Oenbrink 2006, 173 (cited in McIntyre 2018, 175, n. 52).

¹²⁴ Marlowe 2006, 223-225.

¹²⁵ Coarelli 1992, 60.

propaganda, embedding the *conservator persona*-a ruler demonstrating proprietary devotion to the city-into the civic consciousness.

The first and most significant religious initiative of this architectural program was the comprehensive restoration of the Temple of Venus and Roma (*Templum Veneris et Romae*), which dominated one of the city's most sacred region. A severe fire during Maxentius's reign, documented in ancient sources, had extensively damaged this monumental Hadrianic sanctuary.¹²⁶ Maxentius, during the period when Carnuntum was excluded by the Tetrarchy he transformed the remains of the sanctuary into a site of ideological reconstruction. While preserving the original Hadrianic ground plan, Maxentius ordered the interior chambers (*cellae*) rebuilt featuring monumental *opus caementicium* (Roman concrete) vaults and porphyry columns. The most radical architectural intervention, however, was the addition of massive apses housing imperial niches on the back walls of the temple.

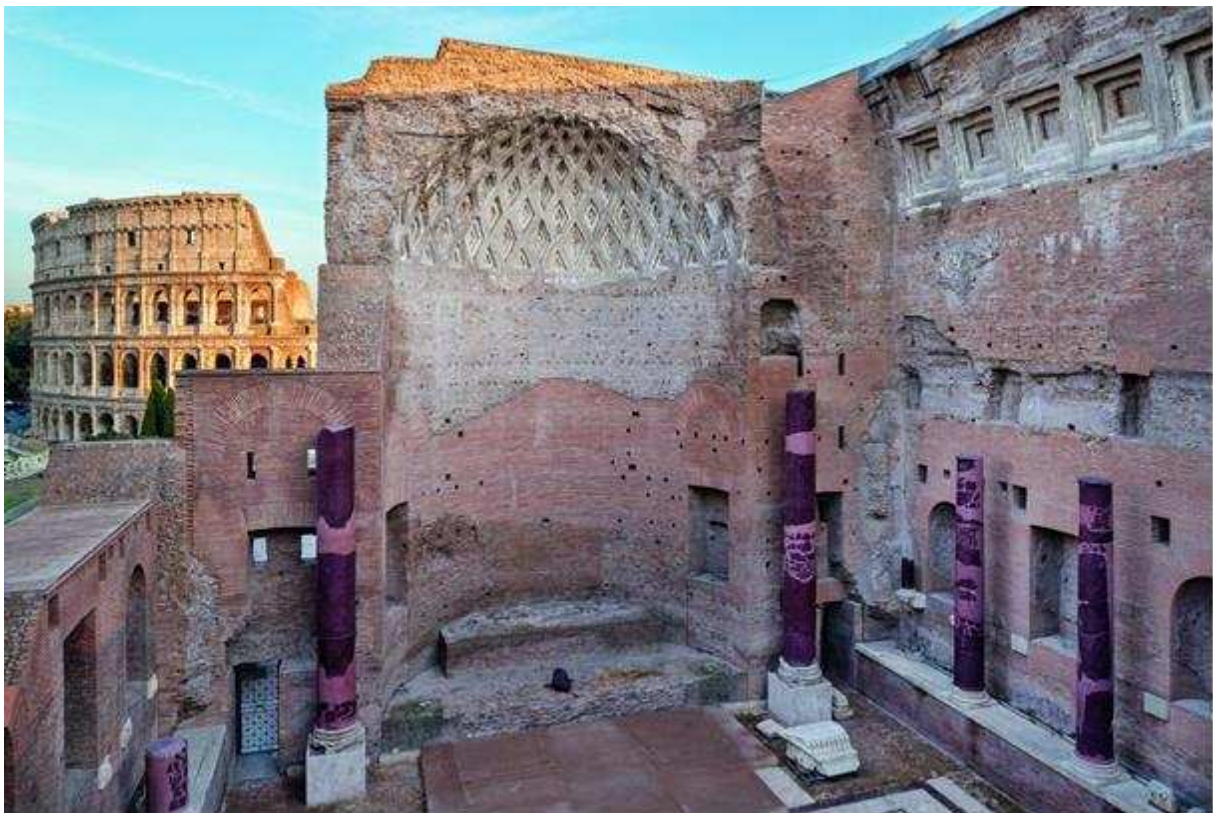


Fig. 7: The monumental apse structure of the Temple of Venus and Roma. Source: Castellani 2019.

The temple's architectural language aligned closely with Maxentius's numismatic agenda; the hexastyle temple depicted on the CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE issues was a direct representation of this structure's monumental presence within the urban topography. With

¹²⁶ Chronographus Anni 354, 148.

these cults of *Venus Felix* (the founding goddess of Rome) and *Roma Aeterna* (symbolizing the city's eternity) through this monumental initiative, Maxentius established himself as the exclusive protector of not just the city's civil memory, but its sacred heritage as well. While the Tetrarchs constructed abstract, divine dynasties (*Jovii* and *Herculii*) in distant provincial centers, Maxentius created a political *persona* binding his legitimacy directly to the founding myths and topography of Rome.

Apart from the architectural activities in the *Forum Romanum*, the Basilica Nova, rising on the Velian Hill stood as a monumental evidence as a Maxentius' administrative claims. Diverging from the horizontal, multi-columned, timber-roofed forms of traditional Roman basilicas (such as the Basilica Julia or Basilica Ulpia), Maxentius' architects translated the monumental vaulting techniques of the Baths of Caracalla and Diocletian into a civil administrative structure. The central nave of the three-aisled structure was spanned by colossal groin vaults reaching 35 meters in height, granting the interior a monumental volume that dominated the surrounding topography.¹²⁷ This architectural transformation also demonstrates Maxentius's desire to make Rome the center of law and administration once again. As John R. Curran substantiates through epigraphic data, the site management of this basilica was overseen directly by urban prefect (*praefectus urbi*) Attius Insteius Tertullus as *praepositus fabricae*.¹²⁸ This detail demonstrates how the political *persona* physically solidified the civil *consensus* forged with the senatorial aristocracy. By housing the tribunals of the urban prefecture (*praefectura urbana*) and the civil bureaucracy, the basilica functioned as an administrative structure that re-established the Senate's executive authority and privileges. Consequently, for a Roman citizen or senator living in this geography, the Basilica Nova stood as tangible proof of the title *conservator urbis suae*, effectively countering the neglect of the Tetrarchy by re-centering the city as the legal capital of the empire.

¹²⁷ Yegül & Favro, 843-844.

¹²⁸ Curran 2000, 58; cf. CIL VI, 1696.

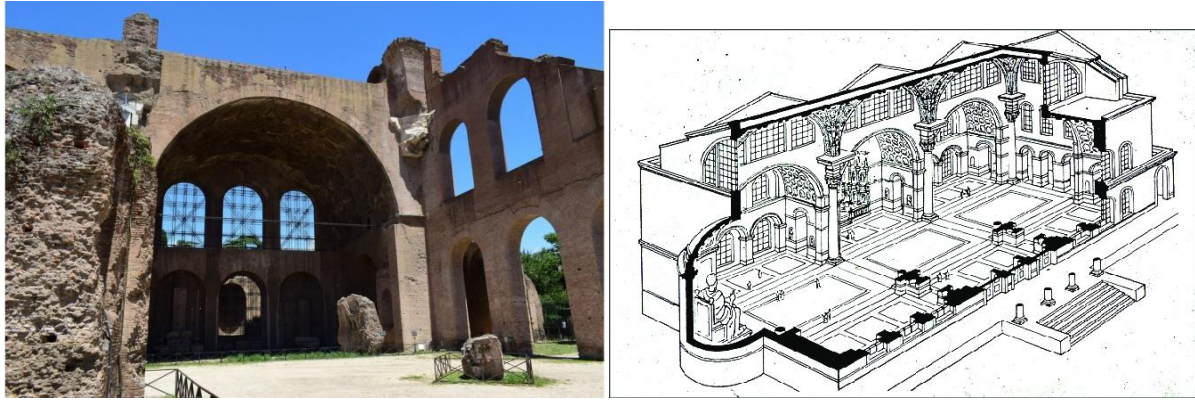


Fig. 8: Basilica of Maxentius (Basilica Nova). On the left, the surviving vaults of the northern nave; on the right, a reconstruction drawing showing the original architectural mass of the building. Source: Smarthistory; "Reconstruction of the Basilica of Maxentius, Rome" (2019):181.

The construction of these public buildings also functioned as a vital socio-economic instrument in Maxentius's relationship with the *plebs urbana*. The disruption of grain shipments to Rome due to Domitius Alexander's revolt had caused severe unemployment and provisioning crises. The street clashes and lawlessness recorded by Zosimus carried the risk of collapsing the administration's civil base.¹²⁹ Maxentius prioritized the construction of public buildings in order to restore civil consensus with the people and alleviate social unrest. Contrary to Constantinian era literary propaganda that painted Maxentius as an inactive usurper confined in his palace, the public experienced him as a *de facto* protector who repairing and constructing public buildings and embracing the city. In this sense, architectural propaganda was not an abstract realm where elites exchanged political messages; it was a practical tool of legitimacy that provided essential sustenance to the urban populace and secured their civic loyalty.

The expansive imperial estate located at the third milestone of the *Via Appia* (at the *ad Catacumbas* site) form a distinctive architectural complex through which Maxentius projected his claims of civic protection and dynastic legitimacy into the suburban periphery of Rome. This complex, includes an imperial villa, a monumental circus (*Circus Maxentii*), and a circular mausoleum dedicated to his son Valerius Romulus (following his premature death in 309).¹³⁰ It serves as an intentional revival of the dynastic architectural traditions of the Early Imperial period.

¹²⁹Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.13-14.

¹³⁰Van Dam 2011, 231.

The *Circus Maxentii* on the *Via Appia*, accommodating approximately 15,000 spectators was directly linked to the villa through an imperial box, that is, a political theater where the emperor could have an audience with his people without showing up in the public space. The Mausoleum of Romulus, located at the center of the complex, served as physical evidence to Maxentius's claim of future dynastic continuity. Naming his son after Rome's founding father and dedicating this monumental tomb to him was the architectural indicator of an institutional bond forged with the city's historical origins.

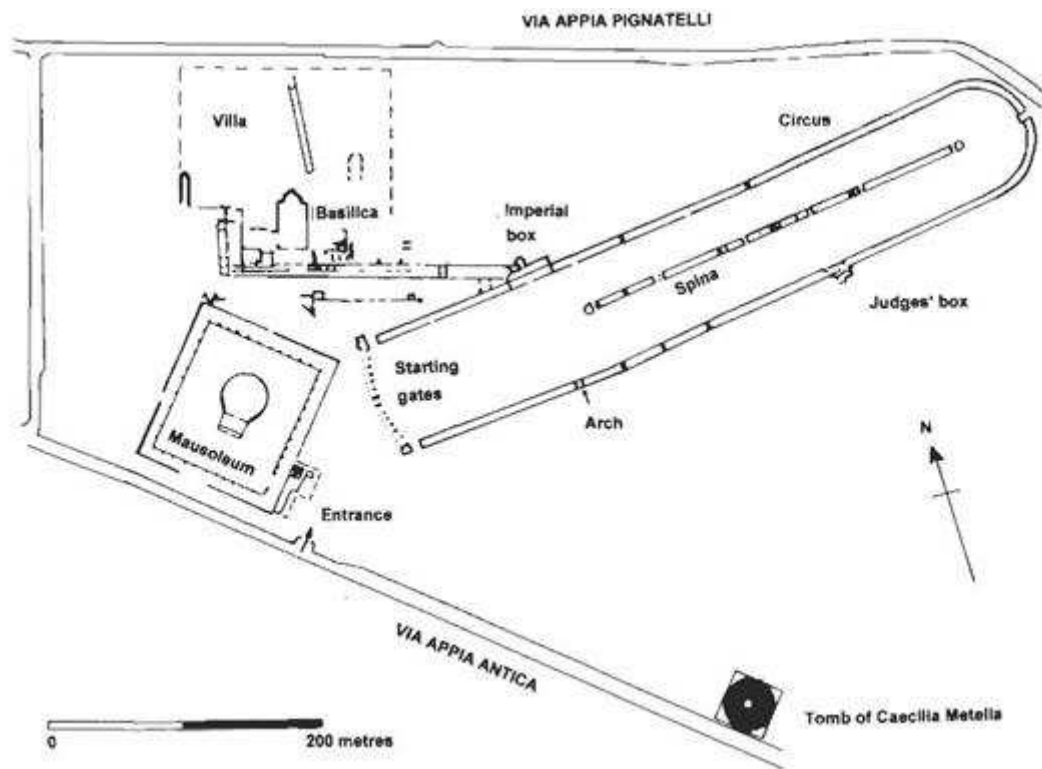


Fig. 9: Site plan of the Maxentius Complex on the Via Appia (connections to the Circus, Mausoleum and Imperial Villa). Source: "A Topography of Death" 2002, 27.

The *ludi* held within the circus functioned to consolidate the civic *consensus* that had been eroded following the African crisis. The final important architectural initiative demonstrating that the political *persona* was not just ideological rhetoric, but a tangible commitment to the physical defense of the city, was the comprehensive reinforcement of the Aurelian Walls. Maxentius almost completely reconstructed the 19-kilometer defensive circuit, as he was confronted with the strategic threats inherent in the sieges of Severus and Galerius.¹³¹ Walls were raised to almost double their original height, towers were enlarged to accommodate

¹³¹Doležal 2022, 288.

heavy defensive artillery, and important gates of the city such as *Porta Asinaria* and *Porta Pinciana* were turned into formidable defensive strongholds.

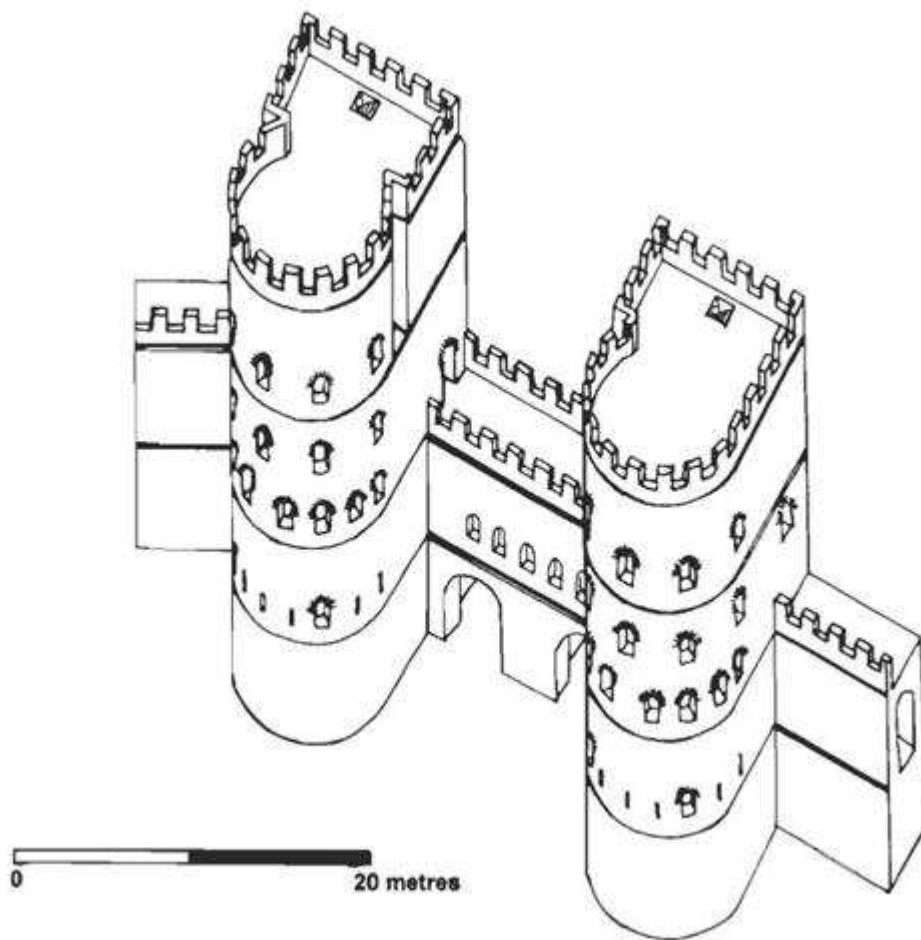


Fig. 10: The sections of the Aurelian Walls that were raised and fortified with towers during the reign of Maxentius (Porta Appia). Source: "A Topography of Death" 2002, 28.

