

THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY A.D.

Dr. G.M. ROGERS

Introduction

Late in A.D. 155 the Greek orator Publius Aelius Aristides from Hadrianoi in Northern Mysia praised Roman rule in the presence of the imperial court at Rome.

Indeed, the poets say that before the rule of Zeus everything was filled with faction, uproar, and disorder, but that when Zeus came to rule, everything was put in order and the Titans were banished to the deepest corners of the earth, driven there by him and the gods who aided him. So too, in view of the situation before you and under you, one would suppose that before your empire everything was in confusion, topsy-turvy, and completely disorganized, but that when you took charge, the confusion and faction ceased and there entered in universal order and a glorious light in life and government and the laws came to the fore and the altars of the gods were believed in¹.

According to Aelius, Rome had firmly established the basis for civilised life-security, the rule of law, and, most importantly, *providentia deorum*, the providence of the gods. The gods looked out for the inhabitants of the Roman empire². A golden age had arrived. Later Edward Gibbon pronounced his famous verdict on the era from A.D. 96-180.

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm but gentle hand of four successive emperors, whose characters and authority commanded involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, who

¹ Publius Aelius Aristides, *Oration XXVI*. 103, translated by C.A. Behr, *P. Aelius Aristides, The Complete Works II* (Leiden 1981) 96.

² P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London 1971) 50.

delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws. Such princes deserved the honour of restoring the republic, had the Romans of their days been capable of enjoying a rational freedom³.

Indeed, by the beginning of the third century A.D. an aristocracy "of amazingly uniform culture, taste and language" rule over an empire extending from Scotland to lower Egypt, from the Caspian Sea to the Atlantic Ocean⁴. A contemporary prognosis for the duration of the empire was simply all eternity⁵.

Yet, however secure that Roman World seemed to contemporary observers, less than twenty years after the death of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, on 17 March A.D. 180, the Christian son of a Roman centurion prayed for the emperors, the whole estate of the empire, and the interests of Rome, in order to postpone the "clausulam saeculi," or the end of the world, with its menace of hideous suffering⁶. Still later, the anonymous author of an encomium of the emperor Philip the Arab from the middle of the third century A.D. exhibited consciousness of a general crisis:

The Empire was the victim of tyrants, cities were destroyed and countries depopulated in civil wars; justice, finances, the army and foreign politics were managed in an unsatisfactory and bad manner, on the whole the Empire was like an ill and rotting body, or like a bolting horse it was in total confusion... it began to sink like a ship, and its rulers, being tired and helpless were not able to find a way out; thus there was an increasing fear of an uncertain future⁷.

After the death of Marcus Aurelius, history descended "from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans of that day," according to the historian Cassius Dio Cocceianus, from Nicaea in Bithynia, consul for the second time in A.D. 229⁸.

Scholars, following Dio's account, from at least the time of Edward Gibbon have traced "the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," from

³ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* I (New York 1946) 61, edited by J.B. Bury.

⁴ P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London 1971) 14.

⁵ P. Aelius Aristides, *Oration* XXVI. 108.

⁶ Tertullian, *Apol.* XXXII. 1.

⁷ Εἰς βασιλέα γί.

⁸ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXXII. 36, 4.

the third century A.D. If barbarians eventually murdered the empire, the first truly murderous barbarians appeared on the borders of the empire in A.D. 235⁹. If the empire committed suicide, "the stupendous fabric yielding to its own weight," the turmoil of the third century exposed the first tears¹⁰. If the comfortable old Roman empire transformed into the "World of Late Antiquity," the spirit of that New World, particularly a change in religious attitudes, developed only after A.D. 200¹¹. None of these explanations, however, have started from the most important perspective: that of the provincials themselves.

For if the nature of the Roman empire "can only be understood by starting from the provinces and looking inward," that is, if the Roman empire was no more than its inhabitants perceived it to be, in order to understand first what the empire was, and second, how it changed, we must turn to the perceptions of provincials¹². Geza Alföldy already has used this approach to analyze the "Crisis of the Third Century," but drew his evidence almost exclusively from literary accounts which are notoriously problematic for the period in question¹³.

In this article, without ignoring the still crucial literary texts, and without pretending to cover all the provinces of the empire for the whole period, I nevertheless would like to add some of the archaeological and epigraphical evidence to our picture of the third century, which has been based almost entirely upon literary sources until now. A more comprehensive approach to the viewpoint of the inhabitants of the Roman empire remains possible. Here I will attempt only a selective sketch.

The Sources

First, I should point out that the literary evidence for the third century is atrocious. The main contemporary accounts are fragmentary and random, while later chronicles and epitomes are tendentious, inaccurate, and, at times, malevolent. Herodian, a minor official in Rome from Syria, wrote eight books on the Roman emperors, starting with the life of Gor-

⁹ A.H.M. Jones, *The Decline of the Ancient World* (London 1966) 362-70.

