Part II

Late Antiquity: Division, Transformation, and Continuity

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The Background to the Third-Century Crisis of the Roman Empire

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In the third century the Roman Empire, ostensibly unshakeable in its might and splendour, was struck by a record of disasters. What exactly constituted this record, apart from political chaos reminiscent of the last days of the republic and military calamities unknown since the days of the Second Punic War, remains a matter of dispute.[1] Yet whatever happened, the fifty-odd years of the crisis wrought irrevocable changes in the fabric of the empire and its society. Again, the *cognoscenti* differ on whether the crisis of the third century provoked those changes or simply strengthened or else hastened already existing tendencies. What really matters, however, is that the great transformation, admirably expressed by Timothy Barnes' designation of the world which rose from the turmoil of that half-century as the New Empire (Barnes 1982), did take place.

I shall start with an attempt at defining the nature of the crisis ("A 'total crisis'?"). Today it is ever more difficult to sustain the once almost universally shared view of a "total crisis" – demographic, economic, social, monetary – of which the usurpations and defeats would have been but symptoms. I shall argue that the crisis was brought about by causes of a strictly political and military nature. I shall try to demonstrate that its primary constituent – the breakdown of the emperors' legitimacy – was caused in the first place by the Roman military's self-examination of their position and responsibilities in the empire, which led them to reject the centuries-long system of imperial power of which till then they had been the staunchest support, and take that power in their own hands; all that in order to be able to defend efficiently the empire against foreign threats, a task in which, they felt, they were being hampered by the existing system.

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In the second part of my chapter ("The barbarians: a nuisance or a threat?") I shall examine the threat which, if my reconstruction is correct, urged the military to bid for the imperial purple and, generally, engage in the power game: the European barbarians. I shall try to pin down the moment when the barbarians started to be perceived as an extremely grave danger to the empire, to investigate the developments within the *barbaricum* which led to their becoming the source of profound anxiety for the Roman military, and, last but not least, look for signs of the latter's awareness of those developments.

The third part ("From exasperation to dread: the Roman military's mood in 235–250"), to an extent a verification of the propositions expounded earlier, is a study of the emergence of the second principal constituent of the crisis: the sudden weakness of the military machine of the empire in the face of the barbarians in Europe and Persians in Asia. I shall try to show how this came about and that the elite of the Roman army had been aware of it well before it was dramatically demonstrated on the battlefields of the fifties and sixties of the third century. The argument essentially consists of an analysis of two most extraordinary, unprecedented events, a coup d'état in 235 and a religious ceremony in 249/250: the signal of the military's sudden concern about the safety of the empire and, fifteen years later, their striking confession of powerlessness in thwarting the agents that endangered it.

The fourth, concluding part ("What went wrong?") is an attempt to explain how the empire, well-informed and for a long time literally all-powerful, allowed the situation in continental Europe to evolve in a manner so harmful to its safety. I shall try to show that this was the result of depriving the governors of military provinces of initiative in their dealings with Rome's neighbors. This in turn was a logical consequence of the ideology and practice of the Roman monarchy that made great victories, and especially wars of conquest, a monopoly of the emperors-*imperatores*, victorious commanders by virtue of their position.

A "total crisis"?

In 235 the Emperor Severus Alexander was murdered in a military camp near Mogontiacum (Mainz) by mutinous soldiers who proclaimed emperor an equestrian officer, C. Iulius Maximinus Thrax.[2] Among the many "firsts" of this coup d'état, two stand out: the reason for the soldiers' turning against a member of the dynasty that had been ruling the empire for forty years and which till then had enjoyed the army's unfailing loyalty – Severus Alexander's utter incapacity as commander-in-chief – and the fact that after his death the imperial purple was usurped by a professional soldier. The rule of the first "military emperor" lasted for only three years; in 238 he was overthrown in an insurrection of defenseless Italy, led by the Senate and supported by the majority of the richest provinces of the empire, unarmed as well. During the next thirty years the emperors were again all senators, with the insignificant exception of M. Iulius Philippus Arabs (244–9), an ex-praetorian prefect and so also a member of the traditional uppermost circle

of power. The military returned to the forefront of politics through the back door, when in 249 the army of the Lower Danube supported a short-lived usurpation of the governor of the two Moesian provinces (?), Tib. Claudius Marinus Pacatianus; after the usurper's defeat and death his conqueror, the imperial legate C. Messius Q. Decius, successfully claimed the purple himself, according to some sources pushed into revolt by his own and Pacatianus's soldiers. Four years later, the army of the Lower Danube rebelled again, under the governor of Moesia Inferior, M. Aemilius Aemilianus, who defeated and killed Decius's successor, C. Vibius Trebonianus Gallus, before being killed in his turn by Trebonianus's legate commanding the army of the Upper Danube, P. Licinius Valerianus, soon proclaimed emperor by his army and the Senate.

By that time the "military anarchy" had degenerated into a real and most terrifying crisis of the empire. The great invasion of the Balkans by the Goths and their allies in 250–1 ended in the disastrous defeat at Abrittus, in which Decius perished, the first Roman emperor killed in battle. A humiliating peace and a promise of yearly tribute kept off the Goths for a while, but a year later the *limes* in Mesopotamia crumbled and in 253 the King of Kings Shapur I routed the Roman army at Barbalissos, conquered Antiochia, and reached the confines of Cappadocia. In the meantime the empire had become victim of a calamity of a different sort, a pestilence as deadly as that of the years 165–80, which broke out in 252/3 and quickly spread to all the provinces. The year 254 – when Valerianus and his son and fellow Augustus, P. Licinius Egnatius Gallienus, set out to the most endangered regions, the Orient and Illyricum – witnessed the recurrence of the Gothic incursions into the Balkans and, for the first time, Asia Minor, the outbreak of fighting on the Middle and Upper Danube, and an all-out war in Mauretania and Numidia against the tribes of the desert; in 255–6 the Alamanni and the Franks started their attacks across the Rhine.

