

# Once again about “Military Anarchy”

J.B. TSIRKIN

## ABSTRACT

The “military anarchy” witnessed the decline and fall of the political institutions of the Early Empire. That period may be interpreted not only as a time of total destruction but also as a transition from one stage of the Roman state to another. The transition was rather spasmodic, revolutionary. By analogy the “military anarchy” may be defined as the second Roman Revolution, just appearing new elements of a future state: The Late Empire.

**Key words:** Political changes, autocracy, decentralization, ruling elite, sacralisation.

## Una vez más acerca de la “Anarquía Militar”

## RESUMEN

La “anarquía militar” atestigua la disminución y la caída de las instituciones políticas del Alto Imperio. Aquel período puede ser interpretado no sólo como una época de destrucción total, sino también como una transición de una forma de gobierno romana hacia otra. La transición era bastante discontinua, revolucionaria. Por analogía “la anarquía militar” puede ser definida como la segunda Revolución romana, apareciendo los nuevos elementos de un futuro estado: El Bajo Imperio.

**Palabras clave:** Cambios políticos, autocracia, descentralización, elite dirigente, sacralización.

Recently the problem of power in general and empires in particular has again become as urgent as ever featuring prominently in many historical and humanitarian studies. The facts and experience of the Roman Empire appear to be of a special interest for the scholars<sup>1</sup>. In this context, the study of the “military anarchy” throws

---

<sup>1</sup> V.I. Ukolova. The Empire as “the sense” of historical space, en: *Power, Society, Individual in Medieval Europe*, Moscow, 2008, p. 20 (in Russian); A.I. Miller, The Legacy of the Empires and Mass Consciousness, en *The Legacy of the Empires and the Future of Russia*, Moscow, 2008, p. 26-28 (in Russian). According to A.I. Miller, the Roman Empire is no longer considered to be a pattern for the following empires. Yet somehow all scholars still use the Roman Empire as a certain yardstick to compare similar states with.

much light on how onw political system was being ousted by another born within the previous one—two clashing systems coexisting within a framework of one state.

In world historiography there is of late a tendency to deny the existence of the third century crisis as such. Many historians relying chiefly on archaeological datta do not believe the economic, social and political mechanism of Rome suffered a radical breakdown at all<sup>2</sup>. They refuse to see any qualitative difference between the Early and late Empires, between the principate and the Dominate. In their opinion, no catastrophic changes occurred in the third century, only some regional mutations slightly on ever not at all affected the general situation<sup>3</sup>. They insist that the third century saw the further development of the previous tendencies and the seeds of the new evolving at that time were later taken up and further elaborated by the tetrarchs and Constantine<sup>4</sup>. Putting it differently, it was in fact a comparatively slow evolutionary process. Therefore we believe it might be worthwhile to study the problem again.

A preliminary remark before describing the events of the years 235-285. In the course of its existence the Roman state had witnessed three great crises<sup>5</sup>. The first crisis erupted at the end of the Republican period, when Tiberius Gracchus rose in opposition against the Senate, and in 88 B.C. it evolved into the agony of the Republic<sup>6</sup>. The third crisis, as we think, was ushered in by Theodosius' death in 395. The Oriental Empire managed to overcome the crisis, but in the West, the assassination of Valentinian III in 454 and the rout of Rome by the Vandals in 455 marked the beginning of the Empire's decline and fall<sup>7</sup>. If we are to measure the second crisis with the same yardstick, we may discern two qualitatively different periods – the crisis proper the beginning of wich, to our mind, was the assassination of Alexander Severus and the rise of Maximinus<sup>8</sup>. Since the principal although not the only

---

<sup>2</sup> On these "revisionist" tendencies in modern historiography see: A. Ziolkowski, *Storia di Roma*, Milano, 2000, p. 413-414.

<sup>3</sup> See p. ex. M. Kulikowski, *Cities and Government in Late Antique Hispania*, en: *Hispania in Late Antiquity*, Leiden-Boston, 2005, p. 31-70.

<sup>4</sup> See p. ex. J.-M. Carrié, A. Rouselle, *L'Empire romain en mutation*, Paris, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Our recognition of the three crises in Rome's history means that we in principle share the generally accepted view on the existence of the so-called crisis in the third century.

<sup>6</sup> For details, see. S.L. Utchenko, *Crisis and Fall of the Roman Republic*, Moscow, 1965 (in Russian); N.V. Checanova, *Roman Dictatorship of the Last Century of the Republic*, St. Petesburg, 2005, p. 21-156; Yu.B. Tsirkin, *Civil Wars in Rome. The Vanquished*, St. Petesburg, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> K.F. Stroheker, *Germanentum und Spätantike*, Zürich-Stuttgart, 1965, s. 88-100.

<sup>8</sup> The significance of this event was emphasised already by Aurelius Victor (*Caes.* 24.7-11).

weapon of destruction was the army, this period may be called the time of the "military anarchy"<sup>9</sup> (for all the relativity of the term).

