

**THE ARCHITECTS OF ROME'S DEMISE:
THE ROLE OF SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS AND HIS SUCCESSORS
IN THE DECLINE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE AS A POLITICAL
ENTITY**

by

Jack Emerson Brown

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ABSTRACT

The decline of the Roman Empire occurred over the course of the third century. Rome went from the unchallenged master of the Mediterranean to a weary giant, beset by foes. The reasons for this decline are myriad. A number of military defeats that occurred over the decades certainly played a major role. However, the economic policies of the Roman emperors during the third century were instrumental in ruining the empire. Beginning with the rise of Septimius Severus in 193 AD and continuing with his successors, the Severan dynasty and the barracks emperors, the emperors indulged in economic policies that severely damaged the stability of the empire, including overspending, particularly on the Roman military, as well as currency debasement and inflation. In addition to problems with the Roman economy, the period was also characterized by frequent civil wars, in which generals tried to claim the title of emperor, and assassinations, with soldiers murdering the emperor when he displeased them. It was a period of chaos from which the empire never truly recovered.

Chapter 1

THE RUINATION OF AN EMPIRE

Ancient Rome was a colossus that controlled the Mediterranean for centuries. The Roman Empire held unrivalled power in Europe, and for a time, it seemed that it would hold that power forever. However, the Roman Empire slowly declined over time. After the golden age known as the Pax Romana, or “Roman Peace,” concluded at the end of the second century, the Roman Empire entered a lengthy period of decline. Over the course of the third century, the once-great empire fell into chaos, and never fully recovered. Civil and foreign wars wracked the empire, and corruption was rampant. However, the reasons for this decline are not initially clear.

War in the Mediterranean

Initially, the most obvious cause for the decline of the Roman Empire would appear to be threats from abroad. The third century saw the emperors of the time contend with numerous foes from outside the empire’s borders. The empire was beset on all sides by enemies.

This state of affairs is apparent starting at the end of the Pax Romana. After seizing power in 193 AD, the emperor Septimius Severus, who reigned from 193 to 211, launched an invasion against the Parthian Empire, a power in the ancient Middle East that had been a thorn in Rome’s side since its foundation, most notably when it destroyed the army of Marcus Licinius Crassus at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC. After a hard-fought war, Severus managed to defeat the Parthians and annex part of

their empire, creating the province of Mesopotamia in the process. He then launched a campaign against the Garamantes, in North Africa.¹ Late in his reign, he fought a war in Britain against the Caledonians.² He was very much a military man, and spent much of his reign campaigning.

His successors followed in his footsteps, facing threats from outside the borders of the empire. Severus' son and successor, Caracalla, was as much a warrior as his father, greatly admiring the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great and trying to live like an ordinary soldier. Much like his father, he also fought several major wars. For example, when a confederation of Germanic tribes called the Alemanni invaded the north of the empire, Caracalla met them in battle and repelled the invasion. He also imitated Severus by fighting another war with the Parthians in the east.³ Subsequent emperors also fought many wars abroad, with new enemies rising to take the place of old ones. For example, after the rise of Severus Alexander in 222, the Persian Empire was restored as Sassanid Persia, thus replacing the Parthians as the great threat to the Roman Empire from the east. Severus Alexander struggled to fight off the Sassanids, with the war culminating in a draw, and was also forced to contend with the Germanic tribes, who had invaded Roman territory once again.⁴ Other emperors had to protect the empire from yet more enemies as the third century

¹ Anthony R. Birley, *The African Emperor: Septimius Severus*, (London: B. T. Batsford Limited, 1988), 129-154.

² *Ibid.*, 170-187.

³ George C. Brauer, *The Young Emperors: Rome, A.D. 193-244*, (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1967), 75-98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 179-191.

wore on, and with increasingly disappointing results. Trajan Decius was killed in battle with the newly arisen Goths in 251, and Valerian fought wars against the Franks and Alemanni, only to be captured by the Sassanids in 260.⁵ As the Pax Romana became a distant memory, the Roman Empire faced more and more threats from abroad, and was increasingly unable to protect itself and its people from them. It may, therefore, initially seem that foreign invasions were the central cause of the decline of Rome. However, the history of the empire suggests that there was more at work in Europe during the third century.

Throughout its history, the specter of foreign invasion loomed large over Rome. During the era of the Roman Republic, the Romans faced an implacable enemy in the form of Carthage, a city-state in modern Tunisia that dominated North Africa. Rome fought a series of wars with Carthage over the course of the third and second centuries BC for control of the Mediterranean. At the height of the Punic Wars, as these conflicts are known, the Carthaginian general Hannibal invaded Italy itself. However, Rome ultimately emerged victorious, and solidified its dominance over the region.⁶ Rome also faced foreign threats in the time of the Roman Empire, during the Pax Romana. In 7 AD, during the reign of the first emperor, Augustus Caesar, three legions were destroyed in the province of Germania, which is Germany today, under the command of Publius Quinctilius Varus. The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest was a

⁵ George C. Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors: Imperial Rome, A.D. 244-284*, (Park Ridge: Noyes Press, 1975), 51-57, 68-96, 121-126.

⁶ David Potter, *Emperors of Rome: Imperial Rome from Julius Caesar to the Last Emperor*, (London: Quercus, 2008), 10.

complete disaster for the Romans, but Rome recovered from its losses.⁷ Later emperors reigning before the third century also had to fight wars to defend the empire. In 101, during the reign of Trajan, Dacia, a state north of the Danube, invaded. In response, Trajan crushed the Dacian forces and annexed Dacia, making it a Roman province. Since Parthia was an irritant at that time, Trajan invaded it as well, albeit less successfully.⁸ During the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the last emperor of Rome's golden age, the northern regions of the empire faced the constant threat of attack by the Germanic tribes. Marcus Aurelius spent much of his reign fighting these tribes and attempting to halt future incursions, enjoying some success.⁹ Ultimately, Rome's decline in the third century cannot solely be attributed to the threat of foreign powers, since Rome had faced numerous enemies in past centuries. Some, like Carthage, certainly posed a greater threat to the empire than confederations of tribes like the Alemanni. There was clearly more at work during the third century than barbarian invasions.

Civil Strife

Another oft-cited reason for the decline of the Roman Empire during the third century is civil war. The third century saw power struggles, military coups, and assassinations beyond count. Rival generals fought each other attempting to gain control of the empire, and Rome was thrown into chaos.

⁷ Ibid., 54-55.

⁸ Ibid., 85-86.

⁹ Ibid., 95.

As was the case with Rome's troubles abroad, the civil strife that was characteristic of the third century began after the end of the Pax Romana, and worsened as time went on. Septimius Severus himself seized control of the empire after a lengthy civil war against a number of other claimants. However, this was not the last time that Rome would be torn apart by strife. After Severus left the empire to Caracalla and his other son, Geta, Caracalla murdered his brother. Caracalla was later assassinated by one of his guards, likely on the orders of Macrinus, the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, the bodyguards of the emperor. Macrinus usurped the throne upon Caracalla's murder, using the Praetorian Guard to gain power, only to be removed from power and executed himself.¹⁰ The early years of the third century were thus characterized by the blood of emperors of Rome. These instances of betrayal and murder would prove to be a sign of things to come.

Macrinus was not the last power to seize imperial power through the assassination of his predecessor. Severus Alexander was assassinated in 235 by his soldiers, who installed one of their own, Maximinus Thrax, in his place. However, the new emperor could not afford to rest on his laurels and enjoy his new throne. Maximinus Thrax was extremely unpopular among the higher echelons of Roman society. A revolt in North Africa saw the governor of the Roman province of Africa declared as co-emperor with his son, the two of them being named Gordian I and Gordian II. The Roman Senate quickly threw their support behind the rebels, only for the rebellion to fail, with the rebel emperors dead. Since the Senate was now openly in opposition to Maximinus Thrax, they quickly installed Pupienus and Balbinus as co-

¹⁰ Brauer, *The Young Emperors*, 1-22, 60-65, 95-115.

emperors, with the elder Gordian's grandson, Gordian III, soon being added as their colleague. Maximinus Thrax was soon murdered by his men, and Pupienus and Balbinus soon joined him in death.¹¹ The position of emperor was becoming an increasingly precarious one as the third century progressed.

However, emperors did not just have mutinies by men under their command to fear. They also needed to be wary of ambitious generals attempting to seize mastery of the empire through force of arms and dissatisfied soldiers far from the embrace of Rome attempting to install a compliant emperor. Military rebellions in the provinces resulted in the overthrow of emperors just as often as assassination plots and betrayals within the emperor's camp. For example, during his reign, the emperor Philip the Arab was forced to put down a number of attempts to usurp his title. The one which eventually succeeded in removing him occurred in Germania when disgruntled soldiers declared Trajan Decius as the new emperor, possibly against his will. Decius' rebels killed Philip near Verona in 249, resulting in yet another emperor rising through the violent death of his predecessor.¹² The third century was, therefore, one of the most chaotic periods in Roman history as a result. Emperors were murdered constantly, and none could be truly secure in their position. When the rulers of the empire survived assassination plots, they were forced to repel generals in the provinces whose lust for power or fear of their mutinous soldiers outweighed their loyalty to the emperors. As was the case with the threat of foreign invasion, however, it was not the deciding factor in the turmoil of the time.

