

## **LIFE AND DEATH IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: THE TETRARCHY AND THE LAST PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS (303 – 311)**

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### **Resumo**

O artigo começa com uma descrição do mundo romano após a Tetrarquia, com a luta pelo poder entre Constantino e, mais tarde, Licínio. Analisamos as questões políticas relativas ao mundo romano durante o período. Usando como fonte iconográfica a coleção numismática do acervo do Museu Histórico Nacional / RJ, utilizamos a imagem como uma fonte de propaganda, legitimando o poder imperial.

### **Palavras-chave**

Moeda; império; iconografia; poder; símbolo.

### **Abstract**

The present paper begins with a description of the Roman world after the Tetrarchy, with the fight for power between Constantine and, later, Licinius. We analyzed the political matters concerning the Roman world during this period. The numismatic collection stored at the Museu Histórico Nacional (National Historical Museum – MHN) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, served as an iconographic source to show how images were used at that time as propaganda, supporting and legitimizing the imperial rule.

### **Key-words**

Coins; empire; iconography; power; symbol.

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## Introduction

With the death of Emperor Alexander Severus, murdered by his soldiers in 235, the period known as *crisis of the third century* begins in Rome. The crisis reaches all the levels of the Empire; political, social and economic.

There was a first moment, referred to as Military Anarchy (235 – 268), in which the emperors were appointed by their soldiers, and killed soon after that. Some of the emperors ruled for a few days. Legions chose their generals as rulers, in the hope of receiving rewards. Each legion, each army, was loyal to their leader. When the commander didn't do as promised, he was killed by his subordinates. According to reports of that time, some emperors were appointed in the morning and murdered a few days later.

The Illyrian Emperors (268–284) were the other phase, which was characterized by a group of rulers, originated from Illyria, current Eastern Europe. In the attempt of solving the administrative and economic problems created during the Military Anarchy, they tried to make a series of reforms.

Between the years 238 and 285, 19 emperors wielded power. None of them had an active role along the Senate, though, which left Rome in an institutional crisis. In the middle of this chaos, a series of reforms was urgently required in order to save the Empire.

## The Reforms of Diocletian

After the murder of Numerian in 284, Diocletian, or *Caius Aurelius Valerius Diocles Diocletianus*, born in Salona, (now Solin, Croatia), was named emperor by the troops. His father was a scribe or emancipated slave, from Dalmatia, coast of Croatia. Seeking to avoid a similar end to his predecessors, Diocletian leaned on people from his social world in whom he trusted.

With Diocletian, one of the most important reformation programs of Roman History began, with the advent of the Empire's restoration. The State was transformed into an absolute monarchy, in which the emperor possessed maximum authority, based on slavery, servitude of free peasants, bureaucracy and the army. Eastern monarchies, in which all that surrounded the king was considered sacred, was a direct influence of this period.

In the year 286, Diocletian begins a series of reforms that, for some time, restore order. Initially, a diarchy is installed accompanied by Maximian (285/286-305), his friend and colleague of arms.

The diarchy system is extended to a tetrarchy. To avoid future riots, Diocletian chooses elements of the same origin and social layer: Galerius, his adjunct, former herdsman in the Carpathians; Maximian, old colleague of arms; Constantius Chlorus, Maximian's weapons assistant. He and his successors chose auxiliaries of similar background.

Diocletian's original idea assumed the principle that the Empire was too large to be ruled by a single person. So he had the common sense of dividing the Roman world among people he trusted, creating the Tetrarchy. He thought no one should remain eternally in power; therefore he created means so that his and Maximian's rule eventually came to an end.

Thus, in the Tetrarchy system, the main emperors, *Augusti*, could only rule for twenty years. At the end of that time, power was passed onto their auxiliaries, the *Caesars*. These, in turn, would assume the function of *Augustus* and choose the next two *Caesars*.

Combined to these facts, there was an inversion of the political axis. Rome became secondary after the officialization of the new capitals Aquileia and Treveri in the West, Sirmium and Nicomedia in the east. With this division, it was possible to produce a series of satisfactory results.

