

# The Crisis of the Third Century as Seen by Contemporaries

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## I

“COMPLAINTS OF EVIL TIMES are to be found in all centuries which have left a literature behind them. But in the Roman Empire the decline is acknowledged in a manner which leaves no room for doubt.”<sup>1</sup> This quotation from Jacob Burckhardt shows the importance of the historical self-awareness during the period of the great crisis of the Roman Empire in the third century. Reflection upon contemporary history, in the sense of its consideration and interpretation, will make it possible for us to understand a society by its capacity or incapacity to recognize its own position as well as its moving forces and changes, especially during periods of crisis and at turning-points of history. It is not necessary to emphasize the importance of the crisis of the third century for the history of the ancient world and for history in general.

Burckhardt, it is true, spoke only of a ‘stormy moment’ as far as the beginning of this transformation of the Roman world was concerned, although in his work about the age of Constantine he had characterized it as the ‘vital crisis of the Ancient World’; he regarded the migration of peoples as the first ‘genuine crisis’ in Roman history.<sup>2</sup> But the ‘genuine crisis’ of the Roman Empire began neither with the migration of peoples nor, as A. J. Toynbee saw it, as early as the fifth century B.C.,<sup>3</sup> but rather with the crisis of the third century (not to be understood in the exact chronological sense). This is true even in Burckhardt’s conception of crisis, *viz.* the coincidence of economic,

<sup>1</sup> J. Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, transl. M. Hadas (New York 1949) 216. This essay, also the subject of a lecture, was written during my stay at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in the academic year 1972/73. I am greatly indebted to Professor J. F. Gilliam (Princeton) and Miss G. Schoppe (Bochum) for helping me with the formulation of the English text.

<sup>2</sup> J. Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, in *Gesamtausgabe VII* (Berlin/Leipzig 1929) 128; *cf. id., op.cit. (supra n.1)* 215.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Toynbee, *Civilisation on Trial* (New York 1948) 227.

social, political and spiritual changes causing an accelerated general process in the course of which an old system would be replaced by a new one. Already late Roman historiography saw this process, in particular under Gallienus, almost as a collapse of the Empire: Eutropius saw here a catastrophic period, *desperatis rebus et deleto paene imperio Romano*, the author of the *Historia Augusta* the danger that *venerabile hoc Romani nominis finitum esset imperium*, and Zosimus saw total confusion: *πάντα μὲν ἦν ἀναρχά τε καὶ ἀβοήθητα*.<sup>4</sup>

But the subject of this essay is to give an account of contemporary views, that is to say, from the end of the second century, when this crisis developed and became apparent, up to the consolidation of the Empire at the turn from the third to the fourth century. The data we get from inscriptions and coins, in particular for the attitude of official propaganda, e.g. the necessity of a *saeculum novum* or the emphasis of success of emperors in the *restitutio orbis*, cannot be treated here in a satisfactory manner, nor can the papyrological evidence. Our main sources for the general attitude of larger groups of Roman society towards contemporary history are literary ones. The authors of the third century were, on the whole, deeply interested in the problems of their own time. Silence about actual problems of the Empire (as e.g. in the works of Clement of Alexandria) was not typical. History as a science was, however, in decline: after Cassius Dio, Herodian wrote fiction rather than history (or, to be more precise, a series of novels), and a historian such as Dexippus was exceptional. But non-historians dealt regularly with contemporary history—even Christians did, following Tertullian's admonition, *cursus saeculi intueri, tempora labentia dinumera, metas consummationis spectata* (*Spect.* 19.2).

Our preserved literary sources from the third century are quite diverse works of pagans and Christians, historians and rhetors, apologists and philosophers, written in Egypt, Asia Minor, Africa, Rome, Gaul or elsewhere, and their statements are influenced by time, place, religion, by the authors' personal interests and by the

<sup>4</sup> Eutrop. 9.9.1; *SHA*, Tyr.Trig. 5.7 (cf. *SHA*, Aurelian 21.1); Zos. 1.27.1. For ancient theories concerning the decline of the Roman Empire see esp. W. Rehm, *Der Untergang Roms im abendländischen Denken* (Leipzig 1930) 9ff; S. Mazzarino, *Das Ende der antiken Welt* (München 1961) 11ff. Cf. also F. Vittinghoff, "Zum geschichtlichen Selbstverständnis der Spätantike," *HZ* 198 (1964) 529ff. For the third century see esp. J. Moreau, "Krise und Verfall. Das dritte Jahrhundert n. Chr. als historisches Problem," in *Scripta Minora* (Heidelberg 1964) 26ff.

literary *genos*.<sup>5</sup> This very variety of sources gives some guarantee for their representative character for Roman society—or, at least, for its educated classes. It is noteworthy that the larger part of the known literary sources from the third century was written by Christians, though they were only a minority of the population. Christians, however, were not only heavily afflicted by the events of that age (first of all by the persecutions, caused in particular by the crisis of the Empire), but also they were interested in contemporary events which seemed to support their belief in the highest degree, and their views concerning the crisis of the Roman world were not at all so different from pagan ideas as they seem at first sight.

The tradition of Roman pessimism regarding the history of one's own time was, as we know, as old as Roman literature itself, and it is not the subject of this paper to trace this pessimism back to the time of the Republic and early Empire. But it is necessary to make two suggestions as to the beginning of crisis-literature in the Severan age. First, from the early Empire one could doubtless quote several complaints about decline in politics, ethics and above all in culture; this pessimistic idea of decline was not, however, identical with a statement of a general crisis embracing decay in all sections of public life, as it was in the third century. Secondly, in the period preceding the crisis of the third century, Roman self-reliance had been, in spite of isolated laments about a decline, perhaps stronger than ever before: one may recall the idea of Florus about the rejuvenation of the Empire or the speech of Aristides on Rome. An atmosphere of general pessimism emphasizing the present crisis spread only after the beginning of military catastrophes under Marcus Aurelius, after the political struggle under Commodus, and particularly after the collapse of the Antonine monarchy and the ensuing civil wars.

## II

Already the Severan age had left no doubt about its feelings of a general crisis of the Empire. After the fall of Commodus, the ruling classes were obviously convinced that the Empire needed to be restored: in 193, Septimius Severus, Clodius Albinus, and first of all Pescennius Niger in the East proclaimed programmes of restitution,

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. the remarks of W. H. C. Frend, "The Roman Empire in Eastern and Western Historiography," *ProcCambPhilSoc* 14 (1968) 19ff.

promising a new age.<sup>6</sup> This continued to be the language of imperial propaganda for the future, just as it had been in earlier periods; nevertheless, the emperors (or at least some of them) saw clearly the difficult new situation of the Empire, arising from profound changes in its structure which made efforts for stabilization necessary. The pressing financial need of the state, ἡ π[α]ρὰ τοὺς καιροὺς δημοσίου ἀπορία, was openly confessed by Severus Alexander in his edict on the *aurum coronarium*, and the emperor emphasized his efforts against the financial crisis: *καίπερ κέκμηκα τὸ κλῖνον ἀναλήμψεσθαι*.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he was the first emperor to be celebrated in epigraphical documents clearly as *restitutor orbis*<sup>8</sup> (on coins, this title had already appeared under Hadrian).