¹⁰ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* II (New York 1946) 1219.

¹¹ P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London 1971) 50-57.

¹² F. Millar, "The Emperor, the Senate and the Provinces," *JRS* 56 (1966) 166; S. Price, *Rituals and Power, the Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1986) 20.

¹³ G. Alföldy, "The Crisis of the Third Century as Seen by Contemporaries," *GRBS* 15 (1974) 87-111.

dian III in A.D. 238, just at the very beginning of our period¹⁴. The Greek historian Zosimus wrote a narrative history of the period after A.D. 498, but his interpretation of events is determined by his reactionary paganism¹⁵. We also possess a collection of biographies of Roman emperors from A.D. 117-284, with the years 244-259 missing, probably composed by a "rogue scholar" at the end of the fourth century¹⁶. These biographies contain many errors, falsifications, and precious bits of good evidence. From a much later period, Zonaras, a twelfth century A.D. Byzantine historian wrote an epitome on the period between Severus Alexander (A.D. 235) and Constantine (A.D. 303), based upon Petrus Patricius¹⁷.

More positively, we have what amounts to a counter history, composed by Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine, whose *Ecclesiastical History*, from the beginning of the Church until A.D. 324, is often tendentious, but not necessarily inaccurate¹⁸. However, the most valuable Christian source for the period is Saint Cyprian, whose correspondence and "intelligence service" at the imperial court enabled him to be very well informed about events throughout the empire¹⁹.

Finally, for once, we have the barbarian side of the argument, in the form of a tri-lingual inscription of the Sassanid Persian ruler Shapor I, from Persepolis, which gives a good contemporary narrative from the eastern frontier of the Roman empire during the 240s and 250s²⁰.

The fact remains, however, that no continuous Greek or Roman historical account for the period exists. No Tacitus emerged from the third century senate to poison our estimation of Gordian III. Instead, we must rely upon the views of various outsiders, including Christians, barbarians and later provincials. Naturally, the dearth of literary sources elevates the evidentiary value of the thousands of inscriptions, papyri and coins which survive from the period. Overall, the fragmentary state of the evidence perhaps reflects the deeper political reality.

¹⁴ Herodian, τῆς μετὰ Μάρκου βασιλείας ἱστορίαι I-VIII, trans. C.R. Whittaker (Cambridge 1969-70) vols. I, II.

¹⁵ *Historia nova* I, trans. J.J. Buchanan and H.T. Davis, (1967).

¹⁶ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* trans. D. Magie (New York, 1922-32) I-II; R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971).

¹⁷ for his value as a source see F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford 1964) 2f., 195-203.

¹⁸ *Ecclesiastical History* trans. K. Lake and J. Oulton (New York 1926-32) I, II.

¹⁹ *Letters 1-81* (Washington 1965) trans. by R.B. Donna.

²⁰ A. Maricq, "Res Gestae Divi Shaporis," *Syria* 35 (1958) 295.

The Military and Political Crisis

All accounts of the period, however random, fragmentary, or biased emphasize the centrality of war, whether civil or foreign. I can only touch here upon the most important conflicts and their consequences for the structure and functioning of the Roman empire.

The first emperor from the period, Maximinus, an equestrian soldier from the Danubian region, who was reportedly so big that he wore his wife's bracelet as a ring, never made it to Italy during his three years as emperor (A.D. 235-38)²¹. After three years of fighting on the Rhine and Danube frontiers, Maximinus was murdered by his own soldiers at Aquileia, who did not wish to fight a civil war against Pupienus and Balbinus, the senatorial leaders. The praetorian guards celebrated this triumph by murdering Pupienus and Balbinus and installing Gordian III as emperor in July of A.D. 238²². The young emperor, a mere thirteen year old, immediately challenged the growing power of Shapor I, King of the Sassanid Persian dynasty, who had overthrown the weak Arsacids of Persia in A.D. 224, invaded Mesopotamia, captured Carrhae, Nisibis, and was threatening Antioch. The young emperor died in A.D. 244-at the hands of his praetorian prefect Philip, or perhaps Shapor I. For according to an inscription set up by Shapor:

And when we were first established in our kingship of the peoples, Gordianus Caesar (238-44) gathered forces of Goths and Germans from all over the Roman empire and invaded Assyria coming against the Iranian people and us. And at Mesiche on the borders of Assyria a great battle took place and Gordianus Caesar was killed and we destroyed the Roman army, and the Romans declared Philippos as Caesar (244-9), and Philippos Caesar came to terms and gave us 500,000 denarii as ransom for their lives and paid us tribute. And we for this reason renamed Mesiche Peros-shapor (victorious Shapor)²³.

Philip the Arab could make peace with Shapor, but not with the province of Pannonia²⁴. One of its officers, C. Messius Decius, invaded Italy

²¹ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* VI. 8.

