CHAPTER I

Prelude to Crisis

THE Principate, by re-establishing order and healing the deep wounds of social and civil war, restored unity to the Roman world for two centuries and, by creating a new efficient machinery of government, gave the Mediterranean lands security and prosperity such as they had never known before and civilization has seldom seen since. The climax of this accomplishment was reached in the second century of the Christian era, a period known as the Age of the Antonines (138–192), and particularly under the two greatest Antonine emperors, Antoninus Pius and his successor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the philosopher-emperor who had to spend the last years of his life at the head of his armies defending the frontier against the Germans. This is the time which Edward Gibbon in The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire regarded as the happiest age mankind has known. His book came out in 1776, and Gibbon, thanks to his massive scholarship and majestic prose, has kept a place among the greatest writers of history ever since. In the opening chapters of this magnificent work Gibbon describes how, in the Age of the Antonines, citizen and provincial, freeman and slave, rich and poor, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Euphrates River, from the Rhine and
the Danube to the Sahara Desert, were united under "the immense majesty of the Roman peace." It is certain that the efficiency, enlightenment, and cosmopolitanism that lay behind this achievement are the most striking aspects of the second century. That they were also the most significant is, perhaps, another matter.

Gibbon's words read almost like a paraphrase of the thought of Virgil (who died in 19 B.C.) in the sixth book of the Aeneid, when he proclaimed the ideal of the Principate of Augustus:

But thou, O Roman, learn with sovereign sway
To rule the nations. Thy great art shall be
To keep the world in lasting peace, to spare
The humbled foe and crush to earth the proud.¹

In the Fourth Eclogue he prophesied an "age foretold" when

The vast world-process brings a new-born time.
Once more the Virgin comes and Saturn's reign,
Behold a heaven-born offspring earthward hies! ²

This era, he goes on to say, would "free the world from perpetual fear" under the "reign of a golden people." Christian enthusiasm saw in these words a prophecy of the birth of Christ. It was, rather, a vision of an imperial golden age, perhaps with a veiled reference to a child of the imperial house. In the next century the same belief in the mission of Rome was voiced by Pliny the Elder (who died a martyr to his scientific interests in the famous eruption of Vesuvius which wiped out Pompeii in A.D. 79). "Italy," he wrote,

¹ The Aeneid of Virgil, tr. by T. C. Williams (New York, 1908), p. 218.
"has been selected by the gods in order to unite scattered empires, to soften customs and unite by the community of one language the diverse and barbarous dialects of so many nations, to bestow on men the intercourse of ideas and humanity, in a word—that all the peoples of the world should have one fatherland."  

**The Age of the Antonines**

Under the Antonines these visions were in almost literal truth fulfilled. Secure behind natural frontiers of ocean, rivers, and desert, behind the *limes* (an artificial frontier of fortified military encampments that linked the Rhine and the Danube), and behind the walls that kept distant Britain safe, the Roman Empire in the second century seemed to lie impregnable. It was "one world" of more than a million and a quarter square miles at its greatest extent, where dwelt between fifty or sixty millions of people: Italians, Greeks, Illyrians, Egyptians, Celts, Germans, and a host of others.

To Tertullian, one of the Fathers of the Latin Church, this pagan empire, at the end of the second century, was a world every day better known, better cultivated, and more civilized than before. Everywhere roads are traced, every district is known, every country opened to commerce. Smiling fields have invaded the forests; flocks and herds have routed the wild beasts; the very sands are sown; the rocks are planted; the marshes drained. There are now as many cities as there were once solitary cottages. Reefs and shoals have lost their terrors. Wherever there is a trace of life there are houses and human habitations, well-ordered governments and civilized life.

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4 Tertullian, *Concerning the Soul*, ch. 30 (author's translation).
Other Greek and Roman writers, law codes, archaeological finds, coins, papyri, and thousands of inscriptions from all parts of the Empire support this Christian estimate.

The road system to which Tertullian refers owed its beginning to the Republic, for as Rome expanded her sway her roads stretched out over the world. The main highways were laid out originally for military and administrative purposes: to facilitate the rapid movement of troops from one part of the Empire to another and to link Rome more effectively with her provinces. The city itself became the focus of world communications, the center of a net of trunk highways, adequately maintained and patrolled and supplemented by local roads. The sea lanes, kept clear of pirates, lighted in places by beacons, and sometimes marked for navigation, led, like the roads, to Italy and Rome. Thanks to this system, the cities and hamlets, the mines and quarries, of the civilized world were linked as never before. Men—Roman soldiers, Roman lawyer-administrators, merchants, students, artists, scholars of every land; goods—domestic and foreign; and ideas—not native only, but alien too—moved with a freedom and speed not again approached in the same vast region until the coming of the railroad in the nineteenth century. Fresh life and prosperity came to ancient cities, new cities sprang into sudden being, and in them a cosmopolitan, universal civilization began to take final shape.