Literary sources of the Severan age give detailed evidence of the decay. Ulpian and Philostratus emphasized manpower shortage and physical degeneration.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary history from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the reign of Severus Alexander was described by Cassius Dio as an age of iron and rust after the golden age of Marcus Aurelius,<sup>10</sup> and all the political, social, economic and spiritual disturbances of his time caused in his view a crisis of the whole Empire, which had been symbolized already by the fire in Rome under Commodus, that οὐκ ἐν τῇ πόλει τὸ δεῖνον στήσεται, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην αὐτῆς ἀφίξεται (72.24.2). This opinion was not confined to the upper classes. A few years after Dio had finished his monumental Roman history, the author of the twelfth book of the *Oracula Sibyllina*, a Jew in the East who was loyal to Rome, saw in the present age a new, bloody and catastrophic period in the history of the Empire which had begun with the reign of Commodus and especially with the civil wars following the year 193.<sup>11</sup> But men such as Dio and Philostratus were still convinced that, in spite of all present evil, the

<sup>6</sup> Cf. on this G. Alföldy, "Das neue saeculum des Pescennius Niger," forthcoming in *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium Bonn 1973*.

<sup>7</sup> P.Fay. 20; see esp. W. Schubart, "Zum Edikt über das aurum coronarium," *ArchP* 14 (1941) 44ff (text on p.45). Cf. also C. Préaux, "Sur le déclin de l'Empire au III<sup>e</sup> siècle de notre ère: à propos du P.Fayum 20," *Cd'E* 16 (1941)123ff.

<sup>8</sup> *CIL VIII* 8797 a=AE 1940, 151 (cf. AE 1948 p.86).

<sup>9</sup> Ulp. Dig. 50.6.3; Philostr. *Gymn.* 1f and 44.

<sup>10</sup> Cass. Dio 71.36.4; cf. F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford 1964) 119ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Orac.Sib.* 12.204ff. Cf. esp. J. Geffcken, "Römische Kaiser im Volksmunde der Provinz," *GöttNachr* 1901, 183ff, and *id.*, *Komposition und Entstehungszeit der Oracula Sibyllina* (Leipzig 1902) 56ff.

sound world of the past (in Dio's view the Antonine monarchy) could be restored: this is the idea of the speech of Maecenas and also of the speech of Apollonius of Tyana before Vespasian, as written by Philostratus.

Apart from all religious and philosophical differences, contemporary Christian views on the present condition of the Empire show interesting similarities. The primitive eschatology of early Christian communities, expecting the end of the world in the near future, had been abandoned already in the second century except by minor groups such as the Montanists. Immediately after the fall of Commodus, the Orient, it is true, was swept by a new eschatological wave: there are groups attested in Asia Minor, in Syria, in Palestine, and perhaps also in Alexandria, who were expecting the Empire of Christ on earth in the immediate future.<sup>12</sup> The Christian and chiliastic way of reflection about contemporary events was the same as in the programme of Pescennius Niger, *viz.* that one age had ended and a new one had begun; this thought was perhaps influenced by the oracle in the eighth Sibylline book (dating from the time of Marcus Aurelius) predicting the end of the Empire for the 948th year of Rome, *i.e.* for A.D. 195.<sup>13</sup> The great representatives of the Church in the Severan age, however, did not share this view. Hippolytus of Rome and especially Tertullian certainly recognized the situation of the Empire, seeing wars, natural catastrophes and persecutions of the Church and also all actual *necessitates* and *querellae* as prognostics of the crisis of the Empire.<sup>14</sup> But they expected the end, as Irenaeus and Sextus Iulius Africanus did, only in the remote future; to them, Rome was the one power which could prevent the end of the world in the near future (Tertullian later changed his view under the influence of Montanism). This opinion was, in the Christian way of thinking, more or less the same as the view of Dio: the Empire was undergoing a serious crisis, but thanks to its internal vigour it was not helpless. Tertullian saw it like this: naturally the fall of Rome must come one day, and the present time was already an age in which *concutitur imperium*; but the strength of Rome could still delay the *clausula saeculi*, and thus the *mora finis* was a real chance, in particular

<sup>12</sup> Hippol. *In Dan. comm.* 4.18.1ff and 4.19.1ff; Tert. *Adv. Marc.* 3.24.4; Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* 6.7.

<sup>13</sup> *Orac. Sib.* 8.145ff. Cf. A. Kurfess, *Sibyllinische Weissagungen* (Berlin 1951) 319.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *e.g.* Hippol. *In Dan. comm.* 4.51; Tert. *Apol.* 20.1ff and *De anim.* 30.4 (on *necessitates artiores, et querellae apud omnes*).

because Christians were praying to God for the welfare of the Empire and for *Romana diuturnitas*.<sup>15</sup>

By the coincidence of barbarian invasions, civil wars, usurpations, increasing economic difficulties and natural catastrophes in the mid-third century, pessimism got the upper hand, obviously among all groups of Roman society. In a petition of peasants from Asia Minor under Philip, the immediate past is characterized as an age of necessities and upheavals, *πονηρία καὶ διασειμοί*.<sup>16</sup> Some years later, under Decius, in a trial in Egypt (the minutes of which are preserved in a papyrus) the prefect of the province refused a community's complaint about its miserable state, remarking that *εὐπορίας μεταβολή* was a common fate of cities and villages of the Empire after Septimius Severus.<sup>17</sup> The speech *Εἰς βασιλέα* of an unknown rhetor under Philip depicts the catastrophic situation under the predecessors of this emperor. The Empire was the victim of tyrants; cities were destroyed and countries depopulated in civil wars; justice, finances, the army and foreign politics were managed in an unsatisfactory and bad manner; on the whole, the Empire was like an ill and rotting body, or like a bolting horse it was in total confusion, *ἀπάντων μὲν κεκινημένων καὶ μεθισταμένων, ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, εἰς ἑτέραν γῆν, καλευούσης δὲ τῆς ἀρχῆς ὥσπερ ἐν μεγάλῳ χειμῶνι ἢ σεισμῶ*, it began to sink like a ship, and its rulers, being tired and helpless, were not able to find a way out; thus there was an increasing fear of the uncertain future.<sup>18</sup> The rhetor praised Philip as a saviour, as did even the authors of the

<sup>15</sup> Tert. *Apol.* 31.3, 32.1 and 39.2; *Ad Scap.* 2.6; *De Resurr.* 24.18. Cf. also Iren. *Adv. haer.* 4.30.3 and 5.24.1ff; Hippol. *In Dan. comm.* 4.8 and *De Christo et Antichr.* 28. For the opinion of these authors concerning Rome cf. esp. R. Klein, *Tertullian und das römische Reich* (Heidelberg 1968) 30ff; J. Speigl, *Der römische Staat und die Christen* (Amsterdam 1970) 244ff; K. J. Neumann, *Hippolytus von Rom in seiner Stellung zu Staat und Welt* (Leipzig 1902) 11ff; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (New York 1967) 347f. Cf. further A. Lureau, *L'histoire du salut chez les Pères de l'Église. La doctrine des âges du monde* (Paris 1914) 94ff, 209ff.

<sup>16</sup> *CIL* III 14191=IGRR IV 598=OGIS 519; cf. A. Schulten, "Libello dei coloni d'un demanio imperiale in Asia," *RömMitt* 13 (1898) 221ff.