²² for Maximinus, Pupienus and Balbinus, and the Gordians see Herodian VI, 8-VIII; Zosimus I, 1-19; P. Townsend, "The Revolution of A.D. 238: the Leaders and their Aims," *JCS* 14 (1955) 49; R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971) 163-193.

²³ inscription of the deeds of Shapor I from Nagsh-i-Rastam near Persepolis.

²⁴ for M. Julius Verus Philippus, praetorian prefect and emperor, A.D. 244-49, see Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* XXIII, 5, 7, and 17; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* VI, 34, 36, and 39; A.T. Olmstead, "The Mid-Third Century of the Christian Era," *CP* 37 (1942) 254f.

and defeated Philip in A.D. 249. Decius, a Danubian senator and consul, was killed in a battle against the Goths in A.D. 251, having persecuted the Christians since A.D. 249²⁵. His successor, Valerian, doubled his accomplishments: he directed a spectacular persecution and suffered a spectacular death²⁶.

The Franks on the Rhine, the Saxons with their pirate ships in the English Channel, and Shapor on the Euphrates all defied Roman arms. Despite the progress of Valerian's son Gallienus against the Alamanni on the Rhine (A.D. 254-56), the Franks in Gaul, and the Alamanni in Italy (A.D. 258-59), Gallienus' own general Postumus organized an independent state in Gaul. The governors of Spain and Britain promptly formed alliances. Worse news came from the east. Shapor had defeated Valerian, who had led a plague ridden army into battle, and taken the emperor himself prisoner. During the emperor's captivity, Shapor used Valerian as a footstool when he mounted his horse, and when Valerian died, his body was stuffed and became the prize ornament of the Sassanian court. At no time was the empire more unstable. Christian apologists drew the inevitable conclusions.

In truth, only Prince Odenathus, from the desert kingdom of Palmyra, checked Shapor's advance through the east. The Roman emperors used Odenathus and his Greek scholar wife Zenobia to restore peace in the east, until Aurelian crushed Palmyran power²⁷. Meanwhile, Gallienus, the son and successor of the captured Valerian, fought the Goths in Greece (A.D. 262), the Heruli, and a host of pretenders to the purple back in Italy²⁸. At Milan in A.D. 268 a group of Illyrian officers, including the future emperors Claudius and Aurelian, assassinated Gallienus. Yet Gallienus left a legacy of recovery. Although an admirer of Greek culture and a friend of the neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus, Gallienus nevertheless tolerated Christianity, a policy repugnant to his Danubian

²⁵ for Decius see R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971) 194-99.

²⁶ on Valerian, emperor from A.D. 253-59/60 and his son Gallienus, A.D. 253-67, see Zosimus I, 29-40; B. MacDermott, "Roman Emperors in the Sassanian Reliefs," *JRS* 44 (1954) 76-80; G. Herrmann, *The Iranian Revival* (Oxford 1977) 92-93; L. de Blois, *The Policy of the Emperor Gallienus* (Leiden 1976).

²⁷ see I.A. Richmond, "Palmyra under the aegis of the Romans," *JRS* 53 (1963) 43-54; F. Millar, "Paul of Samosata, Zenobia and Aurelian," *JRS* 61 (1971) 1-17; M. Colledge, *The Art of Palmyra* (Boulder 1976) ch. 1.

²⁸ for the Gothic raids in Asia Minor see Zosimus I, 18, 31-35; in general on the situation in the Greek world, F. Millar, "P. Herennius Dexippus: The Greek World and the Third-Century Invasions," *JRS* 59 (1969) 12-29.

peers and successors. More importantly, Gallienus excluded senators from military commands, at once professionalizing and barbarizing the army, and created the new mobile army and strategy which ultimately saved Roman *imperium*²⁹.

Gallienus's successor, Claudius Gothicus (A.D. 268-70), annihilated a force of invading Goths in the Balkans and then scored a singular triumph for the period: he died in bed-albeit of the plague.

Next, Aurelian, devotee of the Sun god, and supreme cavalry commander, drove the Vandals from Pannonia, restored the Rhine and Danube borders, broke the independent Gallic state and defeated Palmyra under Zenobia. Both Tetricus and Zenobia walked in chains of gold in his triumph. The empire had indeed struck back. But Aurelian also built a twelve-mile wall around the city of Rome which was twenty feet thick, and evacuated the forward positions in trans-Danubian Dacia (A.D. 270)³⁰. The rogue scholar of the *Historiae Augustae* pronounced a perfect Tacitean epitaph: "Hic finis Aureliano fuit, principi necessario magis quam bono."³¹

The soldiers murdered Aurelian's senatorial replacement, M. Claudius Tacitus, who spuriously claimed descent from the consular historian, within a year. The mutinous legions then elevated M. Annianus Florianus to the purple-and dispatched him, when the supreme court of the eastern legions handed down their decision: M. Aurelius Probus, a lieutenant of Aurelian, and another Danubian. He fought from one end of the empire to the other: Gaul, the Rhine, the Danube, Asia Minor and Persia. He even made peace with Bahran II, the successor of the Shapor I. But the Pannonian army lynched Probus when Raetia declared for Carus, yet another Danubian in A.D. 282³². Carus and his sons, Carinus and Numerianus, did not last past A.D. 285. In the same year, C. Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus, the man the Roman World had been waiting for, seized power and kept it for twenty years³³. After which, like Sulla, Diocletian retired and died in bed.

