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978-0-521-30199-2 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Second Edition: Volume XII:

The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193–337

Edited by Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey and Averil Cameron

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THE CAMBRIDGE  
ANCIENT HISTORY

VOLUME XII

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# THE CAMBRIDGE ANCIENT HISTORY

SECOND EDITION

VOLUME XII

The Crisis of Empire,  
A.D. 193–337

Edited by

ALAN K. BOWMAN

*Camden Professor of Ancient History in the University of Oxford*

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## PREFACE

The twelfth volume of the first edition of *The Cambridge Ancient History*, the last of that series, appeared in 1938 and was entitled 'Imperial Crisis and Recovery', taking as its terminal dates the accession of Septimius Severus in 193 and the defeat of Licinius by Constantine in A.D. 324. The editors thus chose to exclude from its purview the period of Constantine's sole rule and the foundation of Constantinople and, in doing so, they made an implicit statement about what they regarded as key events or crucial stages in the history of the later Roman empire and the transition to the Byzantine and the medieval world. The centrality of the idea of the transition is itself reflected both in the editors' preface to the volume and in the list of contents, as well as explicitly in several of the individual chapters.

As is appropriate to the nature and purpose of *The Cambridge Ancient History*, the new edition of Volume XII reflects the differences in viewpoint and emphasis which have developed in the period since the publication of its predecessor, as well as the accretion of new evidence. We have chosen the same starting-point as our predecessors, the accession of Septimius Severus, but we close this volume at the end of the reign of Constantine (A.D. 337), a choice partly but not solely determined by the fact that the Press took the decision, at about the time when Volumes X, XI and XII were being planned, to add two extra volumes (XIII and XIV) to the series in order to take the story down to A.D. 600. It seemed, on several counts, more satisfactory and logical to end this volume with the death of Constantine, the first Christian emperor.

We have taken as our title for this volume 'The Crisis of Empire', reflecting the incontrovertible fact that the period from Septimius Severus to Constantine was marked by serious dislocation, disturbance and threat to the fabric of the Roman empire. There is, likewise, no doubt that the latter part of the period, between 284 and 337, saw fundamental and far-reaching changes in the nature of imperial power and the organization of the empire which gave to both a form and a substance significantly different from their antecedents in the periods covered by Volumes X and XI. Whether 'recovery' is the appropriate word to describe these phenomena is, we think, less obvious, but we are conscious that all such choices, whether traditional or

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innovative, are judgemental. The period has traditionally been subjected to a tidy periodization, which cannot be wholly avoided. We begin with the accession of Septimius Severus in the civil war following the assassination of Commodus, and the foundation of a dynasty which Rostovtzeff, following in Gibbon's footsteps, famously characterized as 'the military monarchy'. This was followed by a half-century of 'anarchy' (A.D. 235–84), which saw a series of short reigns of short-lived emperors (not a few of which were simultaneous), before Diocletian seized power and established a collegial rule, first with Maximian, later with two junior 'Caesars', thus substantially changing the configuration of imperial power. This period, the first tetrarchy (A.D. 284–305), also saw the first stages in the formalization of the division of the Roman world which shaped the history of the western and eastern empires until the rise of the successor kingdoms and the Arab invasions. After two decades of further conflict between the leading contenders for empire, Constantine defeated Licinius in A.D. 324 and established a sole rule which he and the successors of his line sustained for a further three and a half decades.

Nevertheless, as is noted in the Preface to Volume XIII, there have been significant changes of emphasis and of viewpoint in approaches to the history of the empire in the third and fourth centuries. The editors of Volume XIII rightly draw attention to the fundamentally important works of A. H. M. Jones and of Peter Brown, the one establishing a new foundation for the study of the organization and administration of the later empire, the other stimulating a new appreciation of the interaction of pagan culture and Christianity in the formation of what we now conventionally refer to as 'late antiquity'. Both of these great works rest on a wealth of modern scholarship on all aspects of Roman imperial civilization which has, by and large, suggested a more gradualist and developmental picture than that of an empire reduced by the 270s to political and military impotence and socio-economic chaos, and rising phoenix-like from the ashes in the hands of Diocletian, his colleagues and his successors.