¹¹ Ibid., 186-215.

¹² Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 14-18.

In truth, Rome had a history of civil war, just as it had a history of successfully contending with foreign powers. During the last century of the Roman Republic, powerful politicians and military leaders fought for dominance over Rome. For example, early in the first century BC, Gaius Marius and Lucius Cornelius Sulla fought a civil war over army command, with Sulla eventually emerging victorious and instituting a reign of terror akin to that of the French Revolution.¹³ After the reign of Sulla, Gaius Julius Caesar, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, also known as Pompey the Great, and the aforementioned Marcus Licinius Crassus dominated Roman politics as the First Triumvirate. With the death of Crassus in 53 BC, Caesar and Pompey soon fought for control of the empire. Caesar quickly bested Pompey, only to be assassinated in 44 BC when a group of conspirators came to fear his immense political power.¹⁴ In response, Marcus Antonius, or Mark Antony, one of Caesar's officers, and Gaius Octavius, or Octavian, Caesar's grand-nephew, formed the Second Triumvirate with Marcus Lepidus and defeated Caesar's assassins in a new civil war. Lepidus was eventually stripped of his power, and Antony and Octavian fought yet another civil war for control of Rome. Octavian defeated Antony in 31 BC, gaining unchallenged authority over Rome and becoming Rome's first emperor, becoming known as Augustus.¹⁵ Rome was, therefore, no stranger to civil war. The first century BC was drenched in blood, but Rome emerged from this dark time into a prosperous future. The Pax Romana that began under Augustus saw the Roman Empire rise to new

¹³ Potter, *Emperors of Rome*, 21-23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-42.

heights, becoming the clear master of the Mediterranean world. This was not the case in the third century AD, which saw Rome sink further and further into decline, from which it was never able to fully recover. The clear difference in outcome suggests another cause for the empire's fall. Ultimately, it was not foreign invasion or civil war that caused the Roman Empire to rot away, but rather something less violent. It was ultimately Rome's economy collapsing that brought down the empire.

The Roman Economy

The root cause of the fall of Rome was not force of arms but rather the economic policies of the emperors of the third century, beginning with Septimius Severus. It is here that the decline of Rome differs from the empire's earlier days. Given the changes that occurred during the Roman economy over the course of the third century, it is likely these policies that are at fault.

The Roman Empire in its early days was economically stable. Although there were sometimes difficulties with the imperial finances, the early emperors were able to keep the budget under control. Under Augustus and his immediate successor, Tiberius, there was some difficulty in paying the *praemia*, or army discharge bonuses. However, the emperors were able to keep spending under control, and were able to raise more money by confiscating the property of their political enemies, obtaining levies and payments from the people, taxing the people, taking valuable goods from monuments and temples, and selling the spoils of war. Even in the case of emperors who spent extravagantly, like Caligula and Nero, the budgetary problems faced by the empire were eventually fixed. Caligula's successor, Claudius, was in power long enough to repair the damage caused by Caligula's excesses. Vespasian, who rose to power follow the fall of Nero, also worked toward solving Rome's budgetary problems,

despite inheriting the results of Nero's extravagance and a civil war.¹⁶ Rome's early emperors were, therefore, able to keep the finances of the empire from spiraling out of control. They were, in general, capable of keeping spending from exceeding their revenue streams.

Rome's finances remained strong throughout the Pax Romana. The empire remained prosperous during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian. Even when emperors increased spending, as was the case with Hadrian, they were able to cut spending in other areas, such as garrisons on Rome's eastern frontier. The emperor Antoninus Pius ruled the empire during a time of peace, and did not institute any major spending programs beyond some building projects throughout the empire. It was not until Marcus Aurelius came to power that the empire began to show real financial strain, with constant wars in Germania being a drain on imperial resources. Even then, Rome had enough money for Marcus Aurelius to afford to eliminate a tax on gladiators. Ultimately, Rome had such a strong economy during and after the reign of Augustus because the government owed no public debt. In order to pay for large expenditures, it had to rely upon the money within the treasury. Though the emperors occasionally engaged in tyrannical activity, as when they confiscated property, in order to keep the budget balanced, they generally relied upon new tax revenue coming in to cure deficits.¹⁷ The Roman budget was thus stable for the first two centuries of the Roman Empire. The emperors of the time typically avoided overspending, preferring that the empire operate within its means. Any deficits were quickly solved, and the empire did

¹⁶ Richard Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3-12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-15.

not go into debt. From Augustus to Marcus Aurelius, the empire remained economically prosperous, in spite of some emperors, like Caligula and Nero, indulging in huge expenditures. The Roman Empire during the Pax Romana was peaceful and thriving. This changed following the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius. During the third century, the Roman Empire fell into bad economic habits, and barring a few attempts by some emperors, never made an effort to change its practices.

Septimius Severus' reign began a shift in the economic policies of the empire. Severus came to power through force of arms, and ruled as a military dictator. As a result, the military proved to be a kingmaker, and Severus' policies reflected this, with army pay rising by about one third. Severus was clearly aware for the debt he owed the army for getting him into power. His son Caracalla further increased the pay of the soldiers by one half.¹⁸ As the third century progressed, during the reigns of Severus' successors, the Severan dynasty, the Roman military became increasingly aware of its power, and therefore demanded more money. Emperors who failed to meet these demands were typically overthrown and killed. This led to large expenditures on the army, and an increased need for money. Taxes, of course, were raised, but the citizens of the empire soon became heavily overtaxed. The demands of the army for more gold and silver did not cease, so the emperors debased the currency, or lowered its value, by mixing base metals into the coins. This resulted in inflation, or increases in the prices of goods and services.¹⁹ The inflation, in turn resulted in the higher pay of the soldiers being worth less. The soldiers then lobbied for more money, which in turn led

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 3-10.

to more debasement and inflation. Any emperors who did not go along with the will of army were killed. The end result was a period known as the Crisis of the Third Century. Over the course of about half a century, from 235 to 284, the Roman Empire had twenty-six emperors. These emperors, who became known as the barracks or soldier emperors because they were installed on the throne by the army, were typically killed after two years or less.²⁰ The emperors of the third century, beginning with Septimius Severus in 193 and ending with Carinus in 285, instituted ruinous economic policies that resulted in chaos, misery, and civil strife throughout the Roman world. In the end, Rome never recovered. The year 193 would see the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.

²⁰ James W. Eder, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), xxv-xxvii.

Chapter 2

THE YEAR OF THE FIVE EMPERORS

The Pax Romana saw Rome reign supreme for about two centuries, until the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180. When this occurred, the Roman Empire began its slow slide into decline. However, it was not until the year 193 that the seeds of Rome's doom were sown. In that year, Pertinax, Didius Julianus, Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus, and Septimius Severus claimed the title of emperor. Eventually, Septimius Severus emerged victorious.

The Fall of Commodus and the Reign of Pertinax

Marcus Aurelius named his son, Commodus, as his heir. This proved to be one of the only genuinely bad decisions made by Marcus Aurelius during his reign. Marcus Aurelius groomed his son for power, and gave him a substantial education in an attempt to ensure that he was worthy to rule the Roman Empire. When Commodus ascended to the throne upon the death of his father, he seemed quite promising. He made peace with the barbarian tribes whom Marcus Aurelius had spent so much time fighting. He also kept many of his father's old advisors. As a result, the first few years of his reign were peaceful and prosperous, despite Commodus' extravagant lifestyle and lack of skill. However, this changed in 183, when an assassin attempted to kill him in the amphitheater, claiming to have been sent by the Senate. It transpired that the plot to kill Commodus was actually the work of his sister, Lucilla, and not the Senate, but this ultimately mattered little. Commodus became paranoid, and soon

began to indulge in tyranny. He had senators executed, and his negligence allowed famine and plague to afflict Rome.²¹ Commodus thus began as a potentially worthy successor to Marcus Aurelius, but swiftly proved to be a disappointment. However, he became even worse as his reign went on.

