

THE FIELD ARMIES OF THE EAST ROMAN EMPIRE, 361–630

This book presents a new history of the leadership, organization, and disposition of the field armies of the east Roman empire between Julian (361–363) and Herakleios (610–641). To date, scholars studying this topic have privileged a poorly understood document, the *Notitia dignitatum*, and imposed it on the entire period from 395 to 630. This study, by contrast, gathers all of the available narrative, legal, papyrological, and epigraphic evidence to demonstrate empirically that the *Notitia* system emerged only in the 440s and that it was already mutating by the late fifth century before being fundamentally reformed during Justinian's wars of reconquest. This realization calls for a new, revised history of the eastern armies. Every facet of military policy must be reassessed, often with broad implications for the period. The volume provides a new military narrative for the period 361–630 and appendices revising the prosopography of highranking generals and arguing for a later *Notitia*.

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Preface

This book offers a new reconstruction of the institutional history of the field armies of the east Roman empire in late antiquity. It differs significantly from the reconstruction found in almost all scholarship. Traditionally, historians have relied on a relatively static model for the organization of the field armies, based on the system found in the Notitia dignitatum. This is a list in Latin of the main offices and military commands of the late Roman state, divided between eastern and western commands. The eastern section in the Notitia is generally dated to the 390s and provides the institutional framework within which historians have reconstructed late Roman military history down to the early seventh century. Our reconstruction, by contrast, argues that the late Roman command system was in a process of continual evolution, always adapting to a changing strategic and political environment. The Notitia captures only a snapshot of one particular moment in that history, a couple of decades at most, starting in the 440s. Military units continued to be redeployed after that, and their overall organization was significantly reformed, not just tinkered with, by Justinian. By the second half of the sixth century, the organization of the Roman military began to degrade at an alarming rate, so that the army that faced the Persians and Arabs in the early seventh century bore little relationship, even on an institutional level, to what we see in the Notitia.

The armies and military history of the later Roman empire have received extensive attention from historians. This is largely because they lie at the heart of the narrative of "The Fall of the Roman Empire," an event to which many modern societies ascribe great importance. The explanation for the Fall is a Holy Grail sought after by legions of historians. Yet, whatever broader causes are identified as operating in the background of events, historians must at some point grapple with how they shaped what the Roman armies did, or failed to do, in dealing with the foreign armies who broke the empire apart and conquered its territories, namely the Vandals, Goths, Huns, and Franks in the fifth-century west and the Huns, Avars, Slavs, Persians, and Arabs in the seventh-century east.



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We know about the late Roman armies from many narrative sources as well as from laws, papyri, and inscriptions. An especially important source is the Notitia dignitatum, an administrative blueprint that lists all the units that served under the generals of the Roman high command. Countless books and articles have been published on every conceivable aspect of the late Roman military. Narrative histories of the empire in this period, between the fourth and seventh centuries, are published every year, and these, in turn, rely on the conclusions of a huge mass of technical studies about the size and organization of the late Roman army. Yet it is the argument of this book that this body of scholarship rests on a fundamental misreading of the evidence, especially a misuse of the Notitia. Once this error is identified and corrected, the armies and military history of the eastern empire take on a significantly different appearance. Moreover, a cascade of other corrections follows, for example regarding military planning, strategy, diplomacy, the state economy, and the like, though our focus here will be on correcting the original error from which all the rest proceed.

The specific problem at the heart of our discussion may not at first appear to be that large, but once we grasp its implications for any particular subperiod between the fourth and seventh centuries, we realize that its military history has to be rewritten. What, then, is the problem?

The late Roman army consisted of two kinds of units. On the one hand, there were the mobile field armies that contained better-paid, more experienced soldiers commanded by the top brass, and, on the other hand, there were the frontier units (usually called *limitanei*). The latter were the first line of defense and patrolled the border under the command of local duces (dux in the singular). This book will focus on the former type of force, namely the field armies that fought most of the wars, civil and foreign, and whose actions form the core of the military narrative provided by our sources. In the eastern empire, a formalized system of five field armies appeared at some point: one for Illyricum, one for Thrace, two "praesental" armies stationed in the provinces around the capital (Constantinople), and one for the east (Oriens). These armies were led by generals called magistri militum (abbreviated here as MM), and the exact title of each of these generals was inflected by the name of his regional command, so, for example, the general for Oriens was called *magister militum per Orientem*. We abbreviate their titles as MMI, MMT, MMP I and II, and MMO.

