OUR history,” wrote the contemporary historian Dio Cassius in describing the transition from the mild rule of Marcus Aurelius to the brutal despotism of those who succeeded him, “now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust.” 1 Closer study has shown that there was dross in the golden age of the Antonines and more precious materials in the iron age of the third century. Nevertheless, that century was one of crisis and chaos, depression and disorder, invasion and violence. It witnessed the triumph of military absolutism over the civilian constitution of the Principate established by Augustus and maintained with some changes by his successors. The integrity of the Empire was almost shattered by the internecine wars of rival aspirants for the throne, the incursions of barbarians from the north, and the attacks of the new Sassanian Empire from the East. Costly civil and foreign wars, the greed of the troops, and the mounting expenses of an expanding bureaucracy bled the state white. In its quest for security and solvency a desperate and relentless government, heedless of those rights which Rome had once granted her citizens and subjects, oppressed town and country. The stormy times in which men

1 Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, LXXII, 36.4.
lived could not help but be reflected in their intellectual and spiritual interests.

The Military Basis of Imperial Authority

The power of the army to make and murder emperors, the control of the Roman world by generals elevated to the highest office in the Empire by their troops and in turn overthrown by them—this is the main thread running through the history of the third century. The Empire tottered precariously as the throne was seized by one short-lived ruler after another. Once the servants of the state, the soldiers were now its masters. As the need for them became greater because of the intensified pressure of enemies on the frontiers, the soldiers learned their power and were increasingly insubordinate. Only with difficulty did some of the emperors succeed in playing a larger role than that of puppets in the hands of an unruly army. Yet these emperors, whose portrait busts reveal their toughness and grim resolution, fought their way to the pinnacle of power with the support of the troops and then succeeded in mastering them and in arresting the disintegration of the Empire. From the Danubian provinces, Illyria, Thrace, the Orient, Africa, from the old Roman aristocracy, the new provincial aristocracy, the peasantry, above all from the army, came these emperors who ruled Rome and tried, each in his own way, to prevent her ruin. If it was the army which by its arbitrary exercise of usurped power almost brought Rome to her knees, it was also the army which, under the leadership of the soldier-emperors at the end of the century, enabled her to survive.

For nearly a hundred years before the death of Marcus Aurelius the emperors had tried to select their successors on
the basis of merit and ability. But when Marcus reverted to the dynastic principle of succession in place of the "choice of the best," he paved the way for corruption and misrule which brought in their train civil war, bloodshed, and military despotism. The rule of Marcus' megalomaniac son, Commodus (180–192), was marked by palace intrigues and conspiracies and by unrest in the army and in the Praetorian Guard, which finally murdered the emperor. Once more, as on the death of Nero in 68, the secret was discovered that an emperor could be chosen elsewhere than at Rome. Now, as then, the Praetorian Guard took the lead in murdering and creating emperors. The armies stationed in the provinces then followed suit and offered their own candidates for the throne. Henceforth the army was the dominant factor in the selection of the emperors, and the Senate, which was in theory the constitutional source of the emperor's authority, was powerless to do more than confirm the will of the troops.

Repeating their choice of a new emperor within three months, the praetorians brought about his downfall and sold the vacant throne at auction to the highest bidder. But Septimius Severus, governor of Upper Pannonia, led the troops under his command on Rome and seized power (193–211). When he disposed of his rivals, the governors of Syria and Britain who had themselves been saluted as emperors by their troops, his office was secure. As long as he enjoyed the support of the army, he could scorn the Senate and treat it as another instrument of his autocratic rule.

*The Severan Reforms*

In the intervals between successful wars against his rivals
and against the Parthians on the eastern frontier, Septimius instituted a program of reform. Since he had gained the throne with the help of the army, he was afraid that he might be toppled from it by the same soldiers or by those under the command of generals no less ambitious than he had been. By subdividing large provinces and consequently reducing the number of troops under the command of any one governor, he proposed to reduce the opportunities for revolt. The power and the prestige of the equestrian class were enlarged at the expense of the Senate, and the prefect of the Praetorian Guard was given a greater sphere of activity, especially in judicial affairs. Soon the office came to be held by leading jurists rather than by military men. By a careful reorganization of finances, by increasing taxes and expanding greatly the system of requisitions, Septimius was able not merely to restore the credit of the state which had been almost destroyed by Commodus’ senseless extravagances, but also to leave an enormous fortune to his successors.