These extensive military defensive fortifications generated a tangible sense of civic security among the urban populace. The ancient capital, previously subjected to neglect by the Tetrarchs, was transformed into a formidable fortified center through Maxentius's infrastructure. The title *conservator urbis suae* found its physical articulation in the monumentality of these walls. However, following his defeat in 312, this architectural foundation of legitimacy constructed by Maxentius was subjected to a systematic architectural appropriation and *damnatio memoriae*. After the victory Constantinus ideologically usurped all the monumental initiatives Maxentius had initiated in order to eradicate his political *persona*. The construction of the Basilica Nova on the Velian Hill was subsequently completed and re-designated as the *Basilica Constantini*, and the colossal marble statue of

Constantinus was installed in the western apse, directly supplanting the memory of Maxentius.¹³² There is a prevailing opinion that the heads of the statues have changed.¹³³

The dedicatory inscriptions on the temple within the *Forum Romanum* and the structures along the *Via Appia* were systematically erased, replaced by the nomenclature of the new victor. As Elizabeth Marlowe emphasizes, Constantinus used strategic topographical and architectural interventions to appropriate the urban landscape and civic legitimacy; just as he altered the Basilica of Maxentius to redirect its ideological focus, he specifically sited his triumphal arch in the Colosseum Valley to visually reframe the ancient Colossus of Sol and associate his victory with the sun god.¹³⁴

The role of these architectural initiatives in Maxentius's political strategy was not the excess of tyranny that Constantinus historiography claimed. In fact, it was a calculated legitimization tool used by princeps without official Tetrarchic approval to promote civic *consensus*. Religious memory was revitalized through the *Templum Veneris et Romae*; the administrative authority of the Senate was re-established through the Basilica Nova. Civic *consensus* was continued by providing essential employment to the *plebs urbana* via monumental construction; and the title *conservator urbis suae* found tangible prove through the comprehensive reinforcement of the Aurelian Walls. Architectural, epigraphic and numismatic evidence shows the concrete form of the civil legitimacy he established in the capital for 6 years without being recognized by the Tetrarchy.

The creation of Maxentius's civil *persona* is not just a maneuver to prove his legitimacy. It also established the status of legitimate emperor, bound by ancestral traditions (*mos maiorum*). With monumental public works such as the Basilica Nova and the comprehensive restoration of the Temple of Venus and Roma he provided concrete architectural evidence of his legal claim as the legal sovereign and *conservator urbis suae*.

Additionally his intentional choice to present himself within the city walls wearing the traditional civic toga, instead of the military *paludamentum* favored by his Tetrarchic contemporaries, an expression of Roman *civilitas*. This visual statement indicates that Maxentius wanted to align his administration with the republican and early imperial magistrates. As will be examined in the context of his religious persona (Section 3.4) and

¹³²Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 40.26; Marlowe 2006, 231.

¹³³Marlowe 2010, 203.

¹³⁴Marlowe 2006, 224-225, 231-232.

Constantinus's expropriation (*appropriatio*) of his architectural legacy (Chapter 4), expressing legitimacy through concrete means was so effective that Constantinus had to adapt in place of destroy it entirely.

3.3. Dynastic Persona

The Tetrarchic system, constituting a significant shift in Late Antique Roman history, formally disassociated imperial succession from biological lineage. Instead, it grounded succession upon administrative merit and an institutional framework of adoption (*adoptio*). Tetrarchy was established by Diocletian to stop the dynastic instability of the Crisis of the Third Century. This political model derived its legitimacy from the principles of collegiality (*fraternitas*) and mutual harmony (*concordia*). Within this administrative system, emperors provided their authority not from mortal fathers, but directly from divine figures such as Iovius (Jupiter) and Herculus (Hercules). The *Panegyrici Latini* texts in 289 and 291 actively shaped this ideological discourse, exalting the emperors as divinely appointed figures and replacing traditional aristocratic lineage with a new narrative of divine descent and provincial military valor.¹³⁵ This was no simple administrative preference. It was comprehensive restructuring designed to permanently eradicate dynastic conflicts. At the same time this ideological frame contained an inherent contradiction with the account provided in the same *Panegyricus* of 289. Maxentius was undergoing formal imperial instruction (*imperatoriae institutionis*) at court, actively was being raised as a legitimate dynastic successor.¹³⁶ The status of Maxentius, the biological son of the western *augustus* Maximianus, he was perceived as a threat due to his dynastic connection and due to the legal framework of the Tetrarchy.

This exclusion was formalized during the joint abdication ceremony on May 1, 305. Upon the withdrawal of Diocletianus and Maximianus into private life, Maxentius was bypassed for the rank of *caesar*, remaining in the ancient capital with the status of a *privatus*. Contemporary Christian historiography, especially Lactantius, attempted to this exclusion by attributing it to Maxentius's personal disposition, asserting that Galerius deemed him excessively proud and disobedient, and therefore unsuited for imperial office.¹³⁷ However, this narrative is a retrospective historiographical construct reducing historical causality to personal animosity. Modern studies indicate that the primary issue was the socio-political power he represented, not Maxentius's personal disposition. The emerging military bureaucracy, prioritizing

¹³⁵ Davenport 2016, 386-387, 389-391.

¹³⁶ *Panegyrici Latini* 10(2).14.1-2; cf. Hunsucker 2018, 95-96.

¹³⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 18.12.

administrative merit, perceived a civilian heir residing in Rome-and the biological representative of the *Domus Herculia*-as a threat to their provincially based authority. Maxentius's exclusion from the tetrarchy also indirectly meant the exclusion of the dynastic lineage.

This exclusion provided the basis for the *persona* he would create through the dynasty. In fact, this meant that he used lineage as a tool to create legitimacy in the political arena. During the initial months of his reign, when the forces of the legitimate western *augustus* Severus besieged Italy, Maxentius, lacking important military experience, eased his primary vulnerability by leveraging his father's military and divine prestige. Thus, he recalled his father Maximianus, who had withdrawn to the status of a *privatus* in Lucania, back into the imperial administration, conferring upon him the title *bis augustus*.¹³⁸ Ancient sources record that when Severus's army reached the walls of Rome, they refused to fight against their former commander Maximianus.¹³⁹ While ancient sources treat this defection as only bribery and loyalty to the former commander, when we look at the situation from a dynastic perspective, there is a different picture. The mass defection of the legions demonstrated the systemic vulnerability of Diocletianus's system of administrative succession when confronted with traditional dynastic *auctoritas* and biological lineage. The soldiers did not just switch sides and side with their former commanders. At the same time they rejected the construct of *adoptio*, preferred their allegiance to the biological descent of their former commander.

This dynastic legitimacy was not confined to military strategy; it was systematically spread to the urban populace through numismatic channels. On the early issues struck at the mints of Rome and Ostia, Maxentius recontextualized the visual imagery of the Tetrarchy. On the obverse, instead of presenting himself as a military autocrat, he adopted the title *princeps invictus*, thereby appealing to the senatorial aristocracy. The dynastic ideological claim was articulated on the reverse. He featured Hercules, the patron deity of his father, on the reverse of coinage bearing his own portrait. Through the legend *HERCVLI COMITI -AVGG ET CAESS NN /E /PR* he provided a tangible declaration that he was the legitimate heir to this divine lineage (see Fig. 1). Maxentius found the source of his dynastic legitimacy in *Domus Herculia*.

¹³⁸ Doležal 2022, 268; Van Dam 2011, 229.

¹³⁹ Zosimus, Hist. Nov. 2.10; Lactantius, De Mort. Pers. 26.

Numismatic data, a primary tool of political communication in Late Antiquity, provides the necessary information to understand Maxentius's dynastic structure and the legitimacy he established through it. The Tetrarchic system established by Diocletianus had developed a uniform visual iconography that purposely suppressed the individualized characteristics of the emperors. In the statuary and numismatic evidence of this period, emperors were uniformly depicted as indistinguishable rulers clad in military armor (*lorica*), symbolizing an authority derived from provincial military centers. When Maxentius became emperor, he deliberately avoided visual imagery. In his visual program, he did not choose for military attire. He adopted the *toga*, the traditional garment of Roman civic magistracy and laid the foundations for a dynastic model whose legitimacy stemmed not from administrative hierarchy but from the civil traditions of the capital.

The prominent inclusion of *toga* iconography in Maxentius's visual program was not simply an aesthetic preference; it clearly established an positioning. Within Roman civic tradition, the *toga* functioned as the quintessential symbol of the civil *magistratus* bound by law, the *consul*, and traditional Republican virtues. Unlike the autocratic *dominus persona* of the Tetrarchs-which enforced strict hierarchical distances between the rulers and the populace through court ceremonial-Maxentius sought to revive the *primus inter pares* ideal characteristic of the Early Imperial period.¹⁴⁰ The complete absence of the *toga* within Tetrarchic numismatic and statuary evidence demonstrates the significance of Maxentius's visual departure. He explicitly disassociated his political lineage from the military emperors of the Third Century Crisis, grounding his legitimacy instead in the civic virtues of the ancient capital.

The most tangible evidence of this iconographic strategy is present in the numismatic issues struck at the mints of Rome and Ostia during the initial phase of his reign. Within these coin legends, Maxentius designated himself not with the title *augustus*, but with the title *princeps invictus*.¹⁴¹ The adoption of the title *princeps* a strategic overture aimed at composing *consensus* among the senatorial aristocracy and the *plebs urbana*. Maxentius had established dynastic authority as a civic administration legitimized by the approval of the Senate.

The iconographic details of these numismatic issues further substantiate this civil dynastic model. On the contrary to the standard laureate portraits characteristic of Tetrarchic visual

¹⁴⁰ Van Dam 2011, 241-43.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

conventions, which were strictly executed in lateral profile, Maxentius adopted an unusual portraiture style on the obverse of his initial years, depicting himself bare-headed and in a frontal or slightly turned pose. At this point, it is observed that Maxentius wanted to use the traditional Republican image of the old republic.¹⁴² This bare-headed representation, clad in the *toga*, created an iconographic expression that he was presenting himself to the *plebs urbana* not as a military autocrat, but as a civil leader appear from the senatorial aristocracy of the capital.

Maxentius used this civil iconography and the *princeps* title most intensely during 306 and 307, when the armies of Severus and Galerius besieged Italy. While seeking solutions through diplomacy and military means to defend Rome, using the *toga* in propaganda to demonstrate his legitimacy was a conscious political communication strategy. This demonstrates that Maxentius conceptualized the military conflict not just dynastic dispute over imperial power, but as a traditional defensive war safeguarding the civic privileges of Rome, senatorial authority, and the capital against Tetrarchic forces.

For all that, this civic statesman *persona* that Maxentius sought to improve was subjected to systematic historiographical denigration by hostile sources. Contemporary Christian historiography and Constantinian *Panegyrici Latini* orations characterized Maxentius's decision to remain within the ancient capital, instead of leading the army, on the frontiers, not as a strategic choice, but as a moral deficiency and cowardice (*ignavia* or *vecordia*).¹⁴³ Constantinus historiography stripped the civil administrator identity constructed by Maxentius from its context, painting him as an inactive *tyrannus*.

Critical historical analysis refutes the narrative propagated by these hostile sources. While Maxentius was establishing military fortifications, he also sought to gain the support of the Roman people through methods such as *toga* iconography. This iconography was also a reflection of the dynastic *persona*. During the framework of the Tetrarchy diminished the administrative centrality of Rome, Maxentius embodied the legal privileges of the city within his own *persona* through the adoption of the *toga*. Through the integration of his biological lineage with Roman civic traditions, he established a localized model of political legitimacy.

Establishing dynastic legitimacy through civic iconography was merely the visual dimension of Maxentius's strategy. The diplomatic part of this ideological program was a naming

¹⁴² Van Dam 2011, 225.

¹⁴³ *Panegyrici Latini* XII (IX), 3.4, 14.4; cf. Van Dam 2011, 247-48.

strategy implemented through his marital ties, the names given to his children, and the reflection of these names in monumental form upon the topography of the capital. His marriage to Valeria Maximilla, daughter of the eastern *caesar* Galerius, around 293, was initially intended as a standard diplomatic alliance to maintain the balance of power within the Tetrarchic system and secure inter-dynastic loyalty.¹⁴⁴ However, from 306 onward, rather than severing this marital tie with his father-in-law who had excluded him from the Tetrarchic administration, Maxentius transformed it into the foundational lineage of his own independent, Rome-based dynasty. This pragmatic political approach aimed to create legitimacy outside of military force by leveraging existing family alliances.

The most significant ideological expression of this diplomatic integration was evident in the name bestowed upon the heir born of this union. Instead of giving upon his son one of the standard dynastic names of the Tetrarchy, Maxentius directly associated him with the foundational traditions of the ancient capital, naming him Valerius Romulus.¹⁴⁵ The giving of this name upon his son was a declaration of a tangible dynastic *persona* based on directly in Roman topography and the *mos maiorum*, countering the divine ideological constructs of the Tetrarchy, such as the *Iovius* and *Herculius* affiliations. *Princeps* who named his son after the legendary founder aims to strengthen his legitimacy through this action.

The political significance of this nomenclature lies in its etymological and historical roots. As contemporary sources, particularly Lactantius, record, the name of Galerius's mother—namely the grandmother of Valerius Romulus—was Romula. In the accounts of Lactantius, Romula is characterized as a figure of trans-Danubian origin, strictly adhering to pagan cults, and embodying the provincial identity of the East.¹⁴⁶ Maxentius took this name, which originated from the eastern wing of the Tetrarchy and carried peripheral provincial associations. As part of his legitimacy plan, he transformed it into the Romulus myth. Thus, provincial origins from the East were synthesized with Rome's most sacred myth, and the kinship ties forged by the system against him were turned into evidence of indigenous Roman belonging.

The ideological significance of the name Valerius Romulus demonstrates that the establishment of political legitimacy was not confined to the imperial court or numismatic evidence, but was integrated into the topography of the ancient capital through monumental architecture. To realize the foundational traditions associated with his son's name, Maxentius

¹⁴⁴ Cullhed 1994, 45-48.

¹⁴⁵ Van Dam 2011, 225-226

¹⁴⁶ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 9.

commissioned an imperial complex at *Via Appia*.¹⁴⁷ The circular Mausoleum of Romulus, situated at the center of this complex and emulating the architectural form of the Pantheon in Rome, demonstrated the monumental expression of legitimacy of the new dynasty and its continuity. While the Tetrarchs relocated the imperial center to provincial cities, Maxentius positioned the center of his own dynasty-the mausoleum and the adjacent circus (*Circus Maxentii*)-directly along the *Via Appia*, one of the most important routes of the capital.¹⁴⁸

This architectural complex formed a physical integration of the fundamental traditions of the past, embodied in the *persona* of Valerius Romulus, and the future dynastic continuity. This structure, a conscious revival of the early Imperial tradition of dynastic mausolea, reflects Maxentius's intention to transform his authority from a temporary military usurpation into a permanent dynastic institution. The ideological expression directed at the *plebs urbana* and the Senate was clear. The ruling authority consisted not of assignments from the Tetrarchy, which was far removed from Rome, but of an imperial lineage that emerged from the city itself.

For Maxentius, his marriage to Valeria Maximilla, the birth of Valerius Romulus, and the mausoleum erected in his name held significance far beyond mere family events. The nomenclature spanning from the provincial origins of his mother-in-law to the mythological founder of the ancient capital, alongside the monumental architecture upon the *Via Appia*, demonstrates the emperor's calculated ideological program. This strategy, which integrated his own lineage (*Domus Herculia*) with the topography of the ancient capital, its foundational traditions, and monumental architecture, served as a primary legitimizing element that elevated Maxentius from the status of a *usurpator* and positioned him as the traditional guardian of the Rome.

This dynastic legitimacy was fundamentally shaken by the political crisis of the spring of 308, necessitating a redirection of the imperial *persona*. During the first two years of his reign, Maxentius based his legitimacy largely on the legacy of the House of Hercules (*Domus Herculia*) represented by his father, Maximianus. The existence of both a power within the administration representing tetrarchic authority and a power base outside of this authority was bound to create a crisis. Maximianus's return to Rome following the diplomatic alliance he

¹⁴⁷ Cullhed 1994, 57

¹⁴⁸ Van Dam 2011, 231

formed with Constantinus in Gaul in late 307 increased this friction from a dynastic rivalry into an open crisis of legitimacy.

The peak of this crisis occurred in the spring of 308. According to the accounts of Lactantius, Maximianus convened an assembly (*contio*) with the participation of the military and the urban populace, directly condemn his son as the sole figure responsible for the political instability. Attempting to depose him by physically stripping the imperial purple (*purpura*) from his son's shoulders before the assembly, Maximianus expected that the soldiers would easily give their loyalty to their former commander. However, the Praetorian Guard and the Roman populace rejected the senior *augustus*, defended Maxentius, and expelled Maximianus from the city.¹⁴⁹

Described by contemporary sources as a manifestation of unrestrained ambition, this event, when examined through historical analysis, represents a victory of civil legitimacy against a universal dynastic program. The military and civic institutions of the capital rejected the hierarchical ideological framework imposed by the Tetrarchy. They aligned with their localized ruler, who reifies the legal privileges of the city within his own *persona*. While this event secured political autonomy for Maxentius, it generated a deep ideological vacuum. With the expulsion of his father, the legitimacy derived from the Herculean lineage, which Maxentius had used as his primary external source of legitimacy against his rivals, was effectively nullified.

This ideological rupture forced Maxentius to reconsider his dynastic program. Deprived of the legitimacy provide from his father, the emperor reoriented his focus from ancestral lineage to future dynastic continuity as a matter of political preservation. The dynastic legitimacy established through his father was supplanted by a new ideological framework centered upon the mythological roots of Rome, developed entirely through the *persona* of his son, Valerius Romulus. The claim to dynastic authority evolved from an initial objective to secure integration within the Tetrarchic administration into a fully independent and localized political model, strictly base on within the topography of the Rome.