¹ magister militum per Illyricum; magister militum per Thracias; magister militum praesentalis; magister militum per Orientem.



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We know about these armies primarily through narrative sources, though those sources tend to refer to their generals, who were important men in the political life of the empire, more often than to the armies themselves. This is why the prosopography of the generals has been so crucial for reconstructing the history of the field armies: Scholars assume that commands (usually named in the titles that the generals bore) imply the existence of the armies that they commanded. Our second major source is the *Notitia*. The titles given to military generals in the narrative sources often match or resemble their titles in the *Notitia* closely enough that we can be reasonably confident that they are referring (independently) to the same reality. Moreover, specific units that are attested in the *Notitia* are also mentioned in papyri and inscriptions, thereby establishing a presumption in favor of the reliability of the document's contents.²

The *Notitia* is also a crucial source for the estimates that scholars have made for the size of the field armies. Although the document itself does not give unit sizes, by collecting scattered pieces of evidence and making informed estimates, experts have concluded that each of these five field armies had a paper (notional) strength of between 17,000 and 24,000 men.³ As it happens, our narrative sources occasionally give us plausible figures for the size of these armies on the march and these figures match the totals at which experts have (mostly independently) arrived, thereby confirming the soundness of the methodology. (At other times, the sources give wildly inflated figures, which we discard.) As we have not found all references to these high but plausible figures collected in one place, we group them in a note here.⁴ Those reported figures are usually somewhat lower than the notional ones, but that is because units were not always kept up to strength and a general did not always take his entire force on campaign, even when it was fully up to strength. Soldiers could be left

² See, for example, Kaiser, "Egyptian Units."

³ For example, Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 680–683; Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 44–49; Lee, War in Late Antiquity, 74–78.

We have, then, a plan for 12,000 led by the MMT, a praesental army of 26,000, and "another army" likely of the same size as the praesental army (i.e., the second praesental army) in Thrace in 478 (Malchos, *History* fr. 18.2); 15,000 led by the MMI in 499 (Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle* s.a. 499.1); 40,000 led by the two MMPs and 13,000 led by the MMO in 503 (pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* 54); 20,000 under the MMO in 531 (Prokopios, *Wars* 1.18.5); 15,000 led by the MMI in 548 (Prokopios, *Wars* 7.29.3); 18,000 in Italy under Narses in the 550s (Agathis, *Histories* 2.4.10; this Italian command was, of course, not part of the *Notitia* structure, but the figure indicates the size a field army could still attain at that time); and 20,000 led by the MMO and 20,000 led by the MMA, the general of the Armenian army created by Justinian in 591 (Theophylaktos, *History* 5.9.4; *Chronicle to* 1234 7–8, tr. Palmer, pp. 116–117; cf. also pseudo-Sebeos, *History* II [77]).



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behind for logistical, strategic, and fiscal reasons and also because of disease.

We take no issue with this reconstruction, which we summarize because it is part of the necessary background. Problems arise, however, when we ask when, how, and why this system came into being and when, how, and why it unraveled. In other words, we specifically take issue with the early and later part of the story (i.e., AD 361–450 and 506–630, respectively) and less so with the middle part. The astute reader of Note 4 will notice, for example, that these field armies are attested at full strength only after the 440s and rarely after the reign of Justinian. This uneven distribution points toward our thesis that the *Notitia* system came into being later in the fifth century than previously supposed and gradually changed into something different in the later sixth century. Let us take each of these periods in turn and state what this book argues.

According to a nearly universal consensus in the scholarship – one to which we have found no significant dissent - the Notitia reflects the command structure of the two halves of the empire in the year 395, give or take a few years. That was also the year when the emperor Theodosius I died after arranging for the division of the Roman empire, leaving his son Arcadius as emperor in the east (based in Constantinople) and his other son Honorius as emperor in the west (based in Rome and Ravenna). This historical development is reflected in the structure of the Notitia, which is divided into eastern and western sections, each of which has its own complete list of offices and command structures. While we do not know who drafted this document, why, or for whom, the eastern part is supposed to reflect the original moment (ca. 395) more or less faithfully, whereas the western part was supposedly revised in some respects down to ca. 425. Moreover, this document is understood to be a largely reliable blueprint of the Roman administration at that moment when the two empires set out on their divergent political, military, and historical trajectories. As a result, the military history of the eastern empire in the years and centuries after 395 – indeed, all aspects of its state apparatus and behavior – have been written by historians in such a way as to fit the framework provided by the Notitia. That is, historians have assumed that the Notitia accurately describes the reality hidden behind the occasional imprecision of our sources and they have used the document to correct, interpret, or fill in the gaps in our sources.