The earliest home of this new civilization was Greece and the city-states of the Hellenized East. As the Empire expanded, similar cities grew up in the West, the advance posts of the civilization the Principate was rapidly making universal. On the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, and the Red Sea were thriving, cosmopolitan, com-
mercial centers: Tarragona, Narbonne, Marseilles, Carthage, Brindisi, Ostia, Corinth, Alexandria, Smyrna, Ephesus; along the rivers lay Bordeaux, Lyons, Trier, Cologne; along the roads Damascus, Tarsus, Antioch. In Britain and along the Rhine and the Danube towns grew out of military stations or alongside them as merchants gathered to supply the needs of the soldiers and as veterans received grants of land in the areas in which they had served, and settled there. Such were the cities of Bonn, Mainz, Strasbourg, and Wiesbaden on the Rhine; Vienna, Budapest, and Belgrade on the Danube; York and Gloucester in Britain. Rome, the largest city of the Empire, had over a million inhabitants, and there were at least half a dozen other large cities, each with a population of a quarter of a million or more. Most of the cities of the Empire, however, and especially those in the West, were small towns by our standards, since the population of Europe then was far less dense than it is today.

In the zone of military occupation across the Rhine, 160 towns are known; across the Danube in Dacia (modern Roumania) some 120 cities can be named. In other provinces the record is similar—everywhere cities grew up, at once the foundation and impressive evidence of the life and civilization the Roman Empire was creating and sustaining. And everywhere the cities and the rural districts that fed them were like small replicas of the capital itself. Whether in Britain, along the Rhine or Danube, the Rhone or Moselle, in Africa, Asia, or Syria, on the fringes of the desert, or on the coast, a traveler from Rome might feel at home amid familiar temples, fora, baths, triumphal arches, theaters, and amphitheaters. New cities and new sections of older cities were laid out according to well-conceived plans; long and sometimes colonnaded streets radiated from a central square.
Towns, new or old, had adequate supplies of water provided by aqueducts, good drainage facilities, well-paved and sometimes lighted streets and public squares, impressive public buildings and private homes, many of which were equipped with such amenities as mosaic floors, glass windows, running water, and heating systems.

The Roman Peace

The Pax Romana which made this life possible was protected by an army of some 400,000 men. This force, microscopic for the region to be guarded, was highly trained, superbly disciplined in the greatest days of the Empire, and remarkably mobile considering the state of communications in the world of the time. Never since then has the same area enjoyed so much security at so little cost in manpower, man hours, and money. On the northern frontiers there were occasional border skirmishes, but no serious threat to Roman security; in the East the Parthians were no longer formidable enough to present a major challenge to Roman authority. The troops themselves, whether legionaries or auxiliaries, filled with a fine esprit de corps, a pride in their traditions, and a consciousness of their mission as soldiers of Rome, were active agents of Romanization in the areas in which they were stationed. When they had completed twenty-five years of military service, the auxiliaries were granted Roman citizenship, and they settled usually in the provinces in which they had served. Hence there was in the frontier areas a steady addition of Roman citizens, men who had learned in the army something of the meaning of Rome, while the provinces from which these men were recruited felt that they too had a stake in Rome. As settlements of veterans, merchants, and others developed into towns, natives and Romans met and mingled in the frontier
zones, and Roman culture sifted down slowly but surely and began to leaven the barbarian mass and to prepare the slow formation of future nationalities.

Roman administration was stable, efficient, and generally honest. The government was managed by experts in a close-knit civil service under the control of the emperor. Citizenship, no less highly valued now than before, was bestowed more generously upon deserving provincials. The governing class, indeed emperors themselves, had ceased to be a narrow group of Italians and was recruited increasingly from the upper class of the provincial cities. The Roman government tolerated local customs and traditions, made no effort to impose uniformity of culture, and insisted on one thing only from the countless minority groups under its rule: they must keep the Roman peace. Nevertheless, distinctions and barriers between Rome and the provinces tended to diminish, sometimes to the vanishing point. Although all the municipalities were under the ultimate control of the emperor, varying degrees of self-government were accorded to them. In the midst of this bewildering administrative diversity the common institutions of the Empire were potent bonds of community—the army, the courts, the great administrative system, were all powerful, if informal instruments of education. The army fulfilled a tremendous function, far greater than is easy to imagine unless we analyze in detail the character of its organization. Above all, there was the person of the emperor, the symbol and agent of imperial unity.