The definitive diplomatic event that consolidated this localized dynastic *persona* as an absolute necessity was the Carnuntum Conference convened in November 308. At this conference, where Maximianus was compelled to abdicate and Constantinus was demoted in rank, the senior *augustus* Galerius and the founder of the Tetrarchy, Diocletianus, legally

¹⁴⁹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 28; Doležal 2022, 270-271

invalidated Maxentius's status entirely. Maxentius was stayed as a usurper by the authority of Diocletianus himself.¹⁵⁰ The assignment of Licinius as the new western *augustus* with the mandate to advance upon Italy signified the severance of all of Maxentius's diplomatic ties with the broader imperial administration.¹⁵¹

This exclusion at Carnuntum and the expulsion of his father rendered 308 a turning point in Maxentius's consolidation of political legitimacy. Out of diplomatic recognition and having lost the universal dynastic claim, Maxentius directed his ideological focus toward the new dynastic program cultivated through his son, alongside the strategic alliance forged with the Senate to secure his civic and military base. To legitimize this established reality in Rome, the city initiated a radical iconographic change in his coins, which were its primary tool of propaganda.

During the early years of his reign, Maxentius extensively used the iconography of Hercules (*Domus Herculia*) on his coinage, as he grounded his legitimacy upon the ancestral heritage of his father, Maximianus. However, the severance of civic and diplomatic ties with his father following the political fracture of 308 necessitated the removal of the Hercules imagery from the imperial ideological program. At this point, Maxentius needed to use a new figure to demonstrate his dynastic legitimacy. He chose Mars, the god of war rooted in Roman tradition. The choice of Mars by Maxentius was not only a mythological choice, but also a pragmatic calculation of political legitimacy. The Tetrarchic administration had established its ideological framework upon Jupiter (*Iovius*) and Hercules (*Herculius*), excluding Mars from this official pantheon. By adopting this deity, which the Tetrarchs had extracted from their ideological programs, Maxentius eliminated the ideological privilege of the Tetrarchy and established iconographic domain against the claims of his rivals.

¹⁵⁰Doležal 2022, 271-275

¹⁵¹Doležal 2022, 275



Maxentius Silver, Rome. AD 307-310.
3.3 gr
Obv: MAXENTIVS P F AVG

Laureate head of Maxentius to right.



Rev: MARTI PR-OPA-G IMP AVG N
Mars, standing right, extending right hand to woman and holding spear in left hand; woman standing left; between them, wolf and twins right

Fig. 11: Maxentius coin minted in Rome, inscribed with MARTI PR-OPA-G IMP AVG N and depicting with Mars. Ref: RIC VI Rome 189

Most tangible proof of this ideological shift and Mars's new legitimacy is a particular coin struck directly at the Rome mint (Fig.11). The emperor on the obverse side highlights his imperial power through the legend *MAXENTIVS P F AVG* and a right-facing laureate bust; the political declaration is depicted on the reverse. The reverse, under the legend *MARTI PR-OPA-G IMP AVG N* (Mars the Propagator/Expander of Our Empire), depicts the war god Mars in right profile holding the spear in his left hand and making a gesture of right hand to a female figure who is standing opposite him. The most critical detail of this scene regarding legitimacy is the pair of Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf, positioned precisely between these two divine figures.

This numismatic composition represents the materialization of Maxentius's ideological reorientation from paternal heritage to filial succession and from the Tetrarchic administration to Rome. Maxentius filled the ideological vacuum that after Maximianus by elevating Mars, the city's founding god, to the position of supreme protector. The depiction of the she-wolf and the twins at the center of the coin created the visual appearance of the dynastic program Maxentius established through his own son, Valerius Romulus, centered entirely upon the Rome. Maxentius integrated the war god Mars, the foundational traditions of the city, and his

own lineage upon a single numismatic issue. This integration established a localized legitimizing framework deriving its authority directly from the topography of Rome.

Following conflict with his father in 308 and the exclusion at Carnuntum, Maxentius's vision and *persona* for the dynastic legitimacy centered on his son, Valerius Romulus. However, this legitimacy construct tied to the roots of the Rome was dragged into a structural dynastic crisis by the unexpected death of the young Valerius Romulus in 309. Under normal circumstances, the loss of the sole heir for a leader lacking external support would mean the collapse of that regime's dynastic claims. Nevertheless, Maxentius transformed this tragedy into an ideological tool. He did not accept his son's death as an end; instead, he immediately deified him, elevating him to the rank of *Divus*.¹⁵² This action was less a traditional form of mourning and more a calculated strategy. Maxentius administration, by consecrating a new deity (*Divus Romulus*) from its own ranks, demonstrated to the *plebs urbana* and the Senate that a dynasty, capable of establishing its own sacred lineage directly within Rome, was possible, in opposition to the ideological structures of the Tetrarchy.

To secure this newly established divine status within the consciousness of the *plebs urbana* and to integrate the dynasty into the topography of the city, Maxentius initiated a monumental architectural intervention. For this purpose, as mentioned earlier an extensive imperial complex was built at the Via Appia. This complex comprising a residential villa, a monumental circus (*Circus Maxentii*), and a circular mausoleum dedicated to *Divus Romulus*.¹⁵³ In fact this complex represents the physical manifestation of Maxentius's dynastic program. In their architectural analyses, modern historians Raymond Van Dam and John R. Curran emphasize that this complex creates a deliberate revival of the dynastic architectural tradition of the Early Imperial period.¹⁵⁴ Maxentius, by situating this building on the *Via Appia*, the road with the most powerful historical memory in Rome, directly planted the origins of his dynasty in the very center of the capital.

The circular Mausoleum of Romulus at the center of the complex served as a visual representation of this claim to legitimacy for the future. While Tetrarchic leaders like Diocletianus and Galerius distanced the imperial from Rome by building their own mausolea in provincial capitals like *Spalatum* (Split) or *Felix Romuliana*, Maxentius reversed this spatial exclusion. The mausoleum on the *Via Appia* conveyed the message to the Senate and

¹⁵² Van Dam 2011, 243.

¹⁵³ Curran 2000, 57-61.

¹⁵⁴ Van Dam 2011, 243-244; Curran 2000, 57-60.

the public that Rome was still the absolute center of the world. However, this centrality was reaffirmed by the influence of the dynastic *persona* that Maxentius created through his son.

Circus Maxentii constructed immediately adjacent to this dynastic monument.¹⁵⁵ Circus, functioned as a vital civic venue that facilitated the extension of political legitimacy to the *plebs urbana*. In Roman antiquity, circuses composed essential public arenas where the emperor engaged directly with the urban populace, and civic consensus (*consensus*) was actively affirmed. The memorial games (*ludi*) convened adjacent to the Mausoleum of Romulus provided Maxentius the opportunity to see his direct ideological bond with the *plebs urbana*. The residential villa, the circus, and the mausoleum were so architecturally integrated that dynastic mourning, civic celebration, and imperial authority were simultaneously exhibited to the populace within a single topography. This architectural order was the very image of a civil dynastic model united with the people and was the antithesis of the solitary palaces of the Tetrarchy.

This new dynastic program, consolidated following the loss of his son, experienced its definitive diplomatic development with the dispatches arriving from Gaul in the summer of 310. Maximianus-estranged from his son since the political fracture of 308-was compelled to end his life in *Massilia* (Marseille) following the unsuccessful attempt of his rebellion against Constantinus.¹⁵⁶ Although the elimination of a political rival who had attempted usurpation is conventionally perceived as a decisive victory, and could have been analyzed as such for Maxentius, the emperor evaluated this death not through personal animosity, but through the pragmatic realities of Late Antique. By quickly removing the power struggle of 308 from official civic discourse, Maxentius integrated the event into a diplomatic strategy directed against Constantinus.

At the center of this ideological reorientation lay the concept of *pietas* (the sense of duty to family, gods, and the state), one of the fundamental virtues of the ancient Roman state tradition. Following the Carnuntum Conference, Maxentius, who had disassociated himself from the Herculean lineage and directed his ideological focus toward Mars and the *persona* of his son Romulus, reintegrated his paternal heritage into his dynastic program upon his father's death. He presented himself to the *plebs urbana* not as a betrayed ruler, but through the *persona* of a loyal and pious son (*pious filius*) publicly mourning his murdered father.

¹⁵⁵ Curran 2000, 57-61.

¹⁵⁶ Doležal 2022, 277; cf. Van Dam 2011, 156.

Maxentius formally deified his father (*Divus Maximianus*) and, through the issuance of commemorative coinage, reasserted his status as the sole legitimate heir to the Herculean lineage (*Domus Herculia*).¹⁵⁷



Maxentius Bronze, Ostia. AD 309-312.
5,80gr

Obv: DIVO MAXIMIANO PATRI MAXENTIVS
AVG

Head of Maximian, veiled, right

Rev: AETERNAE – MEMORIA
MintMark: MOSTP

Eagle, wings spread, standing right on domed
hexastyle shrine, right door ajar

Fig. 12: Maxentius coin minted in Ostia, inscribed with DIVO MAXIMIANO PATRI MAXENTIVS AVG.
Ref: RIC VI Nr. 25 (309-312 n. Chr.); V. Drost, *Le monnayage de Maxence* (2013) 338 Nr. 78,26 Taf. 54
(dieses Stück, Anfang 310 bis Ende 312 n. Chr.).

This formal restitution of his father's status created the diplomatic and ideological foundation for the imminent conflict. The strategic alliance forged with Constantinus through the marriage to Fausta in 307 was definitively broken by Maximianus's death. Using the political virtue of *pietas*, Maxentius established the retribution for his father's death as the primary legitimate justification (*casus belli*) for the forthcoming war against Constantinus.¹⁵⁸

This diplomatic tension exceeded territorial boundaries, demonstrating as an ideological conflict enacted through statuary and monuments, created a form of reciprocal iconoclasm. Consequently, in direct retaliation to Maxentius's formal consecration of his father, Constantinus decreed the condemnation of memory (*damnatio memoriae*) against

¹⁵⁷ Doležal 2022, 278.

¹⁵⁸ Doležal 2022, 278; Van Dam 2011, 233.

Maximianus and mandated the destruction of his physical representations.¹⁵⁹ This institutional attack by Constantinus offered Maxentius his diplomatic declaration of war. Retaliating immediately, Maxentius ordered the destruction of all statues, monuments, and depictions of Constantinus in the Italian provinces under his control.¹⁶⁰ This mutual destruction of monuments was the declaration that total war had effectively begun.

The dynastic *persona*, re-established in terms of legitimacy following his father's death, supported the weakening civil reconciliation before the war. The famine precipitated by the African rebellion and the subsequent imposition of heavy taxation had significantly undermined civic loyalty to the regime.¹⁶¹ It was a difficult task to mobilise a weakened and weary city to defend itself against Constantine's Gallic armies. However, based on the impending conflict upon the political *virtue* of *pietas*, Maxentius elevated this engagement beyond a traditional dynastic dispute over imperial authority. The Roman populace and the Senate was called upon to protect the city and defend it at the request of the city's protector. The persona of a son mourning a betrayed father became the most potent ideological tool Maxentius employed to break his diplomatic isolation.

The dynastic persona Maxentius crafted throughout his reign stands as proof of how legitimacy was continuously negotiated not solely by military force, but with the historical memory of the Rome. Defending lineage against the adoption-centric (*adoptio*) framework of the Tetrarchy, the emperor used dynastic identity as a dynamic shield shaping itself according to the crises he endured. Initially, legitimacy was built upon the synthesis of a civil administrator vision and the universal Herculean (*Domus Herculia*) heritage represented by his father, Maximianus. The toga iconography on coins and the title *princeps invictus* distinguished him from the barracks emperors.¹⁶² This positioned him as a civil leader loyal to the traditions of Rome. This vision took root through a naming strategy extending from the provincial name of the East (*Romula*) to the sacred founder of the city (*Romulus*).

The distinction in 308 and the diplomatic isolation at Carnuntum forced to think about the dynastic *persona* not from the perspective of the past, but from the perspective of the future. Following the death of his son, deifying him (*Divus Romulus*) and the mausoleum erected on the *Via Appia* was the physical reflection. Eventually, even the death of his betraying father

¹⁵⁹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 42.1-2; cf. Doležal 2022, 278; Odahl 2004, 85

¹⁶⁰ Odahl 2004, 84-85.

¹⁶¹ Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.14; cf. Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 40.

¹⁶² Van Dam 2011, 241-243.

was transformed into an essential justification for war (*casus belli*) against Constantius through the *virtue* of *pietas*.

This entire process demonstrates that Maxentius's dynastic persona was not the delusion of an inactive usurper (*tyrannus*), as Christian historiography claimed.¹⁶³ On the contrary, it was an apparatus of legitimacy conforming to statecraft, created by a legally excluded leader by seamlessly combining the lineage he possessed, the founding myths of the city, civil iconography, and monumental architecture. Maxentius wove his dynastic identity so deeply into the Rome that following his defeat in 312, Constantinus could not destroy this legitimacy; he was forced to adopt it by expropriating the monuments and history.¹⁶⁴ This expression of legal authority extended into his dynastic policy, which was firmly anchored in the foundational mythology and traditional values of Rome. The naming of his son Valerius Romulus was an ideological statement, designed to link his emerging lineage directly to the genesis of the Rome and assert his legal right to rule. After his son's premature death and the immediate deification the construction of the Mausoleum on the *Via Appia* functioned as a monumental assertion of his family's enduring sovereignty. These dynastic monuments were not passive tombs; they were ideological instruments embedded in the sacred view of Rome. By transforming his newly established dynasty into a divinely sanctioned imperial dynasty, Maxentius demonstrated his legitimate emperorship through the physical transformation of the city. Furthermore, as the subsequent section on his religious persona will demonstrate (Section 3.4), this dynastic complex was not only historically symbolic but also astronomically aligned, creating a framework of traditional legitimacy that his rival Constantinus would later struggle to deal (Chapter 4).

3.4. Religious Persona

The deep transformations in dynastic *persona* during Maxentius's establish of legitimacy are inextricably linked to another arena forming the regime's ideological spine with religious *persona*. In Late Antique Roman state tradition, the emperor's religious identity was more than a matter of personal belief. This was a legal area that regulated the relationship between public authority, the loyalty of subjects, and the existence of the state with the divine. However, the historical analysis of Maxentius's religious persona confronts one of the deepest ideological manipulations in Roman history. Following the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in

¹⁶³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.14; cf. Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 18.

¹⁶⁴ Marlowe 2010, 214-219.

312, the Constantinian Christian historiography that monopolized power entirely defamed Maxentius's religious performance, depicting him as an illegitimate, godless tyrant (*tyrannus*). Therefore, the first and most vital step of this chapter is to dismantle the ideological structure of the tyrant narrative constructed by this Christian propaganda and expose the underlying political reality.

In the texts of Constantinus proponent authors, particularly Lactantius and Eusebius, Maxentius is framed as a political usurper and theological monster. In his *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, Lactantius presents Maxentius's rise to power and his administration as a divine punishment dragging Rome into ruin. Eusebius radicalizes this depiction further in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Vita Constantini*.¹⁶⁵ The Christian historians show Maxentius as a mad man who tyrannized people, went as far as to perform evil prophecies (*artes nefariae*) by killing unborn children, and secretly practiced magic in their rites.¹⁶⁶ This hostile narrative is more than religious fanaticism. It is a discursive strategy of power where the traditional tyrant figure, used in classical Roman rhetoric to devalue delegitimized leaders, is reproduced through Christian theology. By monsterizing Maxentius's religious practices, his enemies aimed to render the legal base of his political authority completely invisible.

In Late Antique discourse, the label of tyrant might function as a political instrument meant to exclude the defeated, potentially overshadowing its role as a moral judgment. Proclaimed by the Roman populace (*plebs urbana*), the Senate, and the Praetorian guards in 306, Maxentius was the de facto legitimate ruler of Italy and Africa. Conversely, Constantinus, who was illegally proclaimed *augustus* by his soldiers in Gaul in violation of Tetrarchic rules, was himself a legal usurper (*usurpator*).¹⁶⁷ To justify this overt civil war he initiated by invading Italy in 312 and to erase his usurper image in the eyes of the civil aristocracy, Constantinus had to present his intervention not as a quarrel over the throne, but as a liberation operation (*liberatio*) saving Rome from a religious despot. The pagan tyrant *persona* attached to Maxentius serves as the sole foundation for Constantinus's strategy to provide divine legitimacy to his own illegal military intervention.

This theological program was also deployed to redefine the official civic discourse during the systematic disposal of Maxentius's legacy (*damnatio memoriae*). Upon entering the Rome

¹⁶⁵ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.14.1-3; *Vita Constantini* 1.33-35.

¹⁶⁶ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.36.

