

CLAH4006

**From Village to Empire: An
Introduction to the History of Rome**

The Third Century Crisis

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“Third Century Crisis”

- Death of Severus Alexander (AD 235) to reign of Diocletian (AD 285).
- Series of disastrous civil and foreign wars; series of economic problems.
- Low-point c. AD 260.
- About two dozen legitimate or “illegitimate” emperors.

Causes

- Persian pressure from East and Germanic (especially Gothic) pressure from the North – exacerbating pre-existing weaknesses.
- Small, well-trained frontier army – assembling piecemeal of field-armies – reliance on infantry.
- Preference for debasement over increase in taxation.
- Emperors as head of military forces – responsible for victories – chronic civil-war.

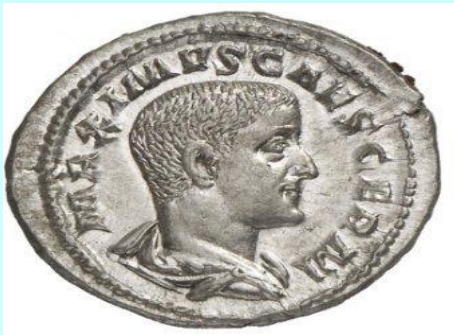
Scramble for Power



Maximinus I, Thrax, AD 235-238. – RIC 5.



Gordian I, March-April AD 238, – RIC 1.



Maximus AR Denarius, AD 236-238. – RIC 3.



Gordian II, March-April AD 238, – RIC 2.

“The procurator of Africa was a man who performed his duties with excessive severity; he handed down extremely harsh decisions and extorted money to win the emperor's favour.” – **Herodian 7.4.1.**

“The senators met before they received accurate information concerning Maximinus and, placing their trust for the future in the present situation, proclaimed Gordian Augustus, together with his son, and destroyed Maximinus' emblems of honour.” (7.7.2).

“A man of senatorial rank named Capellianus was at that time governor of the Moors under Roman rule, the ones called Numidians... Capellianus thus had a formidable military force under his command. Gordian was hostile to Capellianus because they had earlier been involved in a lawsuit... There the son of Gordian died, together with all his companions... When Capellianus entered Carthage...” - **Herodian 7.9.**

“This is what was happening in Africa. When the death of the elder Gordian was reported at Rome, the people and the Senate particularly were completely bewildered... Other senators received votes, but on the final count [Pupienus] Maximus and Balbinus were elected joint emperors by majority opinion.” – **(7.10).**



Praetorian vs. the People



Gordian III, Caesar April-June, 238 AD; Augustus 238-244 AD

“...they kept shouting threats to kill both emperors, determined that the emperor be chosen from the family of Gordian and that the title remain in that house and under that name. The two emperors ordered some of their men to bring the child to the Capitol. Finding the lad playing at home, they lifted him to their shoulders and brought him to the Capitol through the midst of the crowd.” – **Herodian 7.10.**

“The people, as if possessed, seized any tools they could find, made of suitable material, and fashioned weapons. They assembled and went out to the praetorian camp, where they attacked the gates and walls as if they were actually organizing a siege. The praetorians, with their vast combat experience, protected themselves behind their shields and the battlements; wounding their attackers with arrows and long spears, they kept them from the walls and drove them back... With evening approaching, the besiegers decided to retire, since the civilians were exhausted and most of the gladiators were wounded. The people retreated in disorder, thinking that the few praetorians would not dare to pursue so large a mob. But the praetorians now threw open the gates and gave chase. They slaughtered the gladiators, and the greater part of the mob also perished, crushed in the confusion.” – (7.11).

- Praetorians besieged and water-supply cut off.