<sup>17</sup> *P.Lond.* 2565. See esp. T. C. Skeat and E. P. Wegener, "A Trial before the Prefect of Egypt Appius Sabinus, c. 250 A.D." *JEA* 21 (1935) 224ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Εἰς βασιλέα* 7ff, esp. 14 (Keil). As to the problem of the dating of this speech, I follow the opinion of E. Groag, "Studien zur Kaisergeschichte II. Die Kaiserrede des Pseudo-Aristides," *WS* 40 (1918) 20ff; cf. also J. Moreau, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 35f, and L. J. Swift, "The Anonymous Encomium of Philip the Arab," *GRBS* 7 (1966) 267ff. According to C. P. Jones, "Aelius Aristides, *Εἰς βασιλέα*," *JRS* 62 (1972) 134ff, the speech is a genuine work by Aelius Aristides. But his arguments, which would need detailed reconsideration, do not seem convincing.

petition mentioned above, and the prefect of Egypt noted in the minutes of the trial that Decius was expected to restore the order of the Empire. In official propaganda, most emperors were praised, from the time of Gordian III onward, as *restitutor orbis* or the like.

Herodian, under Philip or perhaps under Decius, took a more realistic view of things; the work of this author is, notwithstanding his lack of exactness in reporting facts, our best source for the views of the lower social groups about history in the mid-third century.<sup>19</sup> In Herodian's conception, the period of Roman history after the death of Marcus Aurelius was a continual series of heavy catastrophes, interrupted at best by short breathing-spells which were followed, however, by worse periods, with the danger that the Empire might collapse, ἀρχὴ καλεύουσα καὶ παρὰ μηδενί πω βεβαίως ἰδρυμένη (2.8.4). But Herodian left no doubt about his opinion that the restoration of the Antonine type of monarchy was no longer possible, because only hard soldier-emperors, with the aid of the armies, were still able to hold the Empire together and to defend it against the barbarians. And after the defeat Decius suffered in his war against the Goths, in a catastrophic situation around 253, Saint Cyprian noted as a general opinion that the collapse of the Roman Empire was at hand: *hoc etiam nobis tacentibus . . . mundus ipse iam loquitur et occasum sui rerum labentium probatione testatur* (*Ad Demetr.* 3).

Contemporary Christian judgements, too, reflected exactly the historical situation. Origen in his later works became increasingly interested in his own time and in the future of the Empire; in particular in his commentary on Matthew, written under Philip, though he described the afflictions of his time, he still believed that Rome had a future.<sup>20</sup> But some ten years later, Commodianus was convinced that the annihilation of the Empire, beginning with barbarian invasions, with military revolts and with persecutions of the Church (a vision clearly influenced by contemporary events), was to be expected in the near future, perhaps in the seventh year of the reign of

<sup>19</sup> See esp. G. Alföldy, "Zeitgeschichte und Krisenempfindung bei Herodian," *Hermes* 99 (1971) 429ff. In the work of B. Forte, *Rome and the Romans as the Greeks Saw Them* (PAAR 24, Rome 1972), there are only few remarks about this very important author (pp.364, 451, 456).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. esp. *Comm. in Matth.* Scr. 36ff and *Contra Celsum* 7.72ff; cf. L. Atzberger, *Geschichte der christlichen Eschatologie innerhalb der vorncänischen Zeit* (Freiburg i.B. 1896, repr. Graz 1970) 427ff.

Valerian and Gallienus.<sup>21</sup> His contemporary Dionysius of Alexandria emphasized under Valerian the decay of the Empire brought about by wars, revolts, plagues and manpower shortage, but after the seventh year of Gallienus' reign was over and the persecution of the Church ended, he became astonishingly optimistic.<sup>22</sup> A similar attitude can be found in Book XIII of the Christian *Oracula Sibyllina*: the author was in despair of the decay of the Empire through external and internal wars since the time of Gordian III, but he saw in the emperor (in Odaenathus and not in Gallienus) the lion sent by the Sun, who was able to defeat the Persians and to restore the unity of the Empire.<sup>23</sup>

Our most valuable Christian source of this time is Saint Cyprian, bishop of Carthage. We know the development of his ideas about the situation of the Empire for a period of some twelve years (from *ca.* 246 until 258), exactly following historical events and changes.<sup>24</sup> Cyprian was not only a keen observer of contemporary history, but his correspondence and an 'intelligence service' at the imperial court enabled him to be very well informed about events in the whole Empire; he was able, for example, to communicate to other bishops the contents of a secret order of Valerian before it reached the provincial governors (*Ep.* 80.1). Most scholars tell us that he had always been convinced that the Empire would collapse in the immediate future, but this is not true. In his earlier works, Cyprian emphasized that the Empire was in a crisis, primarily because of its moral decline; but he, like Origen in these years, did not predict its approaching end. Even during the first great persecution of the Church under Decius, Cyprian did not change his mind, in contrast to his correspondents in Africa and Rome, who saw in Decius already the *metator antichristi* and considered the world almost destroyed.<sup>25</sup> A change in

<sup>21</sup> *Instr.* 1.41.1ff and *Carm.* 79.1ff. On the date cf. esp. J. Gagé, "Le poème messianique de Commodien et la crise religieuse de l'Empire romain vers 260 ap. J.C.," *RHR* 159/160 (1961) 131ff; *id.*, "Commodien et le moment millénariste du II<sup>e</sup> siècle (258–262 ap. J.C.)," *Rev HistPhilRel* 41 (1961) 355ff; M. Sordi, "Diogini d'Alessandria, Commodiano ed alcuni problemi della storia del III secolo," *RendPontAcc* 35 (1962/63) 123ff.

<sup>22</sup> Euseb. *Hist.Eccl.* 7.21.1ff; 7.22.1ff; 7.23.1ff. Cf. M. Sordi, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.21), and S. I. Oost, "The Alexandrian Seditions under Philip and Gallienus," *CP* 56 (1961) 1ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Orac.Sib.* 13.9ff; cf. esp. Geffcken, *Komposition* (*supra* n.11) 59ff.

<sup>24</sup> See esp. G. Alföldy, "Der heilige Cyprian und die Krise des römischen Reiches," *Historia* 22 (1973) 479ff.

<sup>25</sup> See on this Cypr. *Ep.* 22.1; 30.5 and 31.6; for Cyprian's views see esp. his work *Ad Donatum*, further *Ep.* 11.8; *De lapsis* 1 and 17f.