The worst was yet to come: Valerianus's defeat and captivity in Persia, which triggered a series of usurpations and brought the empire into a state of permanent civil war; great invasions by the Persians and the barbarians that devastated Syria, Asia Minor, the Danubian provinces, and Gaul; and the greatest ravages of the plague. One bright spot on this dismally black canvas, however, was that during all those years the core of the Danubian army, the strongest fighting force of the empire, stood by Gallienus, providing a minimum of stability that enabled the central power to survive the period of greatest calamities and, by concentrating the immense potential of the empire, to bring about the spectacular turnaround of the late 260s. The myth that military emperors saved the empire notwithstanding, when in 268 Gallienus fell victim to a plot engineered by his top officers, the final victory was a matter of time. The military emperors duly defeated all the enemies and reunited the empire, but, lacking legitimacy and a mechanism of transmission of power within the group from which they had sprung, all except the first, who died of pestilence after ruling less than two years, perished at the hands of assassins or rebellious soldiers. The revolution that started in 268 devoured its children till the providential ascent in 284 of a man so loaded with

charisma as to command absolute loyalty of all and sundry – C. Valerius Diocletianus, the architect of the New Empire.

Such, in the briefest outline, was the course of events during the half-century of Roman history universally known as the crisis of the empire or the crisis of the third century (235–84). For the purpose of the present chapter, it can be divided into three partly overlapping phases. The first, from 235 to 253, was essentially a crisis of legitimacy of the traditional imperial power or, more precisely, the usurpation by the military, till then that power's main support, of the right to eliminate emperors they found deficient and elevate men of their choice to supreme power. The second, from 251 to 267, was the time of direst military crisis, of the impotence of the once all-powerful imperial fighting machine in the face of foreign onslaughts. In those years the core of the army remained faithful to the emperors, out of loyalty or the instinct of self-preservation. In outlying regions, the same instinct made others rally round the usurpers who promised what the central authority failed to provide: protection from the invaders. The military recovery, essentially complete by 271, coincided with the outbreak of a new crisis of imperial legitimacy that lasted from 268 to 284, brought about by the assassination of the last emperor belonging to the traditional political elite and the assumption of power by a military junta, which gave rise to another bout of assassinations and usurpations that were ended by Diocletian.

This dossier, strictly *événementiel* – murders of emperors, usurpations, military revolts, civil wars, defeats at the hands of the Persians and the barbarians – forms the main empirical base for analyzing the crisis of the third century. In its light, the crisis' immediate causes were a sudden decline of legitimacy of the imperial authority in the eyes of the army and the army's equally sudden inefficiency in countering external threats. These two phenomena can be observed already in the first phase of the crisis, which makes it possible to limit analysis and explanation to the years 235–53. Events typical of later phases but not of the first – such as regional usurpations that aimed not at gaining single rule in the empire but at providing means of defense in specific areas – were obvious consequences of these two fundamental causes.

The question is, however, whether it suffices to limit our search to the restricted range of political, ideological, and military phenomena. On this matter, research in the twentieth century was dominated by a school of thought according to which the political and military calamities that plagued the empire for most of the third century were in the final analysis symptoms and effects of a much deeper structural crisis of the Roman world. It would be superfluous to list all the illustrious scholars who subscribed to this view,[3] and even more so to present a summary of their particular models of the "total crisis" (Geza Alföldy's wording) of imperial society and institutions.[4] Suffice it to say that the notion of an all-embracing crisis of the empire in the third century is today in a deep crisis itself. The most revisionist scholars go so far as to question – or even deny – any validity of the concept of "crisis" in describing the empire of that period.[5]

This U-turn in scholarly opinion is a result of the accumulation of evidence which exploded the once universally shared view of the empire's economic, demographic, and social decline that was believed to have begun at the time of Septimius Severus, at the latest, starting a vicious spiral in which depopulation, decrease in agricultural and manufacturing production, decay of urban life, collapse of the monetary system, internal anarchy, foreign invasions, and pestilence influenced each other in a downward progression of interdependent causes and effects, forever shattering the classical ancient world. To begin with, a drop in population on an empire-wide scale is very problematic, even when we compare the situation at the turn of the third century, when the empire was starting its recovery from past disasters, with that prevailing in the mid-second century, the acknowledged "Golden Age" of Rome.[6] In regions where we can actually observe the crisis symptoms, they can be explained by short-term and ubiquitous phenomena such as local crop failures and foreign invasions, or – in the case of Italy – a readjustment of its economic relations with the rest of the empire, which caused it to lose some of its previous enormous privileges, or else the plague, a natural phenomenon. As for an alleged economic crisis starting already in the later second century, the thick volumes of *Società romana e impero tardoantico* (Giardina 1986), backed by later studies, have exorcised its ghost – let us hope for good. Eventually, in the second half of the third century, relative hardship overcame even Africa, the economic wonder of the empire, spared by foreign invasions; but this was an inevitable consequence of burdens imposed on inner provinces to finance the generation-long desperate fighting on all fronts.

Perhaps the most spectacular change in the perception and evaluation of the crisis concerns the vicissitudes of the Roman monetary system. It has, in fact, been demonstrated that after the Severan debasement the silver content of coins diminished very slowly, almost imperceptibly, till a vertical drop in the 250s and 260s (paralleling the many-fold increase in the volume of coins emitted in those blackest years of foreign invasions and internal rebellions), and that prices remained remarkably stable during the entire period, starting to rise in a manner reminiscent of the great inflations of the twentieth century only in reaction to Aurelian's attempt to impose his grossly overvalued "radiates" (Lo Cascio 1984; Bagnall 1985). It is thus obvious that the monetary system crumbled as a consequence of political and military disasters and not vice versa. Equally significant is the fact that the state coped very successfully with the effects of rampant inflation and that, in spite of repeated failures of its monetary policy, its financial apparatus was never seriously disturbed. Not only this: even during the calamitous reign of Valerianus and Gallienus the state machine had apparently no difficulty with raising, equipping, and maintaining huge armies, and moving them over enormous distances.