Death of Maximinus Thrax

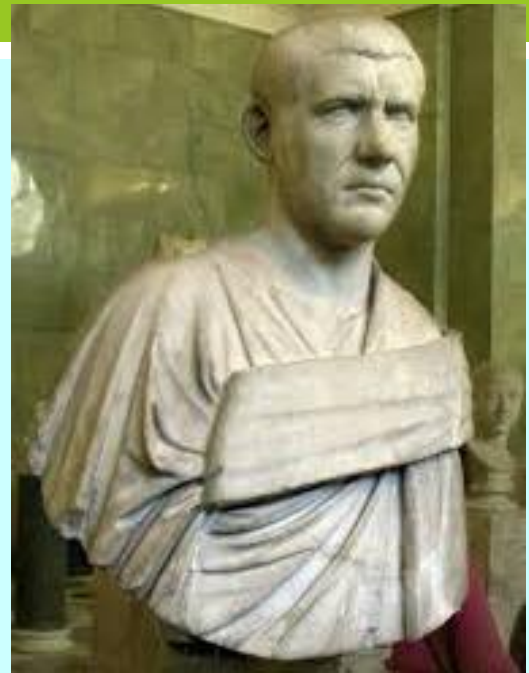
- Maximus invades Italy at end of March – AD 238.
- City of Aquileia holds out against him - protracted siege.

“Some of the soldiers had built temporary huts, but the majority were living in the open air, exposed to sun and rain. And now many died of starvation; no food was brought in from the outside, as the Romans had blocked all the roads of Italy by erecting walls provided with narrow gates.” – **Herodian 8.5.4.**

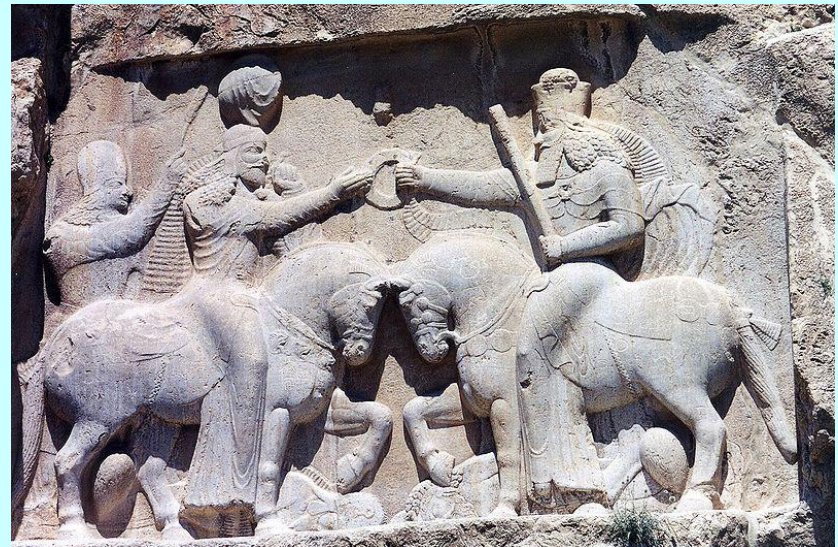
- Pupienus and Balbinus killed by praetorian guards – 6 imperial claimants killed within space of 5 months.

The Sassanid Persians

- Ardashir and Shapur I attacks northern Mesopotamia (AD 236), Dura Europos (239) and Hatra (241).
- Gordian III reaches Antioch AD 242 - dies fighting Sassanids (or killed by own troops) – AD 244, replaced by Philip the Arab.
- Philip pays 500,000 gold dinars to Shapur I, accepts Armenia as Persian sphere of influence, province of Mesopotamia retained by Romans.