¹⁶⁷ Doležal 2022, 265-267.

following his decisive victory, Constantinus completely subsumed Maxentius's architectural and civic legacy within the framework of the *tyrannus*, aiming to neutralize the opposition of the pagan senatorial elite and secure the allegiance of the *plebs urbana*.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, in the *Panegyrici Latini* texts composed after the victory, Maxentius's name was purposely left out; he was designated exclusively as a cruel tyrant or a savage beast. Public buildings and civic reforms in Rome were reframed as tools of tyranny, designed to control the city's populace. The severe punitive measures, such as the public exhibition of his severed head and its subsequent dispatch to the African provinces, were morally justified by Christian authors as the execution of divine justice and the purification of the city from false piety.¹⁶⁹

Critical analysis shows that, beneath the polemics of Christian authors, Maxentius followed a rational religious policy that respected the city's balance. His religious persona remained free from blind pagan fanaticism or any prophetic frenzy. It was a quest for civil consensus (*consensus*) aiming to balance the conservative religious sensitivities of the senatorial aristocracy with the diverse social structure of the capital.¹⁷⁰ Rejecting the centralized religious policy of the Tetrarchy, Maxentius grounded his authority within a civic framework in harmony with Rome's traditional cults and religious institutions. Consequently, understanding his religious *persona* requires moving past the fiction of the *tyrannus* promoted by his enemies, and analyzing how he used Rome's ancient polytheism as a primary source of civic legitimacy.

Obscured beneath the fabricated *persona* of the *tyrannus* promulgated by Christian historiography is a highly systematic civic and religious strategy developed by Maxentius in direct opposition to Tetrarchic theology. The ideological framework established by Diocletianus did not view political legitimacy only as a result of military power or bureaucratic assignment; instead, it built imperial authority directly upon a transcendent theology. Within this paradigm, emperors were viewed as the direct earthly incarnations of Jupiter and Hercules (*Iovius* and *Herculius*) instead of as ordinary mortals.¹⁷¹ This universalizing theology, which distanced the emperor from the urban populace and institutionalized eastern court rituals (*adoratio*), created an unacceptable ideological rift for Rome's senatorial aristocracy. Consolidating his authority in the center of Rome, Maxentius

¹⁶⁸ Marlowe 2010, 202-205, 215-217

¹⁶⁹ Van Dam 2011, 250.

¹⁷⁰ Cullhed 1994, 62-65.

¹⁷¹ Waldron 2022, 58; cf. Doležal 2022, 275-276.

rejected this centralized transcendent theology and based his religious legitimacy on the city's ancestral traditions (*mos maiorum*) and local polytheism.

Maxentius's effort to restore traditional Roman polytheism served as a practical legal framework for regulating Rome's civic order, instead of acting as a sign of religious dogmatism. Within Roman state philosophy, public cults did not function as a matter of individual conscience; instead, they operated as an covenant ensuring the preservation of the state and the civic equilibrium (*pax deorum*). The traditional protectors of this covenant were the city's senatorial aristocracy, namely the Senate. Distinguishing himself from the semi-divine autocrats in distant provinces, Maxentius adopted the *persona* of a traditional civic magistrate (*princeps*) who restored the city's temples, observed ancestral cults, and worked in collaboration with the Senate during religious rituals. This consistent religious observance functioned as the primary ideological strategy he employed to secure the senatorial aristocracy's civic consensus (*consensus*) for his administration, which lacked formal legal recognition, and to consolidate substantial *auctoritas*.¹⁷²

This civic and religious consensus (*consensus*) was not restricted to the senatorial elite; it functioned as a fundamental ideological bond binding the *plebs urbana* to the administration. Rome, still enduring the systemic disruptions of the Third Century Crisis and deprived of its primary administrative status by the Tetrarchy, confronted the ideological apprehension of losing divine favor. Through the patronage of ancestral cults and the renewal of the covenant with the city's deities, Maxentius established himself as the legitimate custodian who reasserted Rome's historic primacy among the urban populace. In contrast to the standardized Tetrarchic pantheon directed toward the broader empire, specific and historical deities indigenous to the civic tradition of Rome were systematically elevated.

The religious observances that Christian historiography condemned as illicit magic and brutality represent the rigorous execution of Rome's ancient order. Maxentius's cultivation of a traditional, civil image as emperor functioned as a pragmatic exercise of statecraft, deployed not to deceive the urban populace, but to establish a cohesive civic bond with the senatorial aristocracy and the *plebs urbana* at Rome.¹⁷³ He opened a fierce ideological front against the divine monopoly of the Tetrarchy by seeking his legitimacy not in a fiction of merit and

¹⁷² Hunsucker 2018, 84-88.

¹⁷³ Van Dam 2011, 224-225.

adoption descending from the heavens, but directly in the temples, altars, and polytheistic heritage of the city.

The most systematic proof of this civic and religious *consensus*, alongside the removal of the Tetrarchic theological hegemony from the official visual program, must be located in the reconfiguration of the numismatic pantheon. During the initial phase of his usurpation, Maxentius established his religious legitimacy through Hercules (*Herculius*), the patron deity of his father Maximianus. Presenting his administration under the divine patronage of the Herculean lineage (*Domus Herculia*) functioned as a provisional theological justification used to secure traditional loyalty within the army and consolidate military authority among the legions. However, political crisis and the cloak-tearing incident he experienced with his father in the spring of 308 forced a fundamental shift in the state's official religious propaganda. The transformation of the former *augustus* into an enemy caused the divine patronage he represented to lose its legitimacy. The cult of Hercules ceased to be an anchor for Maxentius and turned into an ideological burden requiring immediate elimination.

After the dissolution of the Herculean hegemony, Maxentius required an entirely independent divine patronage to sustain his religious *persona*. The most systematic manifestation of this civic and religious consensus, alongside the dismantling of the Tetrarchic theological hegemony within the official visual program, must be located in the reconfiguration of the numismatic pantheon. It represented one of the most pragmatic applications of political theology in Late Antiquity. The primary motivation behind this theological reorientation was the imperative to subvert the Tetrarchic administration's exclusive claim over religious legitimacy. Diocletianus and his co-emperors had strictly confined all official ideological justifications to the dual theology of Jupiter and Hercules (*Iovius* and *Herculius*).¹⁷⁴ They excluding Mars from this imperial pantheon. The fact that no Tetrarch had used Mars as their patron deity offered Maxentius a completely unassailable theological space to which his rivals could lay no claim. Unused by the bureaucratic hierarchy of Tetrarchic ideology, Mars was transformed into a wholly local and independent source of religious legitimacy.

The integration of Mars into the core of his religious persona allowed him to firmly link his religious legitimacy to Rome (*Urbs*) both historically and in terms of the city's established order. Whereas the Tetrarchs predicated their imperial authority upon a superior divine providence, Maxentius systematically aligned his administration with Mars (*Mars Pater*), the

¹⁷⁴ Lenski 2006, 40

divine progenitor of the city and the central figure of its foundational civic traditions. Consequently, he embedded his *auctoritas* directly within the sacred boundary (*pomerium*) and the institutional foundation of Rome.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, this diversification within the imperial numismatic pantheon was not restricted to Mars. The cult of *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun) was simultaneously integrated as a useful and meaningful part component of this ideological program. Both the prominence of *Sol Invictus* among the legions and its entrenched historical presence within Rome demonstrate that Maxentius's religious *persona* was not restricted to the dogmatism of a single cult. Rather, it aimed to establish a broad ideological foundation for civic consensus (*consensus*) encompassing the senatorial aristocracy, the *plebs urbana*, and the military.

Within Late Antique political philosophy, for an emperor's religious *auctoritas* to become a lasting state reality, it had to move beyond coinage and take root within the city's sacred urban fabric. In order to translate the theological assertions present on his coinage into tangible architectural monuments of legitimacy, Maxentius executed a substantial architectural program within the *Forum Romanum*, the historical and religious center of the empire. He redefined the focal point of civic theology by commissioning the circular Temple of Romulus (*Templum Divi Romuli*) along the *Sacra Via*, situated immediately west of the monumental *Basilica Nova*, which he had previously commissioned as the physical embodiment of civic and judicial administration.¹⁷⁶

The topographical placement for this monumental project was by no means coincidental. Since the Republican period, the *Sacra Via* had served as a sacred artery along which triumphal processions (*triumphus*), public religious ceremonies, and the city's ancestral cults were conducted. Due to the instability of the Third Century Crisis and the Tetrarchy's policies, the emperors' long absence from Rome left the *Forum Romanum* in a state of architectural and administrative decay. By situating his new temple precisely upon this sacred thoroughfare, Maxentius did more than erect a physical structure; he demonstrated a clear purpose to rehabilitate (*restitutio*) the capital's neglected religious center.¹⁷⁷ The sanctity of the *Sacra Via* systematically aligned Maxentius's personal religious observances with the civic heritage of Rome.

¹⁷⁵ Van Dam 2011, 241-243.

¹⁷⁶ Curran 2000, 57-60.

¹⁷⁷ Cullhed 1994, 52-54.

The theological focus of the temple is Valerius Romulus, the son who died prematurely in 309 and was personally deified (*consecratio*) by Maxentius. Although the practice of an emperor declaring his deceased heir *Divus* (Divine) was customary within Early Imperial tradition, this specific act by Maxentius served as a fundamental ideological measure directed against the political theology of the Tetrarchy. The Diocletianus ideological framework conceived of divinity exclusively as a superior bond established by rulers at the *augustus* level with Jupiter or Hercules. Maxentius, conversely, integrated a mortal born of his own dynastic lineage-his son, bearing the same name as the city's founding father-into the official pantheon with the explicit ratification of the Senate.¹⁷⁸ This demonstrates that Maxentius built his religious legitimacy upon a localized sacred and civic order, which he could firmly establish directly within the center of Rome, in contrast to the abstract, divinely-providential ideologies of his predecessors.

Architecturally, the *Templum Divi Romuli* reflects the depth of Maxentius's religious *persona* and his strict adherence to ancestral traditions (*mos maiorum*). The circular plan of the structure is a deliberate emulation of the round temples from the city's ancient past (such as the Temple of Vesta) and the monumental Pantheon of the Early Imperial era. The concave facade of the edifice and its antique bronze doors were designed to convey an entrenched, traditional Roman sanctity, rather than projecting an alien cultic impression upon the observer.¹⁷⁹ To strengthen his religious *auctoritas* among the *plebs urbana*, Maxentius chose a classical and civic architectural style that fulfilled the senatorial aristocracy's ideological expectations, avoiding the introduction of culturally foreign forms.

Importance of this civic theology initiative was its role in defending Rome's status as the center against the decentralizing policies of the Tetrarchy. Tetrarchs such as Diocletianus, Galerius, and Maximianus established their religious and dynastic monuments in provincial capitals located near the military frontiers, such as Nicomedia, Spalatum, or Felix Romuliana.¹⁸⁰ Thus, Rome suffered the loss of its role as an administrative headquarters and saw its status as a primary sacred center diminished. By situating the temple commissioned for the new deity of his dynasty directly within the center of the Forum Romanum in place of the provinces, Maxentius consolidated his religious *persona* as an exclusively civic

¹⁷⁸Cullhed 1994, 69-77.

¹⁷⁹Cullhed 1994, 52-55.

¹⁸⁰Van Dam 2011, 245.

prerogative. The outward trajectory of religious legitimacy was reversed; Rome was reaffirmed as the sole legitimate residence of gods and emperors.

This topographical policy fundamentally invalidates the narrative of the *tyrannus* promulgated by Christian historiography. The portrayal of Maxentius as a despotic practitioner of illicit magic within the texts of Lactantius and Eusebius stands in direct contradiction to the historical reality of a legitimate civic magistrate dedicating temples alongside the Senate within the *Forum Romanum*, restoring ancestral cults, and monumentalizing the urban topography of the city (*conservator urbis suae*).¹⁸¹ As the senatorial elite and the *plebs urbana* traversed the *Sacra Via*, they encountered not the malicious figure alleged by Christian authors, but a reverent civic leader (*pius princeps*) consolidating the sacred boundaries of Rome, integrating a newly deified figure from his own dynasty into the official pantheon, and establishing public religion as the fundamental basis of civic consensus (*consensus*).

Eventually, the Temple of Divus Romulus serves as the most lasting political statement of Maxentius's religious persona. Mars, directly visible in numismatic propaganda, and Sol invictus, indirectly but meaningfully represented in public buildings, exist for the same purpose in Maxentius's religious persona.

The traditional historiography has long viewed the solar cult in Late Antiquity as an essentially Constantine domain. However, the monumental topography of Maxentius's Rome decisively challenges this assumption. Maxentius, who was quite subtle in demonstrating his legitimacy, presented his propaganda with finesse, especially in his religious persona and in public institutions, as he did in all his representations of persona. He integrated Sol Invictus in a subtle way into the architectural and memorial representation of his dynasty. Recent archaeoastronomical surveys demonstrate that the main entrance of the Mausoleum of Romulus on the *Via Appia* was aligned with an azimuth of 228°23', expressly designed to capture the sunset on the winter solstice (December 21)¹⁸²

This precise alignment accounted for the local horizon, specifically the six-meter-high enclosure wall, which necessitated a slight structural deviation from the axis of the *Via Appia* to ensure the solar illumination (*hierophany*) penetrated the mausoleum's interior and illuminated the central pillar's niche.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Marlowe 2010, 201–203.

¹⁸² De Franceschini&Veneziano 2021, 99–100

¹⁸³ De Franceschini&Veneziano 2021, 100–101, 106.

This topographical calculation was a deliberate act of dynastic legitimation. During the Late Antique period, the days surrounding the winter solstice (December 21) were inextricably linked to the traditional *Saturnalia*, marking the transition from the old year to the new.¹⁸⁴ From the third century CE onwards, this traditional festival was joined by the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, celebrated on December 25 to commemorate the birth of the solar deity.¹⁸⁵ By orchestrating this solar illumination within the dynastic tomb of his deified son precisely during this chronological window, Maxentius visually and spatially synchronized his own lineage with the unconquered sun.¹⁸⁶

This using of astronomical alignment was not a Late Antique invention, but unlike a deliberate revival of early imperial tradition; much like Augustus synchronized the Ara Pacis Augustae with the equinoctial sun on his own birthday (September 23), Maxentius used this architectural strategy to firmly position himself as a traditional, legitimate Roman emperor rooted in the venerable practices of the first century. The sacred illumination served as a physical signal to legitimize imperial succession, demonstrating that the emperor was the instrument of divine favor.¹⁸⁷ Maxentius pragmatically employed the solar cult to project a public image capable of unifying the diverse sociological dynamics of the capital, transforming the Mausoleum of Romulus into a functional apparatus of civic and religious consensus.

Fortifying the traditional polytheism of the Rome with monumental architecture in both the Forum Romanum and along the *Via Appia* represented only one facet of Maxentius's religious persona, directed primarily toward the conservative senatorial aristocracy. Yet, the sociological reality of the Late Antique capital harbored a massive demographic element extending beyond traditional cults: the Christian communities. The systematic policies of oppression initiated by Diocletianus in 303, termed the "Great Persecution" in modern literature, had inflicted deep social wounds in Italy and the North African provinces. Although Christian historiography, particularly Eusebius and Lactantius, framed Maxentius as a savage continuator of this persecution and an anti-church tyrant (*tyrannus*), available institutional and

¹⁸⁴ De Franceschini&Veneziano 2021, 109

¹⁸⁵ De Franceschini&Veneziano 2021, 109-110

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ De Franceschini&Veneziano 2021, 111-112

judicial documents prove precisely the opposite. The emperor executed one of the most pragmatic and inclusive policies of religious tolerance in Roman history.¹⁸⁸

From the moment he seized power in Rome in 306, Maxentius halted the state terror directed at Christians in the capital. This action stemmed not from him being a secret Christian sympathizer, but from the governing principles upon which he built his legitimacy. For a leader basing his rule on social consent (*consensus*) and urban tranquility, alienating the Christian masses (*plebs urbana*), who represented a considerable portion of his subjects, would have created an administrative vulnerability.¹⁸⁹ By ending the persecution, Maxentius drew a definitive line separating himself from the oppressive and exclusionary Tetrarchs of the East. Thus, he positioned himself as the protector and provider of justice not only for traditional pagans, but for all legal subjects within the borders.

The most definitive evidence invalidating the fabricated *tyrannus* narrative promulgated by the Constantinian ideological program is preserved within the official administrative records (*gesta*) transmitted by Augustine of Hippo. The relevant passage (3.18.34) of Augustine's treatise, *Breviculus collationis cum Donatistis*, which documents the proceedings of the conference convened between Catholics and Donatists in Carthage in 411, demonstrates the precise dimension of Maxentius's religious policy.¹⁹⁰ Within this text, Augustine records from the official documents read at the assembly that Miltiades, the Bishop of Rome, dispatched his deacons to the urban prefect (*praefectus urbi*) bearing letters from Emperor Maxentius and the praetorian prefect (*praefectus praetorio*).

The true significance of this historical document lies in the statement regarding the purpose for which Bishop Miltiades used this official state correspondence. According to Augustine's account, the delegation's objective was to reclaim properties confiscated during the persecution years under Diocletianus, which Emperor Maxentius himself had ordered to be returned to the Christians. This evidence proves that Maxentius's policy toward Christians was not passive ignorance or a simple ceasefire. By issuing orders directly to the highest civil and military bureaucrats of the state, the emperor ensured the legal restitution (*restitutio*) of the church's confiscated real estate.¹⁹¹ This legal restitution and right to property, frequently attributed by modern historiography to the Edict of Milan by Constantinus and Licinius in

¹⁸⁸ Cullhed 1994, 69-75.

¹⁸⁹ Curran 2000, 64-65.

¹⁹⁰ Augustinus, *Breviculus collationis cum Donatistis* 3.18.34 (CSEL 53, 84).