We are thus back at the starting point – the political and military crisis reflected in usurpations and defeats at the hands of external enemies. The origin and causes of the crisis of the third century must be sought first of all in the uppermost circles of power and in the army.

The Barbarians: A Nuisance or a Threat?

Let us start with the crisis of legitimacy of the imperial power, expressed in assassinations of emperors and in usurpations. As we have seen above, the usurpations which took place between the black years 251–3 and the assassination of Gallienus were reactions to disastrous defeats which, on the one hand, undermined the authority of the ruling emperors and, on the other, exposed a number of provinces to enemy incursions. The separate rule in Gaul (*imperium Galliarum*) and some other local usurpations were chiefly a form of self-defense of regions that the central power failed to protect. The so-called secession of Palmyra was mainly the doing of Aurelian, who, after the decisive improvement of the military situation in Europe, decided to put an end to the political configuration in the Orient created under Gallienus and tolerated by Claudius, and thus pushed Zenobia into revolt. Other assassinations and civil wars which convulsed the empire between 268 and 284/5 were consequences of the assumption of power by the soldatesque, which led to the final breakdown of the legitimacy of the imperial power and especially of the mechanisms of its transmission.

The earlier usurpations – from the coup d'état of Maximinus Thrax to Valerian's defeat of Aemilianus (apart from the revolt against Maximinus, a unique event) – were of a different nature. Maximinus's usurpation was the first attempt by the military in the history of Rome to take power in their own hands by bestowing it on a true soldier who would fight the barbarians to the end. The next three – Pacatianus's, Decius's, and Aemilianus's – were also initiated by soldiers of the frontline army facing the *barbaricum*, whose watchword was unconditional war against the barbarians, something they were convinced the current emperors, Philippus and Trebonianus, like Severus Alexander before them, were unable to carry through. The only difference was that in 249 and 253 the officers, mindful of the fate of Maximinus Thrax, backed members of the traditional elite instead of choosing one of their own group.

Explaining the wave of usurpations in the years 235–53 as the result of a breakdown of discipline, greediness, or atrophy of the civic spirit among randy soldiery,[7] is thus a grievous misunderstanding. The army or, more precisely, its corps of officers changed from the role of main supporters of the imperial power to that of its dispenser when they became convinced that the traditional mode of its transmission harmed the vital interests of the empire that they, the military, had been charged to protect. And since the only manner of protecting these interests was, in their view, an all-out war against the barbarians, the inescapable conclusion is that the crisis of the legitimacy of the imperial power was the consequence of an external factor: the barbarians, whom at least from 235 onwards the army saw as a mortal threat to the empire, necessitating a drastic change of policy, a policy they were resolved to realize regardless of the cost.

Judging by the future course of events, the military's fears were fully justified, but we are still in 235, when the Goths, whose blows would soon cut the first holes

in the *limes* and who till 268/9 would remain the gravest threat to the empire, were still an unknown entity, and when the second-greatest enemy, the Persians, had two years earlier avoided further engagement in the first major conflict between the two powers that, although hardly a success for the Romans, certainly did not leave them with any sense of inferiority.

What, then, explains the Roman military's apprehension? One reason can be rejected out of hand: an "objective" decline in the Roman army's combat effectiveness. There is nothing to suggest that in the third century the soldiers were less disciplined and trained than before; their arms were of the same superior quality;[8] and there is every reason to believe that even before the days of Gallienus, steady advancement of equestrian professionals at the expense of senatorial amateurs actually improved the army's performance in the key aspect of command.

If so, the only possible explanation of the officers' concerns and the soon disclosed impotence of the army in the face of external enemies is that the barbarian menace – that is, the fighting strength of the inhabitants of the *barbaricum* and their will to use that strength against the empire – had been growing dramatically in the period preceding Maximinus's coup d'état, and that the Romans were fully aware of that. Now, the period in which this menace would have first revealed itself, and grown to such an extent as to make the Roman military start worrying about the empire's security, would have been very short, at most a decade or two. Under Septimius Severus (r. 193–211) the Romans' conviction of their crushing superiority over the barbarians had still been unshaken. The first event which might have led the Romans to a different appreciation of the barbarian threat was Caracalla's campaign against the western Germans in 213. We do not know, though, what had provoked it; the universally shared opinion, that it was undertaken in retaliation for the barbarians' incursions into the Agri Decumates, is a pure guess, based on those peoples' future record as raiders but chiefly on an unexpressed conviction that, had it not been so, the emperor would not have decided to take the field against so insignificant an enemy. The course of events does not, however, warrant this conjecture. Had the barbarians made any serious inroads, this would have been the first major violation of the borders of the empire in that sensitive region for something like 200 years (or 140, if we treat as such the help given by volunteers from free Germania to Civilis' rebellion in 70). Yet Caracalla's response to what would in that case have been a particularly insolent outrage was a military parade from the Danube to the Main whose chief result (and, most probably, aim) was, as far as we can judge, the hiring of a great number of Germanic auxiliaries for the imminent Parthian expedition.[9]

The first great breach of the *limes*, foreshadowing the incursions of the years 250–84, occurred during the Alamannic invasions of 232/3. Their seriousness is witnessed by a number of forts destroyed on both sections of the *limes* protecting the Agri Decumates, in Wetterau and in the valley of the Altmühl, by the first signs of depopulation of this region, and by the barbarians' crossing the Rhine right in front of the *legio VIII Augusta* at Argentorate (Strasbourg) and plundering the neighboring districts of Gaul (Okamura 1984, 1996; Hüssen 1994; Steidl 2000).