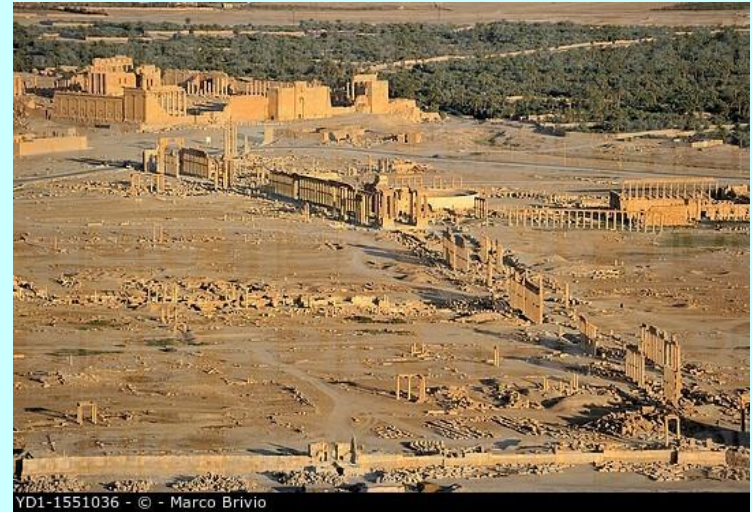


Philip the Arab



Ardashir I and Ahura Mazda

- Armenia annexed by Shapur I – AD 251 – Tiridates II flees to Rome.
- AD 252-53 – Shapur attacks Antioch and is able to raid surrounding areas – localised resistance from elite, e.g. Samasigeramus (high priest of Edessa) – possibly also Odenathus of Palmyra – Shapur departs.
- Odenathus later given title *Corrector Totius Orientis* “Marshal of the East”.



Capture of Valerian

- In area between Carrhae and Edessa, Valerian seized during negotiations – AD 260.

“...great was the grief of all men that Valerian, a Roman emperor, was held as a slave in Persia.” – **SHA *The Two Gallieni* 1.1.**



Rock-face relief, - Naqsh-e Rostam (Iran) – emperor Valerian standing in background.

Res Gestae Divi Saporis

“I, the Mazda worshipping lord Shapur, king of kings of Iran and non-Iran, whose lineage is from the Gods, son of the Mazda worshipping divinity Ardashir... Gordian Caesar raised in all of the Roman Empire a force from the Goth and German realms and marched on Babylonia... On the border of Babylonia at Misikhe, a great 'frontal' battle occurred. Gordian Caesar was killed and the Roman force was destroyed. And the Romans made Philip Caesar. Then Philip Caesar came to us for terms, and to ransom their lives, gave us 500,000 *denars*, and became tributary to us... and Syria and the environs of Syria we burned, ruined and pillaged all... In the third campaign, when we attacked Carrhae and Urhai [Edessa] and were besieging Carrhae and Edessa Valerian Caesar marched against us. He had with him a force of 70,000...we had a great battle with Valerian Caesar. We made prisoner ourselves with our own hands Valerian Caesar and the others, chiefs of that army, the praetorian prefect, senators; we made all prisoners and deported them to Persis...”

“Odaenathus, king of the Palmyrenes, held the rule over the entire East — chiefly for the reason that by his brave deeds he had shown himself worthy of the insignia of such great majesty, whereas Gallienus was doing nothing at all or else only what was extravagant, or foolish and deserving of ridicule. Now at once he proclaimed a war on the Persians to exact for Valerian the vengeance neglected by Valerian's son. He immediately occupied Nisibis and Carrhae, the people of which surrendered, reviling Gallienus. Nevertheless, **Odaenathus showed no lack of respect toward Gallienus**, for he sent him the satraps he captured — though, as it seemed, merely for the purpose of insulting him and displaying his own prowess. After these had been brought to Rome, **Gallienus held a triumph because of Odaenathus' victory**; but he still made no mention of his father and did not even place him among the gods, when he heard he was dead, until compelled to do so — although in fact Valerian was still alive, for the news of his death was untrue.” - **SHA *The Two Gallieni* 10.1-5.**

“Barbarian Invasion”

- Philip ceases tribute payments to the German tribes c. AD 247 – (replaced by Decius in AD 249).
- Series of invasions by Goths and Carpi on Moesia, Dacia and Thrace.
- Decius dies fighting Goths at Abrittus (in Modern Bulgaria).
- Gallus (AD 251-53) makes peace with the Goths – latter retain captives and plunder, and receive subsidy.
- Aemilian (AD 253), governor of Moesia attacks Goths then marches on Rome – Cniva, Gothic king, invades.