¹⁹¹ Odahl 2004, 99-114.

313, was in fact implemented in the capital years earlier by Maxentius himself, the very man declared a tyrant.

The strategy of legitimacy behind the property restitution decision shows the multi-layered structure of Maxentius's religious *persona*. Returning properties to the church, he guaranteed the civil loyalty of the massive Christian population in the capital and neutralized the threat of a potential internal rebellion. Simultaneously, by enabling the church institution to appeal to the state's judicial authorities, he removed Christians from being an illegal organization and integrated them into the civil-legal order of Rome.¹⁹² This act of restitutio meant that Maxentius's absolute judicial power in the Rome was officially recognized by the Christian bishops themselves. Reclaiming their properties, the church simultaneously validated Maxentius's legitimacy.

This policy of administrative toleration and legal guarantee also facilitated the institutional recovery of the Bishopric of Rome. Following severe internal disciplinary disruptions and exiles during the episcopacies of Marcellus and Eusebius, the church moved toward administrative stability under Maxentius's civic administration.¹⁹³ The emperor's comprehensive policy demonstrates that he did not restrict his religious *persona* to the dogmatism of a singular cult. In accordance with the imperatives of the state, he established a broad basis for civic *consensus* simultaneously with the traditional senatorial aristocracy worshipping at the *Templum Divi Romuli* and with Christian clergy pursuing their legal rights.

These acts of legal recognition and property restitution show that Maxentius built his religious legitimacy not through brute force, but through justice and civic consensus. By restoring the social peace shattered by the Tetrarchy within his own framework of governance the emperor, avoided antagonizing Christians; instead, he made them an essential part of his urban legitimacy. Yet, the civil-religious balance that Maxentius forged through Rome's ancient statecraft would be dragged into a structural theological collision when his rival, Constantine, adopted Christianity as an entirely new, universal, and military ideology. The comprehensive civil-religious mix brought about by Maxentius in the capital was a means to protecting the Rome from any major social break. After that, his main political rival Constantine when he crossed the Alps and came to Italy in 312, completely changed the character of the war.

¹⁹² Cullhed 1994, 70-73.

¹⁹³ Curran 2000, 64-65.

Constantinus realized he could not shatter the urban legitimacy Maxentius had built through Rome's ancient polytheism and civil institutions with a traditional accusation of military usurpation (*usurpatio*). As the commander of a Gallic army invading Italy, Constantinus needed a legal justification for his military intervention to undermine Maxentius's civil authority in Rome. This necessity drove Constantine to launch one of Late Antiquity's most significant ideological shifts: transforming Christianity into a universal, military instrument of legitimacy.¹⁹⁴ Before the two armies clashed at the Milvian Bridge, two different political theologies engaged in a war of sovereignty across the geography of Italy.

Constantine's conversion to Christianity was not just a matter of personal theological conviction; it was a strategic state policy designed to undermine Maxentius's fusion of religious and civic *auctoritas*. Maxentius had anchored his religious legitimacy to the topographical center of Rome (*Urbs*), the ancestral traditions of the Senate, and the sacred architecture of the *Forum Romanum*. In contrast, Constantinus predicated his legitimacy upon a supreme and universalizing theology (*Summus Deus*), entirely independent of specific civic topography or traditional senatorial ratification. The reported celestial vision transmitted by Christian historiography and the Chi-Rho monogram inscribed upon the legionaries' shields asserted that political legitimacy was no longer ratified within the civic temples or the Senate house of Rome, but instead of achieved directly upon the battlefield through the providence of a supreme, singular deity. Through this ideological reorientation, Constantinus elevated the civil conflict beyond a conventional dynastic dispute. He presented his military forces as the instruments of divine will and characterized his military campaign as an act of deliverance (*liberatio*).

In response to his rival's universalist theology, Maxentius did not adopt the strict polytheistic dogmatism exhibited by Maximinus Daia in the Eastern provinces. Unlike, he further consolidated his reliance upon his primary foundation: ancestral traditions (*mos maiorum*). His religious *persona* was predicated upon reinforcing the polytheistic, civic, and protective identity of the Rome (*conservator urbis suae*) in opposition to this external monotheistic development.¹⁹⁵ Prior to the military conflict, Maxentius systematically engaged the city's traditional religious institutions, specifically the polytheistic priestly colleges, in his official capacity as *Pontifex Maximus*. To secure divine favor and the preservation of the city (*pax deorum*), he presided over traditional sacrificial rites. By strictly adhering to procedures

¹⁹⁴ Odahl 2004, 104-106.

¹⁹⁵ Cullhed 1994, 62-65.

mandated by the public religion, he consolidated the support of the civic and religious traditionalists of Rome around his administration.¹⁹⁶

This asymmetry between the political theologies of the two rivals created a profound contrast in the spatial perception of legitimacy. Constantinus's theology was mobile, aggressive, and army-centric; his God was a deity of victory moving through tents, legionary standards (*labarum*), and battlefields. Maxentius's theology, however, was entirely static, defensive, and city-centric. He was inspired and empowered by the majesty of the ancient walls of Rome and the holy limits that defined the city (*pomerium*).¹⁹⁷ Mars or Hercules, the original progenitors of the city, was probably the figures portrayed on the shields of Maxentius's soldiers in the classic style rather than some unfamiliar and alien lettermark. This demonstrates that Maxentius framed the war not as a personal power struggle, but as the defense of Rome's sacred order against a militaristic and theological threat arriving from the frontiers.

Peak of this ideological conflict occurred in late October 312, when Maxentius consulted the Sibylline Books (*Libri Sibyllini*), one of Rome's most ancient civic-religious institutions, to determine his military strategy.¹⁹⁸ According to Zosimus and Lactantius, the prophetic texts predicted that the "enemy of the Romans would die on that day." The Constantinian historiographical tradition asserts that Maxentius misinterpreted the prophecy, advanced beyond the city fortifications, and precipitated his own defeat through an alleged divine obfuscation. Conversely, an analysis reveals a fundamentally different context. A Roman *princeps*, having secured the ratification of the preeminent civic texts validating his legitimacy, and with the anniversary of his accession (*dies imperii*) approaching, could not function as a passive magistrate entrenched within the urban fortifications. Maxentius was required to uphold the duties of the city's legitimate protector, as defined by his religious identity and the (*mos maiorum*). In opposition to Constantinus's new theology, he advanced onto the battlefield with the firm theological conviction that the civic deities would preserve the capital thereby exercising fully legitimate statecraft.

Evaluated in the context of these numismatic and architectural phases, the religious *persona* exhibited by Maxentius throughout his reign was neither an incoherent expression of pagan bias nor the strategic failure of a desperate *tyrannus* during a period of instability, as Christian historiography purported. On the contrary, this political trajectory was the calculated move of

¹⁹⁶ Curran 2000, 64-67.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.7-8; cf. Zosimos, *Historia Nova* 2.16.1.

a ruler excluded from the Tetrarchy, who sought to build a localized, robust foundation of legitimacy by employing Rome's administrative framework. Maxentius derived his religious *auctoritas* not from the exclusionary theology of the Tetrarchy (*Iovius* and *Herculius*) dictated by the Diocletianic framework, but from the ancestral traditions of the city (*mos maiorum*), the sacred topography of the *Forum Romanum*, and the ratification of the senatorial aristocracy. His religious policy was a coherent statecraft that transferred the basis of legitimacy from the military command of the frontiers directly to the temples of Rome, civic *consensus*, and divine harmony (*pax deorum*).

The most striking aspect of this statecraft was its flexibility, refusing confinement to a single dogmatic belief and encompassing all social dynamics of the capital. Breaking the Tetrarchic monopoly in the numismatic propaganda by activating ancient protectors of the city like Mars, the emperor declared his religious independence on coins. Simultaneously, by constructing the Temple of Divus Romulus in the center of the Forum Romanum for his deified son, he transformed this ideological claim into a monument of urban theology. Yet, while fulfilling the expectations of the pagan aristocracy, the same Maxentius placed the Christian masses under legal protection. By ensuring the restitution (*restitutio*) of church properties, he made the largest minority group in the capital a part of his civil legitimacy. This multi-layered structure elevated Maxentius from a usurper to just and legitimate patron (*conservator urbis suae*) of all his subjects.

The defeat and the collapse of the regime at the Milvian Bridge in 312 did not stem from any internal weakness of Maxentius's civil-religious legitimacy. This historical rupture marked a significant transformation in Late Antique politics, where Constantine used a universalist Christian theology to consolidate his imperial authority, effectively excluded the traditional civic constitutionalism of Rome.¹⁹⁹ Although Constantine seized Maxentius's urban legacy, condemned his memory (*damnatio memoriae*), and branded him a tyrant (*tyrannus*), he was effectively forced to adopt the same civil-religious framework his rival had established. This was evident in his construction of churches, his integration of bishops into the state hierarchy, and his transformation of Rome's topography.²⁰⁰

In the final analysis, Maxentius's religious persona is the most magnificent example of how imperial authority could cling to urban and historical roots amidst the legitimacy crises of

¹⁹⁹ Odahl 2004, 104-108.

²⁰⁰ Marlowe 2010, 202-212

Late Antiquity. He revived the Rome and its ancient polytheism not as nostalgia, but as a functioning, protective, and legitimacy-producing constitutional machine. Maxentius's attempt to legitimize himself and his power through a religious *persona* is evident in his works. Through public buildings, coins, and meticulously calculated representations, he sought to present himself as legitimate, aligning himself with republican and early imperial values. This is a fundamental aspect of his religious and other personae. This rational religious performance beneath the propaganda of tyranny indisputably proves that Maxentius's case for legitimacy was one of the most uncompromising acts of resistance in the history of Roman state philosophy.

3.5. The Emperor's Struggle to Demonstrate Legitimacy Through His Personae

Maxentius's reign provides a significant case study in Roman political history regarding the defense of constitutional authority (*auctoritas*), achieved not through singular military compulsion, but via the established state traditions of Rome and the carefully calibrated *personae* aligned with these precedents. Examined within the third chapter across their civic, dynastic, and religious dimensions, these *personae* do not represent fraudulent political artifice employed by a usurping *tyrannus* to mislead the populace, as asserted by Christian historiography and Constantinian ideological initiatives. On the contrary, they represent an essential defense by a ruler institutionally excluded by the Tetrarchic order serving to sustain his political legitimacy.

In Late Antique state philosophy, political legitimacy could not be dictated solely by abstract laws or the military compulsion of frontier legions. Instead, the practical demonstration of authority had to be expressed through official communication channels that the populace could visibly perceive and experience within the urban environment. This institutional necessity drove Maxentius to integrate his claim to legitimacy directly into the physical and visual fabric of Rome. This structural resistance was conducted simultaneously across three distinct media: the numismatic plane, through titles and polytheistic iconographies inscribed on coins; the epigraphic plane, through dedicatory inscriptions; and the architectural plane, through monumental public buildings that permanently reshaped the topography of Rome.

When ancient sources such as the Panegyrici Latini and the writings of Lactantius are subjected to critical review, it becomes clear that Maxentius managed these communication channels with a systematic and deliberate vision. Against the severe diplomatic isolation imposed by the Tetrarchic order that excluded him, the emperor utilized numismatic,

epigraphic, and architectural mediums to engrave his legality directly into the historical memory of the capital. Coins, inscriptions, and public buildings established a formal sphere of civic *consensus* within the capital, serving as strong proof of the civic administration, localized dynastic framework, and religious patronage united within Maxentius's *persona*.

Maxentius's civic *persona* emerged from the fact that political legitimacy could not remain an abstract concept; it had to be translated into a visible and physical presence within Rome. Against the exclusionary policies of the Tetrarchic order that legally ostracized him, the emperor was compelled to demonstrate that he was not a *tyrannus* imposing his authority upon the Rome through military coercion. This necessary demonstration was the outcome of careful statecraft that transferred the basis of legitimacy from frontier legionary headquarters and anchored it within the civic center of Rome. To assert his status as a traditional magistrate (*princeps*), the emperor employed three primary communication paths to reach the senatorial aristocracy and the Roman public: coinage iconography, formal inscriptions, and civic architecture.

Coinage serves as the main channel for communicating civic legitimacy to the public, providing the clearest visual articulation of evidence of Maxentius's political stance. While the administrative and military framework of the Diocletianian order frequently depicted emperors in military attire (*paludamentum*) or with a claim of divine inaccessibility, Maxentius preferred an entirely different, localized civic iconography on the coinage issued from the Rome mint. On the obverses of his coins, he had himself depicted wearing the traditional *toga*, the sole symbol of the Roman civil state order and ancestral customs (*mos maiorum*).²⁰¹ This visual choice was no coincidental artistic orientation. It was a declaration on coinage of the effort to prove that the source of power was not military violence or barrack domination, but law and civil consensus.

The globus and scepter, complementary elements of the toga depiction on coinage, further reinforced the demonstration of the civic persona's legitimacy. Holding these symbols of civic authority, Maxentius emphasized that his power derived from a legitimate right to rule predicated upon law, rather than an expansionist military ambition. Despite Christian historiography and Constantian propaganda characterizing him as a belligerent aggressor,

²⁰¹ Cullhed 1994, 45-50; Van Dam 2011, 241-243.

this ruler portrait on coinage served as strong visual evidence to the senatorial aristocracy of Rome of a traditional Roman leader acting as the first among equals (*primus inter pares*).²⁰²

These assertions on the numismatic plane were substantiated through a much more permanent and monumental medium of proof via epigraphic evidence upon monuments erected throughout the Rome. The title *Conservator Urbis Suae* (Protector of His City), employed with systematic consistency across honorary inscriptions and milestones attributed to Maxentius, serves as the most explicit epigraphic record of the emperor's struggle to assert his civic legitimacy.²⁰³ This epigraphic formula did not represent a conventional title employed by the Tetrarchic administration. Instead, it functioned as a political response directed against administrations attempting to reduce Rome to a provincial status. By equating his authority entirely with the administrative preservation of the city and the protection of its civic privileges, these inscriptions provided tangible documentation of his legality.

Epigraphic records upon monuments were observed daily by the Roman populace within the public spaces of the city. The title *Conservator* demonstrated that the emperor was not an external military power occupying Rome, but a legitimate protector operating in harmony with the senatorial aristocracy. Through these inscriptions, Maxentius translated his relationship with the Senate into a tangible civic reality, demonstrating to the populace that civic *consensus* was not simply an abstract concept, but a concrete accord officially recognized by the state administration.²⁰⁴

This expression of the civic *persona* on the numismatic and epigraphic planes attained absolute physical permanence through monumental architectural evidence rising within the urban topography. By initiating the architectural development of the *Basilica Nova*, the center of civic jurisprudence and state justice on the Velian Hill, Maxentius translated his legitimacy into a formal declaration of sovereignty.²⁰⁵ In Late Antique state philosophy, the nature of the public works an emperor dedicated to the city serves as the most definitive indicator of his political intentions and the foundation of his legitimacy. The fact that Maxentius erected not a military installation in the center of Rome, but a monumental civic structure serving exclusively the operation of the Senate, the courts, and the civic administration, provides the most solid architectural documentation of his political vision.

²⁰² Van Dam 2011, 241-243.

²⁰³ Odahl 2004, 79; Cullhed 1994, 45-47

²⁰⁴ Van Dam 2011, 241.

²⁰⁵ Cullhed 1994, 49-55

The monumental vaults and imposing scale of the *Basilica Nova* represented the *de facto* return of civic justice and the legal order to the Rome. Framed within the texts of pro-Constantinus historiography as an illegitimate *tyrannus* confiscating senatorial property, Maxentius was in reality commissioning one of the most expansive public buildings of the era dedicated to the administration of civic justice in the center of Rome.²⁰⁶ This architectural evidence refutes the historiographical narrative of his tyranny. While usurpers and *tyranni* typically suspend the rule of law, Maxentius solidified his own civic legitimacy by erecting a monumental edifice where the law would be administered.

The expression of the civic *persona* functions as a comprehensive political defense in which numismatic, epigraphic, and architectural evidence substantiate and complement one another. Coinage, inscriptions, and the civic structures reshaping the Roman Forum serve as enduring formal signs of Maxentius's claim to legitimacy. By employing these three channels with systemic cohesion, the emperor countered the allegations of illegality directed against him through the physical fabric of Rome, proving to the Roman populace that he was the rightful civic magistrate of the city.

Demonstration of the civic magistrate identity within the urban environment addressed only the immediate aspect of Maxentius's claim to legitimacy. For a stable administration to endure, it also had to be established that imperial authority was secured by a persistent dynastic lineage (*domus*) extending into the future. Having asserted his legitimacy during the early years of his reign through the universal House of Hercules (*Domus Herculia*) represented by his father Maximianus, Maxentius lost this external dynastic affiliation following the political rupture and his father's defection in 308. Being legally excluded by the other *augusti* at Carnuntum compelled the emperor to develop his own dynastic legitimacy from a completely independent, localized origin rooted directly in Rome, and to prove this to the Roman populace.