Cyprian's ideas about the fate of the Empire can be discerned only after the spring of 251, especially in his excellent treatise on the crisis of the Empire, *Ad Demetrianum*, written in 252 or 253. First the splitting of the Church by heretics, then the defeat of Decius, other wars, natural catastrophes, plagues, economic hardships and the danger of a new persecution led him to believe that all these *mala, adversa, clades, plagae* and *strages* portended the collapse of the Empire—that *corruens iam mundus et malorum infestantium turbinibus obsessus* (*De Mort.* 25); *mundus ecce nutat et labitur et ruinam sui non iam senectute rerum sed fine testatur* (*ibid.*); *iam mundi finis in proximo est* (*Ad Demetr.* 23); *iam mundus totus in defectione sit et in fine* (*ibid.* 4). But the years passed, and one became accustomed to live under adverse conditions; and it seems that Cyprian changed his mind again. It was in his 67th letter, written in 254, that he warned the Christians for the last time of the approaching end of the world, and in his last writings he returned to the view he had expressed under the persecution of Decius: the *ultionis dies* had not arrived yet, and the martyrs had to wait for this day in patience.<sup>26</sup>

After Gallienus, optimism spread again, especially after the successes of the great *restitutores orbis*, in particular Aurelian, Probus and Diocletian. The main theme of the official propaganda at this time was that Rome had mastered an immense crisis in her history, by the merits of her emperors. In Diocletian's own words, the Empire was restored *tranquillo orbis statu et in gremio altissimae quietis locato, etiam pacis bonis, propter quam sudore largo laboratum est*.<sup>27</sup> Celebrating the *restitutio*, the *renovatio*, the rebirth of *aurea illa saecula*, contemporary panegyrists looked back in horror to the mid-third century, of which they said *sive incuria rerum sive quadam inclinatione fatorum omnibus fere membris erat truncata res publica*.<sup>28</sup> Even Christians became less pessimistic than before, in spite of the terrible persecution under Diocletian. Arnobius was convinced that also in his time (under Diocletian) *urgent tempora periculis plena* (*Adv. nat.* 2.78), and he gave a detailed description of the *mala* of the Empire; but he saw in them only evidence for permanent changes in history, and he did not point out consequences for the immediate future, as Commodianus or

<sup>26</sup> *De bono patientiae* 21; similarly in *De lapsis* 18, dating from 251.

<sup>27</sup> *De pret.*, praef. 5; see the text now in S. Lauffer, *Diokletians Preisedikt* (Berlin 1971) 90ff.

<sup>28</sup> *Paneg.* 4 (8) 10.2. Cf. also *Paneg.* 2 (10) 4.2; 3 (11) 5.3; 5 (9) 18.1; 6 (7) 2.2. *Aurea illa saecula*: *Paneg.* 5 (9) 18.5.

Cyprian had done.<sup>29</sup> His pupil Lactantius vehemently denied that in his time, when the Empire had become senile already, an *aureus humanarum rerum status* should have been reached.<sup>30</sup> But he pointed out that the Empire would not come to an end for another 200 years. It is noteworthy that the same calculation of 6000 years for the whole of universal history had led Cyprian fifty years earlier to a wholly different conclusion:<sup>31</sup> he had not completely denied the possibility of the rebirth of the *tempus illud aureum* if the pagan world was converted to Christianity (*Div.Inst.* 5.8.3); and after the edict of Galerius he had celebrated the beginning of a new age, *restituta per orbem tranquillitate*, in the same terminology as emperors and panegyrists had done (*De mort.pers.* 1.2).

### III

This brief chronological survey of some echoes of contemporary history during the crisis of the third century shows a uniformity in judgement: Roman society was generally convinced that it was living in an age of serious transformations, and that the result of these changes meant present collapse or future uncertainty for the Empire. A general transformation of the traditional order was the basic experience of people when considering contemporary events. From third-century authors may be derived a catalogue of basic changes in the situation of the Empire.

First, the transformation of the monarchy. In particular Dio and Herodian, but also such 'popular historians' as the authors of the contemporary *libri Sibyllini*, described this process, which today is called the change from the principate to the dominate (in Herodian's terminology, from *ἀριστοκρατία* to *τυραννίς*).<sup>32</sup> They related the rise of a new type of emperor, ruling in an increasingly authoritarian and at the same time military manner; they deplored or recorded how

<sup>29</sup> *Adv. nat.* 1.1ff. Cf. E. Rapisarda, *Arnobio* (Catania 1946) 55ff.

<sup>30</sup> *Div.Inst.* 5.8.8.; cf. 7.15.14ff. See also his attacks against Diocletian, *De mort.pers.* 7.1ff.

<sup>31</sup> *Div.Inst.* 7.25.3ff; *Cypr. Ad. Fort. praef.* 2. Cf. H. W. A. van Rooijen-Dijkman, *De vita beata. Het zevende Boek van de Divinae institutiones van Lactantius* (Assen 1967) 101ff; V. Loi, *Lattanzio nella storia del linguaggio e del pensiero teologico preniceno* (Zürich 1970) 247ff. For these calculations cf. J. Daniélou, "La typologie millénariste de la semaine dans le christianisme primitif," *VigChr* 2 (1948) 1ff.

<sup>32</sup> See esp. Cass. Dio 71.34.2ff on Marcus Aurelius, and e.g. 77.6.1<sup>a</sup> on Caracalla; Herodian: see Alföldy, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.19) 435ff, and W. Widmer, *Kaisertum, Rom und Welt in Herodians Metà Márkon βασιλείας ἱστορία* (Zürich 1967) 11ff, 28ff; *Orac.Sib.* 12.187ff.

the Senate lost its political power and how rulers became 'bad' or even worse from the traditional point of view. Herodian emphasized the change from the Antonine to the Severan monarchy by a convenient distinction: in his account, young Commodus had been instructed that an emperor needed the support of the Senate and of all his subjects throughout the Empire, and furthermore that he needed the loyalty of his army, and money; when Septimius Severus had given instructions to his sons, however, he stressed (as Dio, too, relates) that a strong army and money to pay it were the only essentials.<sup>33</sup>

Second, the instability of the State. Almost all authors of the third century were deeply impressed by the quick change of emperors, raised to power by violence and killed shortly afterwards, and by the fact that justice, fairness and security were, on the whole, lost. Dio, as also the author of the *Eic βασιλέα*, and Saint Cyprian under Philip, drew the conclusion that the emperors of their time had lost their firm power, even those who were more successful; and Herodian began his work with the statement that the stability of the early Empire had been followed by an age with an incredibly high number of emperors within a short time.<sup>34</sup> Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Tertullian were already so impressed by the political crisis after Commodus' death that they predicted, as did Lactantius later, that one day the end of the Empire would come through its disintegration into ten 'democracies'.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, panegyrists of the tetrarchy praised Diocletian for the *restitutio* of internal security, though Lactantius even reproached him with perturbation of the Empire.<sup>36</sup>

Third, the increasing power of the army. Already Dio emphasized that since Commodus, and especially since 193, the army had become the most important factor in politics.<sup>37</sup> Later authors shared this view and deplored not only the lack of military discipline, as e.g. the anonymous rhetor under Philip did,<sup>38</sup> but also the destructive rôle of the army. Herodian expressed what was surely public opinion

<sup>33</sup> Herod. 1.6.6 and 3.13.4; cf. Cass. Dio 76.15.2.

<sup>34</sup> See esp. Cass. Dio 78.41.1 and 80.7.3; ps.-Aristid. *Eic βασιλέα* 7; Cypr. *Ad Don.* 6,10,13; Herod. 1.1.5.

<sup>35</sup> Iren. *Adv. haer.* 5.26.1; Hippol. *In Dan. comm.* 4.6 and *De Christo et Antichr.* 28; Tert. *De Resurr.* 24.18; Lact. *Div.Inst.* 7.16.1ff.

<sup>36</sup> *Paneg.* 4 (8) 18.4: *securitas restituta*. See contra Lact. *De mort.pers.* 7.2ff.

<sup>37</sup> Esp. 72.9.2ff, 74.8.1ff, 75.2.3, 77.17.2, 78.28.1ff, 80.17.1.

<sup>38</sup> *Eic βασιλέα* 30f.