However, when taken on their own terms and not read through the filter of the *Notitia*, neither the military history nor the command structure of the eastern empire in the years between 395 and the 440s corresponds to the



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norms laid out in the *Notitia*. That is, there is no evidence in *any of our sources* apart from the *Notitia* itself that the *Notitia* system was put into place before the end of the reign of Theodosius II. Thus, historians have to go out of their way to square the circle and force the two to match or else to explain why the structures laid out in the *Notitia* had not yet been implemented. To give an extreme example, historians have had to postulate that an entire Roman province (Macedonia Salutaris), which is unattested by any source other than the *Notitia*, popped up briefly in the later fourth century, disappeared again (to avoid the fact that it certainly did not exist in 412), and then reappeared later in the fifth century with a slightly different name. All this is done to preserve the early dating of the eastern *Notitia*. And this is only one example among many such distortions that have been perpetrated in order to maintain the early dating.

Closer to our point of focus is the following problem. In the standard reference book for this period, the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (or PLRE), the titles of military officials have been changed from what the sources actually call them to what they would have been called were the Notitia system in effect, thus distorting the actual nature of the high command to reflect the *Notitia*. In fact, as we show, the pre-*Notitia* system lasted far longer than anyone has suspected, in some respects down to the 440s in fact. (The same distortion appears in the standard German prosopography of the late Roman generals, found in the Real-Enkyklopädie.) Thus, through the anachronistic rubrics that it uses for many offices, the PLRE, monumental and indispensable though it is, perpetrates the sin of circular logic: officials mentioned in the sources must hold the offices named in the Notitia; and, conversely, because officials are assigned to the posts that are named in the *Notitia*, the document must have an early date. The result is a systemic distortion in our field's most authoritative prosopographic reference work.

This book is, to our knowledge, the first attempt in a century to avoid the circular logic of the *Notitia*. Given the uncertainties of the document's date, empirical methodology dictates that we treat the *Notitia* and the other sources (especially the narrative sources and the laws) as separate and try to ascertain when they first overlap. Following this method, we argue that the eastern command system reflected in the *Notitia* came into effect in the 440s, after an unusually long period of peace and relative demilitarization in the early fifth century, and that it was implemented largely in response to the threat posed by Attila and the Huns. This realization has required us to do two things: first, to enter into the highly technical domain of *Notitia* studies to show that nothing prevents us from dating



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the eastern portion of the document to the 440s, and that the external evidence compels us to date it that late (indeed, in making this case we realized that arguments for an early date have been reverse-engineered in order to support the early date); and, second, to reconstruct anew the command structure and military history of the eastern empire without imposing the *Notitia* framework onto all of its phases.

As a result, both ended up looking quite different from the standard picture that we are accustomed to seeing in modern textbooks. We therefore argue in favor of a "long fourth century" when it comes to military matters, one that lasted until the 440s. It was marked by ad hoc and not "named" regional commands, as well as fewer and smaller armies. The *Notitia* system of five field armies and their named commands was introduced in the 440s, after a gradual military buildup.

At the other end of our period, we find that the *Notitia* system did not last very long, as the Roman command system was in a continual process of evolution. We believe that by the 490s it was already evolving into something different. But this development too is hidden in the modern scholarship, which assumes that the *Notitia* structure remained in place throughout the sixth century and even into the seventh, albeit expanded by the creation of three new field armies by Justinian, specifically for Armenia (in 528), North Africa (after its reconquest in 534), and Italy (after its final conquest in 552). Therefore, what we find in book after book are maps and lists according to which the eastern empire had *eight* field armies in 565 for a combined total of ca. 150,000 men under arms (not including the *limitanei*, who become increasingly hard to track in the evidence). Happily, this estimate exactly matches the claim made by the historian Agathias, writing in Constantinople around 580, that toward the end of his reign Justinian had 150,000 soldiers, in contrast to previous emperors who had 645,000.6 Agathias does not say whether the figure of 150,000 includes both the field armies and the limitanei, or only the former. Nor does he reveal who the previous emperors were who had so many more soldiers or where he got his figures. His testimony has, however, anchored the belief that Justinian had eight field armies within the realm of mathematical plausibility.

The present book argues that Justinian created his new field armies largely by cannibalizing the two praesental forces, which, we demonstrate, never appear in the empire's military history as integral armies after 506. This resolves

⁵ For such maps and lists in English publications that are accessible, but written by experts, see Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 62; Haldon, *Warfare*, 72–73, 100; Decker, *Byzantine Art of War*, 17.