As Commodus' reign continued, he sank deeper into insanity. He soon took to calling himself a "Roman Hercules," bearing a club and the skin of a lion and depicting himself with these items in statues. Furthermore, he began to fight in the arena as a gladiator, taking up arms over seven hundred times. His tyranny continued as well, with more senators falling under suspicion. Eventually, even his favorite concubine, Marcia, began plotting his death, with the prefect of the Praetorian Guard and Commodus' chamberlain. The conspirators enlisted a wrestler to strangle Commodus in his sleep, and the emperor was slain on December 31, 192. After the assassination, Publius Helvius Pertinax was made emperor. Pertinax was the prefect of the city of Rome, and a senator. Additionally, he had distinguished himself as a governor throughout the empire, where developed a reputation for integrity and discipline, and had served in a number of political offices during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. He had fallen from favor under Commodus, and was likely surprised when Commodus' killers offered to make him the ruler of Rome. Though reluctant, he accepted.²² It therefore initially seemed that, as was the case after the reigns of Caligula and Nero, Rome would recover after the rule of a bad emperor. Pertinax was known for being a diligent administrator, and was sure to cleanse the vice of

²¹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Hans-Friedrich Mueller (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 58-63.

²² *Ibid.*, 63-67.

Commodus' misrule and restore virtue to Rome. Perhaps the new emperor could revive the Pax Romana and usher in a new golden age of peace economic prosperity. Unfortunately, however, this was not to be. The reign of Pertinax ended in tragedy after a brief period, and any hope of staving off the decline of the Roman Empire ended with it.

Pertinax is a unique figure within Roman history. Unlike many later emperors, he seems to have recognized many of the economic and political obstacles facing the empire. Commodus had substantially raised taxes in order to fund his extravagant lifestyle. Pertinax eliminated these taxes, recognizing that they could not be sustained by the people.²³ In order to offset the rampant spending of his predecessor, Pertinax also auctioned off the trappings of Commodus' lifestyle, thus providing the empire with a substantial sum of money despite the reduced taxes. He also may have foreseen the problems which Rome later experienced with its coinage. One of his most notable reforms was to increase the silver content of the coinage, raising it to what it was during the reign of Vespasian. He also made an attempt to regulate the Senate, making sure that praetors held precedence over others.²⁴ However, not all were pleased with the new emperor. Under Commodus, the discipline of the Praetorian Guard had degraded substantially. They were wary of the new emperor, given his reputation for discipline, but Pertinax was initially able to buy their support with a donative, a gift of money. Despite this gift, the Praetorians became more unsatisfied with Pertinax as the months progressed.²⁵ They made two attempts to overthrow Pertinax and replace him

²³ Ibid., 68-69.

²⁴ Birley, *The African Emperor*, 91-92.

²⁵ Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 67-69.

with emperors more friendly to their desires, but both plots failed. The Praetorians finally succeeded in removing Pertinax on March 28, 193. They revolted, and Pertinax chose to confront them. Though he was initially successful in getting them to cease their rebellion, managing to convince them to sheathe their swords, one of the Praetorians attacked and killed him. Upon his death, his head was cut off and stuck on a spear by those who were sworn to protect him. He had ruled the empire for only eighty-seven days.²⁶ The murder of Pertinax presaged the chaos that was to come. The year 193 would be characterized by blood and death.

A Shameful Auction and Civil War

The assassination of Pertinax would, no doubt, have been disastrous enough on its own. However, the year 193 would become yet worse for the Roman Empire. Following the murder of the emperor, Didius Julianus would ascend in one of the greatest political scandals in Roman history. When this occurred, the empire fell into chaos.

Pertinax died leaving a power vacuum in the Roman Empire. The Praetorian Guard had not had the foresight to move against Pertinax with a replacement ready to assume his place. Pertinax's father-in-law, Sulpicianus, attempted to declare himself as the new emperor. However, a pair of tribunes of the Praetorian Guard selected Didius Julianus as a candidate, fearing the potential retribution of the father-in-law of the man whom the Praetorians had just assassinated. With two claimants attempting to gain the Roman throne, one of the most embarrassing incidents in Roman history began. The Praetorian Guard auctioned off the office of emperor to the highest bidder.

²⁶ Birley, *The African Emperor*, 91-95.

Julianus emerged victorious, with his bid giving 25,000 sesterces to each Praetorian. Having become emperor, Julianus then marched with his new bodyguards to the Roman Forum and declared that he was the new ruler of the empire. While this initially seemed to be an incredibly rapid rise in Roman politics, the throne would soon prove to be a poisoned chalice. The Roman plebeians revolted against Julianus almost immediately, staging a protest in the Circus Maximus and calling for his overthrow, despite his attempts to bribe them into silence. This was noticed outside of Rome.²⁷ The soldiers of Pescennius Niger, the governor of Syria, Clodius Albinus, the governor of Roman Britain, and Lucius Septimius Severus, a governor in Pannonia, which is Austria and Hungary today, declared them to be emperors and rose up in revolt.²⁸ Rome was to face civil war.

Didius Julianus was caught unprepared by three simultaneous rebellions in the provinces, particularly the revolt of Severus, whose legions were stationed quite close to Rome. Julianus was desperate. He attempted to shore up the defenses of Rome, but was extremely pressed for time, so there was little that could be done. His biggest obstacle was, ironically, the group to whom he owed his throne, the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorians had assassinated Pertinax in order to avoid the discipline necessary in protecting the emperor. Now, they were forced to contend with Severus' highly skilled legionaries, who had gained a number of victories against barbarians in Pannonia, and who were led by a skilled commander. Though they did not abandon Julianus, the Praetorians were lazy, and feared Severus' veterans.²⁹ Meanwhile, Severus, though

²⁷ Ibid., 95-97.

²⁸ Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 74.

²⁹ Ibid., 75-76.

well-placed to take Rome, feared a potential attack by Clodius Albinus. Fortunately, Severus was able to secure Albinus' support for his claim by offering him the title of Caesar, or junior emperor. With Albinus now under control, Severus marched on Italy to overthrow Julianus. He quickly gained control of Rome, with Julianus' hastily erected defenses and unreliable guards being unable to resist his veterans. Upon his arrival, Julianus was executed after being emperor for sixty-six days, an even shorter span than his predecessor. Severus then harshly railed against the Praetorians for the murder of Pertinax, then removed them from their posts and banished them from Rome. He replaced them with soldiers from his own legions. Stationing his soldiers inside the city to prevent rioting, the new emperor told the Senate that he sought to avenge the fallen Pertinax. To solidify this claim, Severus gave Pertinax a state funeral and deified him. Ironically, given the differences between their policies, he also took the name Pertinax for himself, emphasizing his connection to the martyred emperor.³⁰ With Severus now in command of the city of Rome itself, it was time for him to turn his attention to his rival in Syria, Pescennius Niger.

With Clodius Albinus satisfied by his title of Caesar, Severus moved against Pescennius Niger in 194. After asking the Senate to declare Niger a public enemy, he marched east to attack Niger directly. After sending an army under Marius Maximus to besiege Niger in his headquarters at Byzantium, which is known as Istanbul today, Severus established his own headquarters at Perinthus, town a short distance away. After an offer to share the empire was rejected by Severus, Niger fled Byzantium to take command of his forces at Nicaea. However, Severus' forces defeated him, and he

³⁰ Birley, *The African Emperor*, 102-105.

was soon forced to flee towards Antioch after narrowly escaping the destruction of his own army. With Severus in control of the province of Asia by this point, he set about chasing down Niger. Though Niger attempted to raise more support and more soldiers, his early defeats at the hands of Severus proved damaging to his prospects. Egypt and Arabia soon deserted his cause, and they were quickly followed by various legions and cities throughout the Roman East. Niger attempted to best Severus' armies at Issus, the site of Alexander the Great's famous victory over Persia in 333 BC, but was defeated again, losing 20,000 men in the process. Desperate, Niger fled to Antioch, where he was finally killed by Severus.³¹ With Pescennius Niger dead, Severus was now seemingly secure in his control over the empire. He held Rome, the unreliable Praetorian Guard was banished, and Niger's forces in Syria had been crushed. He had successfully positioned himself as the heir of Pertinax and the rescuer of Rome. However, despite his successes, Severus could not afford to become lax. Clodius Albinus would not remain content with the title of Caesar for long, and would soon rise against him to claim the throne for himself. For Severus, it would be his last great challenge before taking uncontested command of the Roman Empire, and changing it forever.

An Empire in Flames

Septimius Severus, having defeated Julianus and Niger, and having put the Senate under his control, had seemingly secured the empire. However, Albinus was not to remain content with his subordinate position, nor was Severus willing to keep him as fellow emperor when he likely wished his sons to inherit the throne. As a

³¹ Ibid., 108-113.

result, their alliance quickly fell apart, with yet another civil war breaking out on the heels of the fall of Pescennius Niger. In the aftermath, Severus would have unchallenged control over Rome, and the military would gain a position in Roman politics that would greatly damage the empire in years to come.