The events of the years 235-285 in the political sphere were the natural result of the development of the Roman state and the same time the dawn of a new epoch in its history. The Roman *civitas* of the republican times similar to the Greek *polis* had the three political institutions: popular assembly (*comitia*), council (*Senate*), the officials (magistrates). In the imperial period these three institutions survived but in the following instances: the army<sup>10</sup>, the Senate, the emperor and his bureaucratic apparatus. The relations between the three powers never remained stable, they were ever changing over the two and half centuries. In the duality of the Principate its monarchical component was becoming more and more predominant. Owing to the support of the army and the bureaucratic apparatus, the princeps was turning into a plenipotentiary ruler of the state. In the course of the Civil War in 193-197 and during the crisis of the Early Empire his patent predominance became especially manifest – Rome's public opinion regarded the emperor as lord (*dominus*)<sup>11</sup> and his retinue as a "divine house" (*dominus divina*). All this bespeaks not only a sharp increase of imperial authority but also a radical change in the very system of values in Rome. Its public opinion adopts this monarchic rule practically unconditionally.

However, Rome's imperial power was not devoid of some fundamental contradiction. On the one hand the emperor's authority was practically almost unlimited. The creation of the imperial state apparatus – absolutely independent of the society, based on a purely bureaucratic principle and consequently completely dependent on the emperor – made this power independent of Rome's society as well. The emperor's second support was the army. On the other hand, though, the emperor was not a monarch by Gods' favour, he remained the head of the Roman people. His authority was based on a combination of different powers. Whose concentration in one's hands made it possible for the princeps to exercise this authority. As the head of the Roman people, the princeps received his enormous powers in theory from the Senate, this incarnation of the Roman state. Also in theory, the imperial power was not even hereditary. As a result, this vagueness and contradiction between theory and practice rendered the emperor's authority relatively precarious<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> M.I. Rostovtzeff, *Society and Economy in the Roman Empire*, St. Petesburg, 2002, T. II. P. 145-208 (in Russian).

<sup>10</sup> On the army as a special social organism see: A.V. Makhlayuk, *Soldiers of the Roman Empire*, St. Petesburg, 2006, p. 171-188.

<sup>11</sup> M. Le Glay, *La religion romain*, Paris, 1997, p. 67-68.

<sup>12</sup> Idem., *Grandezza y caída del Imperio Romano*, Madrid, 2002, p. 195-207; M. Bats, S. Benoist, S. Lefevre, *L'empire romain au III<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1997, p. 77-91.

The second facet of the Principate as a state system was the authority of the Senate. The stronger the emperor's rule became the lesser was the real power of the Senate. However, it did not disappear altogether. Unlike the Early principate period, when the Senate played a considerable role in the government of the state and its provinces, some time later it lost its important role of a governing body. Created and finally structured by Hadrian, this state power apparatus was capable to substitute and even completely oust the Senate apparatus on both state and provincial levels<sup>13</sup>. However, the Roman conscience believed not only in eternity but also in an uninterrupted evolution of the state and the visual embodiment of the Roman statehood and its uninterrupted existence was the Senate. Theoretically, it was still the supreme body of authority on a par with the princeps and in some respects even higher than the latter, but on some occasions he was even above the princeps since he was authorized to endow every new ruler with his supreme power or on the contrary to deprive him of any power altogether. However, in practice it was rather a rare occasion as for instance was the case with Nero in 68, Didus Julianus in 193 and Maximus Thrax in 238. As previously, the senators were the prime estate of Rome and therefore they were endowed with numerous privileges, first and foremost with the right to occupy the highest posts in the state. Being a member of this stratum was a hereditary prestige yet, on the other hand, the emperor was fully authorized to make some worthy man a member of the Senate or, on the contrary under some pretext or order, to deprive any one of his membership in the Senate. During a civil war the emperor was quite able to do it even without any formal pretext<sup>14</sup>. In principle as well as according to general conviction, the princeps had to belong to the Senate but during the crisis the throne was occupied by the equestrian Macrinus; he did not reign long but the fact became a precedent. Senators were very proud of their status; they despised their juniors and cringed to their superiors. The Senate as a corporation regarded itself on a par with the emperor but every senator individually considered himself to be the emperor's vassal.

The place of the Roman people as a political institution was in fact occupied by the army, which had changed by that time as well. The creation of a professional army quite naturally resulted in the appearance of army corporative morals. The soldiers as Roman citizens had always regarded themselves as part and parcel of the civic collective but a better part and superior to non-military population at that<sup>15</sup>. It is plainly seen in the speech that Herodian (VII,8,4-8) puts into Maximinus' mouth in which he opposes the courage of his soldiers who terrified and terrorized the Germans, Sauromats, and Persians alike to panic-stricken, mad with fear Carthagin-

<sup>13</sup> G. Poma, *Le istituzioni politiche del mondo romano*, Bologna, 2002, p. 146-149.

<sup>14</sup> M. Bats, S. Benoist, S. Lefevre, *op. cit.*, p. 118-119.