The most significant reforms of Septimius were military. He increased the number of legions, made the conditions of service more attractive, and lowered the old barriers between praetorian and legionary, officer and enlisted man, army and civil service. Septimius scrapped the old Praetorian Guard, which had been recruited from Italians and Roman citizens from the older provinces, and created a new guard for which legionaries from any part of the Empire were eligible. Any soldier might now aspire to service in the praetorians and eventually to an officer’s commission, for which such service was a prerequisite. Since the common soldier could become an officer and the officer in turn a civil servant, the highest military and civil offices in the
state were potentially open to any loyal and able enlisted man. But there were dangers in this seeming democratization of the army and the civil service. Army officers, elevated to the hierarchy of bureaucrats, had no real experience in civil affairs, no conception of the Principate as a civil government. They thought rather in terms of military rule, and their methods were those of men who had spent their lives in the army with its traditions of discipline and force.

By recruiting legionaries and praetorians on a broader basis and by stationing a permanent legionary garrison for the first time in Italy itself, the emperor tried to break down some of the distinctions that still separated Italy from the provinces. Italy was now being assimilated to the rank of the provinces. Troops were recruited increasingly from the peasantry and from the frontier provinces, which had been only superficially Romanized. The army, to be sure, was neither a class-conscious peasant army at war with the urban elements of the Empire nor a barbarian force bent on destroying Rome from within, but Rome was depending to a dangerous extent upon men whose understanding of the Roman tradition was slight and whose devotion to it was less than their interest in their own gain. More and more the Augustan Principate was giving way to military rule. An eloquent epitome of the new conception of government is to be found in Septimius’ last words of advice to his sons: “Enrich the soldiers and scorn the world.”

The Successors of Septimius Severus

These tendencies continued during the reign of Septimius’ son, cruel Caracalla (211–217). In 212 the new emperor issued his famous edict (Constitutio Antoniniana) confer-
ring Roman citizenship upon practically all the subjects of the Empire. This was the logical culmination of a process which even before the Antonine Age had resulted in the leveling of many of the distinctions between Romans and provincials. The edict, however, was no disinterested act of generosity, for it provided a greater number of taxpayers. Even this expedient was not enough to balance a budget reduced by lavish gifts to troops and favorites, bribes and subsidies to barbarians, and an extravagant building program. By tampering with the currency, Caracalla made it possible for the state to weather the storm, but the depreciation of the coinage proved to be no permanent solution to a chronic condition.

Again and again the soldiers showed their power. After the death of Caracalla, the troops placed his assassin on the throne, only to pull him down a few months later. Then they proclaimed as emperor a psychopathic boy of fifteen who, after four years of misrule, was murdered by the Praetorian Guard and replaced by a worthier relative. In 227, however, not only did a new danger arise on Rome’s eastern borders when a revived Persian empire replaced the Parthians as her most dangerous enemies; but throughout the length of the Empire’s northern frontier—from the Rhine to the Black Sea—swarms of barbarians breached the undermanned defenses, crossed the Rhine and the Danube, and threatened Italy itself. When the emperor attempted to buy off the invaders, the troops who had once hailed him slew him and gave the imperial purple to one of their own number, a Thracian peasant who had risen from the ranks (235). The Severan dynasty, which had been founded by Septimius Severus in 193 and to which his successors belonged at least nominally, was now ended.
Septimius Severus had kept in hand the soldiers to whom he owed his throne. The troops, however, soon learned their strength, and as their insubordination increased, imperial power steadily decayed. Eager for gifts and higher pay, the soldiers were prepared to support their candidate only as long as he pandered to their greed. When he failed, they transferred their allegiance to another. Thus the army controlled the emperors, whose policies were increasingly dictated by the need to appease this powerful pressure group. In these circumstances the Empire could not long escape chaos and disintegration.

All the resources of a static if not a shrinking economy had to be tapped for money to pay the army for its support, to pay bribes to enemies who could not be defeated, and to meet the expenses of a bureaucracy which mushroomed as the central government assumed powers and functions once conceded to the municipalities. An immense hierarchy of civil servants was created to collect money, exact goods and services, and in general maintain the emperor's despotic rule. The normal revenues of the state were insufficient, and the system of compulsory services, employed sporadically in the past, was expanded by the Severan dynasty. The government imposed intolerable burdens upon town and country. From Egypt, Asia Minor, Africa, and the Rhineland came complaints that the people were being reduced to poverty and desperation by heavier taxes and an oppressive system of forced services and requisitions. Moreover, individuals and cities which had supported an unsuccessful aspirant for imperial power were punished by the victor. The provinces became full of homeless men, ruined peasants and businessmen, deserters from the army, political refugees, and victims of an emperor's vengefulness who
joined themselves in rebel bands and eked out a precarious livelihood by brigandage. Under Septimius Severus, it is true, certain parts of the Empire especially favored by the ruler enjoyed prosperity and their cities and inhabitants were treated well. Clearly, however, their privileges depended upon the whims and interests of one man and could be withdrawn as arbitrarily as they had been granted.