(2.6.14): with the fall of Pertinax and the proclamation of Didius Iulianus by the praetorian guard, a period of the rule of the soldiery had begun, because this had been the first time that the ἡθῆ of the soldiers had been corrupted, that they had become undisciplined and avaricious, that they had despised their rulers and that nobody had been able to curb their political ambitions, which had not even shrunk from the assassination of emperors.

Fourth, the predominance of the provinces, in particular of the Danubian provinces, not only in military but also in political respects—a fact which must have been obvious since the year 193. It may suffice to cite the famous passage of Mamertinus: *quis enim dubitat quin multis iam saeculis . . . Italia quidem sit gentium domina gloriae vetustate, sed Pannonia virtute?*<sup>39</sup> But the ἐθνῶν κινήσεις, i.e. the rising importance of the provinces and provincials for the internal development of the Empire in Herodian's terminology,<sup>40</sup> was not only a fact worth celebrating. Herodian, perhaps impressed by the propaganda of the *Genius Illyrici* under Decius, emphasized that no power could equal the Ἰλλυρικὴ δύναμις (2.10.8), but he pointed out the disintegrating rôle of such regional powers and at the same time, as Cassius Dio already had done, the decline of Italy.<sup>41</sup>

Fifth, social change, recognized in some respects more clearly than perhaps ever before in ancient history. Already Tertullian had remarked, in addition to seeing other problems of the Empire (external and internal wars, natural catastrophes, economic problems, manpower shortage, political and cultural decline), that *humiles sublimitate, sublimes humilitate mutantur* (*Apol.* 20.2), and the same statement concerning the social order was made by Cassius Dio, too: πάντα ἄνω κάτω συνεχύθη (80.7.2), with the consequence that men of very low social background could receive senatorial posts and commands. Herodian described clearly the impotence of the *eupatrides*, i.e. of members of the ancient senatorial aristocratic families, who were not able to undertake the tasks of the moment, for instance Clodius Albinus (who was cited as a bad example in a speech of Severus, which Herodian, of course, fabricated), and who were not

<sup>39</sup> *Paneg.* 2 (10) 2. 2. Cf. on this esp. A. Alföldi, *Studien zur Geschichte der Weltkrise des 3. Jahr. n. Chr.* (Darmstadt 1967) 228ff.

<sup>40</sup> Herod. 1.1.4 and 3.7.7, cf. 6.3.2. On this see W. Widmer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.32) 49; cf. J. F. Stein, *Dexippus et Herodianus rerum scriptores quatenus Thucydidem secuti sint* (Bonn 1957) 141.

<sup>41</sup> See esp. Cass. Dio 75.2.4ff; Herodian: see Alföldy, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.19) 440f.

suitable for warfare but only for dancing (3.6.7). At the same time, he was convinced (in contrast to Cassius Dio) that it was not aristocratic origin but only personal qualities and merits that should be regarded as qualifications for men in leading positions (5.1.5f)—so it had been in the case of Pertinax, the son of a former slave, who had been the best man in Roman history after Marcus Aurelius.<sup>42</sup> But we hear about other social problems and changes as well, for example, about *στάσεις* of the population of cities and of rural areas.<sup>43</sup> On the whole, the old social order was believed to be largely lost, and radical Christians, such as Commodianus, had the vision that the end of the Empire would involve a ‘revolutionary’ transformation of the social order: *quorumque primores, praepositi sive legati, in loco servorum rediguntur sanctis iniqui* (*Carm.* 987f).

Sixth, economic problems, which were by no means underestimated. Difficulties in the financial situation of the Empire, emphasized so clearly in the previously mentioned edict of Severus Alexander, were a problem treated again and again by Dio and Herodian, as well as by the unknown rhetor under Philip.<sup>44</sup> Other authors, particularly the panegyrists at the turn from the third to the fourth century, pointed out the bad consequences of the fact that before Diocletian large areas of land had lain waste and that agriculture had been in decline.<sup>45</sup> They of course praised Diocletian for solving this problem, but Lactantius reproached this emperor with depopulating the land to the damage of agriculture (*De mort. pers.* 7.3). In Christian literature, the constantly emphasized *fames et terrae motus et pestilentiae* were an old apocalyptic topic. But Saint Cyprian gave in his *Ad Demetrianum* (3) a detailed catalogue of the actual economic problems: shortage of food, increasing prices, exhaustion of mines and quarries, decline of craftsmanship.

Seventh, decrease in population and manpower shortage, frequently emphasized in the third century ever since Ulpian suggested that the number of men who were able to undertake *munera* was very small in his time (*Dig.* 50.6.3); Cyprian lamented that *decrescit ac deficit in arvis agricola, in mari nauta, miles in castris*, and Dionysius of

<sup>42</sup> Herod. 2.1.4, 2.3.1f, 2.3.4.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Cass. Dio 80.2.3; Herod. 7.4.1ff; *Paneg.* 2 (10) 4.3.

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. Cass. Dio 74.5.4f and 80.12.2<sup>2</sup>; Herod. 4.4.7; *Εἰς βασιλέα* 16.

<sup>45</sup> *Paneg.* 3 (11) 15.3; 5 (9) 18.1ff; 8 (5) 6.1ff.

Alexandria was shocked by the decrease in population in his city.<sup>46</sup> This problem, together with physical degeneration and decreasing duration of life, was emphasized also by Philostratus, pseudo-Aristides, Solinus, Arnobius and Lactantius, and by panegyrists as well, who praised the first tetrarchy for the fact that *hominum aetates et numerus augentur*, which was denied, however, by Lactantius.<sup>47</sup>

Eighth, the religious and moral crisis. The disregard of the *mos maiorum* in religion and ethics by such unworthy emperors as Commodus, Caracalla, and above all Elagabalus (80.11.1ff), was one of the main topics in the historiography of Cassius Dio; the necessity to restore *εὐσεβεία* or *pietas, religio* and *mores*, was, in the third century, always acknowledged by pagan society,<sup>48</sup> who saw the main enemy of their religious and ethical tradition in Christianity. At the same time, the Church blamed the increasing decay of ethics on the pagans. But in the view of Christians, especially of Saint Cyprian, time brought, in a sense, the decline of Christianity, too: heresy was on the increase as it had never been before; many Christians were led astray by the temptations of this world; many of them proved to be weak in the persecutions.<sup>49</sup> And the severe persecutions as such completed the apocalyptic forebodings for many Christians: to them they indicated, as for instance to Cyprian or to Commodianus, not only a crisis of the Church but above all the approaching collapse of the Empire.

And finally, the barbarian invasions. Authors of the Severan age such as Cassius Dio and Tertullian were not yet able to recognize the importance of new dangers beyond the imperial frontiers.<sup>50</sup> When under Severus Alexander the newly established Sassanid Empire demanded Rome's eastern provinces, Dio remarked that this would hardly have been noteworthy if Roman armies had had better discipline (80.3.1ff), and he underestimated the Germans completely. But two decades later, Herodian saw the Persians and Germans as equal, or almost equal, enemies to Rome, and after the first

<sup>46</sup> Cypr. *Ad Demetr.* 3 (cf. also *ibid.* 4); Dionysius in Euseb. *Hist.Eccl.* 7.21.9f. On the problem see A. E. R. Boak, *Manpower Shortage and the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West* (Ann Arbor 1955).