<sup>15</sup> A.V. Makhlayuk, *op. cit.*, p. 208-227, 246.

ians who instead of military training are busy singing, laughing and versifying and to wretched, miserable Romans who are able only to cry and scatter in terror at the sight of two or three armed men. The "civilians" paid the soldiers with the same coin. Herodian describes the Pannonian legionaries as blood-thirsty, slow-witted and unable to discern the craft and slyness in their generals' speeches. Such was the general citizens' opinion of the soldiers<sup>16</sup>. With the passage of time the ways of the army and the civil society drifted more and more apart. No doubt the soldiers were faithful to Rome and the Empire but their loyalty to the motherland was transmitted through the attitude towards their general and indefinable analysis to the emperor as the supreme commander-in-chief. In case of a conflict between the emperor and their own general, however, soldiers as a rule took the side of the latter<sup>17</sup>.

Another significant change of this time was the soldiers' increased permanency of life. Accustomed to live in a certain place they hated to have to move to any theatres of war operations. Not without reason did Tacitus (Hist. I,53,14) write that living side by side with civilians (*paganos*) spoiled the warriors. But under the conditions of the strong emperor's authority they could hardly give vent to their discontent. The reforms of Septimius Severus could not but aggravate still further the contradictions between the army's permanent way of life and the urgent need for its mobility. Having got the right to have a family and some land to provide for it, the soldiers felt they belonged to some concrete country rather than to the Empire<sup>18</sup>. It was the soldiers' dread of the Germanic devastating raids that compelled Alexander Severus to end his war with Persia and to start necessary preparations for the German campaign (Herod. VI,7,2-5). It does not mean at all that the Roman soldiers began to represent the interests of the local people. In this respect, of great interest is the petition of the colonies of Asia Minor to Philip the Arab with complaints about cruel uses and abuses not only on the part of local authorities but also of the soldiers who robbed and brought them to ruin (*CIL* III,14191). The soldiers enjoyed their corporate interests which were primarily bound with the concrete regions and a concrete army or even with a concrete military unit rather than with Rome. This state of things undermined to some degree the unity of the imperial army under the circumstances of a growing political strife it could and often did provoke clashes between military units.

The emperor, the Senate and the army became indeed the leading actors of the dramatic events in 235-285. It is hardly worthwhile to divide between soldiers-

---

<sup>16</sup> J.-M. Carrié, *Il soldato*, en: *L'uomo romano*, Bari, 2003, p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> Comp.: L. Capogrossi Colognesi, *Storia di Roma tra diritti e potere*, Bologna, 2009, p. 410-412.

<sup>18</sup> J.-M. Carrié, *op. cit.*, p. 112-127.

emperors and Senate-emperors as was customary until recently in historiography<sup>19</sup>. A truly soldier-emperor was perhaps only Maximinus and maybe some usurpers, whereas Senate-emperors as such were Pupienus and Balbinus. All the other rulers of the period under study defy any attempts to divide them into groups according to this principle. Still it will be unwise to deny the existence and role of these institutions –the army and the Senate. It is necessary, however, to bear in mind that the significance and the political weight of the Senate or the army in different periods was also different.

From the point of view of political history the epoch of the fall of the Early Empire must be divided into two long periods with the rule of Gallienus in between<sup>20</sup>. The coup d'état of the year 235 was a novelty in Rome's history. For the first time the coup was initiated by soldiers themselves even if the mutiny was provoked by Maximianus' own intrigues or those of one of his associates. Thus the army –for the first time ever after the civil wars of the end of the Republic- stood out as an independent active force but not only as a tool in the ambitions general's hands<sup>21</sup>. Maximianus' mutiny may be compared in this respect with Sulla's army attack against Rome in 88 B.C. That rebellion against Rome ushered in the period of the Republic's fall, whereas this coup heralded the decline of the Early Empire. Now the development of the Roman state followed along the same route as during the Severus' rule.

The whole period up to the joint rule of Valerian and Gallienus inclusive is characterized by endless attempts to reach some compromise between the constant consolidation of the emperor's power and the Senate's claim to at least maintain its position. The watershed was Gallienus' reform debarring the senators from military service<sup>22</sup>. This imperial act not only deprived them of their power over the legions but also of their viceregency in the "armed" provinces. And although this

---

<sup>19</sup> See for instance: E.M. Staerman, *The Crisis of the Slave-owning System in the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, Moscow, 1957 (in Russian).

<sup>20</sup> P. Southern begins his survey of the new period in Rome's history with the captivity of Valerian and the establishment of Gallienus' autocracy; for him the time from the year 235 to the year 260 is still part of the previous period begun in 180 with the advent of Commodus to power: P. Southern, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine*, London-New York, 2004, p. 14-80. D.S. Potter views as an uninterrupted period of the decline of Severus' Empire the time from Alexander Severus' coming to power on the one hand and the establishment of the Sasanides' dominion on the other, down to Gallienus' death: D.S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, New York, 2004, p. 217-262.