The Social Structure

Social classes, it is true, continued well defined, yet they were also more fluid than in republican days or at the beginning of the Principate, and movement from one class to
another was more easily accomplished. Below the emperor stood the Senate, still the chief governing class, although its powers and prerogatives now depended upon the good will of the sovereign. Its ranks were steadily replenished from wealthy equestrians and members of the municipal aristocracy of Italy and the provinces.

The equestrian order derived its place and power from the fact that the emperors relied on its members as a balance, particularly for the senatorial order. Recruited from the lower ranks of society—lesser army officers, municipal aristocrats, freedmen of prominence and others who had shown enterprise and ability—they were employed increasingly for the more important imperial posts, and in contrast to those of the senatorial order, which had an ancient grudge against the Principate, they were more wholehearted in their loyalty. In the cities of Italy and of the provinces there was still in the second century an influential governing class, large landowners and prosperous businessmen who could afford the heavy donations and outlays in behalf of their cities which ancient custom imposed as part of the responsibilities of leading men in the Graeco-Roman world.

Below the upper classes of tradition, wealth, and office, and providing new blood for them in the dynamic society of the Principate, were small business people, clerks from public and private employ who had a head for figures and could read, and sometimes even artisans. This general fluidity—one of the greatest contributions of Rome to western civilization—had a good deal to do with the efficiency and endurance of the Empire and with the loyalty of the provinces in times of crisis and disaster.

In the lowest strata of society a quite different situation existed. Everywhere in the country districts there was a
mass made up of small tenant-farmers, hired hands, and slaves, who were barely touched by the urban civilization that was characteristic of Graeco-Roman development. They had counterparts in the cities, folk who had the least possible share in the enormous intellectual, social, and financial profits of the new civilization. These were free wage earners, artisans, unskilled laborers, and slaves. In city and country alike this mass teetered precariously between survival and extinction. Sudden disaster—a poor harvest, flood, fire, inflation, an epidemic—could tip the balance to ruin. A prolonged crisis, long war, civil or foreign, or a series of disasters in close succession would tip it to extinction for large sections of them.

Such a threat was not peculiar to Italy, to the Empire, or to antiquity. It stalked the ancient world as it stalks the modern, perhaps never more menacingly than today. The Romans who had inherited and enlarged the Greek humane tradition reacted to such disasters in the same way that we, who are also heirs to the same tradition, respond to them: they fed the starving. This gave rise in time to the formula of a satirist: “Bread and circuses.” There is not the least doubt that this was a monument of futility as a solution; it bred a social cancer and became a terrible drain on the budget. But the alternative, the desperate rioting of the starving, would have cost still more in social erosion.

The Economic Foundations

Thanks to the Roman peace, the Empire attained its highest economic development. Industry and commerce flourished, especially in the East, where the cities with a longer tradition of trade and manufacturing were situated; but the West, more important as a source of raw materials,
made its own contribution to Rome's wealth. From the West came the bulk of Rome's metal ores: tin, lead, silver, and gold from Spain; tin from Britain; gold and silver from Dacia (Roumania); iron from Noricum (roughly Austria and part of Bavaria). The western provinces produced a surplus of agricultural products which were shipped to Rome and to other parts of the Empire. By this time parts of the West began to develop simple industries and the commerce that went with them. Gaul in particular manufactured native pottery, the terra sigillata, a red-glazed ware, which soon outsold in local markets the Italian Samian or Arretine ware which it imitated, and finally competed successfully with its prototype in Italian and other markets. Gaul, and somewhat later Britain, had important manufactures of glass and bronze-ware, Spain produced swords and armor, Gaul was famous for its textiles. The eastern provinces furnished some valuable raw materials, marble and other stones, timber, fish, as well as farm products, but the East was a more notable source of fine manufactured goods: glassware, metalware, and textiles from Egypt and Syria, woolens from Asia Minor, luxury goods of one kind or another from various places. In all this industrial output, eastern or western, the small workshop—in which a craftsman was assisted perhaps by a few slaves—was the characteristic unit of production. Even where larger "factories" were to be found, as for example in the manufacture of Samian ware in Italy or Gaul or in the building-materials industries—the production of bricks, tiles, or lead water pipes—the number of slaves or free workers was, by our standards, very small, generally fewer than twenty-five, almost never over a hundred.