⁶ Agathias, *Histories* 5.13.7–8.



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one of the fundamental tensions in modern accounts between the eastern empire's ostensible disposition of armies (on the one hand) and the fact that the praesental armies – two of them at 20,000 men apiece, in theory – never appeared when the capital itself was threatened, whether by the rebel Vitalianus in the mid-510s, the Huns in 559, or the Avars in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. We can, in fact, trace in the sources the gradual dismemberment of the praesental forces and their distribution to the east (Armenia) and west (Italy). Thus, by repurposing central armies to the new, expanded periphery, Justinian's wars of conquest and annexation left the Balkans more exposed to attack when the Avars, opponents more formidable than any in the region during Justinian's reign, arrived. We also trace the factors that led to a gradual diminution in the size of the east Roman field armies, until Herakleios, in his war against the Persian empire in the early seventh century, was fighting with the functional equivalent of only two field armies.

Thus, the "classical" phase of the mobile army system, as reflected in the *Notitia*, barely lasted for fifty years and not, as our field has been claiming, for more than two centuries. Many head-scratching puzzles and discrepancies in this phase of Roman military history vanish when we realize that we have made an error in the dating of one document, to which we have given far more historical weight and normative status than it deserves. A host of errors flowed outward from that original one, but fortunately they can be cleared up.

A Note on the Structure of the Book

The core of the book consists of a new history of the eastern field armies and their commanders, which explains how and when the overall structures of command changed. The argument, however, requires some technical discussions, including (a) a discussion of the dating of the eastern *Notitia* (Appendix 4); (b) countering the pervasive but incorrect assumption that *magistri militum* at the court in Constantinople must be fit into one of the "named" regional positions (MMI, MMT, MMP I and II, or MMO) and the equally incorrect assumption that the existence of those generals implies the existence of their respective field armies (Appendix 2); (c) providing a new prosopography of the generals of the later fourth century to show that the *Notitia* does not reflect the military realities of the reign of Theodosius I and therefore could not have been implemented or even planned by him (Appendices 1–2); and (d) providing a prosopography of the MMPs, arguing that far fewer generals are



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known to have held this office than is assumed by the editors of the *PLRE* and none of them before the 440s (Appendix 3).

The bibliography on the late Roman army, the military history of the later empire, and the *Notitia dignitatum* is vast. In our citations, we restrict ourselves to the absolute minimum that is necessary to make our case. As we are rebuilding the history of the eastern field armies from the ground up, our focus will remain on the citation and analysis of the relevant sources as well as the critical evaluation of those works of scholarship that erected the modern house of cards.

Note on Terminology and Spelling

Throughout the period we cover, Roman field armies were supplemented by soldiers drawn from barbarian (i.e., non-Roman) populations both inside and outside of the empire, such as Isaurians and Goths. These soldiers are not our focus as they were generally enrolled into units distinct from the field armies. It is often important to distinguish these barbarian units from Roman forces but doing so is complicated by the fact that they entered Roman service under a variety of arrangements and that some of these, such as the system of *foederati*, were in flux during precisely this period. We have therefore borrowed the term "auxiliary" from the early empire as a general term to describe non-Roman forces aligned with, but not integrated into, the Roman armies.

Our preference for the spelling of the names of east Romans would be to transliterate them from the Greek (e.g., Prokopios) and not to use the Latin versions (Procopius), and we do this for authors of this period who wrote in Greek. But, as this is a study of military history, a domain in which even the eastern empire maintained Latinate traditions until the sixth century, we spell the names of state and military officials in Latin form until the end of the reign of Justinian (AD 565), by which time almost all state operations were conducted in Greek, so from that point on we use the Greek spellings (e.g., Herakleios). For place-names, we transliterate from the local language – Latin in the west, Greek in the east – save when this would cause undue confusion (e.g., Constantinople, not Konstantinoupolis).

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that led us to rethink and reformulate certain aspects of it. Our thanks also go out to Michael Sharp of Cambridge University Press, whose professionalism and judgment are pillars of the practice of rigorous peer review in our field. His service as *magister doctorum* is much appreciated and not taken for granted.

Marion Kruse is grateful to Erica Andrist for the summer that she sacrificed so this book could be written.