Military Anarchy under the Soldier-Emperors

With the passing of the Severan dynasty in 235, the Roman Empire was ruled for fifty years by a bewildering succession of soldier-emperors, elevated to office by their troops and dethroned by them or by the army of a rival. Of twenty-six reigning emperors during that half-century only one escaped violent death. Some lasted only a few months or less, nearly none for more than seven years. Most of these military adventurers were of provincial birth and some were of peasant stock. Most of them had risen through the ranks and were able and doughty soldiers; but trained in the army, they were generally ignorant of the older Roman conception of a civilian state. The real capital of the Empire was no longer Rome, but the headquarters of the general who momentarily held the throne. Government was by military decree, and terroristic methods were enforced by a swarm of secret agents, spies, and informers. Some of the emperors were competent leaders and organizers, but preoccupied as they were with domestic and foreign enemies, they had little opportunity to display their administrative skill. A contemporary observer, St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, gives us a somber and revealing picture of the misery and despair of this world in crisis: ‘Behold, the roads closed by brigands, the sea blocked by pirates, the
bloodshed and horror of universal strife. The world drips with mutual slaughter, and murder, considered a crime when perpetrated by individuals, is regarded as virtuous when committed publicly.” Thus the *Pax Romana* dissolved in a half-century of military anarchy.

Rome’s defenses on the Rhine, the Danube, and in the East were breached by enemies who took advantage of the private wars of the Roman armies and overrun undefended provinces. The recent creation of a new Persian empire under Ardashir, founder of the dynasty called Sassanian after a reputed ancestor, Sassan, raised a dangerous rival to Rome’s eastern power. Under his son, Sapor or Shapur (241-272), the Sassanian Empire almost destroyed Roman authority in the East. In the north, Gothic and other German invaders intensified their pressure and flung themselves across the frontiers to carry their raids into the heart of the Empire. These simultaneous attacks were almost fatal. By the middle of the century the northern frontier was shattered; barbarians poured into Italy and swept over the provinces of Gaul and Spain. The Goths took to the sea and sacked cities on the Black Sea and the Aegean. Under their Sassanian rulers, the Persians occupied Mesopotamia and Syria and all Asia seemed lost. When the emperors could not defeat these enemies, they bought peace or a respite from attack by paying tribute to them. Rome’s prestige at home and abroad was lowered by this policy of appeasement.

Famine and plague rode side by side with Rome’s enemies. The scourge of epidemic disease raged for fifteen years, decimating whole regions and undermining the Empire’s already weakened powers of resistance. As law and order

*Cyprian, Letters, 1, 6.*
broke down, the seas were infested with pirates, the roads with brigands. In various parts of the Empire there were terrible peasant revolts, as the poor were driven from their homes by invading barbarians, undisciplined troops, and voracious tax collectors. A swarm of warlords, the so-called Thirty Tyrants, appeared in almost every province and the unity of the Empire collapsed. If some of these pretenders were speedily suppressed, others maintained themselves for a number of years in independence of the central government. Postumus, a governor of Gaul, organized that province, Spain, and Britain as a separate empire of the Galls. Almost simultaneously, the romantic queen Zenobia, ruler of the caravan city of Palmyra, a Roman vassal kingdom in the northern Arabian Desert, usurped Rome's control of a huge area in the East. By 268 large sections of the Empire were in the hands of such rebels or barbarians and Persians. Ironically Gallienus, the reigning Roman emperor, chose for one of his coins the legend *Ubique Pax*, "Peace Everywhere."

*Recovery under Claudius Gothicus and Aurelian*

The work of recovery was begun in 268 by the emperor Claudius Gothicus, who so soundly defeated the Goths that they ceased to be a problem for nearly a century. His heroic efforts were continued by Aurelian (270–275), an outstanding general and able administrator who was chosen, like his predecessors, by the army. He defeated the German invaders of Italy, rioters in Rome, and the rebel kingdoms of Palmyra and Gaul. The barbarians were driven back, but in their wake they left terrible devastation, burned and looted cities and heavy casualties. Once-flourishing cities became mere shadows of themselves. In Gaul, Autun shrank from nearly
500 acres to fewer than 25, Bordeaux from 175 to 56, and by A.D. 300 hardly a city in Gaul had an area greater than 60 acres. By 260, Alexandria in Egypt, remote though it was from raids, lost some 60 per cent of its former population to plague and famine. Because of Rome's limited resources of men and money, Aurelian evacuated the province of Dacia, and once again the Danube was fixed as the northern frontier. In the interior of the Empire, cities which had relied for centuries upon the Pax Romana, enforced by loyal armies, hastily improvised defensive walls. Rome itself, which had enjoyed security for over 650 years, was ringed by a massive wall.