<sup>47</sup> Philostr. *Gymn.* 1 and 44; ps.-Aristid. *Εἰς βασιλέα* 7; Solin. *Coll.rer.mem.* 1.87 and 1.90; Arnob. *Adv. nat.* 2.75; Lact. *De mort.pers.* 7.2f (cf. also *Div.Inst.* 7.16.14); *Paneg.* 3 (11) 15.4; 4 (9) 29.1; 8 (5) 5.4. Cf. also Galen. 13.597; Callistratus in *Dig.* 50.2.12. On the other hand, Tertullian (*De anim.* 30.4) lamented the excessive amount of population in his time.

<sup>48</sup> See e.g. Cass. Dio in Maecenas' speech: 52.36.1f.

<sup>49</sup> *De eccl.cath.un.* 16 and 26; *Ep.* 59.7 and 67.7; *De lapsis* 5ff; etc.

<sup>50</sup> On Cass. Dio cf. Millar, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) 171.

two great wars Rome fought with the new enemy in the Orient, he remarked that the Persian demand under Alexander was an alarming shock (6.2.3ff). Wars against barbarians were, in his view, no longer struggles to secure the frontiers but to save the very existence of the Empire: οὐ γὰρ περὶ ὄρων γῆς οὐδὲ ρείθρων ποταμῶν ἢ φιλονεικία, περὶ τοῦ παντός δέ (4.14.6). After the defeat of Decius, Cyprian, although living in Africa and being far from endangered frontiers, saw the barbarian invasions as catastrophes, as did the author of Book XIII of the *Oracula Sibyllina*; and Commodianus, in his vision of the collapse of the Empire, saw it destroyed not by some imaginary apocalyptic peoples but by Goths occupying Rome and by Persians killing the emperor in battle.<sup>51</sup> The successes under the *restitutores orbis* encouraged people, although the high estimation of barbarian power remained. Dexippus put words in Aurelian's mouth saying that Rome was able to defeat the Germans in spite of their number,<sup>52</sup> the emperor Probus expressed the hope that already in the near future the Empire would not need soldiers any more,<sup>53</sup> the panegyrists emphasized victories over the enemy and the restoration of Roman frontiers,<sup>54</sup> and on the Christian side neither Arnobius nor Lactantius attributed the same importance to the barbarian danger as the Fathers of the Church had done a generation before.

#### IV

All these changes in the history of the Empire must have convinced contemporaries that a general transformation was in process, threatening total destruction because all changes were attacks on the traditional order. This common thought as to contemporary history may allow us to speak of consciousness of crisis (*Krisenbewusstsein*) in the third century: this feeling was more than the recognition of decline in only some sections of life, as it had been in the early Empire when ethical or cultural or even political decline might have been lamented, yet at the same time there had been pride and satisfaction as regards successes in foreign politics.<sup>55</sup> The patterns of this crisis-theory can be described in the following way.

<sup>51</sup> Cypr. *Ad Demetr.* 2, 5, 10, 17, etc.; *Orac.Sib.* 13.9ff. *Commod. Carm.* 810ff, 887ff.

<sup>52</sup> Jacoby, *FGrHist* 100 F 6.10.

<sup>53</sup> *Aur.Vict.* 37.3; *Eutrop.* 9.17.3; *SHA*, Probus 20.3ff.

<sup>54</sup> See esp. *Paneg.* 2 (10) 5.1ff; 3 (11) 4.1ff; 4 (8) 1.4ff; etc.

<sup>55</sup> Thus emphasized still by the author of the *Historia Augusta*: *SHA*, Carus 3.2.

Many contemporary problems were of course not new, but there was the general feeling that they were now becoming catastrophic. Cyprian pointed this out clearly. Wars, for example, appeared to him under Philip as quite 'normal'. But after the defeat of Decius, to him a convincing *documentum recentis rei* (*Ad Demetr.* 17), he suggested that at present *bella crebrius surgant* and *crebrius continuant* than earlier (*ibid.* 2 and 5). The moral and political decline of pagan Rome was to him not at all a new phenomenon, and under Philip he saw the meaning of Christian life in the ready escape from sinful pagan society (*Ad Don.* 2ff). But some years later the growing internal crisis of the Empire appeared to him already so catastrophic that he saw no possibility for a 'splendid isolation', for *inter ipsa adversa . . . vix coartata et conclusa anima respirat* (*Ad Demetr.* 9). He admitted that even Christians were by no means always honest, but since the time of Decius *lapsi* and heretics had caused a crisis within the Church. Even heresy, he said, was getting more dangerous than before: *malum hoc . . . iam pridem coeperat, sed nunc crevit eiusdem mali infesta clades* (*De eccl.cath.un.* 16).

However, there were other problems which appeared to be completely new. According to Cassius Dio, the innovations of Elagabalus were very dangerous because they made possible a 'revolution' against the traditional order of the State (80.7.3). One of the main subjects of Herodian's stories was to point out 'new' developments in contemporary history: Commodus, the first emperor without any merits of his own, had already ruled in an authoritarian way as nobody had before him; by the fate of Pertinax the political power of the army had been demonstrated for the first time; the fall of this emperor had been followed by civil wars which had been more severe than ever before; under Alexander, Rome had been defeated by the Persians more heavily than ever before, etc.<sup>56</sup>

The main point in this theory of crisis was, however, that all unfavourable changes coincided. The Roman Empire was affected, as Cyprian said, by all the old and new *mala* in *continuatio* and *cumulatio*; *sic celeriter, in tanta celeritate, sic granditer*, that the present time seemed to be the final period of apocalyptic prophecies, *in novissimis temporibus multiplicari mala et adversa variari et . . . magis ac magis in plagas generis humani censuram Dei indignantis accendi*.<sup>57</sup> This view was shared,

<sup>56</sup> Herod. 1.5.5 and 1.15.1, 2.6.14, 3.7.7f, 6.5.10, etc.

<sup>57</sup> *Ad Demetr.* 17 and *ibid.* 5.



among others, by Dionysius of Alexandria, who saw the main point of the crisis in the *συνεχεῖς λοιμοί*, in the *παντοδαπαὶ φθοραί*, in the *ποικίλος καὶ πολὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὄλεθρος* (Euseb. *Hist.Eccl.* 7.21.9). But already Herodian emphasized in his preface the coincidence of *πολλὰ καὶ ποικίλα . . . καὶ θαύματος ἄξια* in the history of his own time (1.1.5).

Even the coincidence of accelerated changes in all fields of the traditional order must have been regarded by contemporaries as a total deformation and confusion of the Empire, and this is virtually what Burckhardt called 'genuine crisis'. This sharp definition did not exist in ancient terminology. Nevertheless, what we now call 'crisis' was then clearly said in other words: *corrupta, immo deleta antiquitas* (thus Tertullian), *τὸ κλῖνον* (thus the emperor Severus Alexander), *ἀρχὴ καλεύουσα* (thus Herodian, and exactly like this, the rhetor under Philip), *εὐπορίας μεταβολή* (thus in a papyrus under Decius), *occasus saeculi* (thus Cyprian), *temporum labes* or *inclinatio fatorum* (thus in the panegyrics), *ruina civitatis Romanae* (thus Victorinus of Poetovio), and so on.<sup>58</sup>

On the whole, it was clearly stated that there was indeed a crisis of history in the third century, and people must have drawn their conclusions. Naturally, there was widespread discussion about the causes of all unfavourable changes; in his commentary on *Matthew*, Origen mocked at this main topic of conversation in the mid-third century: *amant enim qui in calamitatibus sunt, causas earum discutientes, invenire aliquid quod loquuntur* (*Comm. in Matth.* Ser. 39). This criticism was, however, unjustified because pagans and Christians, too, were unable to find the *profundior causa* of all afflictions, in spite of the confidence of Origen (*ibid.* 37).

