

Diocletian's Prices Edict: the prices of seaborne transport and the average duration of maritime travel

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The exact conditions, scope and effects of the promulgation of Diocletian's Prices Edict, issued in A.D. 301 between November 20 and December 10, remain much discussed. According to the Preamble, the Edict is to be considered part of the global re-organization of State and society made possible by the recovery of civil and external peace in 299, as well as being an effect of imperial *providentia*. The Edict was intended to repress the *avaritia* considered the main cause of an unequal and huge increase of prices. It introduced the Tetrarchs as universal benefactors in repairing this calamity by means of new regulation. It established a maximum legal prices for a list of 1300 items, services and wages, and was supposed to be valid within the whole empire,¹ though whether it was published only in the Greek East or in the whole empire is debated (Crawford 1984; Guarducci 1985).² Although the 30 extant copies of the Edict all come from 4 provinces within the limits of Diocletian's sphere of authority, because none comes from Bithynia where Diocletian had his capital and because a particular province chose to have either the Latin or the Greek version, provincial governors evidently played a leading rôle in deciding whether the Edict should be engraved in Latin or in Greek and on marble or published in another medium (bronze tables or perishable materials). The emperor and his colleagues were acting in the same way as *episcopoi* or *agoranomoi*, civic *munerarii* of the 3rd c.,³ but on a world scale in their attempt to regulate prices and build a new order. When the Edict stresses moral aspects, rather than the economic causes of the problems, it is to be considered both an ideological program and a rhetorical construction.

Several scholars (Erim, Reynolds and Crawford 1971; Cope 1977) thought that the Edict was a response to Diocletian's second monetary reform, initiated about three months earlier, which, doubling the face value of the *argenteus*, must have opened the way to a sudden increase in prices; according to the preamble, these could reach 4, 8, or more times what was considered the "normal" amount,⁴ becoming a threat of loss of fiscal incomes. It should thus have been composed in a hurry. But the preamble is silent about the matter and considers the Edict a remedy not only against speculation (*avaritia*), but also against the unequal position of provinces with respect to supplies and the cost of living. The Edict attacked speculation (Callu 1969, 405) and was considered part of a global reform of society under the protection of the new *parentes generis humani*.

Other scholars such as S. Corcoran (1996, 215-45), however, consider it the result of a long period of gestation. This should begin to explain the issue of the arbitrariness or artificiality of the prices quoted, and thus address its documentary value. The notion that prices for any item, service or wage could be the same from one part of the empire to another is more ideological than realistic economically, but it gives an idea of how the tetrarchs intended to unify the world they ruled. In such conditions, it is not surprising that known contemporary prices and those listed in the Edict generally fail to produce parallels, and it has been pointed out (Jones 1974, 351) that the prices listed in the Edict were almost entirely arbitrary, either due to supposed hastiness in the composition or because they had to be entirely new. Corcoran's thesis of the Edict's long gestation, the text of which should have been written at Antioch during

- 1 *Cohortamur ergo omnium devotionem, ut res constituta ex commodo publico benignis obsequis et debita religione <custodi>atur, m[ax]ime cum <iu>s modi statuto non civitatibus singulis ac populis adque provinciis, sed universo orbi provisum esse videatur, in cuius p[er]niciem pauci atmodum desaebisce noscantur, quorum avaritiam nec p[ro]l[i]xitas temporum nec divitiae, quibus studuisse cernuntur, m[iti]lgare aut satiare potuerunt.*
- 2 The only extant fragments found in the West, written in Greek, were discovered at Pettorano sul Gizio (S Italy) and are suspected to have been imported from Greece.
- 3 Dig. 50.4.18.7.
- 4 *pretia venalium rerum non quadruplo aut octuplo, sed i[ta] extorquere, ut nomina <a>estimati>onis et facti explicare humanae linguae ratio non possit.*