The exact reason for the split between the two is unclear. Albinus may have been in communication with the Senate, attempting to convince the senators to declare him emperor while Severus was distracted by Niger. Severus, in turn, supposedly attempted to have Albinus assassinated. The story may be pro-Albinus propaganda, and Severus himself engaged in similar activities, claiming that Albinus was involved in the murder of Pertinax. Whatever the truth may be, Severus gave his son, the future Caracalla, the name Antoninus, in an effort to connect his family to the beloved Antonine emperors, like Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. These emperors had ruled the empire in the last years of the Pax Romana, so the move was heavily symbolic. He also named his son as his heir and the new Caesar, replacing Albinus. As a result, Albinus marched his army into Gaul, modern France, in 195, and declared himself emperor once again. Severus was not immediately able to march against the new rebel since he was still dealing with Niger's supporters in the Roman East.³² However, once the last of Niger's allies had fallen or surrendered, Severus turned his attention to his former Caesar. In 197, Severus marched against his erstwhile ally, ready to eliminate this last threat to his power. With the fall of Clodius Albinus, his last foe, Severus would have control over the Roman military, and therefore the Roman Empire.

³² Ibid., 117-119.

Clodius Albinus' rebellion was to be an uphill struggle. Although he had access to a sizable army as a result of his governorship in Britain, and planned to raise more from allies in Gaul and Hispania, or modern Spain, he was heavily outnumbered by Severus' forces. With the death of Niger, Severus, could bring the full might of the Roman military to bear against Albinus. His own forces in the region substantially outnumbered those of Clodius Albinus.³³ As a result, Albinus was quickly outmatched. He simply lacked the men to defeat Severus. Severus was quickly able to defeat Albinus at Lugdunum, which is Lyons today.³⁴ Although the army of Severus was initially drawn into a trap by a feigned retreat, he emerged victorious. Albinus and his retreating soldiers were chased into Lugdunum itself. Severus' army sacked the city, and Albinus chose to commit suicide rather than be captured.³⁵ With the end of Albinus' rebellion, Severus was now in full control of the Roman Empire. With the military at his back, his rule was absolute.

As a result of the events of the year 193, as well as the civil wars that followed it between Severus and his rivals, the Roman military gained a powerful position in the Roman Empire. Previously, the emperors of Rome had been careful to keep a good relationship with the army. However, they had never heavily emphasized that relationship, and had been careful to keep the military under control. They provided the soldiers with gifts and promotions, but never so many that it created budgetary

³³ Ibid., 124-125.

³⁴ Gerard J. Murphy, *The Reign of L. Septimius Severus from the Evidence of the Inscriptions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1945), 5.

³⁵ Birley, *The African Emperor*, 125.

problems for the empire. This changed in 193. As a result of the rise of Septimius Severus, the soldiers were increasingly coming to realize that they held enormous power in Roman politics. They were kingmakers. They could make or break emperors, and they would support those who seemed most likely to support them.³⁶ The civil wars between Severus and his enemies had opened the floodgates, and the Roman legions now had control over who ruled the empire, and were increasingly aware of that fact. The death of Pertinax, the rise of Severus, and the resulting civil wars would shape the course of Roman history for decades to come.

The year 193 was, therefore, an influential year in the development of Roman history. Commodus was a famously bad emperor, akin to Caligula and Nero, but the ascension of Pertinax after his assassination provided a measure of hope for a return to normalcy. These hopes were dashed by the murder of Pertinax by the Praetorian Guard, as well as the subsequent auction of the empire to Didius Julianus. With three governors rising in revolt against the usurper, the empire would be consumed by civil war yet again. Ultimately, it was Septimius Severus who emerged from the conflict with control of the empire. He marched on Rome to overthrow Julianus, and then turned his attention to his fellow claimants, Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus, defeating them as well. With his rivals toppled, he was in full command of the Roman Empire, while the Roman legionaries were becoming more aware of the power they held to control the throne by putting friendly emperors on it. Septimius Severus' reign would prove to be a turning point for the Romans. After taking the throne by force, his rule was to institute many of the policies that would later become characteristics of the

³⁶ Potter, *Emperors of Rome*, 144.

third century. As Severus and his successors rose, and their policies became more ubiquitous as the decades went by, Rome would see her fortunes fall. The beginning of the reign of Severus marked the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.

Chapter 3

THE FIRST OF THE BARRACKS EMPERORS

Septimius Severus' reign was a transformative one in Roman history. In many ways, he could be described as the first of the barracks emperors. Although most historians tend to agree that the period of the barracks emperors, as well as the Crisis of the Third Century, began with the assassination of Severus Alexander, the last emperor of the Severan dynasty, by his soldiers, and their subsequent installation of Maximinus Thrax on the throne in 235, this is somewhat misleading.³⁷ Like the barracks emperors, Severus gained imperial power through force of arms, and his policies mirrored those of the barracks emperors because both were aimed at appeasing the soldiers and keeping their loyalty. The main difference between Severus and the later soldier emperors was that Severus was able to establish some much-needed stability in the empire during his reign, which lasted nearly two decades. However, it was ultimately Severus who sowed the seeds of Rome's destruction.

War Abroad

A cursory glance at Severus' reign suggests that he was comfortable on campaign, and that the soldiers were, in many regards, his people. His policies demonstrate an immense degree of favoritism toward the army, and a desire to stay in

³⁷ Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 104-106.

its good graces.³⁸ Severus accomplished this in a number of ways. Most obviously, he fought a number of major wars throughout his reign. Setting aside his civil wars with Niger and Albinus, Septimius Severus fought three large-scale conflicts during his time as emperor. He went to war with the Parthians when they attacked the town of Nisibis in 197, and emerged victorious by the end of the year 200, having sacked their capital, Ctesiphon, and conquered part of Mesopotamia. In 202 or 203, he fought a war in his homeland of Africa against the Garamantes, a people in the region who had fought the Romans in the past.³⁹ In 208, he invaded Britain, planning to conquer Caledonia, or southern Scotland. He was initially successful in his war against the Caledonians, though his campaign was concluded prematurely by his death in 211.⁴⁰ Severus' constant campaigning filled a number of roles. Of course, they were helpful in defending the empire. The Parthians had been a threat to Rome for centuries, and Severus' campaign severely hampered their ability to attack the empire. Military campaigns were also invaluable for propaganda purposes. The Roman emperors and generals who used the opportunities presented by wars outside the borders of the empire to gain glory for political purposes are innumerable. Severus, unsurprisingly, maintained this hallowed tradition. Upon his victory over the Parthians, the Senate named him "Parthicus Maximus" as a sign of honor.⁴¹ His campaigns in Africa and Britain likely played similar roles.

³⁸ Maurice Platnauer, *The Life and Reign of the Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus* (Rome: "L'erma" di Bretschneider, 1965), 158.

³⁹ Birley, *The African Emperor*, 129-153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 170-187.

⁴¹ Brauer, *The Young Emperors*, 22.

Severus' campaigns were also crucial in keeping him physically close to the legions. Severus would likely have remembered his own rise to power, and how he seized the imperial throne by raising an army in the provinces and then marching on Rome. He would also have recalled the attempts by Niger and Albinus to do the same. Severus' campaigns across the empire were, therefore, likely to keep any upstart generals from lusting after the throne. The emperor would also likely have wanted to ensure that he was visible to the soldiers. If Severus could be seen to lead the army in person, the soldiers were more likely to respect him, and were therefore far less likely to follow a potential rival in rebellion. This attitude would be of particular benefit when he won his victory in Parthia, since the soldiers would have seen him winning territory for the Roman Empire, as well as glory. The wars themselves were thus as much about Severus and the image that he wished to present, that of a soldier and conqueror, as they were about national security and defending the borders of the empire from future attack.

Severus' wars also enabled him to reward his soldiers for loyal service, a crucial task for a man reliant upon the military to keep him in power. In ancient warfare, a potential source of income was the plunder of a city of the enemy after its capture. While typically an ugly proposition for the people of the city, this provided a way to shower the soldiers with gifts, thus buying their loyalty while far from access to Rome's treasury. It seems that Severus practiced this method of keeping his army satisfied while fighting against the Parthians. According to the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, a collection of biographies detailing the reigns of many of Rome's emperors, Severus, upon capturing Ctesiphon, "gave the soldiers an enormous

donative, none other, in truth, than the liberty to plunder the Parthian capital.”⁴² This move would undoubtedly have made him extremely popular with the soldiers, who would have appreciated the opportunity to plunder the homes of the Parthian populace and nobles, as well as the treasury of the Parthian king himself, after a hard-fought battle to take the city. Severus’ foreign wars were therefore vital in maintaining his hold on the Roman Empire. They were important in defeating enemies of Rome, but also served other purposes. They were useful for propaganda, they enabled Severus to keep watch over the armies in the provinces, and they gave him an opportunity to inspire loyalty in the Roman legionaries, both by leading the soldiers in person and by providing them with gifts taken from the vanquished. However, the wars also created substantial problems for the Roman Empire in later years.