What must have made these inroads a truly shocking experience to the Romans in general and to the Roman political and military elite in particular, was the fact that, as far as we can ascertain, this was the first Germanic attack on the western provinces of the empire since the days of Augustus and the first major hostile move by the barbarians against the empire since the end of the Marcomannian Wars more than fifty years before (*pace* Okamura 1984). We learn from Herodian (6.7.1–5) that when the news of the Alamannic incursions reached the Roman forces campaigning under Severus Alexander against Persia, the emperor immediately abandoned the plan of a new offensive in Mesopotamia and returned with the bulk of the army to Europe. This, however, was but a beginning. When Severus Alexander, irresolute as he always was as commander-in-chief, during the campaign of 234 attempted to buy peace from the Alamannic invaders, the army reacted with astonishing vehemence: an open revolt broke out in which the emperor perished together with his mother and senatorial advisers, followed by perhaps the greatest outrage against tradition and good political manners the empire had ever seen: the accession to the imperial dignity of an equestrian officer from Thrace.

As said above, with the advantage of hindsight we know that the military's fears, which brought about the mutiny of 235, were based on hard reality, even though they failed to recognize one of the two most dangerous future enemies – the Goths – and clearly underestimated the other – the Persians. One element of this reality has been known to us for a long time: the emergence in Germania of military confederations reflected in new and meaningful names which soon became ethnic designations: the Alamanni ("all the men"), the Franks ("the free"), the Saxons ("those of the sword"). The western Germans, since the fall of Arminius kept in a state of hopeless fragmentation, all of a sudden organized themselves for war, although we do not know exactly when.

We are better able to study the transformation of the basic element of the military structure of the Germanic peoples, war-bands called *comitatus* by Tacitus (Ilkjær 1994; Carnap-Bornheim 2000).[10] Marsh sites in Denmark, with their deposits of ritually destroyed weapons of defeated invaders – Ejsbøl Nord, Vimose, and especially Illerup A – not only confirm the structure of these war-bands as described by Tacitus (*principes* – *comites* – *pedites* [*Germania* 6.1, 13–14]; cf. Ammianus Marcellinus's *reges* – *optimates* – *armatores* [16.12.23–6]) but, more importantly, make it possible to observe growing standardization of armament, in the case of shaft weapons suggesting mass production ordered by the leaders of particular *comitatus.* The most valuable weapons, Roman swords, which equipped a surprisingly large proportion of bands whose arms ended in the Danish votive deposits, were certainly the property of the *principes* who issued them to their *pedites* for the duration of an expedition, as witnessed by the low quality (implying local manufacture) and scarceness (in comparison to spears and javelins) of swords in contemporary graves of southern Scandinavia, the home of these bands (Ilkjær 1994; Carnap-Bornheim 2000). A similar phenomenon can be observed slightly earlier in the Polish material: an enormous increase of graves with weapons, and the standardization of the forms of spear- and javelin-points around 120–60,

immediately before and during the first phase of the expansion of the people of the Przeworsk culture to the south, which in written sources is reported as the migration of the Asdings to the Carpathian Basin and northern Dacia (Kontny 2001, 2005).

Another important element of this picture is provided by demography. By now scholars have conclusively demonstrated a great increase in population density in the second and at the beginning of the third centuries in the area of the Przeworsk culture west of the lower and middle Vistula and in all of southern Poland – which, among other consequences, caused the elimination of almost all the once extensive belts of wilderness surrounding inhabited and cultivated areas (Godłowski 1984a; Kolendo 1991). Not that in that period only the Vandals (the people of the Przeworsk culture) multiplied: the changes just mentioned can safely be extrapolated to other parts of the *barbaricum*, where as yet no similarly thorough investigations of changing settlement patterns have been undertaken. Of course, an increase in population does not automatically translate into a corresponding increase of military potential, if only because as a result of such changes a large part of the population needs to be tied to the soil. It seems, however, that, in spite of this demographic leap, the military participation ratio of the population of the *barbaricum* remained at the same very high level: close to 100 percent of the free male population of military age.[11] Comparative material from the same territories in the Middle Ages (the Old Prussians and the Polabian Slavs), shows that war-bands of the kind described above could comprise all the young members of a community. Since, to return to the Germanic tribes of the Roman period, the supply of weapons was the concern of the *principes*, lack of property was not an obstacle to becoming a full-fledged warrior. As to who cultivated the fields, we learn from Tacitus (*Germania* 14.3, 15.2), that this was left to women, the old, and the sickly; with the increase of population, their part was largely taken over by slaves. In Cassius Dio, extensive manhunts are a constant feature of barbarian inroads. Although one must remain skeptical about his report that more than 150,000 Roman prisoners were restored by them after the victory of Marcus Aurelius (72.11.2, 13.4, 16.2), the Augsburg inscription of 259/60 (Bakker 1993), most probably issued by the *praeses* of Rhaetia under Postumus, boasting of the liberation of many thousands of Italian captives (*excussis multis milibus Italorum captivorum*), proves the ubiquity of this practice. Be they women, old men, or slaves, they enabled free young males to engage in the only occupation worthy of their sex, age, and status: war.

To sum up. The *barbaricum* in the first decades of the third century was experiencing a population boom and at the same time witnessed the emergence of great military leagues and the spreading of war-bands that were ever larger and better armed. Both the leagues and the *comitatus* cut across tribal divisions (Tacitus says that young men readily joined foreign bands [*Germania* 14.2]), easily creating huge multiethnic armies. This explains phenomena we encounter in the wars of 250–84: on the one hand, incessant incursions of ostensibly the same peoples, renewed again and again even after the most crushing defeats; on the other hand, great quantities of objects of Roman origin, obviously plundered in the

empire, that are still being found in eastern Germany and Poland, that is, in the barbarian hinterland, far away from the theatres of war. The names of the invaders reported in our texts were little more than labels attached by the Romans to armies composed of war-bands flocking from all over the *barbaricum*, assembling under the banners of whatever frontline people, to break through the *limes* into the interior of the empire.