<sup>21</sup> I. Sergeev, *The Roman Empire in the third century*, Kharkov, 1999, p. 161 (in Russian). We are leaving alone for the time being the issue whether the uprising in the Rhine army was spontaneous or well prepared beforehand by Vitellius and his allies.

<sup>22</sup> The reform of Gallienus is the topic of our other paper.

reform was not realized overnight, soon the Senate lost all influence on the state armed forces. With the state's financial policy almost exclusively in the emperor's hands, under his nearly complete control, the Senate lost all material footholds for its power and it de facto all its authority. Sometimes the emperors were moved for various reasons to do the Senate some favours as did for exemple Claudius and Probus, but actually the real situation remained unaltered. The Senate ceased to exist as an organ of state power, it lived on only as a corporation and a symbol of Roman statehood without any levers of real power. All attempts to reach a compromise between the emperor and the Senate werw doomed to failure. Soon after this reign, the second period if the "military anarchy" set in; it was marked by a constant consolidation of the emperor's autocracy.

During the second period of the "military anarchy" an important landmark was the government of Aurelian who with an iron amalgamated the Roman Empire that had didintegrated de facto into three parts under Gallienus. The success of his wars in the East and West was consummated with a spectacular triumph in 274 (Eutr. IX.13.2; *SHA* Trig. Tyr. 24,4; 25,5; 30,3-4, Aur. 33-34). Aurelian was equally adamant and ruthless in his home policies too. He resolutely suppressed not only riots such as the riot in the Roman mint (*SHA* Aur. 38.2; Aur. Vict. Caes. 35.6; Epit. 35.4; Eutrop. IX.14) but also any kind of opposition. The suppression of the spiritual opposition in the Orient<sup>23</sup> and ruthless executions of Senators in Rome (Eutrop. IX.14; Zos. I.49.2) eradicated a slightest chance of insubordination to the emperor. Aurelian was the first ruler of Roma in its history to introduce an official state cult – the cult of the Invincible Sun (Sol Invictus)<sup>24</sup>. He considered himself to be the god's reflection on earth, moreover, to be a "born god", i. E. God who was unlike other celestial goods born not in heaven but on earth. The emperor himself is "lord an god" (precisely god, deity not just a divine being, the way many – though not all emperors became after death)<sup>25</sup>. And characteristically Rome's society wholeheartedly shares his faith in his divine nature. Aurelian is believed to have said in his address to the mutinous soldiers: they are wrong to assume that the emperors' destiny lies in their hands, because actually it is god not soldiers who endowed him

---

<sup>23</sup> What is meant is first and foremost the execution of Longinus who was obviously the chief ideologist of the separation of Palmyra from the Empire (*SHA* Aur. 27.2-5; 30.1-3) and the deposition of Paul of Samosata from the Episcopal chair in Antiochia (Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* VII. 30.1-19).

<sup>24</sup> F. Millar, *The Roman Empire and Its Neighbours*, London, 1967, p. 244.

<sup>25</sup> M. Le Glay, *La religion romain*, p. 68-69. True, such appellation of Aurelian is not to be found in Rome, it is used only in the provinces, which may be interpreted as the provincial perception of Aurelian after his glorious victories: T. Kotula, *Aurélien et Zénobie*, Wroclaw, 1997, p. 159-161. However, all these inscriptions and legends are in line with the general tendency in the emperor's home policies.

with his purple, and only god will determine the duration of his reign (*FHG IV*. Anon. Fr. 10.6, p. 197). As has been stated above, it is the first fact ever recorded in the Roman history that the emperor admits he owes his destiny to god and only to god (hence the Invincible Sun)<sup>26</sup> and therefore he is responsible neither to the people of Rome, nor to the Senate, nor to the army. Unlike his predecessors, Aurelian appealed not to the eternal city of Rome but directly to the divine will<sup>27</sup>. The imperial grandeur was plainly visible as well (*SHA Aur.* 45.4-5). Coinage became both de facto and de jure the emperor's exclusive monopoly<sup>28</sup>. Thus the Senate was deprived of the last state function it had previously shared, however formally, with the emperor. Under Aurelian the Roman Empire actually, turned autocratic. Aurelian's rule may be considered as important a stage in the development of Rome's imperial power as that of Gallienus. But it is necessary to stress that without Gallienus' reform the steps of Aurelian would hardly have been viable, at least in this shape and at that pace.

The relationship between the emperor and the Senate was summed up by Carus. He at best only informed the Senate that he had been declared emperor but restrained from seeking the Senate's recognition of his supremacy (*Aur. Vic. Caes.* 37.5). Carus became the first lawful emperor of Rome who was not recognized by the Senate. The implication is –the Senate was stripped of its last state function. Though this organ lived on, from the "constitutional" history of Rome it was deleted once and for all<sup>29</sup>. The Principate as a political system created by Augustus breathed its last. Suetonius (*Cal.* 22.2) in his time had accused Caligula of having turned principate into some kind of kingdom. It had cost Caligula his life. Cut about two and half centuries later and almost a century and half after Suetonius had written this emperor's biography, Caligula achieved his aim –instead of the Principate *regni forma* emerged in Rome<sup>30</sup>.