*Defense by Tribute*

Great quantities of money which the Empire could ill afford had been paid to the Germans and Persians as booty, ransom, or tribute. In the dark days of the 60's, the emperors had resorted to the costly and dangerous policy of buying the services of barbarian war bands, in order to replenish the Roman forces depleted by plague and war. Farming, trade, and industry had suffered; peasants, workers, and the urban middle class were in despair and groaned under the burden of taxes and requisitions. It is a revealing glimpse into the decline of commerce and the general prosperity of cities that between 235 and 253, 83 cities of Asia Minor issued their last known coins, and between 253 and 268, 107 more apparently ceased to issue coins. The imperial coinage had been repeatedly debased until it was worthless, prices had soared, the standard of living had declined. Such was Rome's melancholy plight in 275, but at least the integrity of the Empire had been restored by Aurelian, *Resticutor Orbis*, "Restorer of the World."
A half-century of chaos had nearly run its course. The army and the generals whom it had placed on the throne had ruled the Empire and dictated its policies. The state had become a military monarchy, worse, a military anarchy. To satisfy the wishes of the soldiers all else had been sacrificed, for their support was needed if the emperor himself was to survive. An undisciplined, insubordinate soldiery, more interested in distributing political power and gaining its rewards than in fighting the enemy, had become an incubus upon the civil population. The army, preoccupied with the game of emperor-making, had paid only scant attention to the protection of the Empire, and the generals, bidding for the imperial purple, still further disorganized the defenses, which broke down under the strain of simultaneous attack on two fronts.

**Economic Crisis**

Military anarchy was accompanied by economic crisis. Ruinous methods were devised to meet the expenses of government. Gifts to the soldiers to ensure their loyalty, doles to the populace of Rome, the personal extravagance of emperors, an expanding bureaucracy, the high cost of civil and foreign wars, bribes and tribute to the enemy, the devastation caused by invaders, all these had drained the wealth of the Empire. Already in the Antonine Age, as we have seen, there were ominous signs that the once-flourishing cities were finding it difficult to satisfy the demands imposed upon them by the imperial government. Now the heavy hand of the centralized bureaucracy oppressed rural districts and cities alike. Hardly a class was exempt from the financial and personal obligations which were ruthlessly exacted by the agents and officials of the emperor. The
system of compulsory requisitions was extended to pay the soaring costs of defense and administration. In addition to regular taxes, the rich were expected to make money contributions; others were to perform manual labor on the maintenance of aqueducts and public buildings, or to provide oil and grain, or to transport goods, supplies, and soldiers. The burden weighed most oppressively upon the urban propertied classes from which the local magistrates and senators were drawn. As greater demands were made upon their dwindling resources, municipal office, once an honor eagerly sought and willingly held, became indistinguishable from a compulsory public service. To make sure that necessary activities were performed for city and state, the central government intervened to keep the offices filled and thereby undermined local autonomy. Certain people received exemptions by doing other work of public utility, but the more persons were granted the privilege, the greater was the burden on their less fortunate fellows. In the end the constant requisitions upon their capital led to the impoverishment of the middle class, which had been one of the main pillars of the economic structure of the Empire. The cities which had been the keystone of Graeco-Roman civilization declined with the middle class.

The rural districts were no more fortunate. Farmers sought to escape onerous taxes and requisitions by abandoning their farms and taking to the roads as highwaymen. Large areas of land went out of cultivation and the burden was all the more crushing for those who remained. Orders were now given to town councils to make up the deficit of taxes on deserted farms, and landowners were compelled to take up abandoned farms adjoining theirs and to produce enough to pay the taxes on them.
Administrative Abuses