There remains the fundamental question of how much the Romans knew of all this. On this matter scholars hold two positions. One was formulated in model form by Jean-Michel Carrié (Carrié and Rousselle 1999: 94–8), according to whom the Romans, encumbered by cultural prejudices and the fixity of the ancient mentality, had no instruments of control and information on what was going on in areas just outside the zone of direct contact with the empire. The result was a state of "constant impreparation" in dealing with the barbarians, strikingly manifested in the 250s and 260s, when the empire let itself be surprised by the fury and magnitude of the attacks directed against its frontiers. The second opinion has for years been defended by Jerzy Kolendo;[12] in his view, parallel analysis of material remains and written sources points to the Romans' good and steadily growing familiarity with the *barbaricum*. To be sure, due to the evidence available to them, they knew some areas better than others. For example, their very good knowledge of the left-bank basin of the Vistula and the upper basin of the Warta (the areas traversed by the amber route) went hand in hand with a very hazy notion of the Oder slightly to the west. One has the impression that, having arranged the geography of free Germany around its two greatest rivers, the Elbe and the Vistula, they did not bother too much about the countless rivers flowing in between. The loss of all geographical works after Tacitus's *Germania* and Ptolemy's *Geography* (with the partial exception of Iordanes' *Getica*) makes it impossible to study in detail the growth of the dossier on the *barbaricum* occasioned by the Marcomannian Wars. That such growth indeed took place is witnessed, among other things, by an unlikely kind of evidence: a homogeneous group of hoards of Roman coins of the late years of Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, and the first years of Septimius Severus, scattered between the North Sea shore and eastern Poland, that were first analyzed by Peter Berger (1992: 156–60). These hoards have been interpreted, no doubt correctly, as the remains of subsidies paid by the Romans to the second or even third line of barbarians to secure their collaboration or neutrality during the civil wars of 193–7 that drew the greater part of the Roman forces away from the borders. The sudden cessation of this flow was surely the result of the final victory of Septimius Severus that made it unnecessary to subsidize the barbarians any longer. Whether on the Lower Elbe or the Upper Vistula, the Romans clearly knew whom to bribe, which shows better than most their familiarity with the region.

All this leads to the conclusion that the Romans kept abreast of ongoing changes in the *barbaricum*, at least within the extent of traditionally known Germany (as reflected in Tacitus's *Germania*) and the Carpathian Basin. Of course, what the army intelligence knew need not have reached the ears of the emperor and his inner circle of decision-makers – unless, that is, a professional officer became emperor, as

was the case with Maximinus Thrax. For all these reasons I think that the course of events during the 15 years after this emperor's rise to power provides an argument for two assumptions: that the Roman military were fully aware of what was from their perspective the most worrisome development in the *barbaricum*, and that this awareness triggered the revolt of 235 and so, as it turned out, the "crisis of the third century."

From Exasperation to Dread: The Roman Military's Mood in 235–250

Why, then, if the Roman military were so well informed, did they do nothing for a long time to redress the situation, only to react with such fury to Severus Alexander's attempt to end the war with the Alamanni as quickly as possible? A full answer to this question entails the problem of the functioning of the military machine of the empire in general and will be addressed at the end of this chapter. Here I want to suggest only that the sudden outburst of the army's activity is comprehensible in the light of what preceded and provoked it. The western *barbaricum*, though boiling with war-bands, was not in itself a matter of immmediate concern, especially to a people as convinced as the Romans were of their overwhelming superiority over the rest of humankind. In the past they had patiently tolerated the rise of one transient power within their reach after another, taking arms only against those who had grown far too strong, far too rich, and far too insolent (the Dacian state of Decebalus) or who had committed the blunder of attacking the empire (the Marcomanni and other peoples of the Carpathian Basin in 165–7). What changed everything, including the Roman perception of the barbarian threat, was the all-out invasion of the empire by one of the newly born military confederations. Some 70 years before, Rome had for the first time been challenged by her client states on the Middle Danube that were allied with some of the more distant and interior barbarians (*superiores barbari* [*SHA Marcus* 14]) pushing from behind (Godłowski 1984b). After 15 years of fighting, almost all of it on enemy territory, practically the entire Carpathian Basin found itself under Roman control. Trifling causes led to the abandonment of these conquests, but at least the erstwhile enemies, bled to the bone and terrorized by the ferocity of the Roman response, for two generations kept as quiet as other barbarians who during the Marcomannian Wars had not dared to try their luck against the armies of the empire.

And now the descendants of those tame barbarians had the audacity to attack the empire and the strength to break through its defenses. The memory of disasters suffered by those who in the past had been reckless enough to fall foul of Rome having lost its effect as a deterrent, it was imperative to annihilate those who were provoking Rome now, if only to discourage their would-be imitators, swarming around the *barbaricum*. The emperor who tried instead to buy peace from them was a traitor to the empire, richly deserving his punishment. But the actions undertaken by Maximinus during the three short years of his reign suggest another,

farther-reaching motivation as well. After a devastating campaign against the Alamanni, the effectiveness of which can be appreciated by the fact that they renewed their attacks on Roman territory only in 255/6, five or six years after the collapse of the Lower Danubian *limes*, he moved his headquarters to Sirmium, from where he continued his war of extermination, this time against the inhabitants of the Carpathian Basin. This and the fact that Herodian (7.2.9; cf. *SHA Maximin.* 13) credits Maximinus with plans to conquer the whole *barbaricum* up to the Ocean (meaning the North and Baltic Seas), shows that the elite of the Roman army viewed the withdrawal of 180 as a terrible blunder which they were resolved to rectify; whether this view prevailed right from the beginning or only with the hindsight provided by the experience of the incursions of 232–3 we cannot know.

The first military emperor proved true to his vocation: he spent all three years of his rule waging wars on the frontiers, without paying a single visit to Rome. This disregard for formalities, together with the reluctance of the empire's population to bear the greatly increased burdens imposed by his war policies, led to his downfall. One consequence of the unexpected overthrow of the army's elect by the defenseless majority of the empire has already been mentioned: the traditional elite recovered imperial power for one more generation. Yet there was another, really momentous consequence: active and aggressive policies toward the barbarians that inevitably placed upon the population extra burdens for the purpose of strengthening the army, were stigmatized as signs of "tyranny" and became politically and psychologically impossible to pursue – exactly at the time when even more portentous signs of future disasters started to appear on the Lower Danube and in the East.