So the first and perhaps the most significant result of the "military anarchy" was the autocratic nature of the emperor's power.

The second important feature of the "military anarchy" period was the ever growing tendency of regionalising and decentralising the Roman Empire. The tendency was accelerated by the fact that money had actually dropped out of circu-

---

<sup>26</sup> E. Groag, Domitius, en: *RE*, 1903. Hbd. 9. Sp. 1405.

<sup>27</sup> M. Bats, S. Benoist, S. Lefevre, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> J.-P. Callu, *La politique monétaire des empereurs romains de 238 à 311*, Paris, 1969, p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> F. Grelle, La forma dell'Imperio, en: *Storia di Roma*, Torino, 1999, p. 573.

<sup>30</sup> The consolidation of the emperor's authority in the period of the "military anarchy" went hand in hand with a fragile power of some concrete emperor. But the analysis of the reasons of this situation is not the topic of the present article.

lation<sup>31</sup>, and as result the Empire's single economic whole got disrupted. It did not bring about the disintegration of the single state because the Romans had still a very strong feeling of complicity and oneness with the country and the common cause – *res publica populi Romani Quiritum*, but it required some urgent institutional decisions which could combine the growing regionalization with the preservation of the unity of Rome as an empire. Military and political circumstances also cried for such effective measures. When the emperor had -sometimes simultaneously- to repulse the enemies' attacks and to quell another munity (or a least its potential threat), the ruler was not able to grapple wiyh all the challenges. It became vitally important to somewath decentralise the country's government. Even in the previous years in cases of emergency the emperor could trust the supreme power over a part of the state to his trustee. But on the other hand it was extremely dangerous to concentrate much authority over a vast territory and especially over many troops in one man's hands.

A way out of the quandary the emperors saw in granting such power to their relatives. Philip created two quasi-vice-kingdoms with the next of kin at the head – his brother Priscus and obviously his wife's brother Severianus (Zos. I, 19.2; 20.2; *CIL* III, 14149)<sup>32</sup>. Valerian made Gallienus is co-ruler granting him full authority over the western part of the Empire but leaving its eastern part to himself (Zoas. I, 30.1). Some territories and the stationed there troops were governed by the other members of the ruling house. Carus ready to launch his Persian campaing left Carinus behind in the West (*SHA* Car., 7.1; 8.2). but there was a certain shortage of the ruling house members. Nevertheless, to entrust the outsiders with such plenary powers was of mortal danger –they could easily be tempted to abuse them and seize the throne, the way it did actually happen in the reign of Philip; Pacatianus and later Decius who became governors in the wake of Severianus, opposed the emperor (Aur. Vict. Caes. 28.10; Epit. 28.2; Eutrop. IX.3; Zos. I.20.2-21; Sync. P. 683; Zon. XII.19). Pacatianus' munity was suppressed but Decius won the victory and became emperor.

The measures undertaken in the third century to decentralise the supreme power were not the result of a well-thought-over programme of political reforms. They were brought to life by a certain situation and therefore they were not systematic but sporadic and rather haphazard. Once having consolidated their supreme position, the rulers of this period were reluctant to lessen their authority but the events to come showed plainly the inevitability of the division of powers. The elimination of the republican and polis institutions on the highest level and their weakening on a

<sup>31</sup> J.-M. Carrié, A. Roussell, *op. cit.* P. 127-128.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133, 143; J. Fitz, Die Vereinigung der Donauprovinzen in der Mitte des 3. Jahrhunderts, en: *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms.*, Köln-Graz, 1967, s. 127-128.

lower level radically decreased the significance of the horizontal links in the Empire, which inevitably led to the strengthening of its vertical ties without which the state would have collapsed. Yet under the conditions of increasing regionalisation of the Empire the rigid vertical power of alone could not guarantee the governability of such a huge state. Therefore the subsequent decentralisation of the highest state government and the actual division of the Roman Empire into large separate territories (for all its both psychological and official unity) were quite unavoidable. At such moments the figure and personality of the emperor alone was still able to keep the country together<sup>33</sup>.

It should be stressed that the decentralisation "from above" and the decentralisation "from below" went side by side. When the central government failed to ensure safety from the barbarians and a more or less normal functioning of society in some region, the inhabitants of the region took the usurper's side<sup>34</sup>. In this way, on the Roman Empire's territory there came into being every now and then regional "empires" –some ephemeral, others quite viable.

The third salient feature of the period under study is Rome began to lose its functions of the imperial capital. Even in the previous years the emperors could also live outside the Eternal City for different lengths of time. During the "military anarchy" such absences from the capital became practically a regular feature. No doubt they were caused by considerations of foreign policy and military affairs. The emperors were obliged to be as near the most vulnerable regions as possible or sometimes even directly on the theatre of war operations at the head of the army. Where the emperor was there the emergency decisions were made. Rome was still officially *caput mundi*, the world's head but practically the real emperor's residences were coming to the fore<sup>35</sup>. And soon the capital was officially transferred to Constantinople.