There was a lively interprovincial trade in the necessities
of life, such as wheat, oil, and wine, as well as in the cheaper textiles and pottery and metal utensils of daily use which needed regular replacement. The army was one of the best customers in the Empire. Not only did it provide a market for farm products and manufactured goods brought from near and far, but it also fostered the economic development of the frontier regions, as merchants gathered around the military camps and stations to cater to the needs of the troops. As the Empire prospered and the demand for luxuries increased, there was an expanding trade in luxury goods, especially from the eastern provinces and from beyond the frontiers. Provincial and Italian businessmen traveled across the borders through the barbarian lands to the north as far as Scandinavia, or through Parthia to the east, or southward down the Red Sea and across the Indian Ocean. A uniform and dependable imperial coinage facilitated this active trade and served as another symbol of Rome's might and majesty. So, too, the standardization of language—Latin throughout the Empire but especially in the West, and Greek in the East—promoted trade and fostered unity. Nevertheless, while there was economic as well as political unity, there was apparent a tendency toward economic decentralization and self-sufficiency, as provincials began to produce goods which they had once imported from Italy or from other provinces. The centrifugal forces were not yet strong enough to tear the Empire asunder, but already in the second century they were gaining momentum.

The Agricultural Classes

Although the Roman Empire was highly urbanized and enjoyed an active trade and industry, the vast majority of
the people, provincials and Italians alike, then and until very recent times, gained their living from agriculture, either directly by tilling the soil or indirectly from the ownership of farmland. The chief food crops were wheat, olives, and wines produced for local distribution and consumption in near-by cities or for export to feed the huge population of the capital as well as for the army on the frontiers. Some farms raised flax for linen, others were essentially ranches producing meat, wool, and hides for local use or interprovincial trade.

This rural population, like country folk everywhere and in all times, was pretty well cut off from the movement of ideas and clung to the past, the old ways and the ancestral attitudes. They responded less readily to Romanization than city folk, and this had important effects on their position in later times, as the history of the Later Empire and the Middle Ages shows clearly. A minor but suggestive illustration of this is the change in the sense of the Latin ancestor of our word “pagan.” Originally it meant a countryman, a rustic, a peasant. Because the rural class clung longest to the old religion, the Latin word for countryman, when Christianity advanced, came to mean “heathen,” as does the English word “pagan” which is derived from it.

We do not know as much about these rural people under the Empire as we should like to, but there are signs that they did not share equally with the upper and middle classes of the cities in the material advantages of Roman rule. The number of independent small landowners declined steadily as more and more farmers became tenants of absentee landlords on the estates held by the emperor, by the imperial aristocracy, by wealthy provincials who belonged to the municipal aristocracy, or by temples.

Our data are not complete enough for positive, sweeping
generalizations, but some notion of the size of the normal small farm in republican times can be gained from the Gracchan land-reform law of 133 B.C. This appears to have divided public lands into farmsteads of about twenty acres, which were given to the poor. In imperial times some estates were as small as 130 acres, others ran to 1,000 acres. Those of the emperors, swollen by gift, bequest, and confiscation, were vastly larger. Under the Republic, in the days of easy conquests and an abundant supply of captives, the use of slaves had increased greatly. In addition, a good deal of land once used for cereal production had been turned to grazing. Both developments had a bad effect on the small freeholder, who was thus brought to face strong competition from slave labor on large estates. Under the Empire the character of war changed into frontier guardianship and the sources of cheap slaves dried up. Nevertheless, large estates continued to operate and even increase in number and size, although *coloni*, that is, free tenant farmers, according to the original use of the word, began to replace slave labor on them. Some *coloni* kept their original free status; others were among the ancestors of the mediaeval serf. The tendency toward self-sufficiency already noticed in connection with provincial trade and industry began to appear on these larger estates; many of them were producing an ever greater proportion of manufactured goods for their own use or even for sale in near-by cities. Each of these changes is apparent in the second century, and in these respects the mediaeval manor was already casting its shadow before.

