

The Crisis of The Third Century

What was the crisis of the third century?

The crisis of the third century was a period of Crisis and upheaval that began with the assassination of the emperor Severus Alexander in 235 AD, and ended with Diocletian's stabilisation of the empire circa. 284 AD.

The crisis was defined by continuous military failure, political instability, economic instability and unstable frontiers.



Marble bust of Severus Alexander, Metropolitan museum of art, Object Number: 2011.87

The Death of Emperors.

Through the mid-late third century, a great number of emperors died or were deposed due to assassination, murder or civil war.

Between the death of Severus alexander, and up until Diocletian managed to restore a level of stability, Rome was in a state of chaos due to its leaders rarely surviving more than a few years.

Wars with Persia

In the 3rd century, a number of the Roman emperors went to war with the Sassanid Persian empire.

These were mostly met with notable failure, greatly damaging the confidence that the romans had in their military, and sparking further discontent.



Gold aureus of Diocletian, metropolitan Museum of Art, object number: 08.170.444

A Splintering Empire

The period was also marked by a cataclysmic loss of control of the empire by the central government.

The empire itself split up into several pieces at various times. The Gallic Empire which split off from the regions of Gaul and Hispania (260BC-274BC), and the Palmyrene empire (269BC-272BC), which was centred around the client state of Palmyra, and included Egypt, part of Asia Minor, and the entirety of the Levant. While the territories would eventually be reconquered, massive damage was sustained both to the infrastructure and armies in the regions.

The Fortification of Gaul

During the Crisis, a massive amount of Gaul was fortified, amounting to 85% of the cities in the province. This was a massive endeavour, being the single largest amount of “monumental construction” in any century in Gaul.

This fortification is emblematic of a wider problem across the Roman Empire, specifically that the army could no longer guarantee the safety of Roman territory, even as deep into Gaul as Bordeaux.

How Damaging Was the Crisis?

It cannot be understated that the Crisis of the third century represents a massive failure of the Roman Empire. Between temporarily losing control of large swathes of territory, facing several major military defeats and losing a huge number of leaders in such a short time, the Crisis of the Third Century was among the most disastrous series events that Rome would ever Face.

Source Citation:

Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Marble portrait bust of Severus Alexander”, Object Number: 2011.87, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/258540>

Bachrach B. S., 2010, “The Fortification of Gauland the Economy of the Third and Fourth Centuries”, Journal of Late Antiquity 3.1 (Spring), The Johns Hopkins University Press.

De Blois L., 2016, “*Rome and the Worlds beyond its Frontiers*,” Brill

Metropolitan museum of art, “Gold aureus of Diocletian”, object number: 08.170.444, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248069>

Oxford University Press, 2018, “*The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*”, Oxford University Press