The fourth remarkable feature of this period was the deep-rooted radical changes within the ruling elite of the Roman state, in its "political class". In this respect the two above-mentioned periods differ sharply, as is plainly apparent from the emperors' lives. Most emperors before Gallienus and Gallienus himself were senators<sup>36</sup>. Even though some of them, for instance Aemilianus, were of "low" origin, on the

---

<sup>33</sup> V.I. Ukolova, *op. cit.*, p. 24-25.

<sup>34</sup> That was why the Gaul Empire came into being: J.-M. Carrié, A. Roussel, *op. cit.* p. 104.

<sup>35</sup> M. Bats, S. Benoist, S. Lefevre, *op. cit.*, p. 214-216.

<sup>36</sup> With the Romanisation of the Roman Empire, more and more emperors were born not in Rome or Italy but in the provinces. However they all came from the upper strata of the provincial society and all belonged to the Senate estate.

way to the throne they all passed through the Senate<sup>37</sup>. The only exception was Maximinus, the case of Philippus is moot. Certainly the young Gordianus III was not a senator but he was of a noble senatorial family. Many usurpers came also of senators' nobility. A telltale speech was ascribed to Ballista (Callistus) who abdicated the throne not only on account of his age but also because of his occupation (*professio*) since he was but Valerian's prefect (*SHA* Trig. Tyr. 12.1; 4)<sup>38</sup>. After Gallienus, only one senator – Tacitus – occupied the throne, by the army's consent at that (*Aur. Vict. Caes.* 35.9; *SHA Aur.* 40.1-2; *Tac.* 2.2; *Zon.* XII.28)<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, most emperors of the second period came to power at the end of a long way starting as private soldiers. Except Maximinus, after Claudius it became a rule as for Diocletian he is suspected to have been a freedman (*Eutrop.* IX.19.2; *Epit.* 39.1)<sup>40</sup>. As is often the case, the ruin of the former orders and a general disturbance paved the way up to the very top of public and social life to clever energetic and ambitious people, not overscrupulous about their ways and means and even cruel, if need be.

The situation on the throne reflected the general situation in the ruling elite of the state. In former times, preliminary inclusion in the Senate was almost an imperative stipulation for a successful career. Such was the way to the top of M. Valerius Maximianus, an equestrian by birth whom Marcus Aurelius included among praetorians in the Senate and who later proved to be a successful commander of legions in different provinces<sup>41</sup>. Exceptions were extremely rare. Since the mid-third century (sometimes, though seldom, even earlier than that) the road to the highest echelons of state government bypassed the Senate<sup>42</sup>. Under the circumstances of almost incessant civil wars and quick replacements of emperors, close links with a particular ruler usually come to the fore and his retainers irrespective of

---

<sup>37</sup> Aemilianus was a Moor of low parentage (*Eutrop.* IX.6; *Epit.* 31.3) but by the time he was proclaimed emperor, he had been governor of Moesia and, as is known, prior to Gallienus' reform only a senator could become a fully-fledged legate.

<sup>38</sup> The author alludes to Meonius Actionax who claimed to have been an eye witness of the event.

<sup>39</sup> True, if we must believe Carus' biographer, he also was a senator, but this is a disputable issue. Even if he did belong to the Senate estate, we may deduce judging by his name Aurelius that he had joined it only very recently.

<sup>40</sup> Eutropius suggests two versions of Diocletian's origin: a scribe's son and the senator Anullinus' freedman. The uncertainty about the background of such an important and esteemed ruler as Diocletian may be explained by the fact his parents were so socially insignificant that nobody cared much and knew much about them.

<sup>41</sup> R. Hanslik, Valerius, in: *Clairmont Pauly*, 1979, Bd. 5 Sp. 1113; G. Alföldy, *Storia sociale dell'antica Roma*, Bologna, 1987, p. 237.

<sup>42</sup> M. Bats, S. Benoist, S. Lefevre, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

their estate join the ruling elite<sup>43</sup>. Prosopographic research indicated that the new ruling group of the Late Empire, its generals in particular go back to the time not until the reign of Diocletian<sup>44</sup>. It means that during the "military anarchy" the old political and military elite represented basically by members of the Senate estate had abandoned the political scene.

It does not at all mean that the senators had lost their position altogether. They had suffered but insignificant changes only. As far we can judge by the senators of that time that we know of, more than half of them belonged to this estate by birth<sup>45</sup>. On the whole they not only retained but even multiplied their riches. They managed to preserve their high moral prestige as well<sup>46</sup>. As for their political weight as well as that of the Senate it became insignificant. During the Late Empire there was a gap between the economically ruling class (i. e. chiefly senators and their families) and the politically prevalent class (generals and civil bureaucracy). Such was the result of the "military anarchy".