Although Severus’ foreign wars were quite good for him and his soldiers, they had a rather adverse effect on the Roman Empire. For example, they were expensive. Most foreign wars are. Invasion is a costly enterprise. In addition to being a drain on Roman resources, they generally served little real purpose. Severus’ war in Parthia accomplished very little. The Parthians fled Nisibis as soon as he arrived in the region, and his subsequent invasion of Parthia saw few gains. The Parthian king was not captured, and Severus experienced a number of setbacks during the war, including a failed siege of the city of Hatra.⁴³ Furthermore, his annexation of Mesopotamia accomplished very little in the long term. In fact, it could be argued that it made the empire’s prospects in the Roman East worse in later years. The conquest of

⁴² Aelius Spartianus, “Severus,” in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, trans. David Magie, ed. T. E. Page et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1:409.

⁴³ Platnauer, *The Life and Reign of the Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus*, 126.

Mesopotamia would, in later years, provide later kings in the region, such as those of the Sassanid Persians, with the excuse to attack Rome.⁴⁴ While Severus was a skilled general, not all of his successors would be, and the Sassanids would pose a major threat to future emperors.

Severus' wars were geared more toward his betterment, and the betterment of the Roman legionaries, than toward national security or improving the lives of those living in the empire. They provided Severus with a useful source of propaganda, and they enabled him to ensure that his soldiers were not plotting against him. They also allowed him to improve relations with the military by leading the soldiers in person and by providing them with wealth plundered from their conquered enemies. However, Severus' invasions were also costly, provided little in the way of material gain for the empire, and provided enemies with a pretext for future conflict. On the whole, they had a negative impact on the empire. However, Severus' wars were not the only aspect of his military policy.

Buying Loyalty

During his reign, Severus ruled as a military dictator. He came to power through force of arms, and held onto power in the same manner. He would have been concerned about possible attempts to remove him. As a result, he depended upon the army to keep him in power. He kept the soldiers loyal to him in a number of ways. As already mentioned, he allowed them to plunder defeated enemy cities, as was the case at Ctesiphon. However, this was far from the only policy of Severus that existed for the benefit of the soldiers.

⁴⁴ Potter, *Emperors of Rome*, 141.

Severus went to great lengths to ensure that the lives of the soldiers were improved. He was a great promoter of the rights of the Roman military, showering them with honors and improving their privileges. For example, he introduced new medals made of gold and silver, as well as the civic crown, an honor previously denied them. He also enabled the legionaries to wear gold rings. This was an honor that had previously been limited to the equestrian, or knightly, class of Roman society. Of course, the rings did not grant the same social status and privileges as an equestrian to the soldiers, but Severus' decision to grant them to the common soldiers is a clear move to improve their social standing. Similarly, many centurion officers rose to the rank of equestrian during the reign of Severus.⁴⁵ However, medals were not all that Severus offered to the legionaries. He also offered a number of new privileges that they had lacked before, and which made their lives easier. For instance, he shortened the length of military service for soldiers. Veterans benefited substantially, being excused from militia service upon their retirement from the military. Severus also enabled veterans to rise much more rapidly in the Roman civil service, giving diligent soldiers careers upon their exit from the military. However, the most controversial privilege which he granted to the soldiers, likely as a result of fears of immorality and a breakdown of discipline, was his decision to lift the ban on marriage in the Roman military. Before, married soldiers had to live away from their wives or get a divorce. Now women were allowed to have access to military camps.⁴⁶ Severus' reforms were clearly aimed at increasing and maintaining his popularity with the soldiers.

⁴⁵ Platnauer, *The Life and Reign of the Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus*, 164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

Other reforms were more costly. During his reign, he expanded the size of the army, adding new legions and expanding the size of existing military units.⁴⁷ Given the new benefits available to soldiers as a result of his reforms, he likely would not have had much difficulty in finding men willing to join the legions. Of course, since he relied on the military to enforce his rule, he would not have wanted to discourage people from entering the army. Other costly reforms were more directly aimed at satisfying the soldiers. Notably, he increased the rations of the soldiers. Although supplying the army with more food would not have been an inexpensive proposition, it would have gone a long way toward keeping the soldiers comfortable while they were on campaign. Soldiers were likely to support an emperor who made sure that they were well-fed. He made even more blatant attempts to appeal to the goodwill of the legionaries by increasing their pay and showering them with gifts.⁴⁸ He was not content with offering them additional benefits and more rations, so he attempted to simply buy their loyalty, and was successful. It is little wonder that, while dying of illness in Britain, his last words to his sons were “Be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men.”⁴⁹ Severus’ military reforms were, therefore, highly beneficial to the men of the Roman legions, mostly because he relied upon them for maintaining control over the empire, and he wished to keep them loyal to him. However, these policies did not help the empire itself, and ultimately damaged the political and economic stability of the empire in the long term.

⁴⁷ Birley, *The African Emperor*, 196.

⁴⁸ Brauer, *The Young Emperors*, 38.

⁴⁹ Lucius Cassius Dio, *Dio’s Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 9:271-273.

Severus' military reforms put a great deal of strain on the imperial budget. Military spending in the Roman Empire was already quite high. The Roman Empire was already spending between seventy-two and seventy-seven percent of its budget on the army during the reign of Antoninus Pius in the second century, a time of relative peace. Under Severus, spending on the military expanded drastically, as he added new legions to the army, expanded the sizes of other units, and substantially increased benefits for the soldiers. By the end of his reign, spending on the military had increased by between sixty-four and seventy-five percent.⁵⁰ As the military by far made up the largest portion of the budget, Severus' policies only poured more money into the largest drain on the empire's resources, particularly since these increases in the military budget were designed to make him more popular with the troops rather than protect Rome from enemies who were capable of harming it. The increases in the military budget benefited Severus, not the empire, and cost an immense amount of money.

The purpose of Severus' military policies was, therefore, to improve his standing with the soldiers, who were responsible for his ascension to the throne and who he needed to stay on it. He improved the lives of the soldiers, both on campaign and after their retirements, improved their pay, and enabled more people to access these benefits by expanding the size of the army itself. However, Severus had ulterior motives in his support for the legionaries. His policies were an attempt to bribe the military into keeping him in command of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, they actually harmed the empire by further increasing the empire's military budget, which

⁵⁰ Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, 45-46.

was already quite large, even in times of peace. Additionally, this increase in spending contributed to other problems faced by the empire. Severus' overspending on the empire was merely the beginning of Rome's economic woes.

Currency Debasement

Severus' favoritism toward the military did not only create problems with the imperial budget. It also resulted in other economic policies that would have a large impact on the empire in the coming decades. The expansion of the military had to be paid for, so taxes had to be raised. While was likely financially uncomfortable for Rome's citizens, Severus was able to leave the empire with a short-term budget surplus through increased taxation and the confiscation of the property of his rivals' supporters, even with his spending increases.⁵¹ However, these methods could not fully cover his ever-increasing expenditures on the army. As a result, Severus debased the currency by mixing less silver into the coins. This policy was heavily pushed by Severus, and would prove to be one of the most notable legacies of his reign. He quickly undid the reforms to the coinage made under Pertinax, returning the currency to its state under Commodus. He went yet further as time went on, making his debasement the largest since the reign of Nero, who had pushed debasement during his reign.⁵² This resulted in a massive increase in the circulation of the coinage. Severus put 532 million denarii in circulation compared to 106 million under Commodus, the denarius being the most common coin in the Roman Empire at the time.⁵³ These

⁵¹ Ibid., 15.

⁵² Ibid., 100-101.

⁵³ Ibid., 168.

additional coins enabled Severus to pay for his increases in spending, and they did not initially have an adverse effect on the Roman economy, and even provided an economic stimulus. However, as future emperors adopted his economic policies, mostly while attempting to appease the soldiers like Severus did, the economy weakened. Severus' massive currency debasement eventually ushered in the inflation that would become ubiquitous in the third century.⁵⁴ Severus' economic policies were, therefore, unhealthy for the empire, as they reduced the purchasing power of the Roman coins. This would see a decline in economic prosperity as time went on, even if the Romans did not initially realize it.

Severus ultimately left behind a poor legacy. It is true that his relatively long reign restored much-needed stability to the empire after the disastrous events of 193, and for this he certainly deserves a great deal of credit. However, the negative aspects of his reign far outweigh the positive ones. Severus was a military despot, and his policies reflect that. He fought a number of wars abroad for little gain beyond propaganda and plunder with which he could bribe the soldiers, who he knew he relied upon to stay in power. Many of his other policies were also aimed at coddling the army for the same reason. He substantially improved the privileges available to the soldiers, offering them new honors, careers in the civil service upon their exit from the military, and the right to marry while serving. He also increased their rations, increased their pay, and increased the size of the military, allowing more people to obtain these benefits. To pay for these massive expenditures, he raised taxes and confiscated property, but also debased the currency. Although these policies did not

⁵⁴ Birley, *The African Emperor*, 200.

initially damage the economic health of the empire, later emperors would adopt them. As time went on, the empire bankrupted itself by trying to pay for its ever-expanding military and destroyed its currency by constantly debasing it. The military was never satisfied by the concessions made future emperors, and inflation became an increasingly severe problem as time went on. With these developments in mind, it is little wonder that Edward Gibbon describes Septimius Severus as “the principal author of the decline of the Roman empire.”⁵⁵ Decades of kowtowing to the whims of the military and a ruinous monetary policy left Rome a broken shadow of its former self. While Severus did not live to see this occur, his policies ultimately set a precedent that allowed it to happen.