“The Alemanni, having laid waste Gaul, penetrated into Italy. Dacia, which had been added to the empire beyond the Danube, was lost. Greece, Macedonia, Pontus, Asia, were devastated by the Goths. Pannonia was depopulated by the Sarmatians and Quadi. The Germans made their way as far as Spain, and took the noble city of Tarraco...” - **Eutropius 9.8.**

An Empire Divided

Gallic Empire – AD 260-274

“Now while Gallienus, continuing in luxury and debauchery, gave himself up to amusements... the **Gauls**, by nature unable to endure princes who are frivolous and given over to luxury and have fallen below the standard of Roman valour, **called Postumus to the imperial power**; and the armies, too, joined with them, for they complained of an emperor who was busied with his lusts. Thereupon Gallienus himself led his army against him, and when he began to besiege the city in which Postumus was, the Gauls defended it bravely, and Gallienus, as he went around the walls, was struck by an arrow. **So for seven years Postumus held his power and with the greatest vigour protected the regions of Gaul from all the barbarians surging about.**”

- SHA *The Two Gallieni* 4.3-5.



Postumus – AD 260-268/9



Postumus AR Antoninianus. IMP C POSTVMVS P F AVG, radiate, draped & cuirassed bust right / FELICITAS AVG, Felicitas standing left with long caduceus & cornucopiae. RIC 58

“Great, indeed, was the love felt for Postumus in the hearts of all the people of Gaul because he had thrust back all the German tribes and had restored the Roman Empire to its former security. But when he began to conduct himself with the greatest sternness, the Gauls, following their custom of always desiring a change of government, at the instigation of Lollianus put him to death.” – ***SHA Lives of the Thirty Pretenders 3.6-7.***

Palmyrene Empire – AD 269-274

- Zenobia acting as regent for her son Vaballathus.

“And so, having arranged for all that had to do with the fortifications and the general state of the city and with civil affairs as a whole, he directed his march against the Palmyrenes, or rather against Zenobia, who, in the name of her sons, was wielding the imperial power in the East.” – **SHA Aurelian 22.1.**