The third century is considered in historiography as the great century of the equestrian estate<sup>47</sup>. Indeed senators were increasingly replaced in the real political elite by equestrians. Yet far more important than the rise of the equestrians as a new powerful estate was the advent of professionals controlling the main levers in the civil and military government<sup>48</sup>. The former polis principle according to which any citizen (in theory at least) could occupy any office, had finally become a thing of the past. Well-educated and at times even talented dilettantes had been ousted by skilled professionals- experienced and skillful officers and functionaries. Certainly most of them were equestrians but their place and role in the state was determined by their personal qualities and abilities (their loyalty to the concrete emperor among them) rather than their "equestrianism". As far as we can gather from some examples, many people who managed in the final analysis to obtain important state offices as well as some emperors came from the "bottom" of the provincials.

Summing up, the new ruling elite is formed according to new rules. Bureaucratic and military hierarchies are set up on personal ties between the chief (even the topmost one, the emperor) and his subordinates. Proximity and intimacy with the emperor rather than one's origin can guarantee one the uppermost posts in the

---

<sup>43</sup> H. Demandt, *Der spätrömische Militäradel*, en: *Chiron*, 1980, Bd. 10, s. 635-636.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 615-616.

<sup>45</sup> J.-M. Carrié, A. Roussell, *op. cit.* p. 662.

<sup>46</sup> A. Chastagnol. *L'évolution de l'ordre sénatorial aux III et IV siècle de notre ère*, en: *Revue Historique*, 1970, t. 496, p. 308. Possibly, though, this prestige seemed higher in the eyes of the senators themselves than it actually was in the Roman society.

<sup>47</sup> G. Alföldy, *Storia...*, p. 238.

<sup>48</sup> J.-M. Carrié, A. Roussell, *op. cit.* p. 662.

Empire<sup>49</sup>. It its turn a high position secured easy acces to the imperial hierarchy to all sorts of people, even to the "barbarians" as became a common practice later.

The fifth important phenomenon of the period under study was a new ideological and psychological type of relations between the authorities and society. It should be pointed out however that this change began to evolve some time previously. As is often the case, in the ideological sphere such changes take place quicker than in a material reality; Septimius Severus was already called *dominus* and in his reign the notion of a divine house was introduced. This tendency (not without halts and retreats though) became stronger during the "military anarchy". The phrase *dominus noster* became an obligatory epithet of the emperor and in fact turned into a fixed element of thr emperor's title alongside *felix* and *invictus*<sup>50</sup>. The impression is that both the emperors themselves and the Roman society at large were doing their utmost to convince each other how happy they were and how invincible was their empire, Rome's present mishap notwithstanding. At the slightest provocation the emperors assumed triumphal appellations and the fewer their victories and the less significant they were, the more numerous and the more magnificent became their triumphal titles. A striking example is Philippus the Arab. After the defeat of the Roman army he was compelled to conclude an unremunerative treaty and to pay the Persian king an enormous sum of money but he presented his disaster as the greatest victory and became *Parthicus maximus* and *Persicus maximus* (*ILS* 506-507)<sup>51</sup>. No doubt it reflects the growing sacralisation of Rome's imperial authority<sup>52</sup>.

There are some other signs of this sacralisation. The emperors attempted to bind themselves with gods as much as possible. More and more figures of attendant gods – "companions" and "custodians" of princeps were minted on the Roman coins. Previously it had happened as well but only sporadically, whereas after Gallienus and his adversary Postumus it was already a usual practice<sup>53</sup>. This tendency found its culmination during Aurelian's rule. It was no longer enough for him to play the role of the gods' darling and a minion of fortune; he actually identified himself with the Lord god, and his rise and eminence of the imperial authority found their reflection in his outward appearance. The first step in this direction was taken by Gallienus: he put on splendid raiments and footwear and on occasions crowned his head with a diadem (*SHA* Gal. 16.4). However the public at large misunderstood his

---

<sup>49</sup> D.S. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

<sup>50</sup> Numerous inscriptions testify to this.

<sup>51</sup> The title *Persicus* can be found on some coins too: M.G. Abramzon, *Roman Army and its Leader from Coins*, Chelyabinsk, 1994, p. 103.

<sup>52</sup> W. Ensslin, *The End of the Principate*, en: *CAH*, 1939, vol. XII, p. 357-360.

<sup>53</sup> E.M. Staerman, *The Social Bases of Ancient Roman religion*, Moscow, 1987, p. 289-290 (in Russian).

intentions and blamed him for this fondness of extravagance. Two years later, on Gallienus' assassination, Aurelian ascended the throne and did the same even on a grander scale (Epit. 35.5) but it was calmly received and caused no objection.

Since olden times the Romans had firmly believed in the eternity of the City of Rome. In the imperial epoch this eternity was embodied in the emperor's eternity (certainly, not of a concrete mortal person but the head of the Roman people)<sup>54</sup>. Hence the permanent epithets so widespread in the third century: *aeternus*, *perpetuus*, and the like. The joint eternity of Rome and imperial power was best reflected in the pageantry on the occasion of the Millennium of Rome celebrated by Philipp the Arab (Eutrop. IX.3; Aur. Vict. Caes. 28.1; Epit. 28.3). Beginning with Gordianus III, almost every emperor promised the advent of a new century when all evil and troubles of the world would be done away with and the golden age would set in. The eternity of Rome, the Empire and the emperor and the felicity of humankind tighly intertwined made up the corner stone of the ideology of the "military anarchy" epoch<sup>55</sup>.