Abbreviations

ACOActa Conciliorum Oecumenicorum, ed. E. Schwartz, 3 vols. in ser. 1 (Berlin 1913–1937). CIGCorpus inscriptionum graecarum, 4 vols. (Berlin 1828–1877). Corpus inscriptionum latinarum, 17 vols. (Berlin 1893–1986). CILCICodex Iustinianus (Justinianic Code) CThCodex Theodosianus (Theodosian Code) MAMA 1 Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua, v. 1: W. M. Calder, Eastern Phrygia (Manchester 1928). MAMA 3 Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua, v. 3: J. Keil and Wilhelm, Denkmäler aus dem rauhen Kilikien (Manchester 1931). MMmagister militum ("master of soldiers") MMAmagister militum per Armeniam **MMI** magister militum per Illyricum MMOmagister militum per Orientem MMPmagister militum praesentalis MMTmagister militum per Thracias MVMmagister utriusque militiae ("master of both infantry and cavalry forces") ND Occ. Notitia dignitatum: Occidens ND Or. Notitia dignitatum: Oriens PGJ.-P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca, 161 vols. (Paris 1857– 1866). PLJ.-P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina, 217 vols. (Paris 1841– PLRE I A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, and J. Morris, The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume I: A.D. 260-395 (Cambridge 1971).

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(Vienna 1976–present).

List of Abbreviations

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PLRE II

J. R. Martindale, The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume II: A.D. 395–527 (Cambridge 1980).

PLRE III

J. R. Martindale, The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume III: A.D. 527–641 (Cambridge 1992).

P. Oxy.

The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, ed. B. P. Grenfell et al., 85 vols. (London 1898–2008).

TIB

Tabula imperii byzantini, 18 vols. (some still in preparation)

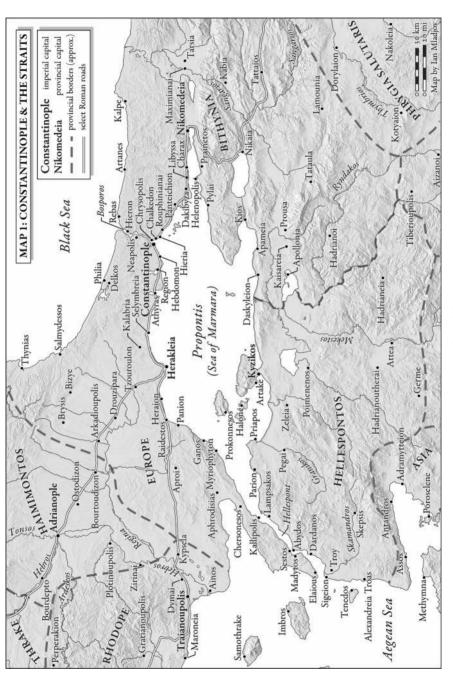


Maps

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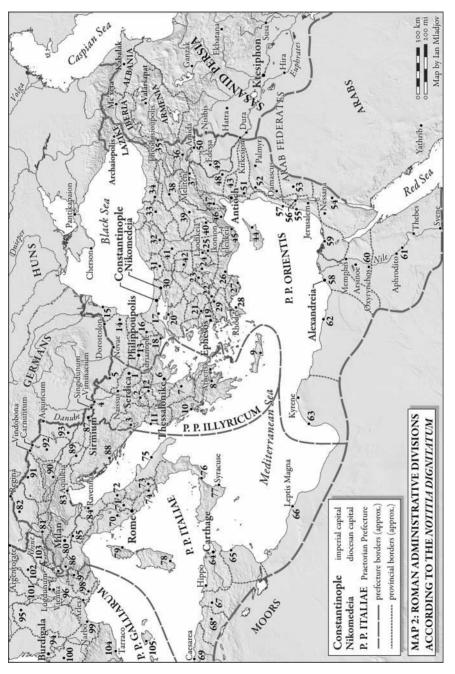