Eleven years after Maximinus's fall, one of his lieutenants, Decius, assumed the purple. One of his first moves as emperor was in its own right as revolutionary, as unheard-of, as the elevation of his former chief: he issued an edict ordering all inhabitants of the empire to sacrifice to the gods according to a strictly prescribed procedure which specified, apart from sacrifice, libation, and tasting of the victim's meat, a verbal declaration of having performed the rites laid down by the edict and having always sacrificed to the gods – all that in the presence of commissions, set up everywhere by order of the same decree, which then issued to the sacrificants special certificates (*libelli*) testifying that they had fulfilled the imperial command. When the first *libelli* appeared in papyrological evidence at the end of the nineteenth century, scholars realized that the emperor's principal aim was to implore the gods to avert dangers threatening the empire and not, as had been thought before, to persecute the Christians.[13] Today, a hundred years later, the same *libelli* testify against now fashionable attempts to play down the significance of the sacrifices ordered by Decius, interpreting them as just another *supplicatio*, common in traditional Roman religion,[14] or a follow-up on the millennial ceremony celebrated by his predecessor on April 21, 248.[15] The compulsory character of these ceremonies, underlined by the unprecedented issuing of certificates, indicates that we are faced with a phenomenon fundamentally different from any seen before. The sacrifices planned by Decius were to be a religious act of the highest order ever conceived or accomplished. All the empire (in the Roman perspective: all the world) was to join

in the ceremony through which, apart from everything else, the emperor was trying to reassure himself (as well as the gods) of the religious soundness of the citizen body, the *libelli* serving to urge the sluggish, terrorize the unwilling (that is, essentially the Christians, since the Jews were officially exempted from sacrificing [Nock 1952: 219 n. 125]), and single out the recalcitrant for punishment. In such an operation, nothing short of the empire's survival must have been at stake.[16]

Yet, there is a major snag with the growing military and political difficulties of the empire as the reason for Decius's decision. In the past, great *supplicationes*, which we might consider a precedent for the sacrifice he ordered, were never decreed in anticipation of future calamities but to expiate those that had already occurred. Decius's edict, however, must have been issued in the winter of 249/50,[17] well before the beginning of the barbarian invasion which was to cost him his life. Had it been proclaimed just a year and a half later, after the disaster at Abrittus, it would probably raise no comment on the part of modern historians. But Decius issued it when the Goths were still on the north bank of the Danube, the Persians east and south of Mesopotamia, and the plague even farther off. One might almost say that with a ceremony that would normally accompany nothing short of a Cannae-like disaster, Decius foretold, or conjured up, his own death and the hell that broke loose with it. The question is, what on earth induced him to think of it?

I suggest that the answer lies partly in the fact, mentioned above, that Decius, a high-ranking senator but also a Pannonian by birth, born in the region of Sirmium, the military capital of the empire, had once been a trusted lieutenant of Maximinus. Those who overthrew the first military emperor knew nothing about the dangers accumulating around the empire; they only wanted to preserve, first, their money, and, second, their old ways and values. Maximinus's supporters, left alone after his fall in order not to antagonize the army further, knew what was going on but, removed from power, could only watch the growing external threat, unable to do anything of consequence to counter it. The first new menace appeared on the Lower Danubian *limes*, since 238 exposed to growing pressure on the part of the Carps and the Goths. The Romans succeeded in holding their positions not by the strength of arms but by playing one invader off against the other and paying subsidies (or, if one prefers, tribute) to the Goths. In 242 the emperor M. Antonius Gordianus III, on his way to the East where the new King of Kings, Shapur I, had unleashed a new war and conquered most of Mesopotamia, fought off the Carps and literally bought the Goths by hiring a great number of them as mercenaries for the Persian expedition. This expedition was one of the greatest military endeavors the Romans had ever launched against an eastern enemy, certainly on a par with Caracalla's expedition of 214–17 and Severus Alexander's in 232. The whole strength the empire could muster was engaged in the war whose chief aim was to restore the position and image of Rome as the only superpower, tarnished by the latest developments. After the victory at Rhesaina and reoccupation of Mesopotamia, the Roman army concentrated on the Euphrates and started its march down the river towards Ctesiphon, to repeat the paradigmatic gestures of Trajan, Lucius

Verus, and Septimius Severus, the by then almost ritual conquest and looting of the capital of the Iranian empire. At Misikhe, almost at the gates of Ctesiphon, it was opposed and defeated by Shapur.

The Roman army was worsted but not destroyed, and it managed to return safely to Mesopotamia, where Gordian's successor, his praetorian prefect Philippus, disentangled the empire from the war by promising to abandon Armenia and paying a tribute. And yet, more perspicacious eyes among the Romans surely viewed the outcome of this campaign as a bleak omen for the future. As slightly earlier on the Lower Danube, now in the Orient the Romans barely held their ground, and even that only by making humiliating concessions. Even worse, the greatest and best army they could field, led by experienced commanders, proved no match for the Persians. For more than 500 years, Rome the invincible had been the greatest military power in the world, in spite of numerous setbacks always triumphing over her enemies. In 235, the Roman military, though obviously frustrated with the ruling elite's incapacity, had been fully confident of their own ability to cope with the external threats. Now, only a few years after Maximinus's overthrow, they had declined to take up the challenge of one enemy and ended up inferior in a frontal encounter with another – although neither of these enemies had even been thought of ten years earlier, when the military had decided to take matters into their own hands.