It is not necessary to detail the well-known explanation by pagans of the decay, namely, that all present evils were caused by the Christians, as they refused to worship gods and to sacrifice for the *salus* of the emperor which guaranteed the *salus* of the whole Empire, thus drawing down the vengeance of the gods.<sup>59</sup> It must be emphasized that this reproach against the Christians was made not only by primitive crowds but by well-educated social groups, too, as can be seen from Porphyry's famous work against the Christians: "But

<sup>58</sup> Passages in Tert. *Ad nat.* 1.10.4; *P.Fay.* 20 (see *supra* n.7); Herod. 2.8.4 and ps.-Aristid. *Εἰς βασιλέα* 14; *P.Lond.* 2565 (see *supra* n.17); Cypr. *Ep.* 58.1; *Paneg.* 2 (10) 4.2 and 4 (8) 10.2; Victorin. *Comm. in Apoc.* 8.2.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. A. Alföldi, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.39) 285ff.

now people are surprised at the plague which has seized the city for so many years, meanwhile Asclepius and the other gods do not appear. Nobody has seen any god being helpful to the State since Jesus was worshipped.”<sup>60</sup> Contrary to this general pagan view, the whole Christian apology laid the blame on pagan society, vehemently putting forward very similar arguments: all contemporary evils were to be regarded as *ultio divina* (thus in Cyprian’s terminology, referring to the defeat of Decius by the Goths) for the religious and moral sins of pagan Rome and, indeed, for the weakness and laxity of some Christians, too.<sup>61</sup> The basic idea in their argumentation was in both cases the same: neglect and refusal of the true religion and ethics had the vengeance of a divine power as consequence.

This was, in the end, the traditional Roman way of interpreting history by moral decline.<sup>62</sup> Historians attempted to find more rational explanations as well. Cassius Dio and Herodian tried to explain all evils in contemporary history by errors and mistakes of emperors—in particular the young ones, said Herodian (1.1.6)—who disregarded the traditional order. The same personalistic attitude towards history is to be found frequently. Christian authors such as Cyprian or even Lactantius attributed a high degree of responsibility for all contemporary *mala* to bad emperors.<sup>63</sup> But this personalistic view of history (completely in accordance with the tradition, of course) was essentially only a special form of the theory of moral decline: decay in religion and ethics was made obvious and was also caused mainly by wrong *mores* of rulers. Even Herodian, a man without profound interests and talent for the philosophy of history, felt that these explanations of contemporary history were not quite satisfactory. He was inclined, it is true, to explain the first crisis in Roman politics after the death of Marcus Aurelius (and so, in the end, the whole struggle between Commodus and the Roman élite) by the jealousy of a woman, the empress Lucilla when she lost the first place in theaters (1.8.3ff); but he conceded that Commodus was rather the victim of unfortunate events than their cause. Panegyrics at the turn from the third to the fourth century suggested that the crisis of the

<sup>60</sup> Κατὰ Χριστιανῶν fr.80; see A. Harnack, “Porphyrios ‘Gegen die Christen’, 15 Bücher,” *AbhBerl* 1916 Nr.1.

<sup>61</sup> See esp. Cypr. *De lapsis* 1; *Ad Demetr.* 7, 9ff, 17; cf. *Ep.* 11.1.

<sup>62</sup> On this cf. e.g. V. Pöschl, “Die römische Auffassung der Geschichte,” *Gymnasium* 63 (1956) 190ff.

<sup>63</sup> Cypr. *Ad Don.* 11; Lact. *De mort.pers.* 4.1ff.

past was caused not only by the wrong behaviour of emperors, *diversis regentium moribus*, but by an inexplicable *inclinatio fatorum* as well.<sup>64</sup> Even if one tried to analyse contemporary history more philosophically, one would only be able to take up the traditional theory of biological degeneration of the physical and social world. *Quis enim sapientium dubitat, quis ignorat omnia quae orta sunt occidere*, asked Minucius Felix, just as Sallust had done, and Cyprian, suggesting the decay of the *mundus iam senescens*, copied the same source: *haec Dei lex est ut omnia orta occidant et aucta senescant*.<sup>65</sup> Lactantius shared this view, taking up Seneca's idea about Rome's biological development from *infantia* through to the necessary *interitus*.<sup>66</sup> That the Empire was getting old or ill and tired was a view of Dionysius of Alexandria and of pseudo-Aristides, too,<sup>67</sup> and moral decline was seen by these theoreticians as the main sign of *senectus*.

This attitude, which assigned the cause of the crisis to moral decline manifesting itself first of all in the depravity of rulers or of single social groups (as pagans, Christians or heretics), and which was explained by the conception of history as a process of biological senescence of mankind, did not on the whole add to the ancient philosophy of history. But at the same time this attitude had a very important and 'constructive' consequence for contemporary thought about future possibilities: the idea that the elimination of all evils was always possible and that the crisis could be mastered by the restoration of traditional order. On the whole it is astonishing that people in the third century were less pessimistic than might have been expected. Apart from radical and unorthodox Christian groups, only very few Christian authors in what were virtually the worst years of the Empire were convinced that its collapse was inevitable as a result of the present crisis and that it must come in the near future. On the other hand, pagan and some Christian sources as well always expressed the hope that present evils could be overcome in a short time, apart from the constant imperial propaganda for this hope. The theory of biological (and moral) decline always allowed, at least in pagan

<sup>64</sup> *Paneg.* 6 (7) 2.2 and 4 (8) 10.2.

<sup>65</sup> Min. Felix, *Oct.* 34.2 and *Cypr. Ad Demetr.* 3, following Sall. *Iug.* 2.3.

<sup>66</sup> *Div.Inst.* 7.15.14ff. Cf. on this esp. R. Häussler, "Vom Ursprung und Wandel des Lebensaltervergleiches," *Hermes* 92 (1964) 313ff; I. Hahn, "Prooemium und Disposition der Epitome des Florus," *Eirene* 4 (1965) 21ff; P. Archambault, "The Ages of Man and the Ages of the World. A Study of two Traditions," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 12 (1966) 193ff.