Primary tool for delivering this essential political message to the public was the official state coinage. When reviewing numismatic emissions after 308, it becomes clear that Hercules iconography was systematically withdrawn, replaced on the reverses by the mythological founders of Rome. By decoupling his dynasty's legitimacy from the abstraction of the distant past or Tetrarchic adoption ceremonies, Maxentius issued folles depicting the twins suckled

²⁰⁶ Marlowe 2010, 202–211.

by the she-wolf (*Lupa Romana*) and Mars, the God of War.²⁰⁷ This visual evidence functioned as an official declaration that the dynasty derived its authority not from military encampments, but directly from the founding myth (*origo*) of the city and the territorial core of Rome.

Systematic promotion of *Mars* and the twins on coins provided a concrete political response to the adoptive ties favored by the Tetrarchs. According to Noel Lenski, legitimacy in Late Antiquity was defined not just by military success, but by how effectively an emperor rooted his authority in historical continuity.²⁰⁸ By associating his dynastic claim, derived from his biological lineage, directly with the founding ancestors of the city, Maxentius visually demonstrated to the senatorial aristocracy and the Roman populace that the institutional continuity of Rome and the preservation of his dynasty were inextricably linked. This alignment shifted the status of the imperial family from an external administrative entity governing the city into its native son and legitimate historical heir.

This localized dynastic legitimacy, disseminated through coinage, was substantiated by a monumental architectural program within the topography of the Rome. The architectural evidence of his dynastic *persona* is the expansive Maxentius Complex on the Via Appia, situated just beyond the city's sacred boundary (*pomerium*). Comprising an imperial villa, an imposing circus (*Circus Maxentii*), and a monumental circular tomb (*Mausoleum*), this complex functioned as far more than an aristocratic residence. It served as a formal declaration, demonstrating the permanence and authority of the dynasty to all who entered the city.²⁰⁹ While emperors such as Diocletianus or Galerius erected their dynastic tombs in provincial capitals, Maxentius demonstrated that his lineage was rooted in the Rome by positioning the funerary monument of his own dynasty directly upon Rome's preeminent processional artery. The most clear element of this monumental demonstrating is the mausoleum dedicated to his heir, Valerius Romulus, who died prematurely in 309. Having deliberately bestowed upon his son the name of the city's founder, the emperor employed a civic and religious initiative following his early death to deify him (*consecratio*) and inter him within this circular temple-tomb. A Roman emperor exercising the prerogative to deify his biological heir serves as one of the most definitive signs of his authority (*auctoritas*). By integrating his son into the official pantheon as Divus Romulus with the formal ratification of

²⁰⁷ Cullhed 1994, 48-50.

²⁰⁸ Lenski 2006, 68-70.

²⁰⁹ Cullhed 1994, 49-55.

the Senate, Maxentius was demonstrating to the Roman populace that his dynastic lineage not only possessed the legal right to govern the city, but had also achieved sufficient administrative power to contribute a new deity to the city's divine protectors.²¹⁰

Deification of his son was immediately translated into numismatic evidence via the state mints. Coinage bearing the legend *Aeternae Memoriae* (To Eternal Memory), depicting a circular, domed temple surmounted by an eagle, disseminated the divine presence of Valerius Romulus across the imperial territories.²¹¹ These numismatic records document a reality that extended beyond paternal grief; they highlight the official status of a new sacred lineage, established and constitutionally registered within the territorial core of Rome in defiance of the Tetrarchic order's dynastic exclusion. This dynastic claim was no longer an abstract assertion, as it possessed tangible divine substantiation.

The display of the dynastic *persona* through numismatic and architectural channels serves as a formal achievement that extends well beyond Maxentius's assertion of an abstract right of succession; it integrates his biological lineage into the administrative continuity of Rome. The iconography of the twins and the she-wolf on coinage, the monumental mausoleum along the *Via Appia*, and the deified young heir (*Divus*) function as the solid official guarantees of legitimacy the emperor presented to the senatorial aristocracy and the Roman plebs. He was demonstrating unequivocally through architectural and numismatic evidence that he was not an illegitimate usurper, but the founder of the sole legitimate Roman dynasty integrated with the formal foundations of Rome, securing its continuity from the past into the future.

Establishing civic and dynastic legitimacy within the urban environment required a religious guarantee, proving that the traditional pact between the state and the gods (*pax deorum*) had been restored. Challenging the theological monopoly imposed by the Tetrarchic order through Jupiter and Hercules (*Iovius and Herculus*)²¹², Maxentius was compelled to translate his religious authority from an abstract claim into formal statecraft before the Roman populace. The emperor's effort to be demonstrating his religious *persona* functions as a structural civic-religious defense, conducted simultaneously through coinage, monumental interventions within the topography of Rome, and official legal policies directed at religious communities. This defense invalidates the historiographical narrative of a godless *tyrannus* produced by Christian authors, utilizing the official documentation of the state itself.

²¹⁰ Cullhed 1994, 69-77.

²¹¹ Cullhed 1994, 55.

²¹² Curran 2000, 57.

The initial step in communicating religious legitimacy to the Roman populace again relied on the efficacy of official numismatic propaganda. Countering the exclusionary theology of the Tetrarchic order, Maxentius asserted his theological independence by disseminating the local and traditional cults of Rome on the reverses of coinage issued from state mints. The iconography of Rome's founding ancestor, Mars (*Mars Pater*), serves as visual evidence that the emperor's religious patronage appealed not to a narrow faction, but to a broad, systemic belief system embraced by the military and the civic populace. This coinage disassociated Maxentius from the status of an external *tyrannus* imposed within military camps and positioned him in the capacity of a legitimate *pontifex maximus* defending the city's traditional religious structures and ancestral customs (*mos maiorum*). As this coinage circulated, it provided tangible documentation that the sacred, systemic order of Rome was officially guaranteed by the ruler of the city.

However, the most permanent evidence of the religious *persona* was provided by the architectural development of the city's sacred topography, specifically the *Forum Romanum*. Maxentius substantiated his civic theology through monumental architecture with the *Templum Divi Romuli*, which he commissioned along the *Sacra Via* (Sacred Way) in the name of his formally deified son. This monumental structure is not merely a funerary edifice; a definitive assertion of legitimacy demonstrating how the state religion was preserved within the historical center of the city, integrated into the daily civic routines of the senatorial aristocracy and the Roman populace. Having experienced administrative and religious marginalization during the Diocletianic order, the *Forum Romanum* was reinstated as the center of imperial theology and civic authority through this monumental intervention of Maxentius. This architectural evidence demonstrates that the emperor translated his religious *persona* from an abstract theological claim into a tangible reality.

The legal dimension encompassing Christians within this comprehensive framework of religious legitimacy provides the evidence that most definitively refutes the historiographical narrative of tyranny disseminated by Constantinian propaganda. Maxentius demonstrated his religious authority by establishing that he was a just ruler not only to the traditional senatorial aristocracy but also to the Christian population of the capital. The state records (*gesta*) transmitted by Augustine himself in his work *Breviculus collationis cum Donatistis* (3.18.34) document that Maxentius's administrative toleration toward Christians was not a passive

policy.²¹³ By issuing official directives to the highest magistrates of the state, the emperor legally mandated the restitution (*restitutio*) of church properties confiscated during the Diocletianic persecution. The fact that Christian bishops reclaimed their properties through the judicial authorities of the state constitutes the most robust institutional documentation that Maxentius's legitimacy in the Rome was officially recognized by the church as well.²¹⁴ This situation documented that the emperor administered the Rome not through military coercion, but with civic *consensus* and justice.

Maxentius's sustained endeavors in demonstrating his *persona*-whether as a civic, dynastic, or ultimately religious figure-through various numismatic, epigraphic, architectural, and legal mediums enabled him to establish a solid foundation of legitimacy within Rome. Maxentius demonstrated through tangible evidence that he was a traditional toga-clad *princeps*, a dynastic founder rooted directly in the territorial core of Rome, and a ruler (*conservator*) safeguarding the sacred institutional order of the city for diverse religious communities; furthermore, he sustained these claims even in the face of the political isolation imposed by the Tetrarchic order, his father's defection, and subsequent military crises. This comprehensive framework, established by integrating these distinct *personae* into a cohesive statecraft, was now positioned to confront the definitive evaluation of legitimacy within Late Antique state philosophy against an emerging external threat gathering outside the walls of the Rome.

This comprehensive framework of legitimacy, examined throughout the third chapter across its civic, dynastic, and religious dimensions via evidence from the urban environment, demonstrates that Maxentius's *personae* were not temporary reactions to periodic crises, but rather a cohesive defense. Against the universalist, military-centric administrative tutelage of the Tetrarchic order that marginalized the Rome, Maxentius recognized that legitimacy could not be substantiated by abstract decrees, but only through the city's own institutional history, territorial core, and ancestral traditions (*mos maiorum*). The institutional harmony the emperor established with the senatorial aristocracy, the localized dynastic lineage he derived from his biological descent, and his religious patronage securing the sacred infrastructure of the city do not represent isolated political initiatives. Unlike, the core elements of a cohesive statecraft synchronized to cultivate civic *consensus* within the borders of the Rome.

²¹³ Odahl 2004, 92.

²¹⁴ Barnes 1982, 16-18.

The most significant formal achievement of this system statecraft is that it translated legitimacy from an abstract theoretical claim into a robust physical reality observed by the Roman populace daily through numismatic, epigraphic, and architectural evidence. The iconography of a traditional toga-clad civic princeps disseminated from the state mints, the epigraphic records bearing the title Conservator (*Protector*), the dynastic temples commissioned along the Sacra Via, and the Basilica Nova substantiated Maxentius's formal authority (*auctoritas*) within the topography of Rome. Consequently, by 312, when Constantinus crossed the Alps and arrived at the gates of Rome, he did not encounter an illegitimate and unsupported tyrannus, as the historiographical narrative of Christian authors asserted. On the contrary, Constantinus confronted a legitimate Roman emperor who had unequivocally been demonstrating his authority through architectural evidence, numismatic records, and civic consensus, having firmly rooted his administration within the formal foundations of Rome.

Indeed, the strength and permanence of this system framework of legitimacy established by Maxentius through his personae was ironically shown most definitively by the events following his military defeat at the Milvian Bridge. Even though his memory was officially condemned by a senatorial decree (*damnatio memoriae*) and his statuary was destroyed following his demise in 312, the civic, dynastic, and religious framework he established was so robust that it could not be completely eradicated even by Constantinus. To consolidate his own authority in Rome and secure legitimacy in the eyes of the senatorial aristocracy, Constantinus was compelled to appropriate the monumental architectural projects Maxentius left unfinished, integrate his traces within the urban topography into his own administrative vision, and effectively assume the potent civic role of protector (*conservator*) established by Maxentius. Maxentius may have been defeated militarily on the battlefield, but the civic framework of legitimacy he was demonstrating endured within the monumental topography of Rome.

Following this decisive military encounter where political theologies and claims of legitimacy confronted one another, the conflict between the *personae* of the two rival emperors transitioned into an entirely new phase. This tension between the permanence of Maxentius's civic legacy and Constantinus's new universalist vision will constitute the primary focus of the fourth chapter. In the subsequent section (4.1), the *de facto* administrative policy Constantinus formulated following the conflict toward the city of Rome, the senatorial aristocracy, the Roman *plebs*, and, most importantly, against Maxentius's officially

condemned memory (*memoria*) and the monumental architectural legacy he left behind, will be analyzed in detail. Consequently, it will be demonstrated how the struggle for dominance over the physical and constitutional fabric of the Rome persisted beyond the military conflict.

The public representation of Maxentius cannot be understood through the traditional historiographical lens of a defensive usurper attempting to hold onto illegitimate power. Instead, as the preceding analyses of his civil, dynastic, and religious *personae* have demonstrated, his reign was characterized by a cohesive ideological strategy. Maxentius did not treat the spheres of civil administration, dynastic succession, and religious devotion as separate or just theoretical concepts; on the contrary, he integrated them into an instrument of imperial legitimation rooted in traditional Roman values.

This integration is evident in his use of Rome's physical and cultural topography. By wearing the civic toga and reshaping the architectural center of the city with monuments like the Basilica Nova, he anchored his authority in the traditions of the Republic and the early Empire, demonstrating his *civilitas*. This civil foundation extended into his dynastic policy through the deification of Valerius Romulus and the construction of the dynastic complex on the Via Appia. Finally, by aligning the entrance of the Mausoleum with the winter solstice and the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, Maxentius linked his physical presence in Rome to divine sanction. Through this topographical and astral alignment, he revived the early imperial traditions of Augustus, demonstrating his lawful emperorship not through Tetrarchic military force, but through the sacred and historical landscape of the Rome.

Therefore, the construction of the Maxentian image was not a synthesis of Tetrarchic propaganda, but a reorganization of traditional Roman identity. He built a regime structurally and ideologically rooted in the physical reality of Rome; consequently, his victor, Constantinus, could not eradicate his legacy. As Chapter 4 will examine, the framework established by Maxentius was integrated into the city to such an extent that Constantinus was compelled to physically and symbolically expropriate (*appropriatio*) the instruments of legitimacy his defeated rival had constructed.

4. The Situation After Maxentius

4.1. Constantinus' Approach to Maxentius's Legacy After the Battle of the Milvian Bridge

The Battle of the Milvian Bridge, which concluded with Maxentius's death in the Tiber on October 28, 312, was more than a military turning point in Late Antique history; it marked a deep shift that decided the formal destiny of Rome. Following the defeat, control of the Italian peninsula and North Africa passed entirely to Constantinus. The localized Roman regime, which had resisted the exclusionary, military-centric policies of the Tetrarchic order for six years and built its legitimacy upon civic consensus, was dismantled by the intervention of an army originating from the frontiers. This military result placed the senatorial aristocracy and the Roman populace entirely under the authority of a new, external conqueror whose administrative intentions remained uncertain.²¹⁵

The formal entry ceremony (*adventus*) Constantinus conducted into the Rome the following day, on October 29, 312, served as the most tangible visual declaration of the city's new reality. The victorious commander entered the city not by the invitation of the Senate or through civic consensus, but directly by right of conquest. During this entry, Constantinus exhibited Maxentius's severed head upon a spear throughout the streets of Rome and subsequently dispatched it to the North African provinces to there. This act definitive evidence that the new administration's framework of legitimacy was not civic, but entirely military and formidable. For the Roman populace, this spectacle symbolized the fall of a civic princeps who had originated from their own structure and safeguarded the city for years, as well as the de facto termination of the city's administrative autonomy.

Constantinus's administrative takeover of Rome immediately eliminated the civic-religious balance established during the Maxentius era. The senatorial aristocracy and the Senate no longer interacted with a localized civic magistrate like Maxentius, who grounded his authority in the city's ancestral traditions (*mos maiorum*) and shared executive administration with them. On the contrary, they encountered an absolute military power that derived his legitimacy from a divine mandate and his Gallo-Germanic legions. This new *augustus* was an emperor who did not originate within the borders of Rome, possessed no inherent connection to its topography, and did not derive his legitimacy from the monumental legacy of the Forum

²¹⁵ Marlowe 2010, 215-219; cf. Cullhed 1994, 75-85.

Romanum. In summary, Constantinus's entry into Rome signified the end of the city's administrative autonomy and the localized containment of imperial authority.

This detachment was distinctly evident in the topographical and administrative relationship Constantinus maintained with the city of Rome throughout his reign. While Maxentius had rarely departed Rome during his six-year reign, establishing the city as the exclusive center of imperial administration, Constantinus treated the Rome essentially as a provincial center. Entering the city in late October 312 following the military conflict, Constantinus remained in Rome for only a brief period and departed from Italy in January 313, proceeding to Milan to convene with his ally Licinius.²¹⁶ This prompt departure the most explicit indication that the new emperor had no intention of using the Rome as his primary administrative center. The new emperor signaled his clear intent to move away from Rome as his primary administrative hub through this abrupt departure, which served as a stark, formal sign of his shifting priorities.

Constantinus's infrequent and brief stays in Rome throughout his reign provide clear proof of his detachment from the city's civic roots. After leaving in 313, he returned only once in 315 to mark his tenth imperial anniversary (*Decennalia*). Following this, a lengthy absence ensued, interrupted only by a final visit in 326 to celebrate his twentieth imperial anniversary (*Vicennalia*).²¹⁷ The circumstance that the total time he spent in Rome during his reign of over three decades amounted to only a few months demonstrates that, within his framework of legitimacy, the Rome had been relegated to a ceremonial historical space visited only sporadically.

The emperor's prolonged administrative absence created a formal break for the Senate and the *plebs urbana*. Imperial residences, circuses, and temples that served as hubs of the ruler's presence under Maxentius were returned to the management of city magistrates (*praefectus urbi*) by Constantinus. Rome forfeited the systemic primacy Maxentius had restored, becoming a peripheral concern compared to Constantinus's military campaigns and his quest for a new imperial capital. These circumstances reveal that Constantinus viewed Rome not as a seat of power, but as a subjugated territory requiring firm military and administrative oversight.

²¹⁶ Barnes 1982, 71-72.

²¹⁷ Barnes 1982, 77.