As early as the time of the Antonines, communities had complained to the central government about the requisitions demanded by imperial officials. Inscriptions and papyri documents now reveal the rising tide of protests against these abuses. The very frequency of imperial edicts designed to mitigate these evils shows how ineffective they were. So useful a device for obtaining money and services was not easily abandoned. From Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Africa, and Thrace comes evidence of the acute distress caused by the imposition of these burdens. In Egypt officials and soldiers requisitioned boats, pack animals, and drivers for the transport of troops and supplies, as well as grain and other foodstuffs, clothing, and leather hides. For visits of prefects or the emperor and his retinue on tours of inspection there were special requisitions of transportation, food, and housing; for the upkeep of the imperial post service, farmers' horses were pressed into service and farmers themselves forced to labor to maintain roads and stations. Small wonder that the Egyptians fled from their villages to the swamps of the Nile Delta in order to escape these intolerable exactions. Syrian villagers complained to the governor that they had been forced to furnish lodging for soldiers and officials. The Thracians objected to soldiers and provincial administrators who demanded the right of being entertained at the expense of the community. In Asia Minor tenants on imperial estates complained that they were being ruined by the high cost of entertaining representatives of the government or by heavy fines and other burdens, as well as by the exactions of soldiers and public officials, who demanded the services of the villagers and their oxen for
transport duty. To escape, they had been forced to bribe these officials, and when they had been unable to produce enough some of them had been imprisoned, others even executed. Farm work was at a standstill; no alternative remained but to abandon the imperial domains unless the emperor intervened in their behalf. Thus the Roman world was filled with harassed and uprooted men from town and country. The stock questions put to an oracle in Egypt are revealing: “Am I to become a beggar?” “Is my flight to be stopped?” “Shall I be sold?” “Shall I have to be a member of the local council?”

By regulation and regimentation the government tried to stem its financial difficulties; these multiplied as one domestic crisis succeeded another and as enemies pressed upon the Roman frontiers. The need for money to provide gifts for the legions, the high cost of defensive wars which did not pay for themselves in land and booty, the heavy toll of taxpayers taken by war and disease, the disorganization of business and farming, the loss of revenue from lost provinces, the draining away of Rome’s shrinking store of precious metals for unproductive luxury goods—all these factors complicated a desperate situation. Rome had ceased to expand and had no great new fields to exploit. Instead she had to depend upon her internal resources and these, as they were organized, were inadequate. The repeatedly tried solution of debasing the currency and increasing the amount in circulation had a disastrous effect upon economic life. The gold coinage lost all stability and the silver coins lost 98 per cent of their silver content; records from the Roman province of Egypt indicate that banks, which there as elsewhere in the Empire carried on many of the operations which we associate with banking, refused to accept the
imperial coinage. The market was now flooded with this worthless silver-washed currency, and a catastrophic inflation was the result. The price of grain doubled between A.D. 250 and 265, and as prices climbed the purchasing power of such trust funds as the *alimenta* shrank to the vanishing point. The "alimentary" system, established by the emperor Nerva (96–98) and expanded by his successors, granted state loans to Italian small landowners at moderate interest payments which were set aside for the support of needy children. The interest from the *alimenta* was now worth about 2 per cent of its original purchasing power. Under these inflationary conditions millions were impoverished and utterly wretched. Only the soldiers, imperial officials, and rich landlords enjoyed relative security. The state itself was virtually bankrupt. In Gibbon's phrase, it "appeared every day less formidable to its enemies, more odious and oppressive to its subjects."

**Intellectual Activity of the Third Century**

Confused and chaotic though the century was, it was not completely barren of intellectual activity. If there were no outstanding writers and no great art, there were at least competent writers and artists, while in religion and philosophy there were vital stirrings as men looked for faith and hope in a world which was uncertain and insecure, full of darkness and despair. There were still schools and universities, and the curriculum, based upon Greek and Latin classics, was little changed. Philosophy retained its primacy in some centers, and everywhere rhetoric and law were emphasized. In jurisprudence, the field which Rome had made peculiarly her own, important work was done by some of the greatest jurists in a long and distinguished line. The
third-century jurists Papinian, Ulpian, and Paulus helped elucidate, systematize, and preserve the law which was Rome's richest legacy to the medieval world. In science, at the beginning of the period, Galen produced a synthesis of existing medical knowledge which had a remarkable influence upon the history of medicine in the European and Arab world of the Middle Ages. The great age of science had ended long before, however, and pseudoscience and superstition were winning a victory. Never before had the Roman world been so full of charlatans with scientific pretensions, astrologers, soothsayers, wonder-workers, and wizards.