Certain patterns emerge from this opera bouffe. The political balance of the empire shifted from Rome and Italy to the Greek provinces and

²⁹ Zosimus I. 30-40.

³⁰ Zosimus I. 47-61.

³¹ *S.H.A.* XXXVII.

³² for the campaigns of Probus see Zosimus I, 64-71.

³³ on the early career of Diocletian see A. Jones, J. Morris, and J. Martindale, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* I (Cambridge 1971), Diocletianus 2.

the Danubian region. The Danubian provinces, characterized by early military occupation, the presence of veteran colonies, and little Christianization, provided the military leadership which rolled back Gibbon's "deluge of barbarians." Sirmium, Sremska Mitrovica in modern Yugoslavia, produced Decius, Probus, and Maximianus; Dacia Ripensis could claim Aurelian, Constantius and perhaps Galerius. The emergence of a military oligarchy from the Danubian provinces was no less a social revolution than Octavian's 250 years before. Just as Octavian, the later Augustus, relied upon the equestrians and the Italians to consolidate his revolution—at the expense of the noble families and Rome—so the Danubian emperors used the legions of the Danube to usurp and triumph, while systematically excluding senators from military commands. Men of low social background, conversely, acquired senatorial posts and commands³⁴. Real political competition arose only among Danubian military leaders. Gallienus' assassination in A.D. 268 illustrates this point precisely: two conspirators among many, two Danubians, two future emperors. Assertions of senatorial control merely betrayed failing signs of life: Papienus and Balbinus lasted for four months in A.D. 238, Tacitus and Florianus less than a year in A.D. 275/6.

The year A.D. 284 brought the new order. The legions of the Danube "elected" emperors from the pool of their commanders—the inescapable and final revelation of Tacitus' *arcanum* of the empire, which Augustus had buried deeply within the façade of the "Restored Republic."³⁵ Soldiers were the real source of political power in the empire. Once the competitors for the purple openly acknowledged this fact, the imperial system of government could be detached from the framework of Republican institutions. Senatorial power never recovered. In turn, the imperial court was militarized. This created the expectation that an emperor would spend most of his time fighting. What distinguished the fighting done by the Danubian emperors from the Julio-Claudian ancestors was purpose: the first century emperors fought for the ideology of Rome expanding to the limits of the "world." Their third century descendants fought for the very survival of the civilised world³⁶.

The simultaneous and persistent barbarian invasions already sketched out, the civil wars endemic to a state without an orderly means of succes-

³⁴ Cassius Dio, LXXX. 7.2.

³⁵ Tacitus, *Histories* I. 4. 2.

³⁶ Herodian IV. 14. 6.

sion, and other disasters, such as the plague which started in the eastern empire, and various earthquakes which affected Italy and the eastern provinces, caused this difference. So barbarians, civil wars, and natural disasters at least disrupted the empire during the third century. To their credit, the Romans of the third century refused to become mere victims.

A Strategy for Survival

During the third century the Romans abandoned a strategy for the defense of the empire which had been developed under Augustus³⁷. Until A.D. 200 two concepts underpinned imperial military strategy. First, the Roman army "fixed" the borders to outsiders. The legions and auxiliary units defended a fixed perimeter, and especially used geographical features, such as mountain ranges and rivers (including the Rhine and the Danube), as well as fortifications and extended walls (particularly Hadrian's wall in Scotland), to keep intruders out. Second, their defensive strategy was preclusive. When possible, the Roman army confronted attackers *before* they entered imperial territories and eroded the logistic base of support: money, food and manpower.

The Romans maintained this perimeter, preclusive defense with remarkable success for two centuries. But simultaneous attacks of Goths in the west and pressure exerted by Persia in the east cracked this defense during the third century. Essentially, the Roman empire was caught between large migration flows from north to south and east to west, which pushed barbarians across the borders of the empire in large numbers. Nor was this trend, which contemporary Romans noticed, temporary³⁸.

The only rational response was maintenance of a minimally adequate level of security at the lowest feasible cost to the society as a whole. Under the leadership of Danubian emperors, the Roman army therefore adopted a new defensive strategy, "defense in depth," which controlled especially the logistic damage of barbarian invasions until the revised borders of the empire could be restored finally under Diocletian³⁹. Once the imperial army controlled the barbarian threat, the Roman emperors returned to a perimeter defense as quickly as possible.