When Decius assumed the purple, an all-out war with both these enemies was again imminent. The conviction that a struggle to the bitter end with the barbarians – not buying peace from them – served the interests of the empire best had by that time spread far and wide among the cultivated classes, reaching even men like Herodian, and was adopted as the official policy by the cautious Philippus. When he refused to continue paying tribute to the Goths, the Lower Danubian *limes* became once again a theater of war. At the same time Shapur started hostilities in the East, ostensibly in retaliation for the Romans' failure to keep out of Armenia. The empire faced war on two fronts with forces which had already proved inadequate for the task and which for the reasons mentioned before could not be augmented to any considerable degree. In this situation the only imaginable help could come from the gods, but not in the way they had assisted the empire of the Roman people before. "Trust in the gods and keep your swords sharp" – which might well have been the Roman motto during their conquest of the world – no longer applied; now it was rather, "Nothing except the gods' help can avert the disaster."

What Went Wrong?

Thus in less than 20 years the mood of the military elite of the empire turned from lack of concern to exasperation and then to dread, each turn signaled by the revolutionary events examined above. We have seen that this change of mood was in the final account brought about by demographic, social, and political processes taking place in the *barbaricum* during the long centuries of Roman domination.

The question remains of how and why the Romans allowed these processes to take place, how and why they let barbarian Europe transform itself into an immense military camp, ready to charge Rome's borders.

The main reason is to be sought in what I would call the "institutional trap" into which the Roman Empire (in the primary sense of the aggregate of territories under Roman dominion) fell at the passage from republic to empire (in the secondary sense of the monarchic form of government).[18] The ideology that equated the Roman autocrat with *imperator* (victorious commander) quickly prompted an understanding that extending the limits of the empire in the former sense, which under the republic was the right and duty of every holder of *imperium* (the right to command), that is, of every provincial governor, became in practice the exclusive prerogative of the emperors and their heirs apparent. This process had already started under Augustus, when the first emperor monopolized the right to celebrate a triumph, using the perfectly reasonable excuse that the governors of military provinces were no longer magistrates of the sovereign people but his deputies. During his reign this change did not in the least slow the pace of Roman conquests; it only meant that the victories of his generals augmented his personal score. Under his successors this monopoly was extended to waging offensive wars and winning great victories. An indispensable prerequisite of maintaining this monopoly was that the provincial governors were deprived of initiative in dealing with Rome's neighbors – in plain language, of the right to make their own conquests. The only thing a governor was in practice expected to do was to defend his province; if this required carrying the war into enemy territory, the Roman troops eventually had to return to their bases. The dorsal spines of the frontier zones along which these bases were situated – the Danube, Rhine, Hadrian's Wall, etc. – which eventually became the Empire's political frontiers, served in the empire's heyday as fetters for the ambitions of provincial governors: they were the limits inside which they were obliged to return after the end of a campaign. In this way the empire deprived itself of what under the republic had been the most effective mechanism of expansion against the so-called "barbarians": the slow but relentless process of swallowing up the lands in which the provinces – in the primary sense of territories in which Roman magistrates exercised their essentially military *imperium* – had been established: the Apennines, the Alpine regions, Spain, the Balkans, and so on.

In theory, nothing prevented the emperors from continuing the conquest of the continent, stopped "before the end of the horizon" (Linderski 1984: 144) by the outbreak of the Pannonian insurgency in 6 AD and never truly relaunched.[19] But in practice, once wars of conquest became an imperial monopoly, further expansion in Europe was precluded. One reason was the singular lack of (climatic, environmental, and cultural) attractiveness of central Europe (and even more so of the Scottish Highlands!) to Mediterranean peoples. An emperor eager to reap the conqueror's glory found a much better field of action in Asia, where on top of everything else he could present himself as a second Alexander. But even in the East there were territorial limits to Roman aggressiveness. Few emperors could

afford the luxury of a prolonged absence from Rome, the seat of their power and legitimacy. This is why, after Trajan, the emperors waging wars in that area aimed principally at sacking Ctesiphon, conveniently located within striking distance of Roman armies: a symbol-laden repetition of Alexander's conquest of Babylon and Persepolis. But there was another, very practical reason which effectively limited the emperor's freedom of movement in time and space, indispensable in any large-scale war of conquest: any place where the emperor was at a given moment was also the seat of the imperial government. An emperor on-the-move dragged along an enormous train of officials, clerics, and servants even when he himself was leading the life of a simple soldier. This explains why emperors going to the East always took the tedious, but well-prepared land route along the Danube and across Asia Minor, although they could have reached Antioch much more quickly by taking a ship (Halfmann 1986).

Of course, everything depended on a given emperor's determination and sense of responsibility. Those who possessed these qualities – Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus – spent long years on distant peripheries of the empire. But the very fact that any consistent policy of conquest depended on the emperors' personalities in the long run doomed it to paralysis: after Marci and Severi inevitably came Commodi and Heliogabales. Assertions, otherwise meaningless and repeated too often, that Rome had conquered the maximum of what she could hold or that she had reached the natural limits of her expansion (as if the Rhine and especially the Danube had ever been "natural limits" of anything), make sense to a certain degree only because, once conquest and, more generally, every great war became the privilege (and duty) of the emperors, a combination of political, ideological, and logistic considerations drastically restricted the functioning of the Roman machine of conquest, eventually bringing it to a standstill. One result was that the huge, magnificently organized, equipped, and trained army, on every "objective" criterion vastly superior to the republican militias under their magistrates-commanders, became in practice a frontier guard. What made this situation truly abnormal was that the frontiers over which that army stood guard cut across the geographical and environmental unity that is central Europe, leaving half of it on the outside. It was that other half, the *barbaricum* in the slang of modern historians, which, left unattended, gradually organized itself for war, bringing about the empire's crisis in the third century and its fall in the fifth.