A profound formal challenge remained for the new emperor, who arrived from the imperial frontiers and could not rely solely on military force to assert his position. Although Maxentius had perished and his armies were dispersed, the civic, dynastic, and religious legitimacy framework he had built over six years with the support of the Roman populace and solidified through monumental architecture and numismatic evidence remained firmly in place. Consequently, when Constantinus entered Rome, he did not encounter an institutional vacuum. Instead, he faced a monumental formal structure shaped entirely by Maxentius's personae, which left architectural traces across the urban topography and linked the senatorial aristocracy to his established civic policies.²¹⁸

This monumental and formal reality explains why Constantinus could not immediately dismantle the deeply entrenched civic consensus following his military victory, nor could he instantly impose a total legal condemnation against Maxentius's memoria. To avoid alienating the senatorial aristocracy and the Roman populace, this emperor who resided elsewhere and only visited Rome sporadically was forced to adopt a measured, gradual strategy of appropriation, opting to absorb Maxentius's civic legacy rather than attempting to destroy it through military coercion.

The enduring civic and monumental administrative resistance Constantinus encountered upon entering Rome in the autumn of 312 definitively shaped the initial policies of the new regime. Although a military victory had been secured, the victor recognized that the systemic and political reality of the city could not be altered immediately through force. In Late Antique statecraft, condemning the memory of a defeated rival (*damnatio memoriae*) and dismantling his administrative framework was a standard procedure. Yet, during his initial months in Rome, Constantinus avoided immediately executing this policy of absolute legal condemnation against Maxentius's memoria, forced instead to adopt a measured and protracted strategy. This delay stemmed not from the emperor's personal clemency, but entirely from the efficacy of the deeply entrenched civic consensus Maxentius had established within the city.

The formal relationship Maxentius established with the senatorial aristocracy (*Senatus*) and the Roman populace (*plebs urbana*) over six years had transitioned his status from an illegitimate usurpation into the city's very own identity. Had Maxentius genuinely been an illegitimate tyrannus uniformly rejected by the Roman populace, as Constantinian

²¹⁸ Cullhed 1994, 75–77; Marlowe 2010, 202–205.

historiographical narratives asserted, the immediate physical destruction of his *memoria* and the monumental architecture he commissioned following the military conflict would have been received with civic approval. The systemic reality, however, contradicted this narrative. As scholars of urban topography such as Elizabeth Marlowe is demonstrating, the civic and religious architecture Maxentius commissioned within the city was so integrated with civic utility and the city's monumental legacy that immediately dismantling them would not signify conferring *liberty* upon the city, but rather initiating a formal conflict with the core of Rome itself.²¹⁹ Confronted with the efficacy of this deeply entrenched civic consensus, Constantinus was compelled to defer the immediate legal and architectural dismantling of Maxentius's dynastic legacy.

Another formal necessity underlying this measured administrative strategy resided in the status of the Senate. While establishing his civic *persona*, Maxentius consistently drew authority from senatorial approval and directed the administrative framework in coordination with the *Senatus*. Condemning Maxentius immediately as an illegitimate *tyrannus* upon entering Rome would have effectively relegated the senatorial aristocracy which had collaborated with him for six years and ratified his legal decrees to the status of accomplices. As an external emperor detached from the city, Constantinus required the administrative expertise and allegiance of this civic elite to govern Rome. The formal process of declaring Maxentius a legal *tyrannus* was deferred to avoid alienating the senatorial aristocracy and to gradually integrate them into the new administrative order.

Regarding the Roman populace (*plebs urbana*), the dynastic and civic bonds established by Maxentius were too firmly established to be immediately dismantled. The civic spectacles conducted at the *Circus Maxentii*, the administrative regulations regarding the urban grain supply, and the formal respect for the city's sacred boundary (*pomerium*) had established Maxentius as a definitive civic protector (*conservator*) in the estimation of the Roman populace. Constantinus recognized during his formal *adventus* on October 29 that he could not immediately eradicate the *memoria* of Maxentius. While military units such as Maxentius's Praetorian Guard were disbanded and their encampments dismantled, Constantinus suspended military coercion regarding the civic, architectural, and formal legacy of the city, commencing a phase of administrative accommodation.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Marlowe 2010, 215-219

²²⁰ Van Dam 2011, 217-218.

This formal reality provides clear evidence of how deeply Maxentius's framework of legitimacy had taken root within Rome. The civic legacy of the emperor who perished in the battle was so firmly established that not even Constantinus, acting as sole *augustus*, could immediately dismantle it through a single decree. This deliberate deferral of the *damnatio memoriae* procedure proves that Maxentius's influence persisted within the urban topography of Rome long after his military defeat. Such enduring civic and monumental resistance compelled Constantinus to implement a gradual, systematic administrative strategy across the topography of the city. When Constantinus entered Rome in late October 312 following his victory at the Milvian Bridge, the city he occupied was not the capital of an illegitimate tyrant, as subsequent panegyrics and Constantinian propaganda asserted. Rather, he confronted the monumental and ideological legacy of Maxentius, a ruler who had materialized his constitutional legitimacy into the topography of the Rome. Constantinus's immediate policy in Rome was defined not by eradication, but by the spatial expropriation (*appropriatio*) of the Maxentian framework of public representation.

The *damnatio memoriae* decree served only as a legal facade for a broader process of architectural and ideological assimilation. Seeking to consolidate his military victory and integrate his new administration within Rome, the emperor chose not to dismantle the deeply rooted civic and religious legacy Maxentius had built within the urban topography. To avoid damaging the *persona* of a localized civic magistrate who had commissioned, safeguarded, and enhanced the city, the architectural integrity of the structures remained intact. However, the formal and ideological ownership of these monuments was transferred to Constantinus through methodical statecraft. This strategy proved the most effective method for integrating the monumental *memoria* of Rome into the service of the new, victorious emperor.

The most explicit manifestation of this administrative strategy of monumental appropriation is the monumental *Basilica Nova* complex situated upon the Velian Hill at the eastern periphery of the *Forum Romanum*. Designed and commissioned entirely by Maxentius as a monumental center of civic justice, senatorial administration, and civic *consensus*, this structure was nearing completion when Constantinus entered Rome. Rather than physically dismantling this center of civic jurisprudence to commission a military victory monument, Constantinus appropriated the architectural project and fundamentally modified the structure's orientation to reflect his own *auctoritas*. He integrated a new, monumental entrance upon the southern facade of the basilica-which originally lay on an east-west axis parallel to the *Sacra Via*-and

commissioned a large apse upon the northern wall, entirely redefining the structural focal point of the edifice according to his own administrative vision.²²¹

The element integrated within the interior of this new apse upon the northern wall represented the most decisive ideological intervention Constantinus directed toward his rival's legacy. At the exact center of this apse, the emperor commissioned a colossal marble statue of himself seated upon a throne (the *Colossus*). Beneath these monumental vaults that Maxentius had commissioned to substantiate civic justice, the monumental representation of Constantinus now presided. The *Colossus* statuary was not just an aesthetic representation an explicit declaration signifying that, although his predecessor had commissioned the edifice, Constantinus now functioned as the exclusive authority over the city and its justice. Unlike physically dismantling the structure, Constantinus effectively appropriated Maxentius's *persona* of the civic *princeps* enhancing the city by integrating his own monumental representation, personally assuming the administrative role as the exclusive arbiter of civic justice.

This administrative strategy of monumental appropriation extended beyond the *Basilica Nova* to the entire sacred and dynastic fabric of the city. Monuments within the *Forum Romanum*, such as the *Templum Divi Romuli* a structure serving as a firmly established sign of the lineage Maxentius derived from his son underwent this same process of appropriation. Constantinus avoided physically dismantling these sites, thereby preventing any infringement upon the religious practices of the senatorial aristocracy or the foundational principle of *pax deorum* (the peace of the gods). Instead, facilitated by the administrative pragmatism and adaptability of the Senate, the dedicatory inscriptions were modified; the edifices were re-dedicated to the virtues, military triumphs, and the assumed liberator *persona* of the new, victorious emperor.

The alignment of the Roman Senate, the city's oldest administrative body, with this process of appropriation is the definitive sign of how formal legitimacy was transferred. The senatorial aristocracy, which had directed the administration alongside Maxentius for years, pragmatically authorized the legal transfer of their predecessor's monumental legacy to Constantinus through official decrees to secure their position under the new regime. According to the *Panegyrici Latini*, the Senate ordered that all major civic architecture commissioned by Maxentius *be rededicated to the merits of Constantinus (meritis*

²²¹ Coarelli 2014, 91-92.

Constantini).²²² This decree signaled the transformation of military control into a legalized administrative transfer by the Senate. It represented the integration of authority derived from military coercion into a formal civic framework, authorized by Rome's most ancient body.

Constantinus bypassed the firmly established resistance Maxentius had created within the urban topography not through physical destruction, but through systematic spatial appropriation (*appropriatio*). Maxentius's *persona* as *Conservator Urbis Suae* (Protector of His City) was legally transferred along with the civic architecture he commissioned; Constantinus redefined the civic *memoria* by integrating his own epigraphic and monumental representations into these structures. Appropriating this legacy was the most crucial step in preparing the foundation for the comprehensive *tyrannus* narrative that would later be formulated in legal and historiographical records. Constantinus first appropriated the architecture, then applied legal frameworks to eradicate the *memoria* of the original patron.

While the appropriation of monuments served as a way to absorb Maxentius's civic legacy, Constantinus also needed to employ legal and epigraphic mechanisms to dismantle his rival's deeply rooted support. However, his measured administrative strategy meant that declaring Maxentius an illegitimate *tyrannus* and enforcing a formal *damnatio memoriae* could not happen immediately. Constantinus first needed to solidify his authority in Italy and secure the backing of the Senate. This formal necessity meant that the official designation of Maxentius as a *tyrannus* appeared in state documentation only months, or even years, after the military victory.

The records of the *Codex Theodosianus*, one of the most significant compilations of the Late Antique legal framework, provide the evidence of this deferred and gradual legal liquidation. It was not until January 6, 313—months after the military victory on October 28, 312—that laws CTh 15.14.3–4 formalized the cancellation of official administrative acts executed during the Maxentian era (*rescissio actorum*), marking the first instance Maxentius was officially designated as a *tyrannus* within the formal legal documentation of the state²²³ This legal process of liquidation was so deeply integrated into city that enactment of law CTh 5.8.1, regulating the restitution of expropriated properties and legal rights to their former owners,

²²² Barnes 1981, 46.

²²³ *Codex Theodosianus* 15.14.3–4 (January 6, 313). For a modern analysis of these laws in the context of Constantinus the Great's erasure of the "tyrant" (Maxentius) memory (*damnatio memoriae*) and efforts toward political legitimacy, see Tantillo 2020, 28–29.

was deferred until March 19, 314—nearly a year and a half following the military conflict.²²⁴ This chronological interval within the formal legal documentation constitutes definitive evidence that the administrative order established by Maxentius possessed a level of legitimacy far too deep to be immediately dismantled through military coercion.

Simultaneously invalidating Maxentius's legitimacy retroactively within the legal domain, Constantinus initiated a comprehensive administrative communication strategy upon the epigraphic plane. Through monuments and marble inscriptions commissioned across the Roman Empire, the localized, protective (*conservator*) *persona* successfully utilized by Maxentius was systematically appropriated, and Constantinus's assumed *persona* as the *liberator* was formulated. The inscription *CIL* XIV 131 (*ILS* 687), situated in Ostia, one of the most explicit manifestations of this epigraphic appropriation and the newly established formal framework. Within this dedication, Constantinus is honored as the "restorer of public liberty" (*restitutori publicae libertatis*), the "defender of the city of Rome" (*defensori urbis Romae*), and the "author of the common salvation of all" (*communis omnium salutis auctori*).²²⁵ The claim of functioning as the exclusive legitimate protector of the city, which Maxentius personally utilized upon his numismatic and monumental evidence, was formally transferred to the *persona* of Constantinus via this epigraphic strategy. The representation of the localized civic *princeps* safeguarding the city from external threats was superseded by the *liberator persona* "saving" the city from an alleged internal *tyrannus*.

This epigraphic strategy was not restricted to the administrative appropriation of imperial titulature; it was executed through institutional dichotomies characterizing Maxentius's six-year administration as a constitutional rupture. The inscription *CIL* VIII 7006 (*ILS* 688), commissioned within North Africa, represents the institutional culmination of this new administrative communication strategy epigraphically formalized by the administrative framework. Within this epigraphic evidence, Constantinus is represented as a *liberator* who "illuminated with the new light (*nova luce*) of his blessed victory the liberty crushed by the darkness of slavery (*tenebris servitutis*)."²²⁶ The *consensus* Maxentius established with the

²²⁴ *Codex Theodosianus* 5.8.1 (March 19, 314). For a modern discussion of this law regarding the cancellation of the tyrant's decisions and the restoration of legal status, see Tantillo 2020, 28-29. Additionally, for the general legal context of the process, see van Poppel 2014, 18.

²²⁵ *CIL* XIV 131 = *ILS* 687. For an epigraphic examination of Constantinus being referred to as "*restitutor publicae libertatis*" (restorer of public liberty) in the Ostia inscriptions within the context of imperial propaganda, see Grünewald 1990, 221 (no. 265).

²²⁶ *CIL* VIII 7006 = *ILS* 688. For a detailed analysis of Constantinus being described in this North African (Cirta) inscription as the one who "illuminated with a new light" (*nova luce inluminavit*) the darkness of slavery, see Grünewald 1990, 195 (no. 97) and 224-25.

senatorial aristocracy and the Roman populace was abruptly relegated to the "darkness of slavery" within these senatorial-approved epigraphic dedications, while the military integration of the external Gallic legions was epigraphically documented as a "new light" illuminating Rome.

Through legal decrees (*Codex Theodosianus*) and epigraphic texts (*CIL* inscriptions), Constantinus completely reorganized the administrative framework around this *tyrannus-liberator* dichotomy of his own formulation. Following the administrative appropriation of civic architecture, this legal and epigraphic liquidation a civic intervention aimed at eradicating the powerful framework of legitimacy Maxentius had established through monumental architecture and justice in Rome from the official *memoria* of the state. However, the definitive effect of this *tyrannus* narrative epigraphically documented and legally enacted would be finalized by a distinct historiographical mechanism originating outside the direct administrative framework: the texts of Christian ecclesiastical historians.

Legal decrees and epigraphic texts were not enough to fully dismantle the legitimacy of Maxentius. While these formal tools addressed the Senate and city administration, the new regime required a broader narrative to frame the past as a period of illegitimate *tyrannis* throughout the empire. This ideological work was carried out by the intellectual supporters of the new administration: the Christian ecclesiastical historians. The most lasting phase of the *damnatio memoriae* process, which Constantinus began through monuments and law, was finalized in the writings of Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea.²²⁷

De Mortibus Persecutorum by Lactantius and the works of Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Vita Constantini*, are not neutral historical records. They are theological texts that systematically erased the civic and religious *persona* of Maxentius. These authors transformed a civil conflict between Roman rulers into a spiritual battle between a divine liberator and a wicked *tyrannus* who relied on illicit rituals. In the writings of Eusebius, Maxentius is depicted as a violent despot who oppressed the Senate, committed crimes against the aristocracy, performed forbidden magic, and massacred the Roman people. Through these texts, the firmly established civic consensus and the identity of Maxentius as *Conservator Urbis Suae* (Protector of His City) were deliberately inverted and erased. This historiographical narrative of a *tyrannus* formulated by Christian authors fundamentally contradicts the archaeological and institutional evidence Maxentius established within Rome.

²²⁷ Barnes 1981, 42-44.

As explicitly demonstrated in previous sections of this thesis, a civic magistrate who legally restored the properties of Christian congregations (*restitutio*), commissioned a monumental center of civic jurisprudence (*Basilica Nova*) within the urban core, and exercised his authority with the approval of the senatorial aristocracy shares no correspondence with the irrational and violent *tyrannus* described by Eusebius.²²⁸

Constantinus's military authority and the growing influence of ecclesiastical authors established these biased accounts as the official history. The tangible administrative reality that Maxentius built in Rome, proven by his monumental architecture, was eclipsed by the *tyrannus* narrative created by these Christian writers.

In the final analysis, Constantinus's administrative policy regarding Maxentius's legacy following the military conflict at the Milvian Bridge was not immediate physical destruction, but a gradual, multi-layered appropriation (*appropriatio*) dictated by Late Antique statecraft and civic necessities. When Constantinus formally entered Rome on October 29, 312, he did not encounter an institutional vacuum, but a firmly established civic consensus and a monumental framework of legitimacy established precisely through Maxentius's *personae*. To avoid provoking civic unrest among the Roman populace and the Senate, the new victorious emperor was compelled to pursue a measured administrative strategy, initially deferring the absolute execution of *damnatio memoriae*. Instead of physically dismantling Maxentius's civic and religious architecture, he appropriated them (*appropriatio*) by integrating his own monumental representations; once his administrative authority in Rome was fully consolidated, he legally nullified his predecessor's legitimacy via the legislation of the *Codex Theodosianus* and epigraphic inscriptions (CIL), formalizing the *tyrannus* designation directed toward him. The final phase of this process was executed by the historiographical narratives of ecclesiastical authors, who transitioned Maxentius's localized civic administration into a narrative of theological despotism.

The entire process demonstrates that the conflict, which was definitively resolved by military means at the Tiber River on October 28, 312, persisted for several years across the monumental, legal, and epigraphic domains of Rome. Maxentius may have been defeated in military conflict, but the solid civic, dynastic, and religious characteristics he had integrated into the Roman administrative framework were so deeply entrenched that immediate military coercion by Constantinus could not dismantle them. They could only be dismantled through a

²²⁸ Cullhed 1994, 74-76.

gradual legal and monumental appropriation, using all the civic, legal, and historiographical institutions of the state.