The beginning of the change in military strategy actually took place under Septimius Severus⁴⁰. By A.D. 196 Septimius had formed three new

³⁷ E. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore 1976) 7-50.

³⁸ Herodian, IV. 14.6; also Εἰς βασιλέα generally.

³⁹ E. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore 1976) 127-190.

⁴⁰ A. Birley, *The African Emperor* (New York 1972) 201.

legions because of his civil war and the Parthian threat: I, II, and III Parthica. II Parthica remained near Rome under an equestrian commander. This new legion became the nucleus for the first central field army of Rome—a proto-type rapid deployment force. Septimius also doubled the size of the praetorian cohorts to 10,000 total, increased the size of the urban cohorts to 6,000 and doubled the number of guards and policemen (*vigiles*) to 7,000. Later, cavalry troops were added. Eventually, 30,000 men became permanently available at or near Rome for frontier duty, in effect, a substantial central reserve which could march off to Persia to supplement the legions permanently stationed on the border.

This idea of a mobile reserve comprised the first component of the strategy of defense in depth. Cavalry gradually dominated this mobile force and, indeed, under Gallienus (A.D. 253-68), regional reserves of cavalry bestrode the major axes of the empire, including Aquileia, which controlled the gateway to Italy, Sirmium for the Danubian region, Poetovio for the Drava valley, and Lynchnychus, for the major highway into Greece from the north.

Further, the importance of cavalry also narrowed the locus of political power. Claudius, a cavalry commander, replaced Gallienus in A.D. 268 and Aurelian, a greater cavalry commander, replaced Claudius in A.D. 270. If you wished to wear the purple, it helped to command cavalry. *Promoti*, the old 120 horse legionary cavalry contingents, units of native cavalry such as the *Equites Dalmatae*, and some heavy armoured troops composed these new cavalry forces, which were called *vexillationes*.

Roman cavalry tactics also improved over the course of the third century, as the Roman army learned how to utilize light cavalry supported by steady infantry. In A.D. 271 Aurelian defeated the Palmyrans at the Orontes River in Syria and then at Emesa, where he used the same tactics. Once the Roman army joined battle, he directed his light native cavalry to retreat; the enemy heavy armoured cavalry (called *clibanarii* or “bread ovens”) pursued until they were exhausted. Then, the Roman army counter-attacked and cut the enemy into pieces. Units of these bread ovens appeared in the Roman army at the end of the third century—prototypical medieval knights.

But if improved tactics were, at least in part, responsible for the imperial recovery, the Romans bought that recovery at a tremendous social, economic, and political cost. Defense in depth necessitated the interception of the enemy *within* the borders of the empire. Strong, self-contained forts

along the frontiers, with mobile forces deployed between and behind them, provided security for the empire as a whole, and were particularly effective in providing protection for the central government. But the cost to any one area or province might be extreme: a fortified provincial town had to hold out until relieved. By then, the barbarians usually had ravaged the surrounding countryside. Thus, the relentless invasions of barbarians from A.D. 235 until 284 inflicted damage not only on imperial land but also upon private property, lives, and provincial morale which had a cumulative effect. It invariably eroded the logistic base of the empire and inexorably diminished the worth of the imperial structure to its inhabitants. If the Roman empire was no more than its inhabitants perceived it to be, there was never a time when it appeared to represent less and do less for its subjects than during the third century. During the best of times, the demands and benefits of imperial administration were limited: the provincials paid the tribute and received peace in return. During the crisis of the third century the provincials still paid the tribute, but did not receive peace in return, an exchange bound to encourage dissatisfaction and disloyalty—to the imperial rulers, to the empire itself, and to its deities. Defense in depth, a strategy only for survival, contained, within its terms, hidden, but fundamental changes in the social, political, economic and spiritual structure and functioning of the empire. The terms by which the state weathered the deluge of barbarians changed the state forever. It was no accident at all that, once the Roman army secured the basic borders of the empire in A.D. 284, Diocletian immediately reverted to preclusive, perimeter defense. And the successors of Diocletian successfully implemented this strategy until new barbarians officially ended the political structure of the western empire during the fifth century A.D. But *what* these borders enclosed from A.D. 285 until 410 or 476 was dramatically different from the Roman World known to Aelius Aristides.

The Economic Crisis

The military crisis of the empire was inextricably intertwined with an economic crisis fully recognized by contemporary observers⁴¹. The Roman army provided costly protection. The soldiers always demanded more money and prospective emperors needed their good will. Thus the military budget increased dramatically during the third century and was paid for, at first in cash, and later in kind, by the provincials.

⁴¹ cf. Cassius Dio, LXXIV. 5-4 f.; Herodian V. 4.7, Cyprian, *To Demetrian* 3.

