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Re-evaluating the Roman West in the 3rd c. A.D.

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Introduction

A comparative survey of the period of about two hundred years from Augustus ... to the age of Marcus would reveal no such similar succession of reigns, variety of fortunes in both civil and foreign wars, disturbances among the provincial populations and destruction of cities ... There have never been such earthquakes and plagues, or tyrants and emperors with such unexpected careers, which were rarely if ever recorded before ... In a period of 60 years the Roman Empire was shared by more rulers than the years warranted, so producing many strange phenomena.

With these dramatic words Herodian began his histories, a work he completed in the middle of the 3rd c. A.D.¹ Around the same time Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, wrote:²

In the winter there is not such an abundance of showers for nourishing the seeds; in the summer the sun has not so much heat for cherishing the harvest; nor in the spring season are the corn-fields so joyous; nor are the autumnal seasons so fruitful in their leafy products.

Looking back on the especially turbulent time of Gallienus' sole rulership, a panegyrist remarked to Constantius I:

For then, whether through neglect of affairs or through a certain deterioration in our fortune, the state was dismembered of almost all its limbs. At that time both the Parthian had too lofty pretensions and the Palmyrene claimed equality; all of Egypt and the Syrians had seceded, Raetia was lost and Noricum and the Pannonias devastated. Italy herself, mistress of nations, lamented the destruction of very many of its cities.³

And on an inscription discovered in Augsburg in 1992 we read that, in the winter of 259/60, Germanic hordes actually penetrated deep into Italy, taking thousands of captives, but were defeated on their way back by the governor of Raetia.⁴ From these testimonies it becomes clear that the vicissitudes of political and military history during the 3rd c. — above all, the numerous changes of emperor and the repeated barbarian invasions — left a deep impression on the inhabitants of the Imperium Romanum.

Material culture was also transformed in the 3rd c.: the number of inscriptions rapidly declined and, along with it, the production of portrait statues. Simultaneously came a massive increase in the re-use of inscribed stones and sculptures for the most varied purposes.⁵ All of this could point to fundamental changes in the society of the empire, changes that broke with numerous deeply-rooted traditions. Even more telling evidence for increasing economic trouble seems to be offered by the 3rd-c. coinage. The swift decline in precious metal content indicates *prima facie* an unchecked inflation with disastrous economic consequences.⁶ To this we could add the elevated number of 3rd-c. coin hoards especially in the NW provinces. The fact that these deposits, supposedly hidden out of fear, were never recovered is generally taken as a sign that the owners died or were put to flight by enemy attack. By mapping such hoards, modern historians have attempted to plot scenarios which track the broad outlines of the disarray.⁷

1 Hdn. 1.1.4-5 (transl. Whittaker). For the work of Herodian, cf. Zimmermann 1999a.

2 Cyprian, *Dem.* 3 (CSEL III.1 p. 352 f.; transl. Wallis). Concerning the veracity of Cyprian's description of 3rd-c. events, cf. the divergent views of Alföldy 1989c; Strobel 1993, 146-84; Schuler 1999.

3 *Pan. Lat.* 8 (5).10.2-3 (transl. Nixon and Rodgers); cf. their commentary 1994, 122-26.

4 Published by Bakker 1993 (= *AE* 1993.1231). This spectacular find has evoked a huge bibliography: cf., among others, Schallmayer 1995 and 1996; Jehne 1996; Le Roux 1997; König 1997; Strobel 1998.

5 For all these phenomena, see now Borg and Witschel 2001.

6 Cf. the classic study of Callu 1969 and the recent summary of Estiot 1996.

7 See, e.g., the map in: Cüppers 1990, 121 Abb. 60, with the interpretation of H. Bernhard on 125: "Die große Zahl der Münzschätze zeigt die plötzliche Bedrohung ... Zwischen Hoch- und Niederrhein gab es kaum eine Stadt und einen Gutshof, die nicht von den Zerstörungen betroffen waren". For other kinds of hoards, cf. Fischer 1999.