

## Roman Empire: The Crisis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD

### *Contributory Factors:*

- A. **The Plague:** Brought to the Roman Empire by the victorious legions of its army when they returned from Parthia in AD 165, this epidemic devastated the empire and kept recurring for years. It hit the economy of the empire which had almost certainly started to stagnate by the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. And by the end of the century it was probably contracting. The plague which broke out in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD caused depopulation and widespread shortages of manpower for food production and for the Roman army, severely weakening the empire during the crisis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.
- B. **The Civil Wars:** Civil wars followed the assassination of the emperor Commodus in AD 192. Their effects on the empire were far worse than those of the plague. The emperor Septimius Severus (AD 193-211) finally came out victorious in the civil wars in AD 197, but at a terrible cost, both military and economic. In these wars, both Severus' and his enemy Albinus' armies suffered huge casualties. Trained and experienced Roman soldiers were killed fighting each other, a loss that was difficult for the empire to easily make up. After the defeat of Albinus at Lugdunum (Lyons) which he had made the headquarters of his forces, Septimius Severus, a brutally vindictive man, sacked it so thoroughly that it never recovered either its wealth and splendour or its status as the prime city of Gaul.
- C. **The Problem of Succession:** The murder of the last Severan emperor, Alexander Severus (AD 222-235), in AD 235, is usually considered to mark the end of the Principate and its replacement by mere anarchy. The year AD 238 saw the coinage of seven distinct emperors. And there were at least 50 claimants to the imperial throne in the half century that followed AD 235. Some of these claimants formed wholly separate states seceding from the empire. One such claimant, Marcus Postumus, governor of Lower Germany, was proclaimed emperor by his troops in AD 260. He won recognition by the legions in Britain, Spain, and even Raetia, so that an important part of the Roman Empire in the West seceded. He made Trier his capital and established there a separate Senate. Thus was formed what scholars have dubbed the Gallic Empire. The problem of succession became crucial in the ensuing chaos. Of the 27 or so "regular" emperors, 17 were killed by their own troops or officers, two were forced to commit suicide, one died a natural death, and the rest were killed in battle. Even outstandingly successful and popular emperors like Aurelian (AD 270-275) were murdered. The custom by which the Senate had sanctioned the choice of the next emperor became an outmoded farce. In the circumstances, elevation to the imperial purple became effectively a deferred death sentence.
- D. **The Barbarian Attacks/Raids:** The barbarian peoples outside the empire had long been waiting for an opportunity to renew their raids. Now, with the Romans at each other's throats, they saw and seized it. These barbarian Germanic peoples included, among others, the Alamanni in southern Germany, whose name means "all men", the Franks in the lower Rhine, whose name

means “free men”, and the Goths (probably originating in southern Sweden) who migrated slowly into the southern Ukraine and finally burst upon the Roman Empire in AD 245 when they crossed the Danube delta and raided Moesia (in the Balkans south of the Danube). Thence they pushed farther south into Thrace (European Turkey and north-east Greece). In AD 251 the emperor Decius (AD 249-251) went to repel them. He failed and became **the first Roman emperor to be killed in battle**. Emboldened by this feat, the Goths renewed their raids over the next 17 years, at times even taking to the sea and ravaging the Mediterranean which the Romans proudly called *Mare Nostrum* (“Our Sea”). The Goths were eventually defeated by the emperor Gallienus, son of the emperor Valerian, at Nish in Serbia in AD 268. He lost, however, 50000 men in the campaign. Subsequently, the Ostrogoth half of the federation (east Goths) retreated to the Ukrainian steppes where they created a kingdom of their own stretching from the Danube to the Vistula, while the other half, the Visigoths (west Goths) established a smaller adjacent kingdom north of the Carpathians.