But many emperors were needlessly profligate. At the death of Commodus, Pertinax found only 250,000 denarii in the state treasury⁴², only ten times what Elegabalus paid for a "dancing girl" around A.D. 220⁴³. In contrast, at the death of Pertinax, only 87 days later than Commodus' in A.D. 193, the praetorian guards auctioned off the empire between two rich men, Sulpicianus and Didius Julianus, each of whom could afford to bid more than 5,000 denarii per soldier, or a total of 25,000,000 denarii each. This sounds preposterous, until one recognizes that the emperor Tacitus was said to be worth 280,000,000 sesterces in investments alone in A.D. 275⁴⁴. Large personal fortunes existed at a time of general impoverishment and recession.

These problems were heaped upon a foundation of persistent debasement of currency, inflation, and reduced revenues. The silver content of the denarius, still 75 % under Marcus Aurelius, sank to 5 % by A.D. 250. In the second century, a modius of wheat cost half a denarius: in A.D. 301 it cost 100 denarii. In fact, the value of a denarius sank to about 5 % of what it had been before the inflation of the third century. For a government with no token money this spelled economic disaster.

These trends must be seen within the strategic context. Caracalla, the son of Septimius Severus, raised the pay of the army by 50 % -about 675 denarii per year, per legionary. This concession cost 70,000,000 denarii yearly. To meet these new expenses Caracalla increased confiscations and issued a new coin called the Antoninianus, which weighed in at 1 1/2 of a denarius, but was tariffed at 2 denarii. He also doubled the 5 % inheritance tax of Roman citizens and abolished all exemptions. The depreciation of currency reached its height under Gallienus. During his reign he issued an Antoninianus which was short weight and vilely minted- a copper coin hiding underneath a 5 % silver wash.

Provincials recognized and deplored the social consequences of the military and economic crisis. As the state demanded greater revenues for the limited protection it provided, an oppressive system of collection emerged. Eventually the central government imposed a capital levy on the rich in the provinces and regimented the propertied class into a hereditary caste, obligated as members of a municipal council to carry out du-

⁴² Cassius Dio. LXXIV. 5-4.

⁴³ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae: Elagabalus* XXXI. 1 (100,000 s).

⁴⁴ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae: Tacitus* X. 1.

ties. Herodian provides a wonderful picture of the consequences of this system under Maximinus in A.D. 235-38.

There is no point in destroying barbarians, if even more people are being murdered actually in Rome and the subject nations, nor in carrying off prisoners and plunder from the enemy, when the people at home are stripped bare of possessions... men who were rich one day and beggars the next are a daily sight... After Maximinus had reduced most of the distinguished families to penury, he then began to think it was an unimportant, insignificant activity, and not enough to satisfy his desire. So he then turned to the public treasury and began to expropriate any money in the city being collected for the food supply and cash distribution to the common people⁴⁵.

The Roman government also compelled both individuals and cities to domicile soldiers and imperial officials at their own cost. A petition of Scaptopara in Thrace from A.D. 238 to Gordian IV reveals a stark and (probably) common complaint about the indiscipline of soldiers, its effect upon a village, and the continual necessity of entertaining imperial officials.

In addition to these, soldiers too, when sent elsewhere, leave their proper routes and come to us, and likewise compel us to provide them with hospitality and supplies and pay us no money. And the governors of the province and even your procurators for the most part visit here for the benefit of the waters. We are continually entertaining the authorities, as one needs must⁴⁶.

Just as in the post-industrial revolution world, inflation drove up prices and wages during the third century -but with a far greater destabilizing effect upon an agricultural economy, where wealth traditionally had been invested in land. The real victims of these conditions must have been the poor- clearly the vast majority in the Roman empire, but also those on a fixed cash income: suprisingly, the government itself, and its employees. Strangely, the taxes in the empire, even during the period of maximum military, economic, and social pressure, remained at a relatively fixed rate, and were not substantially increased. Rather, when the revenues of the empire did not increase, and the real value of its receipts shrank, the government resorted to depreciating currency at an increasing tempo. Of course this decreased the real value of its revenues in turn.

⁴⁵ Herodian, VII. 3,3-6.

⁴⁶ *CIL* III. 12. 336.

All of this led to the abandonment of a money economy. The Roman government still levied taxes, but met the bulk of its requirements by levies in kind. War was expensive business, even in the third century, and the Romans had plenty of other business at hand. The simultaneous civil and foreign wars of the third century exacerbated pre-existing financial problems and undermined the confidence and loyalty of provincials. A good index of this lack of confidence among some wealthy provincials at least is the chronological distribution of imperial temples and sanctuaries built in Asia Minor over the first 250 years of the empire. Fifteen are attested for the years A.D. 100-150, but only 2 for the years A.D. 200-250⁴⁷. As one Roman historian has observed, the central and irrefutable element in the evidence for a crisis in the third century is the almost universal absence of evidence, either inscriptional or archaeological, for construction and development in the Greek cities of Asia Minor⁴⁸. The Aristocrats of the Greek cities plainly did not have enough money to initiate the civic projects they had so willingly undertaken during the second century, and probably did not have enough confidence in the future of such projects or the public honor they might bring. The re-stabilization of the economy and society first required peace-if only a new social basis. Without peace, the economic *and* social price of protection could only increase.