The editors of the first edition noted that source-criticism had played a central role in revising historical views of the period. In amplification of this, the volume contained a note on the sources by Harold Mattingly, concentrating on the literary and numismatic evidence. In 2002, we would prefer to avoid the term 'source-criticism', as suggesting a rather too restricted approach to the appreciation of the importance of the many writers whose works are relevant and we would emphasize the fact that our views of many important historical phenomena have been significantly changed by the accretion of new documentary and other non-literary sources. We have not attempted to write a note to match that of Mattingly, but encouraged the authors of individual chapters to comment on the relevant sources as they think appropriate. The latter half of the twentieth century has seen

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a plethora of works treating the writers of history in their contemporary context and establishing the value, not merely of the facts which they retail, but of their own experiences and viewpoints. Thus, to name only a few, Cassius Dio and Herodian have been historiographically contextualized, and Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage made to contribute to more than a merely narrow ‘Christian’ approach to third-century history. The importance of Lactantius and Eusebius (the former in particular long stigmatized as an unreliable source) for the Diocletianic and Constantinian periods has been firmly established. Two works or collections on which Mattingly commented only briefly deserve special notice here. The first is the notorious collection of imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta*, ostensibly the work of six different writers. Mattingly was well aware of the problems which this posed but it has taken the influential work of Sir Ronald Syme, following the pioneering study by Dessau published in 1889, to establish beyond all doubt that this is the work of a single, puzzling and unreliable late fourth-century author whose testimony, especially for the third-century emperors, cannot be used unless supported by evidence from other more reliable sources. Second, the collection of twelve Latin Panegyrics, eight of which are relevant to the Diocletianic and Constantinian periods. These are (of course) rhetorical, tendentious and often chronologically imprecise or confusing but there is nevertheless a great deal of historically valuable information to be derived from them, especially when collated with the other literary and documentary sources, as a recent re-edition and exhaustive commentary demonstrates.

The contributions of numismatics, epigraphy, papyrology and especially archaeology to the history of this period are vital, particularly in the absence of a single reliable and comprehensive literary historian such as Tacitus or Ammianus Marcellinus. Each category of evidence presents its own difficulties. The complex history of the coinage in the third and fourth centuries is still imperfectly understood in relation to economic history and in particular the relationship between currency debasement and price-inflation. There are a few very important new inscriptions such as the Currency Edict of Diocletian, but the number and density of inscriptions pales in comparison with the second century. Papyri of the third and fourth centuries are particularly plentiful and attest to important features of political, social and economic history, not least in elucidating some of the complex chronological problems of imperial reigns and providing detailed evidence for the Decian persecution. Some individual texts or groups of texts have, however, occasionally been made to sustain too heavy a burden of generalization: the collapse of the coinage in the 260s, the growth of the *annona militaris*, the crushing burdens of liturgical service and the decline of the *curiales*. Nevertheless, the papyri have an important contribution to make and add a dynamic perspective to the important evidence of the legal codes which

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can, if taken in isolation, present a rather static picture. Archaeology too makes an important and positive contribution in allowing us to see regional and local variations in the degree of social and economic change and the richness and variety of the material culture.

The contents of this volume are divided into six main sections. The intention of Part I is to provide a basic narrative account of the political history of the period between 193 and 337, devoting separate chapters to the Severan dynasty, the period of the so-called ‘anarchy’ (235–84), the first tetrarchy (284–305), and finally the succession and the reign of Constantine (306–37). Part II offers an account of the administration of the empire from what is, broadly speaking, the perspective of the central authority. One chapter is devoted to the army, which underwent major changes in the late third and early fourth centuries, another to the central public administration. The third chapter in this section deals with the development of Roman law, for which the Severan and the Diocletianic periods were particularly significant. The placing of this topic in this section is a deliberate tactic, intended to indicate that these are not merely matters of legal theory or jurisprudence, but that the legal developments and their perpetrators were central to the changes in government and administration. As in the case of the chapters on Egypt and on Christianity (see below), the account offered here contains important material on the period before the accession of Septimius Severus, not treated in detail in Volume XI.