⁵⁵ Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 82.

Chapter 4

THE DOGS OF WAR

Severus' decision to rely upon the army to keep him in charge of the empire would prove to be disastrous for Rome in the long term. The emperor was becoming increasingly dependent upon the Roman legions in order to maintain his hold on the throne. At the same time, the soldiers were becoming increasingly aware of the power they held over the emperor. Since Severus rose to power through the power of the army, they realized that they had control over who was made emperor. The next logical step was their realization that they could overthrow the emperor if he failed to do as they wished. The end result was an empire that would come to fear the military. Emperors went to great lengths to ensure that the soldiers were kept happy. The legionaries were paid increasingly large amounts of money, and more attention was paid to their wishes on campaign. If the emperors failed to heed the demands of the army, the soldiers rose up in revolt and replaced them with someone more willing to obey their wishes. The situation was, predictably, a catastrophic one for the Roman Empire.

The Military Budget

The Roman Empire, like any government, had a number of expenses. For example, the empire had to pay for its civilian employees, including bureaucrats and employees of the Senate. Additionally, the emperor's household was paid for by the government, and could grow quite costly depending upon the emperor. Indulgent

emperors like Caligula and Nero likely spent more on their households than a Stoic like Marcus Aurelius. Other items that the Roman government spent its money on were handouts to the civilian population, or *congiaria*, and handouts to the military, or *donativa*. Building projects were also a recurring part of the budget, with emperors such as Augustus and Septimius Severus using new buildings for propaganda purposes. Emperors also spent large amounts of money on gifts, both to the court of the emperor and to foreign courts, as well as on bribes to keep certain enemies from attacking Rome, like the Germanic tribes. However, the biggest expenditures were on the Roman army, paying for salaries, discharges, supplies, and the myriad other items that a military requires.⁵⁶ The empire's budget thus covered a number of areas, and some could be quite expensive at times, but the lion's share of the empire's money was spent on the Roman army.

As already mentioned, spending on the military made up about three-quarters of the empire's budget in the middle of the second century, during the reign of Antoninus Pius, a time of peace. Severus, being a military dictator who used the army to hold on to power, as well as to fight a number of foreign wars, increased military spending by about seventy percent.⁵⁷ Caracalla would follow in his father's footsteps, and later emperors would, in turn, follow their example, with spending on the military being in a constant state of increase. The discipline of the military had broken down. The legionaries of Rome were far less interested in their duty to the Roman Empire than they were in extracting every favor they could from their emperor. They were, in

⁵⁶ Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, 33-45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

essence, loyal to the highest bidder, and if the highest bidder was not the emperor, the emperor was violently replaced. Initially, of course, ambitious generals convinced the soldiers that they would make a better emperor, as likely occurred when Maximinus Thrax became emperor through the overthrow of Severus Alexander. However, the move to overthrow dissatisfactory emperors increasingly came to be a grassroots effort among the soldiers, to the point that some generals may have been forced by their men into becoming emperors. Trajan Decius, for instance, may have been forced by his men to overthrow Philip the Arab. As a result, the emperor had a great incentive to pay the army more, offer them better supplies and rations, and grant them more donatives. The breakdown of discipline cost the empire in other ways as well. The army could essentially do as it wished with impunity, and expected the civilian populace to serve it in this regard, committing many abuses in the process. Legionaries conscripted peasants to build their projects, confiscated essential goods for logistical purpose, confiscated luxury goods for personal pleasure, and quartered themselves in the homes of civilians without their consent. Of course, this created an obligation for the government to repay the civilian populace for the damage caused by the army, and while this obligation was not often met, it added another burden to a budget that was becoming increasingly stressed under the weight of the legions.⁵⁸ As Severus' practice of submitting to the desires of the soldiers increasingly became an established part of imperial policy, more money was spent on them. The soldiers, of course, were never satisfied, and the result was that spending on the military was in a constant state of growth.

⁵⁸ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 6.

Severus opened the door for this growth in spending, and the corresponding collapse of the priorities of the army. Severus was a skilled general and an effective military dictator, and while he was alive he was able to control the army with little difficulty. Although he heavily increased spending to keep the soldiers content, his use of wars in the provinces to keep an eye on the soldiers kept them from rebelling and plunging the empire into chaos. However, his successors were far less capable at controlling the army than he was, and the army grew increasingly difficult to satisfy with each passing year. The soldiers were rapacious, and demanded more benefits soon after the emperors made concessions. This state of affairs soon became unsustainable, with the military budget skyrocketing not out of a need to keep the empire safe from foreign invasion, but out of a need to keep the emperor safe from the soldiers, whose duty was ostensibly to keep the empire safe. Just as Severus increased spending on the soldiers, so too did his successors in the Severan dynasty. The later barracks emperors continued these practices. However, it was not until years after Severus' death that the threat posed to the empire by its own legions became fully apparent.

The Scions of Severus

Severus' son, Caracalla, took his father's dying words to heart upon his ascension to the imperial throne. Like his father, he pandered to the army constantly. In fact, very little changed after Severus' death in terms of the direction in which the empire was headed. He continued to rule the empire as a military dictator after he murdered his brother. Upon killing Geta, he supposedly massacred twelve thousand other people who were suspected of loyalty to his brother and rival. With the greatest threat to his rule having been dealt with, he was quick to follow in his father's

footsteps. Viewing himself as a conquering hero, he quickly found himself engaged in a number of major wars throughout the empire. He fought the Alemanni when they invaded from Germania in 213. After defeating them, he bribed them in order to bring the war to a quick end. He also attempted to continue his father's practice of fighting a war with the Parthian Empire, planning to attack the Parthians on the pretext that they were sheltering a pair of Roman enemies. Wanting to avoid a war so soon after their defeat at the hands of Septimius Severus, the Parthians surrendered both of them to Caracalla. Frustrated, he allowed one of his generals to launch an invasion against Armenia. When this invasion ended in disaster, he decided to fulfil his ambition of attacking Parthia. Fortunately for Caracalla, he was more successful in Parthia than in Armenia, ravaging the countryside and desecrating the tombs of the Parthian kings.⁵⁹ Caracalla's wars likely served similar purposes to those of his father. They gave him an easy source of propaganda, they helped him present himself as a strong warrior to the soldiers, and they enabled him to be active in the provinces, preventing rebellions in those regions. His father taught him how to turn his foreign wars to his advantage. However, wars were not the only aspect of Caracalla's military policy. He was extremely effective at catering to the soldiers in other ways.

Caracalla presented himself as an emperor of the soldiers. He tried to live as a soldier while on campaign, eating the same food and practicing the same exercises as his men. Of course, like Severus, he also engaged in more expensive attempts to gain the support of the legions. For example, he raised the pay of the soldiers by half, on top of the pay raise granted to them by his father. The Severan dynasty was becoming

⁵⁹ Brauer, *The Young Emperors*, 75-97.

increasingly profitable for the soldiers, even in its early days. Additionally, he allowed his armies to quarter themselves in cities during the winter. Before, the soldiers generally spent their winters in camps outside the cities. Caracalla's fascination with Alexander the Great also led to him to create new military units. He established Alexander's Phalanx, a unit of sixteen thousand men armed with pikes, in the manner of Alexander's soldiers. These policies, combined with his foreign wars, were extremely expensive, and Caracalla heavily taxed the people to pay for them. This move was certainly unpopular among the people, but it was not their approval that he needed. He needed the approval of the soldiers, and that required massive expenditures. When his mother expressed concerns about his spending habits, he drew his sword and claimed that he would never be poor as long as he had it.⁶⁰ Caracalla was, therefore, well aware of how his relationship with the military was necessary for him to maintain his rule over Rome. Similarly, his eagerness to live as they did, and too pay them huge amounts of money, endeared him to the soldiers. They were incredibly loyal to him as a result of his policies. When Caracalla was assassinated and replaced in 217 thanks to the machinations of Macrinus, the ambitious commander of the Praetorian Guard, the charade of the military being under the control of the emperor began to fall apart. The last emperors of the Severan dynasty found the military increasingly difficult to control.

The soldiers were not pleased when Macrinus became emperor after the death of Caracalla. Caracalla had been adored by the soldiers, so Macrinus was unpopular to begin with, and his implication in the death of Caracalla did not help matters. When

⁶⁰ Ibid., 69-77.