The Moral and Religious Crisis

Pagan and Christian writers of the era found moral and religious causes for the crisis already described. Both sides blamed each other for the disasters which occurred from A.D. 235-84. Porphyry, the third century philosopher from Tyre and student of the neo-platonist Plotinus at Rome from A.D. 262-63, claimed that "No god was helpful to the state since Jesus was worshipped" (κατὰ Χριστιανῶν). Eusebius, the historian of the church, emphasized in Books VII and XIII of the *Ecclesiastical History* that the Emperor Valerian suffered capture and torture by Shapor I as a direct punishment for his persecution of the Christians carried out in the 250s. The logic of the two arguments is identical. The idea of religious error is central to the era: the wrong god or gods had been worshipped and in an impious manner.

Thus Christian loyalty to the empire became a critical issue at the height of the military crisis. For, at this point, the Christian Church had

⁴⁷ S. Price, *Rituals and Power, the Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1986) 59.

⁴⁸ F. Millar, *The Roman Empire and its Neighbours* (London 1967) 243.

become a state within a state. The most significant development within Christianity at this time was not the geographical spread, but the further organization—both within individual churches and in the contacts between them. By the middle of the third century the Church at Rome was a substantial organization. In a letter to the Bishop of Antioch (Fabius) Cornelius, the Bishop of Rome from A.D. 251-53, mentioned 46 priests, 7 deacons, 7 sub-deacons, 42 acolytes, 32 exorcists, readers, and watchmen, and more than 1500 widows and poor persons who received support from the Church in Rome⁴⁹.

Also, increased organizational links between the churches grouped around the great churches of Rome, Carthage, and Antioch developed. At Rome in A.D. 247, 60 bishops from Italy met to condemn the Novation heresy, while 70 bishops of Africa met in A.D. 220, 85 in A.D. 256. Bishops from Cappadocia, Pontus, Cilicia, Palestine, Arabia, and Alexandria⁵⁰ attended the synods at Antioch in A.D. 264 and 274 which condemned Paul of Samosata. Their decision on the second occasion was communicated to all the provinces.

If earlier Christian literature had been doctrinal, scholarly, and apologetic, that of the second half of the third century was mostly composed of letters of bishops from Rome, Antioch, Carthage and Alexandria concerned with questions of discipline and coherence of church organization. The persecutions ordered by Decius and Valerian partially explain this change.

The sources, unfortunately, do not provide a clear explanation for why Decius began his persecution of high church officials in A.D. 249. Hostility toward his tolerant predecessor Philip has been suggested, although unconvincingly. The emperor who revided the censorship wished to unite all the forces of the empire for the great task of reconstruction—his response to the military disasters. Decius called for a general sacrifice and intercession before the images of the gods of the empire. Sacrifices and prayers were associated with solidarity: the provincials and the Italians were to pray together for the health of the empire. In February of A.D. 250 a decree came which commanded universal sacrifice by all free men, women and children in the empire. It was necessary to sacrifice, pour a libation, and taste sacrificial meat; the penalty for refusal was death.

⁴⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI. 43. 11.

⁵⁰ Dionysius of Alexandria was absent in A.D. 264 due to illness.

When sacrifice was completed, each person received a certificate signed by the commission in charge, which testified to compliance to the universal command. An example of one such libellus, precisely dated to 14 June A.D. 250, survives from Arsinoe in Egypt:

To the select commission supervising sacrifices from Aurelia Demos, daughter of unknown father and Helene, and wife of Aurelius Irenaios, residing in the Hellenion quarter. I have always dutifully sacrificed to the gods, and now also in your presence, in accordance with the edict, I have made sacrifice and libation and tasted the offerings, and I request you to countersign my statement. Farewell. I, Aurelia Demos, have submitted this. I, Aurelius Irenaios, wrote for her as she is illiterate.

I, Aurelius Sabinus, head councilman, saw you sacrificing.

Year I of Imperator Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, Payni 20⁵¹.

Under such pressure, many Christians lapsed: thereby they determined the agenda for the doctrinal arguments of Christianity for the next hundred years. Lapses during the persecutions, as well as an increase in heresy, convinced Cyprian that it was *Christian* morality which was declining⁵².

But the state also created many martyrs, around whom the apocalyptic and anti-imperial strands of Christianity gained momentum. The idea of the city of god and the city of man was born in the third century.

Disasters and disloyalty brought about the persecution of Valerian. In A.D. 255, when the Goths invaded Pontus, Christians there either helped or acquiesced. According to Gregory Thaumaturgus, some acted as spies and guides for the invaders, some shared the booty, helped attack homes and property, and hunted down refugees. In turn, Valerian attacked first the clergy, and then in A.D. 258, both the clergy and influential laymen. Much as in the day of Pliny the Younger, the state punished persistence of belief. Sometimes persistence was unnecessary. We possess the verbatim record of the interrogation of Fructuosus, the Bishop of Tarragona in Spain on 21 January A.D. 259.

