

Third-century crisis of the Roman Empire: origin and reflection in ancient sources

In the third century (A.D. 235-284) the Roman Empire, ostensibly unshakeable in its might and splendour, was struck by a record of disasters from which it never fully recovered and which wrought irrevocable changes in the fabric of the state and society, bringing about not only what has aptly been called the New Empire, but also the new historical epoch, Late Antiquity. Whereas the main constituents of this ‘third-century crisis of the Empire’ are well-known – the sudden collapse of the emperors’ legitimacy in the eyes of the military, till then the staunchest support of the existing political system (first manifested in 235 by the first military coup d’état and the accession of the first emperor soldier), and the equally sudden weakness of the till then invincible Roman army in the face of the external threats (first manifested in 251 by the first death of the emperor in battle) – its causes remain a matter of controversy. The once universally shared vision of decline, which by the end of the 2nd century at latest would have started the vicious spiral of negative phenomena – demographic, economic, social, spiritual – of which usurpations and defeats would have been but symptoms, is today universally rejected, mainly thanks to accumulation of archaeological evidence which shows that immediately before the outbreak of the crisis all over the Empire things were very much the same as in the preceding ‘golden’ century. As a result, however, the causes of the crisis have become unexplicable. The difficulty with finding them is largely due to the lamentable state of our written sources. The earliest extant historical works on which scholarly reconstructions are based were written hundred years after the crisis and are without exceptions full of evident distortions and mistakes, and at the same time markedly different from one another. It thus looks that the time of political and military crisis was also the time of crisis in historical writing.

The project aims at explaining the causes of both crises. Its first objective is to show that the cause of the army’s taking power in their own hands was an external factor, the European barbarians, whom the military suddenly began to perceive as a great danger to the Empire and whom they were resolved to fight to the bitter end, a task in which, they felt, they were being hampered by the existing system. To this end, a survey of archaeological evidence on the barbarian Europe’s military potential in the century preceding the crisis is required, to see if the army’s fears were justified and if they suffice to explain the second symptom of the crisis, the army’s sudden inability to cope with the barbarian threat. The other objective is to explain, first, why in the 3rd century the Latin-speaking élite of the Empire stopped writing history and why, when in the following century they started writing it, they described the crisis in such a muddled manner, and second, why their version of events succeeded in dominating the Greek historiography, though we have fragments of 3rd century works in that language which presented the time of the crisis in incomparably more truthful and detailed manner. In this case, the task is to reconstruct the store of information (true and false) from which historians chose their variants of the course of events and especially to find a key to motives of the particular authors’ choices.