Macrinus expressed a desire to eliminate the pay raise granted to the military by Caracalla, the men of the legions became even more dissatisfied with their new emperor. When Caracalla's maternal aunt, Julia Maesa, offered her grandson Bassianus as an alternative, claiming that he was the illegitimate son of their beloved Caracalla, the soldiers needed no more encouragement to rebel, and killed Macrinus.⁶¹ Bassianus soon became known as Elagabalus for his worship of a Syrian sun god, and swiftly became a controversial figure. His reign was wracked by scandal, with the new emperor dressing in women's clothing and marrying another man.⁶² He even married a Vestal Virgin, one of the priestesses of the goddess Vesta who took vows of chastity.⁶³ The supposed son of Caracalla was not living up to the expectations of the soldiers as a result of these scandals, and they leaped at the opportunity to replace him when Elagabalus' aunt offered her son, Severus Alexander, as a replacement. Elagabalus was killed in 222, and Alexander was soon proclaimed the new emperor.⁶⁴ Alexander quickly gained a reputation for piety despite his young age. Unlike previous members of the Severan dynasty, he was quite popular with the Senate. He also attempted to gain favor with the soldiers by granting them frequent gifts, though this was not particularly effective because he was not as overwhelmingly generous as Septimius Severus and Caracalla. However, his tenuous relationship with the military

⁶¹ Potter, *Emperors of Rome*, 149.

⁶² Aelius Lampridius, "Antoninus Elagabalus," in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, trans. David Magie, ed. T. E. Page et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 2:105-177.

⁶³ Potter, *Emperors of Rome*, 150.

⁶⁴ Brauer, *The Young Emperors*, 144-154.

fell apart as a result of his wars. When Sassanid Persia arose in the Roman East, Alexander's war with it ended inconclusively, hardly a glorious victory. When Germanic tribes invaded the empire, the soldiers feared that he was attempting to bribe them into surrendering, and demanded higher pay. Severus Alexander was murdered by his men in 235, and they made one of their own, Maximinus Thrax, emperor in his place.⁶⁵ With three emperors in a row murdered because the army was displeased with them in some way, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the soldiers held all of the power in the empire.

A Culture of Fear

The fall of Severus Alexander and the rise of Maximinus Thrax saw the beginning of the Crisis of the Third Century. Rome suffered as a result of foreign invasion, internal chaos, and a bad economy.⁶⁶ The military now had complete control over the emperor. Any emperors who failed to satisfy the wishes of the military were killed and replaced. This began with Maximinus Thrax himself. Upon his ascension, the Senate rebelled against him, sponsoring a number of candidates against him. Maximinus would not accept resistance to his rule, and led his army against the Senate, besieging the city of Aquileia when it sided with his enemies. This proved to be a mistake, for his soldiers soon grew discontent with the siege and Maximinus' command. They eventually killed him in 238, surrendering to the Aquileians.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid., 155-191.

⁶⁶ Simon Esmonde Cleary, *The Roman West, A.D. 200-500: An Archaeological Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18-24.

⁶⁷ Brauer, *The Young Emperors*, 209-212.

Another emperor who may have fallen victim to disloyal soldiers was Gordian III, who came to power following the deaths of Pupienus and Balbinus, Maximinus' successors. Pupienus and Balbinus had been assassinated by the Praetorian Guard when they suspected that the emperors were going to replace them. When Gordian fought against the Sassanid Persians, he met his end. This appears to have been the result of a conspiracy by Philip the Arab, the prefect of the Praetorian Guard. If this account is to be believed, the soldiers respected Philip as a leader far more than they did Gordian, and decided to assassinate him, making Philip emperor in 244.⁶⁸ The constant assassinations of emperors in this manner eventually created a culture of fear within the Roman Empire. Emperors were terrified of being viewed as unsatisfactory by the military, for they knew that if they were, they would soon find themselves robbed of their thrones and their lives. As a result, they shamelessly pandered to the soldiers at every opportunity, being careful to grant them whatever they desired.

It was not just the emperors themselves who had to fear rebellious soldiers. Some of the generals who the soldiers made emperor through rebellion were forced to rule the empire unwillingly. With emperors regularly dying when they displeased the army, the idea that being emperor could be a bad thing in a period when emperors were dying like flies has some credence. For example, Trajan Decius was declared emperor by his soldiers after he won a war against the Goths during the reign of Philip the Arab. Decius' army may have forced him into it. Supposedly, he sent a letter to Philip saying that he would give up the title of emperor upon his arrival in Rome. Whether or not Decius was forced by his men to become emperor, Decius' army

⁶⁸ Ibid., 214-223.

defeated that of Philip in 249, and Decius was made emperor.⁶⁹ A similar incident occurred when the emperor Probus was assassinated in 282. Carus, one of Probus' officers, was chosen by the soldiers to be the new emperor. As was the case with Trajan Decius, Carus may have been forced to take power by the soldiers he was leading.⁷⁰ With the army essentially having the power to make and unmake emperors at will, the emperors made sure to cater to the military as much as possible. As a result, spending on the army continued to increase, with emperors paying the soldiers more money in order to preserve their lives. The emperors were terrified that the army would kill them if they did not bribe it into keeping them on the throne. The imperial throne was extremely unsafe during the Crisis of the Third Century as a result of constant submission to the whims of the soldiers.

The intense favoritism toward the military displayed by the emperors during this time ultimately spoiled the army. The soldiers were well aware that the emperors needed their support, so they could leverage whatever they desired from the men who ostensibly ruled them. As a result, the emperors who followed Septimius Severus paid the soldiers increasingly large amounts of money. The military budget constantly expanded, becoming an ever-increasing burden on the empire. The emperors had to pay for wars to rally the support of the soldiers, as well as increased pay and frequent donatives. The soldiers also sought better privileges. What resulted was a complete breakdown in military discipline. The soldiers refused to follow an emperor who did not grant them whatever they desired. If an emperor attempted to contradict the will of

⁶⁹ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 16-17.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

the army, or if the army found a candidate who would be more pliable than the current emperor, the emperor was overthrown and killed. The generals who were made emperor by the soldiers had to submit to their wishes, or suffer the same fate. Some emperors may even have been put on the throne unwillingly, fearing the wrath of the army if they refused. Instead of the military serving the emperor and the Roman Empire, the emperor now had to serve the army or die. What resulted was chaos. The emperors of the Severan dynasty who followed Septimius Severus all died violently. When Severus Alexander was assassinated, the result was a period that lasted about fifty years in which emperors rose and were overthrown within a few years, and sometimes within a few months. However, while the overspending on the military and the resulting breakdown of discipline that characterized this period was one of the major deciding factors in the decline of the Roman Empire, it was not the only one. Rome's manipulation of its currency also contributed to the fall of Rome.

Chapter 5

UN SOUND MONEY

While Rome's wasteful spending on the military and the collapse of the emperors' control over the military played a great role in Rome's eventual fall, it was not the only economic factor at work in the empire's decline. One of the hallmarks of the third century was the Roman Empire's disastrous monetary policy. In order to pay for the extreme increases in spending resulting from an increasingly demanding military, the emperors of the time debased the currency. They heavily reduced the precious metal content of their coins as the decades went by, reducing their value. This, in turn, created inflation, raising the prices of goods and services. The empire had great difficulty combating this, and dug itself into an economic hole. With the money of the people constantly being worth less, the result was an economic depression. The Roman currency was worthless, and this led to severe economic problems.

The Antoninianus

Septimius Severus' practice of debasing the denarius by reducing its silver content was a key part of his economic policy. As was the case with his favoritism toward the military, Caracalla followed his father's lead in this regard. Like his father, he needed to pay for a number of wars and increased pay and benefits for the soldiers, and the increases he made to taxes could not completely cover the increased spending. As a result, Caracalla continued his father's practice of currency debasement.

However, Caracalla's method of currency debasement was more novel than that of Severus, though he also practiced the same method as his father. Not only did he reduce the silver content of the denarius, he also created a new coin that further contributed to the continued debasement of the currency.

Caracalla reduced the silver content of the denarius by eleven percent, following the policies of his father. He also reduced the weight of the aureus, a prevalent gold coin in the Roman Empire, by ten percent. However, his most notable contribution to Roman monetary policy occurred in 215, when he introduced a new coin which has come to be called the antoninianus.⁷¹ Apparently, the antoninianus was ostensibly worth two denarii, and is sometimes referred to as a "double denarius." However, it weighed no more than one and a half denarii, and "was no purer than the single denarius," so it was actually worth less than its official value.⁷² The end result was a thirty-three percent net reduction in silver content compared to the denarius of Severus' reign.⁷³ The antoninianus was, therefore heavily overvalued. The denarius remained the primary silver coin in circulation for some time, and the antoninianus initially saw limited circulation, though it grew more prevalent as time went on.⁷⁴ The antoninianus thus provided a way for Caracalla to create more coins to pay for his military spending. However, his practice of overvaluing the new coin with its low

⁷¹ Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, 101.

⁷² Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 10.