The mass of the people, dispirited and depressed, found hope in magic and superstition or in ancient cults, Oriental mystery religions, and Christianity. A few intellectuals, dissatisfied with the Stoicism and Epicureanism which had flourished under the Late Republic and Early Empire, found answers in Neoplatonism, which was the leading philosophy of the pagan world until the sixth century. Its chief figure was the Egyptian-born Plotinus (c.205-270) who settled in Rome during the period of military anarchy. His work, the Enneads, or Nine Volumes, was edited by Porphyry, the best known of his disciples. Neoplatonism was a synthesis of Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and other philosophic elements adjusted to the religious aspirations of the time. By thought and meditation the Neoplatonists sought to be in touch with the absolute, with the eternal, which they conceived as lying behind all phenomena. It was the Neoplatonists who in the last centuries of the Empire defended the classical intellectual tradition against Christian critics. Christian thought itself was ultimately influenced by this last great school of pagan thought.
Even in the darkest days of the century, sculptors, painters, and architects continued their activities, and when material conditions improved somewhat, as a result of the reorganization of the Empire at the end of the century, fresh opportunities were given them. There was still originality, especially in architecture, a fair degree of technical skill, a sense of color and decoration revealed in mosaics and sarcophagi, and strength displayed notably in portrait busts. Judged by the standards of classical art, however, the art of the period lacked originality, realism, balance, and proportion. More generally than in the Augustan period it was imitative, conventional, showy, and tasteless. In this mediocre art of late Rome, however, may be found the germs of Christian art of East and West in mediaeval Europe.

In literature there were new interests as the reading public sought relaxation and escape from care. The Greek romantic novels, the *Aethiopica* by Heliodorus or *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus, with their rather stereotyped themes of love and adventure and their exotic settings or charming descriptions of the quiet pastoral life, enjoyed popularity. With the exception of Dio Cassius, who early in the third century wrote a *Roman History* in eighty books, there was no outstanding historian, but other writers produced historical biography and did antiquarian research. Much useful, if unoriginal, work was done in collecting anthologies of earlier writings and in literary criticism. In general, the authors of the time were pedantic and artificial, more interested in the arrangement of words, the external form, than in content and substance. A wealth of rhetorical adornment scarcely concealed their poverty of ideas. Christian literature in Greek and Latin was more austerely practical. Its
themes were religion and theology, its emphases polemical and defensive, as Christianity itself fought for survival. For the pagan writers of a civilization in crisis originality flagged and the creative spirit waned. The future belonged to the writers, as well as the artists and thinkers, of a religion which was slowly winning its way in a still-hostile world.

_Diocletian and Constantine the Great:_

_Administrative Reforms_

In 275 Aurelian was assassinated and several emperors succeeded him in the familiar pattern of rulers created and deposed by their armies. Finally, Diocletian (284–305), the last of the military adventurers of the century, was given the imperial throne by his troops. Diocletian, an Illyrian of humble birth who had risen from the ranks of the army through military ability, was no mere soldier, but an administrator of unusual power. His reign marked the end of half a century of military anarchy and the beginning of a new epoch in Rome’s declining career. His reorganization of the Empire, carried several stages farther by his successor Constantine the Great (306–337), gave the state a new lease on life.

These reforming emperors restored the unity of the Empire and established a measure of peace, stability, and security, but the price of survival was high and the results impermanent. For the little that remained of the relatively liberal Augustan Principate there was substituted a hereditary despotism. A free economy was replaced by a state-controlled one. The inhabitants of the Empire were regimented: workers were frozen in their occupations, farmers tied to the land, and city officials to their posts. The reorganization, to be sure, was not revolutionary; rather it
made systematic and permanent emergency measures which had been taken during the years of crisis. Under Diocletian and Constantine the Roman government became an undisguised absolutism, but this was merely the logical conclusion of a process which had been developing for at least a century.

Since the problems of defense and administration seemed too great for any one ruler, Diocletian sought a formula which would preserve the unity of the Empire, maintain his own autocratic power, and provide an orderly succession of emperors without the intervention of the army. He divided the Empire into eastern and western portions and appointed a colleague to rule the West, while he governed the East and exercised a general control over both halves. Each of these Augusti adopted a Caesar to assist in the management of imperial affairs and eventually to succeed him. The government was now divided among four rulers, two in the East and two in the West. Each had his own capital, army, praetorian prefect, and bureaucracy. This scheme, with its provision for automatic succession, broke down after Diocletian's abdication in 305, however, and there was a resumption of civil war as the Augusti and Caesars fought each other. The victor, Constantine, son of one of Diocletian's Caesars and probably like Diocletian himself of Illyrian origin, won the western provinces first and finally the whole Empire for himself.