More Information



I Constantinople and the straits





2 Roman administrative divisions according to the Notitia dignitatum



	2) imply carried (symmeta)	DIOCESE OF AEGIL I US	
ROMAN ADMINISTRATIVE	24 Pisidia (Antiocheia)	58 Aegyptus (Alexandria)	(PANNONIAE)
DIVISIONS ACCORDING TO THE		59 Augustamnica (Pelousion)	87 Pannonia II (Sirmium)
NOTITIA DIGNITATUM	26 Pamphylia (Perge) 27 Lvcia (Mvra)	60 Arcadia (Oxyrynchos) 61 Thebais (Ptolemais)	88 Dalmatia (Salonac) 89 Savia (Siscia)
PRAETORIAN PREFECTURE OF	28 Insulae (Rhodes)	62 Libya Inferior (Paraitonion)	90 Noricum Mediterraneum (Virunum)
ILLYRICUM	29 Caria (Aphrodisias) DIOCESE OF PONTICA	63 Libya Superior (Berenike)	91 Noricum Ripense (Ovilava)
DIOCESE OF DACIA	30 Bithynia (Nikomedeia)	PRAETORIAN PREFECTURE OF	93 Valeria Ripensis (Sopianae)
1 Dacia Mediterranea (Serdica)	31 Honorias (Klaudioupolis)	ITALIA	
2 Dardania (Scupi)	32 Paphlagonia (Gangra)		PRAETORIAN PREFECTURE OF
3 Praevalitana (Doclea)	33 Helenopontus (Amaseia)	DIOCESE OF AFRICA	GALLIAE
4 Mocsia I (Viminacium)	34 Pontus Polemoniacus (Neokaisareia)	64 Africa Zeugitana (Carthage)	
5 Dacia Ripensis (Ratiaria)	35 Armenia Interior (Theodosioupolis)	65 Byzacena (Hadrumetum)	DIOCESE OF SEPTEM
DIOCESE OF MACEDONIA	36 Sophene et Gentes (Arsamosata)	66 Tripolitania (Leptis Magna)	PROVINCIAE*
6 Macedonia I (Thessalonike)	37 Armenia II (Melitene)	67 Numidia (Constantina)	94 Aquitania II (Burdigala)
7 Thessalia (Larissa)	38 Armenia I (Sebasteia)	68 Mauretania Sitifensis (Sitifis)	95 Aquitania I (Biturigum)
8 Achaia (Corinth)	39 Cappadocia I (Kaisareia)	69 Mauretania Caesariensis (Caesarea)	96 Viennensis (Vienna)
9 Creta (Gortyna)	40 Cappadocia II (Tyana)	DIOCESE OF ITALIA	97 Alpes Maritimae (Ebrodunum)
10 Epirus Vetus (Nikopolis)	41 Galatia I (Ankyra)	70 Tuscia et Umbria (Volsinii)	98 Narbonensis II (Aquae Sextiae)
11 Epirus Nova (Dyrrachion)	42 Galatia II Salutaris (Pessinous)	71 Valeria (Reate)	99 Narbonensis I (Narbo)
12 Macedonia II Salutaris (Stobi)	DIOCESE OF ORIENS	72 Picenum Suburbicarium (Asculum)	100 Novempopulana (Elusa)
	43 Syria I (Antioch)	73 Samnium (Beneventum)	DIOCESE OF GALLIAE*
PRAETORIAN PREFECTURE OF	44 Cyprus (Konstanteia)	74 Campania (Capua)	101 Lugdunensis I (Lugdunum)
ORIENS	45 Isauria (Seleukeia)	75 Apulia et Calabria (Barium)	102 Maxima Sequanorum (Vesontio)
	46 Cilicia I (Tarsos)	76 Lucania et Brutii (Rhegium)	103 Alpes Graiae et Poeninae
DIOCESE OF THRACIAE	47 Cilicia II (Anazarbos)	77 Sicilia (Syracuse)	(Darantasia)
13 Thracia (Philippoupolis)	48 Euphratensis (Hierapolis)	78 Sardinia (Carales)	DIOCESE OF HISPANIAE
14 Moesia II (Markianoupolis)	49 Osrhoene (Edessa)	79 Corsica (Aleria)	104 Tarraconensis (Tarraco)
15 Scythia Minor (Tomis)	50 Mesopotamia (Amida)	80 Liguria (Milan)	105 Balearica (Palma)
16 Haemimontus (Adrianople)	51 Syria II Salutaris (Apameia)	81 Raetia I (Curia)	
17 Europa (Herakleia)	52 Phoenice Libanensis (Emesa)	82 Raetia II (Augusta Vindelicum)	* Treated jointly in the Notitia
18 Rhodope (Traianoupolis)	53 Arabia (Bostra)	83 Venetia et Histria (Aquileia)	Dignitatum.
DIOCESE OF ASIANA	54 Palaestina III Salutaris (Petra)	84 Flaminia et Picenum (Ravenna)	
19 Asia (Ephesos)	55 Palaestina I (Kaisarcia)	85 Aemilia (Placentia)	
20 Hellespontus (Kyzikos)	56 Palaestina II (Skythopolis)	86 Alpes Cottiae (Segusio)	
21 Lydia (Sardeis)	57 Phoenice (Tyre)		

(cont.)