With the growing sacralisation of the emperor's power, the very figure of the emperor is soaring up on a superhuman level. As has been stated above, Aurelian proclaimed his absolute independence of popular or soldiers' opinion. There was a distance of only one short step to his declaration that he would suffer no interference into his affairs from any human institution. This particular step was taken by Carus who refused point-black to get his authority legalised by the Senate.

Aurelian not only raised his power and his own person beyond human reach but he also in fact introduced a state religion. In Rome religion had always been closely tied with the state and politics, but at that time a considerable qualitative leap took place in the field of religion. The cult of the Invincible Sun was gaining foothold as both the most respected and revered and even obligatory for the whole Empire partly to the detriment of other deities. In terms of politics, it was the beginning of the "Holy Empire", a theocratic monarchy in which the leading role was not played by the religious head but by the emperor himself, now *de facto* the religious chief of the state.

The second side of this process is public attitudes towards him in the state. Having usurped practically unlimited power and placed himself above the human world, the emperor accepted a tremendous responsibility as well. Right from the start the moral grounds of the imperial authority were as follows: stability in society, prosperity of the citizens, Rome's grandeur and victories in wars. Under the shocking conditions of the third century the public faith in the emperor-saviour increased ten-fold, but far from all throne holders met those expectations. In such cases both

<sup>54</sup> J.-M. Carrié, A. Roussell, *op. cit.* p. 106; V.I. Ukolova, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Cf.: E.M. Staerman, *The Social Bases...*, p. 288.

soldiers and most civilians supported not the head of the state but the victorious general<sup>56</sup>.

Besides another (at first sight opposite) phenomenon is worth mentioning. Barbaric raids growing ever more frequent and destructive; the incessant financial crisis and a resultant sharp drop in the life standards of broad masses of people; arbitrary rule of local authorities, soldiers stationed nearby, landlords and big leaseholders and most of all the emperors' manifest inability to check and cure all the nation's ill—all these led to the alienation of many people from the authorities in general. The mounting sacralisation of the emperor's power resulted also in the mass disappointment with the official religion. Leaving alone the religious background of the period for the time being, we shall stress that of all cults and religions practised at that time only Christianity offered a considerable opposition to the current practices. By no means a political opposition, moreover emphasising its political loyalty at every turn, Christianity ideologically denied the existing order. St. Cyprien had a good reason for prophesying the advent of Anti-Christ and the last time in its wake<sup>57</sup>. It in principle opposes the Christian ideas against the idea of Eternal City and its empire above all and consequently against the idea of the emperor as its symbol. Valerian's catastrophe and his ignominious captivity only accentuated the fragility of the "Roman myth". The later part of the third century is exactly the time that Christianity began to win over the sympathy and support of the masses in the Roman Empire<sup>58</sup>.

Too sum up, the period of the "military anarchy" witnessed the decline and fall of the political institutions of the Early Empire, first and foremost of the Principate as a political structure based on an integral unity of the monarchic and polis-republican elements. During the civil war at the end of the republican epoch, as we well know, some seeds of the empire were already ripening; likewise in the period under review were gathering strength or just appearing new elements of a future state—the Late Empire. The "military anarchy" may be interpreted not only as a time of total destruction but also as a transition from one stage of the Roman state to another, more in line with a political, social, economic, religious and ideological reality of the state<sup>59</sup>. The transition was not relatively smooth, evolutionary, though; it was rather spasmodic, i.e. revolutionary. R. Syme once labelled the fall of the

---

<sup>56</sup> J.-M. Carrié, A. Roussell, *op. cit.* p. 105-106; J. Scheid, *La religione a Roma*, Roma-Bari, 2004, p. 151-152.

<sup>57</sup> G. Alföldy, *Die Krise des Römischen Reiches*, Stuttgart, 1989, s. 484-490. These views were also shared by other Christians, especially during the mass persecution.

<sup>58</sup> D.S. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 313; A. Ziolkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

<sup>59</sup> K. Christ, *Römische Geschichte*, Darmstadt, 1980, s. 233.

Republic as a revolution<sup>60</sup>. By analogy the "military anarchy" may be defined as the second Roman revolution. Many emperors contributed their share towards the making of a new type of the state but, no doubt, the major steps on the way were the reforms of Gallienus and Aurelian while the finishing touch was put by Carus. At this time an autocratic monarchy becomes de facto firmly established, a new political elite comes to power, Rome begins to lose its status of the capital, the initial measures to decentralise the imperial government are undertaken, the emperor's power soars sky-high and he claims dependency exclusively on divine forces. All these will be the Late Empire's salient features. Since the adoption of Christianity as a state religion, a new type of ideological relationa between the authority and the society of Rome will take shape.

Translated from the Russian by L. Chistonogova.

---

<sup>60</sup> R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford, 1939.