The New Ceremonial

The emperor's own person was surrounded by an aura of sacrosanctity. He was no longer princeps, first citizen of the state, but dominus et deus, lord master and god. From the Sassanian Empire was borrowed an elaborate court cere-
monial with all the Oriental trappings of an imperial wardrobe, luxurious raiment, and a diadem. To impress the exalted station of the emperor upon ordinary mortals and to emphasize the distance which separated him from them, the few subjects who were granted audiences with the sacred ruler had to prostrate themselves before him and kiss the hem of his robe. These were a few of the externals of imperial office which the Byzantine emperors in the East and the kings of western Europe eventually inherited.

Military Reforms

The emperor's power, however, depended upon more than ceremonial. The army had to be reduced to subservience, the administration of the provinces reorganized, the bureaucracy made more efficient, and the economic strength of the Empire restored.

One of the great weaknesses of Rome in the preceding years had been her inability to fight simultaneously on two fronts; she needed a larger army if she were to resist the twin menace of barbarian and Persian. But any expansion of the army increased the potential danger of a coup d'état like those which had almost destroyed Rome during the past half-century. The risk was taken and the number of troops increased, but their organization and distribution were changed. The army, consisting now of about 650,000 men, was divided into two main branches: a garrison force (limitanei and riparii), stationed along the frontiers, and expeditionary forces (comitatenses), posted at various strategic locations from which they could be quickly moved to danger zones on the frontier. Strong palace guards (palatini) protected the emperor himself. Cavalry units were enlarged and given a far more important role than they
had hitherto. When the need arose, the frontier garrisons were reinforced by hired warriors from barbarian tribes in treaty relations with Rome. This reorganization of the army nearly doubled the number of effective troops, and more officers had to be provided. Many of them came up through the ranks, since a steady sequence of promotions made it possible for an enlisted man to win a commission and eventually even command of a whole army. In the new army the most important role, that of fighting the invaders, was given to barbarians. The plague and civil wars had so reduced the available manpower of the Empire that the only solution seemed to be to use Germans to fight other Germans. The sequel showed that the barbarians, to whom land or money was given in return for military service, could not be trusted to defend an empire to which they had no genuine attachment.

**Separation of Military and Administrative Functions**

Diocletian almost entirely dissociated the civil service from the army. The sole concern of the troops was to defend the Empire; the business of the bureaucracy was to administer it for the emperor and above all to collect the taxes. To assure more efficient administration and to weaken the capacity of governors to revolt, the provinces were divided and subdivided until by the fifth century there were about 120. These tiny provinces—and Italy itself had shrunk to provincial status—were grouped in larger administrative districts called dioceses, each under a *vicarius*, and the dioceses in turn were assigned by Diocletian to the Augusti and Caesars. To each of these four rulers was attached a praetorian prefect who was charged with his
former judicial powers as well as sweeping administrative functions in connection with public utilities and services. Although some of the provincial governors continued to be drawn from the Senate, that body did not have even nominal control over the provinces. It was in fact no more than a municipal council for the city of Rome, and by Constantine's time the distinction between senators and equestrians had disappeared. A host of new officials, many with pompous titles, exercised a vigilant control over the subjects of the Empire. Administrative institutions became more rigid as the conditions which had called them into being worsened. As the expenditures for defense and war mounted, the need for money became more acute, and a complicated and costly machinery of government was devised to enforce the regimentation of the subjects of the state. The Empire was caught in a web from which it could not seem to escape.

This was the administrative framework of the Later Roman Empire. Changes in detail were made by the emperors after Constantine, but it was essentially upon this model of an absolute, bureaucratic state that the Germans formed their kingdoms and the Byzantine emperors built their government. We shall see too that many of these institutions were adopted by the Christian church when it found need for a more complex organization.

*Economic Reforms*

By their economic reforms Diocletian and Constantine accelerated the process which had already brought the inhabitants of the Empire under the all-embracing control of the state. Not only were the requisitions and compulsory public services reinforced and expanded, but they were also
made more systematic and regular. Early in his reign Diocletian tried to end monetary confusion and to stimulate trade by re-establishing a reliable currency in both gold and silver. Prices continued to climb, however, and in 301 the emperor issued the famous Edict of Diocletian which, by setting wage controls and fixing price ceilings for the sale of nearly everything, proposed to eliminate profiteers and black-market activities. Although the death penalty was prescribed for infractions, it proved impossible to enforce the edict, which made no distinction between wholesale and retail prices and no allowance for differences in quality or variations in supply and demand. In the eastern provinces the edict caused serious riots, and after a year or so it became a dead letter; while in the West it does not seem to have been effectively enforced at all. This attempt to combat inflation was as unsuccessful as his currency reform. Both were palliatives which might bring temporary relief, but could not cure a deep-seated malady.