- E. **The Rise of the Sasanids in the East:** The rise of the Sasanid Empire (also Sassanid, Sasanian, Sassanian Empire) of Persia in the East posed a serious threat to the Roman Empire in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Founded by Ardashir I (variant spelling: Ardeshir), a local sub-king of Fars in Persia who overthrew Arsacid rule in AD 224, it was from his grandfather, Sasan, that the new dynasty took its name. To a far greater extent than either the Achaemenid or the Arsacid Empires, the Sasanid Empire was aggressive and belligerent in its stance from the very beginning. The Sasanids came from Persis (Fars). Guardians of Persepolis, the ancient royal city under the Achaemenids, the Sasanids were determined to revive the glories of the Achaemenid Empire which had once extended to the west as far as the Aegean. So major conflict with Rome seemed inevitable. Early clashes, during the reigns of the Roman emperors Alexander Severus (AD 222-235) and Gordian III (AD 238-244) were inconclusive. Things, however, began to change with the ascension of Shapur I, son of Ardashir I, who succeeded his father around AD 240. Shapur I’s reign of about 32 years (*Circa* AD 240-272) outlasted those of 16 Roman emperors. His successful western offensive began when he forced the new Roman emperor Philip the Arab (AD 244-249) to make a humiliating peace in AD 244 whereby the Roman emperor had to pay a huge indemnity to the Persians. His second offensive ended in AD 256 with the capture of 37 Roman cities, including Dura-Europus and Antioch. All survivors were carried off into captivity. In his third campaign he fought against the forces of the Roman emperor Valerian (AD 253-260) who had taken a huge army of 70000 men to the Near East to repel him. Valerian’s army was hit by plague and cornered in Edessa (city in Upper Mesopotamia) by the forces of Shapur I in AD 260. Valerian was captured and he had to spend the rest of his life in captivity. He was **the first Roman emperor to be captured in war**. The capture alive of a Roman emperor was an unprecedented event which produced shock and consternation among the Romans but which the emperor Gallienus, Valerian’s son (who was co-emperor with his father from AD 253 to AD 260 and sole emperor from AD 260 to AD 268), could not avenge. Much later, however, in AD 298, Galerius, the Caesar of Diocletian, the Roman emperor, triumphed over the Sasanid emperor Narseh (AD 293-303), annexing important territories beyond the Tigris. The subsequent peace lasted for 40 years. The reign of

Diocletian (AD 284-305) also brought stability to the empire and marked the end of the crisis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The empire thereby managed to survive a near-total collapse.

- F. **The Economic Crisis:** Owing to the aforesaid factors, the damage caused to life across the provinces proved hard to repair. At the same time, the increase in the size and cost of the Roman army led to a steep rise in taxes. The emperor Septimius Severus had increased the military strength of the empire to 400000 men and raised the army's pay by 50 per cent – a rise which was, perhaps, overdue. But the next emperor, Caracalla (AD 211-217), son of Septimius Severus, raised the pay of the troops again by another 50 per cent. To pay for this, Caracalla had to debase the coinage, a custom followed by so many of his successors that money eventually became almost worthless. By the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, many traders and bankers were refusing to accept Roman coins. The soldiers resorted to exacting goods and services from the unfortunate civilians whom they were supposedly protecting. The economic results were grim but are unquantifiable. It is estimated that at least 15 per cent of all arable land fell out of cultivation in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. (The Roman province of Egypt, however, was probably thriving, and archaeological evidence from North Africa also suggests a period of economic prosperity.) City life, especially in the West, also suffered terribly. Although the capital of the empire, Rome, did not shrink in area, other cities shrank drastically, leading to urban decay. Within these cities, the old Decurion class of local officials, who had been in many ways the backbone of the empire, began to collapse beneath an increasing burden of taxes. Those rich enough to do so withdrew to self-sufficient country estates, whereas the less wealthy were reduced to penury and swelled the number of the urban poor. No matter what the tetrarchs and their successors attempted, the blow to civic life, especially in the West, was to prove irreparable.

#### References:

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Subhabrata Datta