Of course, historical processes being but results of sequences of actions and influences by innumerable human and natural agencies, there was nothing inevitable in the particular course of events which led to the crisis whose origins and causes I have tried to describe. And yet, one might argue, its outbreak was foreshadowed in an event that took place two centuries earlier, in 47, somewhere in today's Lower Saxony and described in some detail by Tacitus (*Annales* 11.19–20). The energetic governor of Lower Germany, Cn. Domitius Corbulo – who first brought the rebel Frisians back to subjection after they had shaken it off 20 years earlier, and then began the conquest of the powerful and turbulent Chauci further inland,

independent since the disaster in the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD – was recalled, in Tacitus's words, as an enemy of peace and a threat to an indolent emperor. On top of it, the emperor in question, Claudius, ordered all trans-Rhenanian military garrisons under the command of the governor of Lower Germany back to the left bank of the river. The Lower Rhine was to be an impassable frontier, for Roman generals no less than for the free Germans. The frustrated words, *beati quondam duces Romani* ("happy the Roman generals of yore"), which Corbulo uttered before giving his troops the order to retreat, encapsulate the paradoxical situation prevailing on the frontiers of the Roman Empire after its transition from the free republic to the empire – precisely the situation that led to the empire's third-century crisis and ultimate fall.

Abbreviations

DHA *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*
JRA *Journal of Roman Archaeology*
SHA *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*

Notes

1 For a selection of the enormous literature on the subject, see Loriot and Nony 1997; Carrié and Rousselle 1999; Potter 2004, and various contributions in Carandini et al. 1993. See now also the important collection of chapters in Johne 2008 which, unfortunately, appeared too late for integration into this chapter.
2 The political history of the period is conveniently presented in Christol 1997; Loriot and Nony 1997.
3 E.g., Rostovtzev 1957; MacMullen 1976; Alföldy 1989.
4 Alföldy 1984: 134: "Die Krise war total."
5 It is worth noting, though, that these are chiefly the opinions of archaeologists, based almost exclusively on archaeological evidence; see, e.g., Lewitt 1991; Witschel 1999 (slightly toned down in Witschel 2004). Among historians, Carrié, in Carrié and Rousselle 1999, is perhaps most engaged in fighting the notion of a third-century crisis. Unfortunately, with the criteria used by these revisionists, the French Revolution was not a crisis either. I am also not sure about what can be gained by simply substituting one term (transition, whether mid-term or accelerated) for another (crisis). See now the careful survey of the evidence by Duncan-Jones 2004.
6 Duncan-Jones (1996) argues that the plague of the second century may have been a calamity of an order approaching that of the bubonic pestilence of the sixth century and the Black Death, but the evidence he offers does not warrant that conclusion; see Greenberg 2003; Bruun 2003. We are still largely in the dark about the nature and impact of the plague of the third century. Both epidemics may have been quite deadly, but their effects were surely limited.
7 Thus esp. Alföldy 1984, 1989. Rostovtzev's grand vision, of oppressed villagers in uniforms turning against privileged city-dwellers, essentially boils down to the same (1957: 344–448, esp. 440–6).

8 Even when, in the second half of the century, that is, in the depth of the crisis, a great increase in weapons production prompted simplifications in the complicated, labor-intensive process (but not the technology!) of fabricating sword blades, this was reflected in a decline not in their quality, only in the elegance of the damask's pattern. See, e.g., various contributions in Carnap-Bornheim 1994; Biborski 1996.

9 Whereas the well-informed but malicious Cassius Dio accuses the emperor he hated of buying phoney victories from tribes living as far away as the mouth of the Elbe (78.14.3–4), Herodian is not even aware that in 213 there had been any fighting in Germany; he presents Caracalla's activities there as a tour of inspection of the *limes* (4.7.1–3). We know from the acts of the Fratres Arvales for 213 that Caracalla spent a very short time in free Germany: on August 11 the Brethren made a sacrifice *quod dominus noster … per limitem Raetiae ad hostes extirpandos barbarorum <terram> introiturus est*, and on October 6, *ob salute<m> victoriamque Germanicam Imperatoris*; see Scheid 1998: no. 99a (283–4).

10 Generally on German war-bands, see Wenskus 1961; Kristensen 1983.

11 On the notion of military participation ratio, see Andrzejewski 1954: 33–4.

12 Apart from the author's several articles in Polish, see Kolendo 1992. Generally on Roman intelligence services, see Lee 1993 (quite superficial); Austin and Rankov 1995.

13 See esp. Liesering 1932 (old but irreplaceable); Clarke 1984: 21–39.

14 According to Clarke 1984: 23, "this religious rally was a decidedly old-fashioned gesture", but he fails to give precedents.

15 Thus, e.g., Rives 1999: 148; Garnsey and Humphress 2001: 22. Potter 2004: 243 speculates that "in all likelihood Decius was seeking to legitimize his position through a most public act of devotion and, quite possibly, to respond to the undercurrent of unease caused by the passing of the millennium."

16 Rives 1999 dismisses Decius's action as a minor affair: the emperor was a busy man, he had no time to spare for long-term policy, and the edict left no traces in later non-Christian tradition. He concludes that "the edict on the universal sacrifice was a relatively spontaneous measure, and perhaps not very well-thought out" (151). But a modern historian's inability to detect the sense of a Roman emperor's action does not yet make that action nonsensical. The silence of the tradition is no argument at all, considering how pitifully scarce our non-Christian sources for the period are (even Decius's pseudo-biography in the mendacious *Historia Augusta* has been lost); besides, one can hardly imagine later pagan writers dwelling upon a religious experiment of so unprecedented a scale by the emperor who ended so disastrously. Most importantly, whether well thought out or not, the operation, which was compulsory for the whole population of the empire and set in motion the whole state machinery, presupposes an extremely powerful motivation on the emperor's part. On this crucial point Rives comes out with the following proposition: "Decius' decision to require some kind of certification may in fact have simply been a whim" (ibid.). We can certainly do better than that.

17 Clarke 1969 proposes January 3, 250, but see Rives 1999: 147.

18 On what follows see Cornell 1993; Ziolkowski 2000: 352–69.

19 A rich panorama of views on various aspects of Roman imperial expansion (or lack of it) is offered in Whittaker 2004: esp. 1–49.

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