Diocletian and Constantine established a “planned economy” not because of a doctrinaire preference, but because they were hard pressed to obtain two basic and closely related requirements, men and money. Incessant civil and foreign wars, famine and epidemic, a declining birth rate, and a high rate of infant mortality had created a serious shortage of manpower which became more critical as the emperors expanded the army and civil service. There was a need for men not only to perform vital public services, but also to produce the food, clothing, and other products which the state and its inhabitants required. Above all, men were needed to provide the taxes without which the state would perish. We have already seen that the government had to have money to pay the army and the bureaucracy,
to appease potential enemies, and to meet the high costs of an Orientalized court and an ambitious building program. The scheme of economic reorganization was a drastic solution for a complicated problem.

A new system of taxation, a tax in kind (annona) levied on land and the labor employed upon it, largely replaced the tax in money. The new tax varied according to the productive capacity of the land and the number of men working upon it. Since it was payable in kind, the government had to have state granaries and stockyards and new officials to care for them. If the tax were to be paid, the land had to be kept under cultivation and farmers had to be prevented from abandoning their work, as many had been doing. First the tenant farmers (coloni) on imperial estates and eventually those on private estates were compelled to remain on their lands for life. Finally the order was applied to their heirs as well. In this way farm workers were tied to the soil and an important step had been taken toward reducing them to serfdom. Many small landowners accepted the same status voluntarily, for when they fell heavily into debt they could “commend” themselves to wealthier landlords who paid their debts and in return took them over as coloni for life.

No one escaped the ubiquitous state. City-dwellers, both workers and businessmen, had to pay regular taxes in money and in kind, an oppressive special tax collected every five years, and emergency taxes payable in labor or produce. When certain essential workers, for example, members of the various associations or collegia of millers, grain shippers, bakers, and butchers, tried to leave their occupations in order to avoid the demands of the state, they were compelled to remain. Workers who had found employment else-
where were forced back to their former occupations, and finally the children of workers and merchants were bound to their fathers' callings. Under Constantine the principle of hereditary public service was made law and applied to all classes, including soldiers, civil servants, and municipal officials. In effect, the state had nationalized everyone and everything.

Diocletian and Constantine performed a herculean task. By their reorganization they gave the Roman Empire a respite from invasions and civil war, but the respite was brief and its price very high. No adequate resistance was likely to be offered to the barbarian invaders by a people who had lost freedom and hope and, above all, their belief in the cause of Rome. Roman civilization had been based upon an association of self-governing city-states under the protection of the Pax Romana. It could not remain unchanged when local government, whose vitality had already begun to ebb in the second century, was given its death blow by the establishment of a centralized, absolute state. The decline of the Roman Empire, which we shall analyze in a later chapter, was both postponed and accelerated by Diocletian and Constantine.

The Beginning of a New Era

Two acts of Constantine the Great may well be considered as symbolizing the end of one phase of history and the beginning of another. His conversion to Christianity marks the change from a declining pagan civilization to a vital Christian civilization, and his establishment of a new Christian capital at Constantinople in place of pagan Rome signifies the shift of the center of gravity from West to East. The Roman Empire in the West endured for nearly
a century and a half before the barbarian invaders built their kingdoms upon its ruins. In the East the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, whose foundations were laid when Constantine created Constantinople, played a major role in history for another thousand years. In both East and West, Roman civilization was the matrix for those institutional and cultural forms which we call mediaeval.
CHAPTER III

The Ordeal and Triumph of Christianity

The conversion of the emperor Constantine the Great to Christianity marked the beginning of a new epoch. A religion which had been derided and persecuted now won its way to victory over the other religions in the Empire, the older Graeco-Roman gods as well as the new cults brought in from the East. In the twilight hours of the Empire the pagan gods went down to defeat, and the triumph of Christianity heralded the birth of the Middle Ages.

What were the factors within Christianity which fostered its victory? What were the external circumstances which facilitated its spread from a tiny and insignificant part of the Roman Empire over the length and breadth of that immense Roman world? Why was the imperial government, normally tolerant in matters of religion, hostile to Christianity? Although it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer categorically questions which concern men's spiritual attachments and aspirations, an examination of religious developments during the first three or four centuries of the Empire may at least suggest some possible explanations of both the ordeal and the triumph of Christianity. Without