In 297, Galerius expelled the Goths from the low Danube. In the following year, he achieves an important victory against the Sassanids, expanding the roman border to Kurdistan. Diocletian massacred a revolt in Alexandria, defeating the usurper Domitius Domitianus; Constantius I, or Chlorus, recovered Britain from the hands of Allectus; and Maximian ends a rebellion in Mauritania.

The tetrarchs attempted to show the population that the time of the *Principate*, that is, the principality or apogee of the Empire, was back. Not just a new order, but a return to the old one. In a period of crisis and riots, the union and friendship among the rulers were fundamental for Rome's stability.

A series of monuments was made, in which this union is evident. These works served as a sort of political propaganda of that time, representing the union and friendship in favour of the Empire, after all, according to themselves, they worked for the salvation of an already decadent Roman

world, as we can identify in the following monetary coinages of the period.



Museu Histórico Nacional's collection, Rio de Janeiro. Photo by: Cláudio Umpierre Carlan, October 2006.

Inscriptions:

Obverse: IMP DIOCLETIANVS PF AVG

Reverse: IOVICO AVGG

Bronze *Follis*, coined during the Tetrarchy period. It was manufactured between years 304 and 305, in Alexandria. The “heads” or obverse represents the bust of Emperor Diocletian, with a crown of rays. In the “tails” or reverse we see an image of Jupiter, the supreme deity. Representing a masculine figure, there is an image of Victory, the winged goddess, with a globe in her right hand, symbol of royalty and perfection.

*Follis* was a bronze coinage created during Diocletian's economic reform, between 294 and 295.

During the twenty years of the Tetrarchy, Diocletian was considered an *iuno*, that is, a son of Jupiter (Carlan: 2006, 12).



Museu Histórico Nacional's collection, Rio de Janeiro. Photo by: Cláudio Umpierre Carlan, October 2006.

Inscriptions:

Obverse: IMP DIOCLETIANVS PF AVG

Reverse: SACRA MONET AVGG ET CAESS NOSTR

*Follis* coined in the year 300, in the first house of Treveri or Trier. In the obverse there is a bust of Diocletian wearing an armor and diadem. The crucial difference comes in this piece's reverse side, which refers to a republican Roman tradition. SACRA MONET, temple of Juno, a sacred place where, thanks to the presence of pigeons, the Romans would have been alerted of the arrival of a Gaulish invader, in the fourth century B.C.

Within the symbolic pattern used in the Tetrarchy, in this coinage we can highlight: balance; justice, prudence, whose function corresponds to the weighing of the acts (Chevalier, Gheerbrant: 1997, 113); the cornucopia, which, in Roman tradition, represents happiness and fertility; here it is portrayed with its opening upwards, not downwards, which can be related to several divinities (Chevalier, Gheerbrant: 1997, 288).

### **The Persecution**

This turbulent period was of great importance for the Christian Church, since its role in evangelization grew in the eastern provinces of the Empire and in some western zones of the Mediterranean. The Christians had fifty years of peace and prosperity, until Diocletian, during his government, organized the last persecution against them (303-313), putting an end to this alleged happiness.

It was an abrupt change, to which most historians have their own personal explanation. But, since it is not our aim to discuss the several schools of thought that analyzed this period, we shall consider the Christian tradition, according to which Diocletian yielded to the insistence of his son-in-law and *Caesar*, Galerius, as an excuse to accuse Christians of setting fire to the imperial palace in Nicomedia.

Christian rhetoric professor Lactantius (245 or 250 – 325), in his work *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, chronicles this period from a Christian perspective.

The first persecution edict, issued on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 303, commanded the closing of churches, the delivery of scriptures and an order to the clergy that sacrifices should be made to the gods. Until this moment, only ecclesiastic authorities had been affected, but another edict extended the obligation of sacrifice to all the Christian community. With the Christians' refusal, military authorities fulfilled the imperial orders.