Proconsul Are you the bishop?

Fructuosus I am.

Proconsul You were.

⁵¹ *SP* 319.

⁵² *Letters* 59.7; 67.7; *On the Lapsed*, 5f.

The Bishop was burnt alive shortly thereafter. This execution was characteristic of a hardening of Roman attitudes that lasted only as long as Valerian lived. The Christian writers were able to mock Shapor's "foot-stool" and survive. Gallienus restored the property of the church and instituted tolerance, which lasted until the great persecution of Galerius.

So, in the middle of the crisis, a great success story emerged. Christianity survived and flourished, particularly in the eastern provinces. But the triumph was bought at a great cost to the old aristocratic leadership pool of the empire; the story of Gregory the "Wonderworker" may serve as an example. An ambitious mother had destined Gregory and his brother Athenodorus for the profession of public speaking, which entailed a knowledge of Roman law. The brothers left their home in Neocaesarea in Pontus to study at a celebrated school of Roman law at Berytus in A.D. 236. But their sister had married a lawyer on the staff of the governor of Palestine and he wanted her to join him there. So the brothers accompanied their sister to Palestine, where they met Origen, the great Christian teacher. Gregory stayed with Origen in Palestine until A.D. 242 and then returned to Pontus as a Christian Bishop. He had given up all for his faith: affairs, studies, law, home and kindred. Christianity became his education - his essential means to salvation. A century later, his biographer, Gregory of Nyssa, claimed that when Gregory the "Wonderworker" arrived in Pontus, there were 17 Christians - and when he finished there were 17 pagans⁵³. Gregory's Christian message offered those provincials craving for a redemptive religion, first, a recognition of their misery, and second, an available means to salvation.

Whereas traditional paganism had mobilized feelings for things-rites, statues, oracles, and temples, christianity appealed to the new mood of the Severan era: the need for a god with whom one could be alone⁵⁴. The moral excellence theretofore reserved for Greek and Roman gentlemen of uniform culture, taste and language could be usurped by the uneducated masses of the empire through conversion and revelation. A large breach in the confident wall of classical culture appeared during the third century. In the process, talented provincials such as Gregory the "Wonderworker" were lost to the old institutional structure. An alternative *curcus honorum* arose, which the tolerant and diffuse Roman state, unable to defeat, as so many times in the past, adopted: thereby also Romanizing the hierarchy of the Church. The hard line pagan response under Gallienus

⁵³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Gregory the Wonderworker*.

⁵⁴ P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London 1971) 51-52.

and Aurelian was vital but insufficient. In the end the monotheistic mysticism of Christianity simply offered more to the poor who composed the majority of the empire (and always had) than the pagan re-interpretation of older cults and legends as symbols of, or stages toward, a single reality. Transformation began with the self during the third century.

Conclusion

So the empire weathered the deluge of barbarians. But the terms of survival transformed the state forever. And if the might of Illyria largely restored the old borders by A.D. 284, the irreversible victory of the barbarian frontiers over the Mediterranean core of classical civilization had begun with the revolt at Fars in A.D. 224. Aurelian abandoned trans-Danubian Dacia by A.D. 270, Britain was lost by A.D. 410, and after 480 the North ruled Gaul. The culture of the western provinces remained sub-Roman for centuries. The culture of the eastern provinces did not remain sub-Byzantine long after A.D. 640⁵⁵.

The Romans of the third century A.D. could not see this future. They simply survived and restored order by the end of the third century. The stupendous fabric was rewoven.

A military revolution saved the empire for Dominate, not Principate. A new, authoritarian emperor ruled the empire like a general, ignoring senators but not legionaries. Thus, the focus of political power shifted from Rome and Italy to the muscular Danubian provinces. The militarization of the state dictated increased financial demands upon the citizens—and by no coincidence, building within the rich Greek cities of the eastern empire virtually ceased. A new social order was emerging.

The Christians and the pagans blamed each other for all of this: the neglect and denial of true religion and ethics had led to the vengeance of a divine power. This traditional Roman fashion of interpreting history by the moral decline of depraved rulers or single social groups such as the Christians or heretics explains both the Christian persecutions and the Roman ideology of restoration. The crisis could be stemmed if good, energetic emperors fought to restore the *old* order—and suppressed all groups which seemed to challenge that order. It was no accident at all that the *restitutores orbis*, the restorers of the world, came from one of the least Christianized regions of the empire. But would the effort have been made if the emperors of the Danube had known that they were restoring, not the *providentia deorum*, but laying the foundation for the *Providentia dei*?

⁵⁵ P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London 1971) 20.