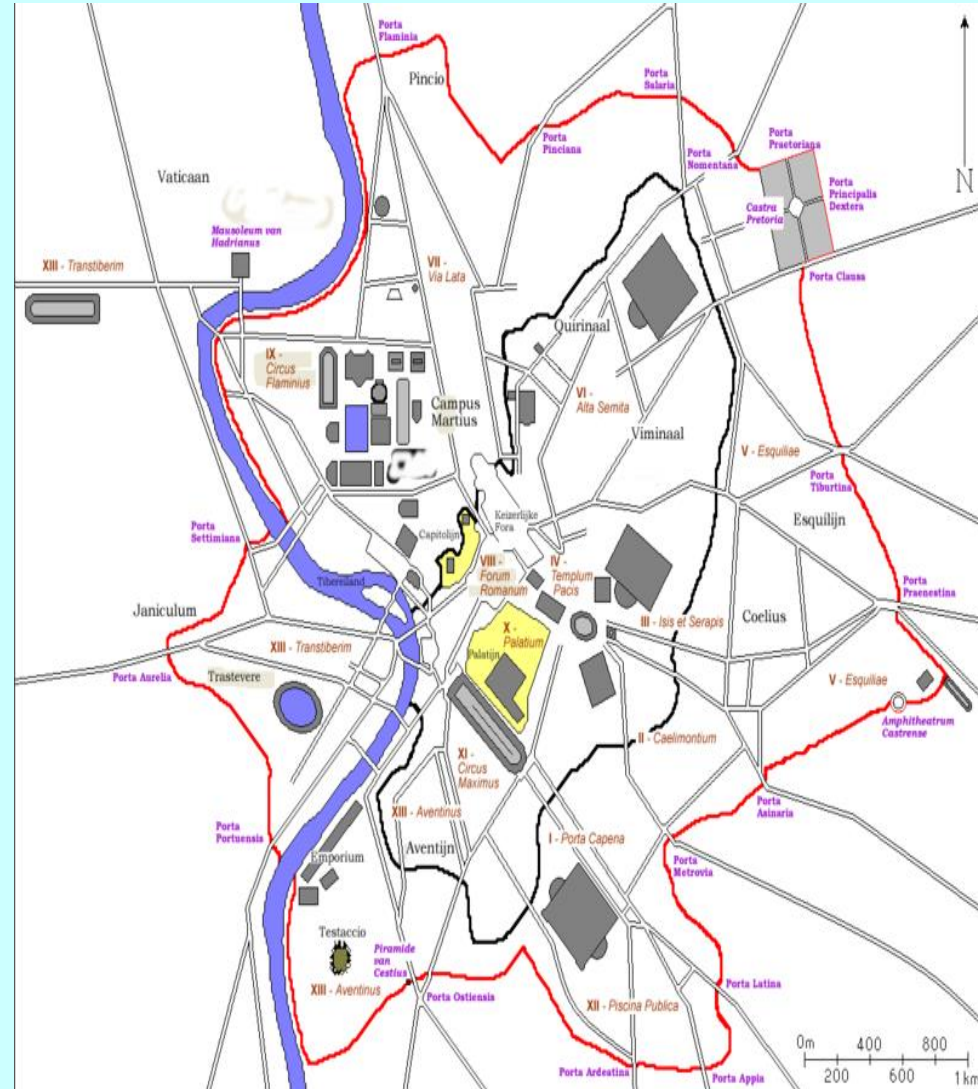


Zenobia

“There were three royal chariots, of which the first, carefully wrought and adorned with silver and gold and jewels, had belonged to Odaenathus, the second, also wrought with similar care, had been given to Aurelian by the king of the Persians, and the third Zenobia had made for herself, hoping in it to visit the city of Rome. And this hope was not unfulfilled; for she did, indeed, enter the city in it, but vanquished and led in triumph.” - **SHA *Aurelian* 33.1-3.**

Aurelian Walls

- Initiated in AD 271-72, completed by Probus (AD 276-82).
- Towers roughly every 100 Roman feet (c. 30m).
- Maxentius (AD 306-312) subsequently doubles height of wall.



Economic Problems

Debasement

- Debasement – a reduction in the precious metal content of a coin, i.e. adulteration with base metals.
- *Denarius* (Roman silver coin) increasingly subject of debasement during Imperial period – also reduction in weight.
- Some reduction in weight of *aureus* (Roman gold coin).
- Ratio of 1 *aureus* to 25 *denarii*.
- During third century BC more dramatic debasement – by AD 270 *Antoninianus* (double *denarius*) about 2% silver.
- Causes – limited availability of precious metals? Increased expenses? Deliberate policy?

Inflation

- Mainly effecting those without direct access to agricultural resources?
- Aurelian mints gold coins of extreme purity – break in the link between silver and gold.
- New coins of 5% silver minted.
- Eight-fold increases in prices in Egypt.

Table: Price level and inflation in the Roman Empire²

Date	Reign of Emperor	Estimated price index (denarii, reign Augustus = 100)	Average inflation per annum
27 B.C.– 14 A.D.	Augustus	100	0,7%
64 A.D.	Nero	75–85	
C. 200 A.D.	Septimius Severus	200	
C. 215 A.D.	Caracalla	267	
C. 250 A.D.	Trajan Decius	300	3,65%
274 A.D.	Aurelian	700	
293 A.D.	Diocletian	1400	22,9%
301 A.D.	Diocletian	7000	

¹ Dr. J. P. A. van der Vin (Royal Coin Cabinet, Leiden) was so kind to make comments upon the draft of this study.

Plague

“For so great a pestilence, too, had arisen in both Rome and the cities of Achaea that in one single day 5,000 men died of the same disease.” – **SHA**
The Two Gallieni 5.5.

- Plague breaks out among Claudius Gothicus' army and kills him (AD 270).

Christian Persecutions

“After a reign of seven years Philip was succeeded by Decius (AD 251). On account of his hatred of Philip, he commenced a persecution of the churches, in which Fabianus suffered martyrdom at Rome, and Cornelius succeeded him in the episcopate.” – **Eusebius**
***Ecclesiastical History* 6.39.1.**

- AD 257/58 - Valerian and Gallienus issue proclamations of persecution against the Christians:
 - orders to participate in sacrifice to gods.
 - attacks seem mostly directed against clergy.
 - desire to acquire money?
 - persecution ends after Valerian's capture (AD 260).

Overview

- A period of development rather than crisis?
- Decentralisation of power.
- Creation of mobile field-armies.
- Imperial court as the capital.
- Abandonment of indefensible frontiers.

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