In reality, the persecution was not as terrible as it is often depicted. In some places, such as the West ruled by Maximian, or in the regions under Constantius Chlorus' (Constantine's father) authority, the oppression was more lenient.

Constantius Chlorus, for example, fined the Christians in a symbolic value only to carry out the imperial order; after all, the fine's value was not stipulated by the Empire. Maximian obligated the Christians to enter the Temple of Jupiter, up to the point that many were carried inside by roman legionaries. However, this occurred without physical violence: once in the temple, they were released. The orders were fulfilled, but people wouldn't mention how it was done.

In the East, the persecution was more violent. Prisca and Valeria (wife and daughter of Diocletian, respectively), professed Christians, died during this period.

After the twenty years of government had passed, candidates to *Caesar* were pre-chosen by Diocletian. The year 305 marked the end of the first Tetrarchy with the resignation of the *Augusti* Diocletian and Maximian. That way, the two *Caesars* ascended to the *Augustus* category and two Illyrian officers were named their auxiliaries.

The second Tetrarchy was thus formed by: Constantius Chlorus and Severus II (or Severus Augustus) in the West; Galerius and Maximinus Daia (or Daza), Galerius' nephew, in the East. With the exclusion of the

previous governors' natural children, whether they were legitimate or not, from power, a new civil war begins.

The biggest problem created by this order of succession was the governors' sons' situation, legitimate or not. Constantine, son of Constantius Chlorus and Helena, future Saint Helena, and Maxentius, Maximian's son, did not accept being removed from power. Maximian himself did not accept his isolation, returning in 306 to the political scenery.

Constantius Chlorus fell ill during an expedition against the Picts in Chalcedon, and died in 306. Constantine was beside him in *Eboracum* (present-day York). His general Chrocus, of Germanic origin, and the troops that were loyal to his father proclaimed him emperor. Simultaneously, the western *Caesar*, Severus, was named *Augustus* by Galerius. In this same year, in Rome, Maxentius was also designated emperor and Maximian returned to public life, claiming the imperial title.

The first to fall was Severus, betrayed by his troops, while Constantine and Maximian forged an alliance. By the end of 307 there were four *Augusti* – Constantine, Maximian, Galerius and Maxentius – and one *Caesar*, Maximinus Daia, a situation which gave rise to a civil war.

### Final Considerations

One of the main points of the reforms that we must highlight is the *Colonus*. In this system, the rural worker or *colonus* is tied to the land. He is not a slave, but is not a free worker either. He owes a series of obligations to the landowners and pays a sort of lease for the use of everything that makes up the property: land, water, tools, among others.

In return, the landowner allows the settler to keep a part of the production and protects him from invaders and robbers. This stimulates small landowners to sell their property in exchange for the protection of a *great lord*. It is the beginning of the feudal serfdom, which prevailed throughout much of Europe.

Diocletian was the first Roman emperor to abandon Rome as capital, exercising government from the Greek city of Nicomedia in Asia Minor, present-day Turkey.

The Empire was divided in four administrative regions. In 293, each emperor chose a successor: Diocletian appointed Galerius, and Maximian,



Constantius Chlorus. From then on there were four emperors, two of them with the title of *Augustus* and two with the title of *Caesar*. Constantius Chlorus and Galerius were named *Caesars*.

The *Caesars* were military chiefs capable of ruling and protecting the Empire, adopted as sons by the *Augusti*, to whom they would succeed in case of death, incapacity caused by old age or after twenty years of their governments.

The Dominate, a despotic and military monarchy of Hellenistic type, was organized. Under the influence of eastern ideas, the *Princeps* was converted into *Dominus*, that is, in master or absolute ruler at the helm of great bureaucracy.

In this sense, the Emperor became “lord and god” and all who were admitted in his presence were obliged to kneel down and kiss the tip of the royal robe. The Roman principality, with this, was extinct: civilians had been defeated by the military and the Roman Senate was eclipsed by bureaucratic nobility.

The discontent of other heirs, such as Constantine and Maxentius, led the Empire to a new Civil War.

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Responsibility for ideas is restricted to the author.

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