Part III corresponds in a broad way to the province-by-province treatments offered in the new editions of Volumes X and XI but includes only one chapter on an individual province (Egypt). We have adopted a different, thematic plan for this volume, dealing separately with the development of the provinces, regions and frontiers and with the provincial and local administration (as distinct from the central administrative structures described in Part II). The single provincial chapter in this section may seem anomalous, but perhaps not less so than the corresponding anomaly in the first edition (on Britain). There are two reasons for including a detailed treatment of Egypt. One is that the evidence of the papyri for the third century and in particular for the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine makes a very important contribution to our understanding of the changes in administration and the socio-economic problems of the period, and it is a contribution which goes far beyond the borders of the province of Egypt itself, touching on major features of the central administration. The second is that Egypt was deliberately excluded from the provincial section in Volume XI, the intention being that the chapters in Volumes X and XII should between them cover the whole period.

Part IV consists of two chapters written by a single author, offering an account of the very complex problems presented by the monetary and



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economic history of the period – more vital and more difficult to interpret for the third century than for any other part of the empire's history.

In Part v we offer a survey of the most important of Rome's neighbours, beyond the boundaries of the empire, the Germans, the Sassanids, the inhabitants of Armenia and the Arabs and desert peoples. These are of particular importance not merely because of the successive periods of military crisis provoked by the hostility of external tribes and kingdoms during the third century, but also because an appreciation of their role and development is crucial to our understanding of the conditions which determined the shape of the eastern and western empires in later centuries.

Part vi is devoted, broadly speaking to religion and culture, though it will be noted that we have departed from the precedent of the first edition in not dealing with the history of Greek and Latin literature in this period. But the centrality of the topic of Christianization needs no justification and religious change may be said to be the predominant theme in four of the five chapters in this section. Two chapters deal with pagan religion and popular culture, one with the development of the philosophical schools and one with Christianity as such. The editors took the decision to consolidate the treatment of the subject between A.D. 70 and 337 in this volume rather than split it between Volumes XI and XII. To this has been added a chapter on the important topic of art and architecture in the later empire.

As in earlier volumes, authors have been encouraged to provide what they saw as a balanced account of their topic in the current state of knowledge and research. The editors have not attempted to impose any kind of unity of view or approach on the individual chapters and they are conscious of the fact that it is more than normally difficult to reach a generally accepted 'standard' account of much of this period, particularly the central decades of the third century. For this reason, the reader may well find that there is a greater than usual number of inconsistencies or differences of view between one chapter and another. We take the view that this unavoidable and we have not attempted even the minimum amount of reconciliation which was applied in earlier volumes.

We are conscious of the fact that there have been unavoidable delays in seeing this volume through to completion. Volumes X, XI and XII of the new edition were planned in conjunction and it was hoped they could proceed *pari passu* over a period of a few years. That, alas, proved far too optimistic. In the event, this is the last of the volumes of the new edition to see the light of day, coming behind Volumes XIII and XIV. Many of the chapters were written several years ago, and we have been able only to offer their authors the opportunity to make minor revisions and to update their bibliographies.

The principle of ordering the bibliographies is that adopted for the later volumes in the new edition. A list of frequently cited works of general

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-30199-2 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Second Edition: Volume XII:

The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193–337

Edited by Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey and Averil Cameron

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PREFACE

importance has been extracted and placed at the beginning. There then follow bibliographies for each part.

The editors have incurred many debts in the preparation of this volume. John Matthews was one of the original team who planned the work. We are of course, enormously grateful to all the individual authors. The maps were compiled by John Wilkes. Chapters 11 and 12 were translated by Michel Cottier and Ann Johnston. Chapters 6a–d were translated by Hugh Ward-Perkins. Chapters 9 and 16 were translated by Brian Pearce and Geoffrey Greatrex. In the latter stages of the work, Simon Corcoran has provided a great deal of assistance to the editors, particularly on the bibliographies but also on substantive matters, especially in the chapters covering the period from 284–337. We are very grateful indeed to him for this work, without which the volume would have been further delayed. Thanks are also due to Professor R. J. W. Evans and Mr. Fatih Onur for advice on the accentuation of modern toponyms in Appendix III.

The index was compiled by Barbara Hird.

Finally, it is difficult to pay adequate tribute to Pauline Hire, whose vision and determination has driven this new edition to completion. It is unfortunate that we were not able to complete it before her retirement but we hope that she will greet the appearance of this volume with pleasure and relief. The work which remained to be done after Pauline's retirement was not inconsiderable and we are equally indebted to her successor, Dr Michael Sharp, for his cheerful patience, goodwill and determination.

A. K. B.  
A. M. C.  
P. D. A. G.