*The Cultural Outlook*

The period of the Antonines, with the efficient and even beneficent imperial government, the years unbroken by dif-
difficulties, and the relatively high standard of general prosperity might well have been expected to produce a brilliant culture. Spiritual vigor and creativeness, however, did not go hand in hand with unity, peace, power, and prosperity, and the general poverty of intellectual life was a portent of decline or at least of stagnation. Art, to be sure, showed new vitality in medal engraving and portrait sculpture, but on the whole art and literature became conventional and dull. Imitation and pedantic affectation largely took the place of originality. For the cultivated and leisure class, from which the writers came, the freshness and savor of life were somehow wanting. Confidence in the possibilities of this world seemed to be waning, and the writers of the period sought flight from reality by producing a literature which had little connection with the life of the times. Since the present age seemed dull and uncreative, the leading authors wrote on themes that were irrelevant to life in a style that was neither fresh nor spontaneous, but a nostalgic attempt to recapture the flavor of an earlier and a happier age.

It was, however, not only the writers of the Antonine period who seem to have found little to attract them in the contemporary world. In general there was a sense of insecurity, a brooding quest for hope and salvation after death. Intellectuals turned to the consolations of philosophical schools in which reason and clear thinking often yielded to emotionalism, mysticism, and superstition. The mass of the people were finding a substitute for a world which was too much for them in the Oriental mystery religions. These cults, which had been coming into the Mediterranean world for centuries, will be dealt with in more detail later. Here it is enough to point out that they
were bound up with the sufferings of hero-saviors, that they offered purification to the individual in this life and also held out a priceless hope of personal immortality. Among the religions which came out of the East, Christianity, a late arrival, was destined to triumph only after a vigorous contest. As men were increasingly beset by troubles, as hope for improvement waned, these religions exerted a tremendous mass appeal. More and more men sought courage and escape in other-worldly mystery religions.

**Symptoms of Decline**

What was wrong? Even before the crisis of the third century, even before the margin of security was reduced during the Principate of Marcus Aurelius (161–180), there were factors which stifled initiative and killed enterprise. The tranquillity of the Antonine Age was deceptive; peace existed but precariously, prosperity was neither widespread nor deeply rooted. The seeds of decay were germinating beneath the surface and soon sprouted under the favoring circumstances of foreign war and internal chaos.

Long ago Rome had granted or acknowledged the freedom of cities, especially in the East, to manage local affairs through their own senates and municipal magistrates, their own financial systems, and their own courts. The imperial government had always retained the right to exercise an overriding control, but in general it did not infringe upon the wide sphere of local self-government. This generous privilege had encouraged a loyalty to Rome and a pride in the Empire as well as a civic pride which at least in the governing class of the municipalities had served as a powerful psychological stimulus to mental and material achievement.
The Decline of the Cities

Despite their apparently flourishing condition, the cities of the Empire, focal points of ancient civilization, were showing symptoms of economic decline and their inhabitants were displaying signs of a loss of civic initiative. Membership in the Empire was still highly prized, but Romans and non-Romans alike were yielding their municipal liberties to a paternalistic and increasingly autocratic central government which more and more bent men to its will. Regulation had not yet become regimentation, but the imperial administration was holding the control reins more tightly and more often than before was drawing upon them.

The Fiscal Crisis

The long wars of Marcus Aurelius and the devastating plague which accompanied them gave an additional impetus to a decline which had set in earlier. Local and imperial taxes mounted, towns overspent their resources on civic improvements, and a bureaucratic central government required more funds for the amenities of peace and the necessities of war. Wars had once enabled Rome to balance the budget by adding new areas for exploitation and by bringing in vast sums as booty. The Roman economy had expanded with the Empire. Now, as wars were mainly defensive and as the frontiers remained fixed, the economy itself became static or even contracted. The imperial government found itself hard pressed to raise the funds required to maintain an army of soldiers and civil servants. Since excessive financial demands were made upon the municipalities and the local officeholders, many of these men sought escape from what had once been an honor but was now a costly burden. The
aversion to municipal office was not yet widespread, but the signs were ominous and foreshadowed the breakdown of the system of local government.

It is one of the ironies of history that the decline was sharply intensified during the Principate of Marcus Aurelius, the very type of philosopher-king whom Plato had regarded as the ideal ruler. A period of incessant wars on the strategic northern and eastern frontiers succeeded peace. Soon after his accession, the northern defense line was stripped of large detachments of troops for service in the Parthian Wars in the East. Barbarian tribes, especially the Marcomanni and Quadi living beyond the Upper Rhine and Danube, overwhelmed the weakened garrisons in 167, breached the northern frontiers, swarmed into the border provinces, and invaded northern Italy itself. Only with difficulty was their advance halted, and only after long years of heavy fighting were they defeated in the Marcomannic Wars. The first great invasion from the north was finally repelled, but the threat of wandering barbarians (as the Romans called their Germanic neighbors to the north) continued to hang over the Empire.