<sup>67</sup> Dionysius in Euseb. *Hist.Ecll.* 7.23.3; ps.-Aristid. *Εἰς βασιλέα* 13f.

conceptions, the idea of a possibility of rebirth, corresponding to the cyclical conception of historical development in Roman tradition.<sup>68</sup> The only thing that was necessary for this renaissance was the return to the right moral order, as Cassius Dio held in the speech of Maecenas, or as the persecutors of the Church demanded, or as pseudo-Aristides made it clear when he explained that Philip's successes in restoring the Empire were due to his programme, namely, the return first of all to *εὐσεβεία*.<sup>69</sup> Even the so-called linear conception of the history of Christianity<sup>70</sup> did not exclude this possibility: according to Tertullian, Christian piety could at least affect the *mora finis*, and the conversion of pagans to the right religion would 'ameliorate' the world, as Origen and Lactantius said.<sup>71</sup>

But the main point of this conception was necessarily the expectation that emperors would be able to turn the fate of the Empire: when the emperor himself manifested and guaranteed moral order, the only thing the Empire needed then were brave and clever rulers who were willing and able to restore traditional order. This ideology was the background of the continual hope that the emperor would be the *restitutor orbis* and the guarantor of a new *saeculum* blessed with prosperity; this was expressed not only by imperial propaganda or by panegyrics but also by the most educated groups of Roman society: Dio emphasized that Pertinax had succeeded with his programme to restore the traditional order of Rome by his moral qualities in a very short time, but to stabilize his work (*ἀσφαλῶς ἐπανορθοῦσθαι*) a longer reign would have been necessary.<sup>72</sup> The reversal of the biological and moral decline through the virtues of an emperor was possible also in the view of Christians, which may be illustrated by the opinion of Dionysius of Alexandria about Gallienus after he had

<sup>68</sup> Cf. on this J. Gagé, "Le 'Templum Urbis' et les origines de l'idée de 'Renovatio'," *Mélanges Fr. Cumont* (Bruxelles 1936) 151ff; R. H. Martin, "The Golden Age and the *κύκλος γενέσεων* (Cyclical Theory) in Greek and Roman Literature," *G&R* 12 (1943) 62ff; L. Bösing, "Zur Bedeutung von 'renasci' in der Antike," *MusHelv* 25 (1968) 145ff.

<sup>69</sup> *Eic βασιλέα* 15.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. O. Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit. Die urchristliche Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung*<sup>2</sup> (Zürich 1948) esp. 169ff; J. Daniélou, "The Conception of History in the Christian Tradition," *JRelig* 30 (1950) 171ff; W. den Boer, "Some Remarks on the Beginnings of Christian Historiography," in *Studia Patristica* IV (Oxford 1961) 348ff.

<sup>71</sup> Tert. *Apol.* 39.2; Origen, c. *Cels.* 8.69 (cf. also *Comm. in Matth.* Ser. 37); Lact. *Div.Inst.* 5.8.1ff, 5.8.8.

<sup>72</sup> Cass. Dio 74.5.1f and 74.10.3.

defeated Macrianus: it was as if the Empire put off its old age and its former bad situation to flourish in youth.<sup>73</sup>

## V

When Burckhardt wrote that “in the Roman Empire the decline is acknowledged in a manner which leaves no room for doubt,” this observation is particularly valid for the crisis of the third century. Contemporaries clearly realized that they were living in a crisis period of history. Not only did they record symptoms of that crisis with astonishing realism and without failing to notice changes even in the social and economic structure, but they also recognized that a general transformation of the Empire was in progress, having begun with the crisis and collapse of the Antonine monarchy, then intensified by the coincidence of several heavy blows starting in the Severan age, and threatening the collapse of the Imperium in the mid-third century. This was not so self-evident; one could cite the view of Orosius on his own time at the beginning of the fifth century: it was the zenith and not the worst crisis of Roman history.<sup>74</sup> But—and this contrast is fascinating—Roman society was not able to explain this transformation and decay adequately, adapting only traditional theories for a quite new situation. A suggestion of Plotinus concerning his own philosophy may be generalized: “Our theories are by no means new, and they are not of today; they were announced already a long time ago, without a development, and we are today only exegetes of these old doctrines.”<sup>75</sup> The theory of biological and moral decline made it possible to hope to find a way out of the present misery with the help of energetic emperors, and it would be wrong to underestimate the encouraging influence of this hope. But theoretically a solution of this problem must have been regarded always as a restoration of the traditional order and not as an adequate reform of the Empire.<sup>76</sup> Great emperors such as Severus, Gallienus or Diocletian made nevertheless the necessary reforms, always emphasizing that they

<sup>73</sup> Euseb. *Hist.Eccl.* 7.23.3.

<sup>74</sup> *Hist. adv. pag.* 7.34.1ff, etc.

<sup>75</sup> *Enn.* 5.1.8.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. G. B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform, its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1959) 16ff; whereas the idea of reform was “essentially Christian” (*ibid.* 5).

were measures of restoration and not of 'progress'.<sup>77</sup> A suggestion such as *quantum reformavit saeculum istud*, made by Tertullian (*De pall.* 2.7), corresponded to Christian and not to Roman views; in pagan thought even *reformatio* was a return to tradition, *ad pristinam gloriam reformare* was the term where the Empire was concerned, and *ad antiquam firmitatem*, as Eumenius said.<sup>78</sup> This traditionalism was no doubt an immense source of spiritual strength for Roman society, as always in history. But it enforced the suppression of all social groups which seemed to be enemies of the traditional order, and so in particular the persecutions of the Christians caused the most important social conflict of the Empire during the crisis of the third century, just as if there had not been problems of greater urgency.

The crisis affected, however, not only the conflict between the pagan State and the Christian Church. The obvious decay of the Empire was of course the subject of exasperated discussion between pagans and Christians, as the whole series of the works of apologists, or even Porphyry, testifies. But, as may be evident from several suggestions made in this essay, there was no fundamental difference between pagan and Christian attitudes towards actual problems or even towards the fate of the Roman Empire. On the contrary, the symptoms of that crisis and its character as a general transformation and decay were regarded by pagan and Christian authors in a similar manner and sometimes expressed in an astonishingly similar terminology; when explaining the causes they argued against each other, but partly with the same arguments, and in arguing they showed also similar conceptions of history; and their attitudes towards prospects for the future were not unlike. Apart from minor groups, Christians lamented the decay of the Empire just as pagans did and felt that they were affected by the crisis, as the pagans did as well: *cum enim concutitur imperium, concussis etiam ceteris membris eius, utique et nos . . . in aliquo loco casus invenimur*, Tertullian said (*Apol.* 31.3). And not only pagans, but also Christians prayed for the Empire in its crisis, *pro imperatoribus, pro ministeriis eorum ac potestatibus, pro statu saeculi, pro rerum quiete, pro mora finis*, or, as Cyprian said, *pro arcendis hostibus et imbris impetrandis et vel auferendis vel temperandis adversis rogamus*

<sup>77</sup> Cf. J. Baillie, *The Belief in Progress* (New York 1950) 6ff; E. N. Tigerstedt, "The Problem of Progress in Classical Antiquity," in *The Disciplines of Criticism. Essays in Literary Theory, Interpretation and History for R. Wellek* (New Haven/London 1968) 593ff, esp. 612f.

<sup>78</sup> *Paneg.* 5 (9) 14.4 and *ibid.* 5.3.

*semper et preces fundimus et pro pace ac salute vestra propitiantes et placantes Deum diebus ac noctibus iugiter adque instanter oramus.*<sup>79</sup> When the emperor Galerius surrendered to the Church by approving of its legality, he did this officially with regard to this function of Christian communities: *debebunt deum suum orare pro salute nostra et rei publicae ac sua, ut undique versum res publica praestetur incolumis.*<sup>80</sup> Agreement, coexistence and cooperation between the Roman State and the Christian Church were consequences of the same historical process as the great conflict between them previously, that is to say, the crisis of the third century.

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October, 1973

<sup>79</sup> Tert. *Apol.* 39.2; Cypr. *Ad Demetr.* 20. Cf. also *Acta Procos.* 1.

<sup>80</sup> Lact. *De mort.pers.* 34.5. See on this esp. H. U. Instinsky, *Die alte Kirche und das Heil des Staates* (München 1963) 13ff.