Conclusion

The six-year administration of Maxentius, situated at the center of one of the most significant structural crises of legitimacy in Late Antique political history, has been historically characterized through a narrative of illegitimate tyrannis, formulated by the administrative communication of the new regime and the partisan historiographical texts of Christian ecclesiastical authors. Following the military defeat at the Milvian Bridge in 312, the official historiographical narrative formulated by the Constantinian administration entirely isolated Maxentius from the context of Roman administrative philosophy, designating him as an illegitimate tyrannus characterized by violence and illicit practices. However, the critical analyses conducted throughout this dissertation utilizing numismatic, epigraphic, architectural, and legal evidence demonstrate that this tyrannus narrative does not reflect historical and structural reality. Rather, it represents a systematic historiographical and administrative formulation utilized by a new authority integrating itself into the legal framework of Rome to consolidate its own framework of legitimacy.

From the perspective of Roman legal law and state tradition (*mos maiorum*), the accusation of "illegitimate military usurpation" (*usurpatio*) directed at Maxentius represents a fundamental structural contradiction. Following the Third Century Crisis, Diocletianus and the Tetrarchic order, having consolidated administrative authority, entirely detached structural legitimacy from the senatorial aristocracy (*Senatus*) and the Roman populace (*plebs urbana*) of the Rome, transferring it to peripheral military headquarters and the force of the frontier legions. Within the framework of the Tetrarchic order, Rome had been relegated to an administrative provincial territory, stripped of its structural primacy. Consequently, Maxentius's rise to power in the capital in 306 was not a military coup against the legal rights of the city. On the contrary, it was a legal restoration (*restitutio*) movement that recentered the civil and historical privileges of the Rome against a administrative tutelage that alienated the city by excluding it.

Represented as a narrative of theological despotism within the historiographical texts of authors such as Eusebius and Lactantius, this emperor actually represents the most traditional structural response implemented by Roman statecraft during periods of crisis. While the Tetrarchic order based its legitimacy upon a formulated theological lineage (Iovius and

Herculius) decoupled from localized institutions and imposed upon the Roman populace through military force, Maxentius established his administrative framework upon localized structural foundations. He grounded his authority within a localized framework of legitimacy rooted in the historical topography of Rome and civic consensus. This structural positioning distinguishes him from an illegitimate tyrannus subjugating the city, establishing his persona as a legitimate civic protector (conservator) re-instituting the city's marginalized legal institutions.

This dissertation has systematically deconstructed this historiographical narrative formulated by Christian ecclesiastical authors and Constantinian administrative communication, utilizing the explicit structural evidence of the personae Maxentius established through epigraphic and numismatic dissemination. In Late Antiquity, structural legitimacy had to be substantiated not merely within the formal framework of legal texts, but through visual representations upon numismatic evidence, imperial titulature epigraphically formalized in marble, and monumental architecture integrated into the urban topography of Rome. Rather than acquiescing to the marginalizing administrative decrees of the Tetrarchic order and the absolute political isolation imposed at the Conference of Carnuntum, Maxentius consolidated his structural *auctoritas* within the borders of Rome through the comprehensive establishment of a civic, dynastic, and religious persona.

In the final analysis, characterizing Maxentius's imperial administration as a conventional dynastic conflict or illegitimate military intervention ignores the civic and structural depth of Roman statecraft. He re-established Rome and its traditional polytheism not as mere aesthetic elements of administrative communication, but as functional and protective legal institutions that directly generated structural legitimacy. Within this structural context, the definitive resolution to the question of whether Maxentius represented an illegitimate tyrannus or a legitimate emperor must be sought not within the outcome of a singular military conflict, but within the deeply entrenched civic consensus his civic, dynastic, and religious personae generated within Rome.

The efficacy of the legal resistance Maxentius established within Rome resides in his transition of legitimacy from an exclusive reliance upon military force into a multi-layered framework of structural *auctoritas* and civic consensus. The civic, dynastic, and religious personae, examined throughout the third chapter as independent phenomena via numismatic, epigraphic, and monumental evidence, actually represent elements of a unified statecraft,

mutually reinforcing one another and operating in structural cohesion. Against external administrative tutelage and the threat of military occupation, the emperor utilized this integrated tripartite framework of legitimacy, derived from the city's traditional structural practices (*mos maiorum*). These personae do not represent deceptive facades utilized to manipulate the Roman populace, as Christian historiographical narratives asserted, but rather functional legal components that facilitated the structural resilience of Rome.

The civic persona, representing the initial component of this legal synthesis, was communicated to the Roman populace through official numismatic evidence. The militaristic representations of the Tetrarchs in divine nudity or military attire (*paludamentum*) were rejected; instead, the representation of a princeps clad in the traditional toga and holding the scepter of civic justice was prioritized. This civic and legal positioning was substantiated by a localized dynastic framework whose origins were integrated directly with the topography of Rome and its foundational mythology (*origo*). Following the political isolation at Carnuntum and the betrayal of his father Maximianus, Maxentius relinquished the universal Herculean (Hercules) theological lineage. By integrating visual representations of the Lupa Romana, the twins, and Mars upon his numismatic evidence, he associated his own dynastic lineage directly with the structural continuity of the city. The legitimacy of the dynasty was detached from the ratification of external imperial courts and associated directly with the divine progenitors of Rome.

This structural confidence granted to the senatorial aristocracy and the localized dynastic claim was in the final analysis consolidated through its transition into a religious patronage (*Conservator Urbis Suae*) securing the sacred structural fabric of Rome. Maxentius's framework of legitimacy would have remained incomplete without guaranteeing the *pax deorum* (the peace of the gods) within the sacred boundary (*pomerium*) of the city. The visual representations of Sol Invictus upon numismatic evidence, the safeguarding of traditional civic cults, and the civic tolerance that encompassed the legal restoration (*restitutio*) of Christian ecclesiastical properties integrated the diverse religious populations of the city within a unified framework of legitimacy. Far from the historiographical narrative of an illegitimate tyrannus, this inclusive administrative policy demonstrates that the emperor secured civic consensus not through military force, but through administrative equilibrium and legal justice.

All these civic, dynastic, and religious personae did not remain merely abstract claims or numismatic representations; they materialized into a monumental civic theology integrated within the urban topography of Rome. The Templum Divi Romuli situated within the core of the Forum Romanum, the Basilica Nova functioning as the monumental center of civic justice, and the dynastic mausoleum commissioned along the Via Appia represent the definitive monumental evidence of the *auctoritas* and *consensus* Maxentius established. Maxentius integrated this tripartite persona so deeply into the structural and legal fabric of Rome that structural legitimacy became synonymous not just with the persona of the ruling emperor, but with the structural continuity of the city itself.

Furthermore, the recent archaeoastronomical findings regarding the Mausoleum of Valerius Romulus on the Via Appia provide the ultimate concrete evidence of this integrated statecraft. By aligning the entrance of this dynastic monument to capture the winter solstice illumination (December 21), Maxentius spatially and temporally synchronized his lineage with the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*. This deliberate architectural and topographical calculation was not a Late Antique invention, but a conscious revival of early imperial tradition mirroring the Augustus integration of the *Ara Pacis Augustae* with solar alignments. Through this monumental staging, Maxentius actively demonstrated his status as a lawful and traditional emperor (*legitimus princeps*) to the Senate and the *plebs urbana*. He did not merely assert ideological authority; he provided tangible, physical proof of his legitimate emperorship by embedding it directly into Rome. It definitively proves that Maxentius's religious and dynastic representations were neither superficial propaganda nor illegitimate pagan fanaticism, but a deep constitutional integration of Rome's sacred topography and traditional polytheism into his legitimate administration.

To comprehensively understand the historical significance of the framework of legitimacy Maxentius established through monumental architecture and jurisprudence within Rome, it is essential to contextualize within a legal framework the specific political philosophy and administrative order he opposed. Diocletianus, who resolved the Third Century Crisis, had transitioned the state into a centralized military administration to consolidate imperial authority, entirely detaching structural legitimacy from the civic institutions of Rome. The Tetrarchic order had consolidated administrative authority into an exclusive theological framework under the titles Iovius (of the Jovian lineage) and Herculus (of the Herculan lineage), dependent upon peripheral military headquarters, and imposed upon the Roman populace through military force. Within the context of this militarized and peripheral

statecraft, Rome did not function as a legal center, but was relegated to a marginalized historical legacy. Consequently, Maxentius's assumption of power in 306 and the subsequent six-year administration he established represented a legal re-establishment rooted within the localized institutions of Rome against this theological and military framework.

Against the theological framework of the Tetrarchic order, which derived legitimacy from theological concepts and imposed it through military force, Maxentius re-centered structural legitimacy directly within the local topography, the sacred boundary (*pomerium*) of the city, and the traditional legal institutions of Rome. He transitioned structural primacy from the exclusive confines of palatial administration and integrated it directly into the senatorial aristocracy (*Senatus*), the civic spaces of the Forum Romanum, and the direct administrative engagement of the Roman populace (*plebs urbana*). This represented a fundamental, yet inherently traditional, structural realignment regarding the nature of legal legitimacy. Structural legitimacy was no longer generated within peripheral frontier provinces via the administrative decrees of caesares appointed by the authorization of external augusti; rather, it was established through a localized civic consensus derived from the structural dynamics of Rome, administered in coordination with the senatorial aristocracy along the Sacra Via.

This civic structural resistance transitions Maxentius's persona from a conventional dynastic usurper or a transient military commander emerging during a structural crisis into one of the most traditionalist proponents of Roman statecraft. While the Tetrarchic order fragmented the structural primacy of Rome by transferring the administrative center to provincial cities such as Nicomedia or Mediolanum, Maxentius maintained the continuity of the Roman legal framework by commissioning circular architecture within the urban core, representing himself in traditional civic attire, and administering civic jurisprudence (*restitutio*). His administration represented a structural civic conflict executed to safeguard the structural privileges and administrative autonomy of Rome against the expansive administrative tutelage attempting to relegate the city to a provincial administrative territory.

The true political significance of this legal resistance, which Maxentius consolidated through his civic, dynastic, and religious personae within Rome, paradoxically manifested following his military defeat in 312. Had Maxentius genuinely been an illegitimate tyrannus subjugating the Roman populace through military force, oppressing the senatorial aristocracy, and lacking any civic consensus within Rome, as Christian historiographical narratives and Constantinian administrative communication asserted, his entire physical and administrative legacy would

have been immediately voided through absolute physical destruction upon the victorious armies' entry into the city. However, historical, legal, and archaeological reality fundamentally contradicts this historiographical narrative. As explicitly demonstrated in the fourth chapter (4.1) of this thesis, when Constantinus formally entered Rome, he avoided directly challenging this deeply entrenched civic consensus and was compelled to address the monumental framework of legitimacy Maxentius had established not through immediate physical destruction, but through a pragmatic administrative strategy of spatial appropriation (*appropriatio*).

This administrative necessity to appropriate and adapt represents the definitive structural evidence demonstrating the success of Maxentius's framework of legitimacy. Constantinus, who secured administrative, avoided physically voiding the Basilica Nova, the monumental center of civic jurisprudence, or the *Templum Divi Romuli*, which completed the sacred structural fabric of the Forum Romanum. These structures represented not the personal arrogance of an illegitimate tyrannus, but the functional operation of the Roman administrative order itself and the common welfare of the city. Rather than nullifying this deeply entrenched civic consensus, the new victorious emperor chose to maintain the physical integrity of the architecture; he integrated his own persona into these structures by commissioning monumental apses, integrating his own colossal representations, and epigraphically modifying the dedicatory inscriptions via senatorial decrees. To consolidate his authority within Rome, Constantinus was compelled to appropriate and assimilate that robust representation of the civic administrator and Conservator persona established by Maxentius.

The fact that a victorious emperor was so dependent upon the monumental and administrative projects of his defeated predecessor represents a significant legal acknowledgment within the context of Roman public law and civic legitimacy. Constantinus completely assimilated into the civic framework of the predecessor he defeated in military conflict within the urban topography; to consolidate his own administrative authority within Rome, he was compelled to rely upon the robust framework of legitimacy Maxentius had established through monumental architecture and jurisprudence. The military victory may have concluded Maxentius's administrative tenure; however, the deeply entrenched civic consensus he integrated into the urban topography was so profound that it compelled the victorious emperor to operate within his established structural parameters. Consequently, this compulsory assimilation and *appropriatio* strategy executed by Constantinus represents definitive structural evidence that Maxentius did not represent an illegitimate tyrannus, but a legitimate

Roman emperor whose administrative center could not be governed without appropriating his structural legacy.

In light of all this numismatic, epigraphic, architectural, and legal evidence, returning to the fundamental legal framework situated at the core of this thesis: the resolution to whether Maxentius represented an illegitimate usurpator or a legitimate emperor is definitively established within the structural parameters of Roman statecraft. In Late Antiquity, structural legitimacy cannot be evaluated exclusively through the *ius gladii* (right of the sword) secured within military conflict, nor by the exclusionary administrative decrees executed by external rivals within peripheral military headquarters. Maxentius's six-year administration fundamentally contradicts the conventional historiographical narrative of tyrannis, where in administrative authority is usurped through immediate military force, jurisprudence is suspended, and the administrative institutions are exploited for personal advantage. On the contrary, it represented a comprehensive movement of legal re-establishment (*restitutio*) that re-instituted the forgotten and seized political honor of Rome.

Maxentius did not establish his administrative authority through peripheral military headquarters, but rather integrated his structural framework within the urban core of Rome; it was officially authorized by the senatorial aristocracy and secured the comprehensive approval of the Roman populace (*plebs urbana*). In accordance with *mos maiorum*, an emperor who secures senatorial agreement in the administration of the state, administers civic jurisprudence, and safeguards the religious institutions of the city cannot represent an illegitimate usurpator; rather, he represents a legitimate princeps and a definitive emperor who entirely fulfilled the civic requirements of the Roman legal framework. His defeat in the military conflict in 312 cannot render his legal presence within Rome and the administrative framework he had previously established as illegitimate; rather, it demonstrates that this legitimate authority was physically voided through military force.

The civic, dynastic, and religious personae the emperor meticulously established via numismatic and epigraphic dissemination during this six-year period did not represent mere deceptive facades of administrative communication utilized to conceal illegitimate authority; they represented vital legal institutions through which structural legitimacy was generated and safeguarded within the borders of Rome. This statecraft—which demonstrated adherence to the civic legal framework through representation in traditional civic attire upon numismatic evidence, associated its dynastic lineage into the localized foundational mythology (*origo*) of

the city with visual representations of the twins and the *Lupa Romana*, and epigraphically formalized the *Conservator Urbis Suae* (Protector of His City) titulature by consolidating the sacred structural fabric of the city with monumental architecture—represents the definitive manifestation of structural legitimacy. Maxentius did not impose his power on the masses with a foreign divinity; by establishing a structural integration with Rome's own topography, institutions, and populace, he demonstrated that structural *auctoritas* can only function in conjunction with civic consensus.

The fact that the victorious emperor Constantinus, upon formally entering Rome, avoided physically nullifying this robust framework of civic consensus established by Maxentius, and was compelled to assimilate into this structural representation of legitimacy by appropriating (*appropriatio*) his civic architecture, fundamentally contradicts the comprehensive historiographical narrative of tyrannis formulated by Constantinian authors. Characterized as a dark, bloody, and sorcerous despot tyrannus within the historiographical texts of Eusebius and Lactantius, Maxentius actually represents one of the most traditionalist proponents of Rome's structural primacy. He represented a localized and legitimate Roman emperor who systematically re-instituted Roman statecraft within its local topography, opposing the administrative tutelage of the Tetrarchic order that restricted structural legitimacy to the exclusive confines of palatial administration.

Furthermore, this research represents a significant methodological contribution not solely to this specific subfield, but to Late Antique historiography in its entirety. By systematically deconstructing the historiographical monopoly of pro-Constantinian literary narratives, it demonstrates the indispensability of interpreting political reality primarily through the concrete evidence of material culture and urban topography. Maxentius's strategic integration of his civic, dynastic, and religious personae demonstrates that within the ancient administrative framework, monumental architecture, epigraphic records, and numismatic representations did not represent mere reflections of administrative authority, but functioned as the active legal and spatial conduits through which structural legitimacy was negotiated and maintained. In the final analysis, this dissertation establishes that when textual sources are systematically cross-examined with explicit archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence, the historiographical narrative of Late Antiquity is disengaged from the partisan formulations of the victorious administration, re-integrating marginalized historical figures into their appropriate context within the evolution of Roman statecraft.

In conclusion, this research disengages Maxentius from the partisan *damnatio memoriae* narrative formulated by the administrative communication of the victorious administration and Christian ecclesiastical authors, re-integrating his persona into its appropriate context within Roman public law. Established within the borders of Rome, substantiated by civic consensus across every administrative medium from numismatic evidence to monumental architecture, this framework of legitimacy did not represent the transient administrative attempt of a conventional usurpator. Against the expansive administrative tutelage of Late Antiquity, Maxentius represents the definitive and legitimate structural resistance of traditional Roman statecraft, executed to safeguard the civic, religious, and legal autonomy of Rome.

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