The emperor’s troubles multiplied as an epidemic brought back by the troops returning from the Parthian Wars spread like wildfire through the western provinces and caused thousands of deaths. Famine was widespread as farmers died of plague or deserted their fields in the face of enemy advance, and a weakening economy was further depressed. Meanwhile the expenses of the state mounted. The prolonged series of campaigns was costly, the bureaucracy was expanding rapidly, extravagance in imperial court circles was great. The financial structure of the Empire was essentially unsound. In peacetime there were generally ample revenues,
but in time of war there was no capital reserve nor was it possible to create a national debt in order to meet the extraordinary expenses. The auctioning of the crown jewels in order to procure money for war was a desperate expedient to which Marcus was reduced. It was the provincials, the inhabitants of towns, who were called upon to bear heavier burdens, to undertake fresh liturgies or so-called voluntary services, either by furnishing additional sums in cash or by providing food, lodging, and transport for imperial troops.

Not until the third century were the full effects of this policy felt, but while Marcus Aurelius was still alive there were signs that the vitality and prosperity of the cities were being undermined. The middle and upper classes were being increasingly subjected to the overriding needs and interests of the central government. In its quest for money the government imposed heavier burdens than the towns could assume and thereby throttled enterprise. In its search for efficiency the imperial bureaucracy ultimately destroyed local self-government. Imperial commissioners, for example, were imposed upon cities whose financial condition was precarious. As early as Trajan's reign (98–117), such special administrative experts (called correctores, curatores, or logistai) had been appointed by the emperor to supervise and overhaul the disordered finances of cities and even whole provinces. Begun as an emergency measure to end financial mismanagement, imperial control over local administration tended to become a regular practice. Thus the action of the second-century emperors paved the way for the tighter control of local affairs by the central government in the following century. The process of civic decay had begun within the cities themselves, but the corrosive action of the state was
rapidly wearing away municipal liberty, a keystone of the structure of Roman civilization.

For the common man, the farm worker, or the humbler folk in the cities of the Empire, the burden of life became harder. True, the condition of slaves had improved under the impact of a growing humanitarianism; true, with the drying up of the sources of slaves, slave labor was gradually being replaced by free labor, but the evil of slavery was not examined, let alone cured. The pauperization of the mass of free men advanced, and if slaves gained freedom, free men were reduced to the status of subjects—an equality of subjection to a state which was ever more autocratic. The causes of social conflict, repressed rather than excised, festered beneath the surface.

The Unsolved Problems of Empire

These are a few of the signs of decline which manifested themselves during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. In themselves they may not have been serious; given time, but more important, given thought, they might have been prevented from becoming aggravated. But no respite was granted and the crisis worsened as a decent, if improvident, emperor was succeeded by a worthless son. The Romans in general showed little interest in ideas, little perception of the theoretical bases of the state and its economy. Many problems, which perhaps only in retrospect and with the advantage we have of hindsight seem fundamental, were left untouched. So the cancer of slavery was not cured, the growing poverty of the urban population and the increasing misery of the rural folk were dealt with, if at all, by palliatives such as doles, subsidies, and benefactions. The prob-
lem of checking the growing parasitism of the cities upon the countryside, the problem of reversing the trend toward political centralization in order to keep pace with an advancing economic decentralization, the problem of establishing representation for the provinces, the problem of preserving municipal autonomy within the framework of a world state, the problem of providing adequate revenues for the state without destroying the taxpayers—these questions were not considered, or, if they were, were not solved. As external pressures from barbarians and Persians increased and as internal chaos mounted, some solution to these and other problems would have to be found if the Empire were not to disintegrate.

When Marcus Aurelius died in 180, the Empire still seemed secure. Coins might still attest the “Eternity of the Roman People.” The Romans had created and preserved a unified world, and they seemed strong enough to perpetuate unity and security. They failed, and the signs of their failure became clearer as the third century advanced. A hundred years of crisis followed the death of Marcus Aurelius. When the Empire recovered, its political, economic, social, and cultural structure was profoundly altered.