⁷³ Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, 101.

⁷⁴ Constantina Katsari, *The Roman Monetary System: The Eastern Provinces from the First to the Third Century AD* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 79.

silver content for a coin worth two denarii, as well as his debasements of the denarius and aureus, devalued the Roman currency and contributed to inflation. It may also have caused some within the Roman Empire to lose some of their faith in the Roman currency. With the antoninianus having such a small amount of silver for what it was supposed to be worth, some citizens may have been tempted to place more reliance on other coins like the aureus, since they were still seen as somewhat trustworthy.⁷⁵ Caracalla's monetary policy was, therefore, largely the same as his father's. Like Severus, he too debased the currency in order to pay for his military expenditures. His most notable reform, the antoninianus, was a scheme to rapidly debase the currency by creating a coin with a much smaller silver content than its ostensible value. His monetary policy resulted in inflation, as well as some distrust of the antoninianus thanks to its lack of silver. Later emperors would continue these practices, debasing the currency even further.

Currency Debasement in the Third Century

The emperors who succeeded Caracalla continued to push currency debasement as a policy, and it quickly became ubiquitous. His successors in the Severan dynasty largely followed the model set by the dynasty's early members. The monetary policy of Elagabalus saw the silver content of the denarius fall by another sixteen percent, with the emperor minting many new coins.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the reign of Severus Alexander saw some positive reform. He eliminated the antoninianus, putting

⁷⁵ C. H. V. Sutherland, *Roman Coins* (New York: C. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 217-218.

⁷⁶ Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, 101.

an end to Caracalla's fraudulent coin that weighed less than its supposed value. Of course, the antoninianus was later restored, but his discontinuation of the coin represented a positive step.⁷⁷ However, the end of the antoninianus was the only area of his monetary policy that was particularly remarkable. Like his predecessors, Severus Alexander engaged in some debasement, though not to the same degree that they had. The value of the aureus fluctuated somewhat, though the denarius remained relatively stable during his reign, making his monetary policy less inflationary than the other members of his dynasty.⁷⁸ The emperors of the Severan dynasty, therefore, largely followed the policies of the dynasty's founder, Septimius Severus. The currency was debased in order to fuel the empire's expenses, specifically the military. This, in turn, began to create inflation in the Roman economy. The Severan dynasty ultimately saw the earliest occurrences of practices that would become more commonplace in later years. The monetary policies of later emperors would follow in the path of those of the Severan emperors, with disastrous results for the coinage.

The Crisis of the Third Century saw the empire fall even further into decline. The emperors who followed Severus Alexander generally emphasized a monetary policy that relied more and more upon debasement and inflation. Pupienus and Balbinus reintroduced the antoninianus upon taking power, reducing its weight in the process. A stable currency was far from their minds. Gordian III, meanwhile, heavily increased the production of the so-called "double denarius," making it far more common throughout the empire. The coinage continued to weaken as time went on.

⁷⁷ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 224.

⁷⁸ Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, 101-102.

The emperors continued to reduce the silver content of the antoninianus in order to pay for their foreign wars and bribes for the military. By the time of Trajan Decius, the fineness, or purity, of the antoninianus was about forty percent.⁷⁹ The currency had become even worse by the reign of Valerian in 253. The antoninianus contained even less silver, and gold coins were becoming harder to come by. The cities of the Roman East, meanwhile, minted bronze coins of little worth. As this was going on, inflation continued rapidly increasing.⁸⁰ As a result of almost a century of currency debasement and inflation, the coinage was fundamentally worthless by the year 274, during the reign of Aurelian. The antoninianus consisted of about four percent silver. It was made almost entirely of copper, with only a thin coating of silver concealing the reality of how far the coinage had fallen.⁸¹ The emperors of the Crisis of the Third Century, therefore, largely followed in the footsteps of their predecessor from the Severan dynasty until the currency was essentially worthless. With the antoninianus, an ostensibly silver coin, consisting of only four percent silver, the coinage was of no use to anyone. Inflation was completely out of control, and the currency seemed to be beyond repair. The Roman economy was in a state of economic depression as a result of a poor monetary policy that had been in place for decades.

Compounding the problem was the fact that few of the emperors following the rise of Septimius Severus made even the slightest attempt to halt this currency debasement. Since the excessive military spending that occurred during this time

⁷⁹ Katsari, *The Roman Monetary System*, 79-80.

⁸⁰ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 69.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 234-235.

depended upon the constant debasement of the coinage, and this spending went to give the soldiers higher pay and more privileges, the emperors of the time generally did not make any attempt to reduce currency debasement for fear of being killed by the soldiers. There were, of course, exceptions, emperors who made some attempts to solve the empire's monetary problems, or who at least did not contribute heavily to the debasement, but they did not tend to last long. As already mentioned, Severus Alexander eliminated the antoninianus, though this reform did not last long after his death, and he was killed after three years as emperor.⁸² Another emperor who did not contribute to the devaluation of the currency was Philip the Arab. By the time of his reign, the antoninianus had a silver exterior, but was beginning to utilize copper in the interior of the coin. Philip the Arab was ultimately unable to fix the currency, and may not have tried, though he likely recognized the damage being done to the coinage and does not seem to have heavily pushed currency debasement in the manner of Septimius Severus and Caracalla. He was ultimately killed in 249 by the army of Trajan Decius, who may have been forced into rebelling by his soldiers, having failed to keep the soldiers satisfied.⁸³ There were very few attempts to reform the currency in the third century. The occasional attempts to do so, such as Severus Alexander's abandonment of the antoninianus, did not last. The best that the emperors were able to accomplish was to be like Philip the Arab, and avoid causing too much damage to the currency while attempting to appease the soldiers. The emperors were simply too afraid of death at the hands of the military to stop devaluing the currency, and consequently reducing the special favors granted to the army.

⁸² Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 224-225.

⁸³ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 10-17.

Of course, the people of the Roman Empire were becoming increasingly aware that the coinage was declining in value. As such, the people of the empire gradually began to lose their faith in the Roman currency. An early example of this can be found with the reaction to the antoninianus upon its introduction by Caracalla. Knowing that it was not actually worth two denarii, some investors seem to have chosen to put their faith in the golden aureus, which was more stable at the time.⁸⁴ By the reign of Philip of the Arab, the antoninianus was becoming increasingly distrusted throughout the empire. As already mentioned, the coin had a silver exterior and copper interior by this time, and the silver coating was thin enough that it quickly eroded to reveal the copper beneath. The Roman people were, therefore, given clear evidence that the currency was becoming less valuable.⁸⁵ Matters worsened over the course of the next few decades. Aurelian introduced coins that were almost entirely copper, being only about four percent silver. By this point, people had next to no faith in either the currency or the Roman government. They knew that the new coins were essentially worthless. Instead of giving their old coins over to the government, they decided to hoard them instead, since the older coins were more valuable.⁸⁶ The people of the Roman Empire, therefore, had their faith in the currency eroded as the value of the coins eroded. As their currency became increasingly worthless, they lost their confidence in imperial monetary policy. As a result, they took measures to avoid the worst effects of it, either by using coins that were more stable than Caracalla's antoninianus or by hoarding older

⁸⁴ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 218.

⁸⁵ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 10.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 234-235.

coins that were more valuable than those introduced by the emperors. The Roman people were becoming more aware of the monetary hole that the empire had been thrown into as a result of decades of currency debasement and inflation, and were increasingly discontent as a result. The people's trust in the coinage was irrevocably damaged.

The currency was thus heavily debased from the reign of Septimius Severus to the end of the Crisis of the Third Century. The Severan dynasty saw Caracalla introduce the antoninianus, an overvalued coin, while his successors, Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, debased the currency. During the Crisis of the Third Century, matters became worse, with nearly every emperor debasing the currency. Emperors such as Gordian III minted more coins of increasingly small values, further devaluing the Roman coinage. By the reign of Trajan Decius, less than half of the antoninianus was silver, and after Valerian became emperor the currency became even worse. By the time Aurelian had ascended to the throne, the coinage was essentially worthless, being less than five percent silver.⁸⁷ Because the increased benefits for the military that the emperors needed to pay for depended upon this monetary policy, there was little incentive for most emperors to try to halt the debasement, since refusing to submit to the wishes of the military was likely to get an emperor killed. With the currency becoming increasingly less valuable, more Roman citizens attempted to keep more valuable coins from times past for themselves. The Roman Empire had fallen victim to hyperinflation. Its currency had become effectively worthless. The emperors, in their attempts to curry favor with the soldiers, damaged the coinage severely.

⁸⁷ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 234-235.

However, is ruinous as the Roman imperial monetary policy was during the third century was for the currency, with its rampant currency debasement and inflation, it fed another serious problem prevalent in the empire during the third century. It was the combination of these two factors that ultimately had the biggest impact in causing the decline of the Roman Empire.

A Snowball Effect

The policies of Septimius Severus and the emperors who succeeded him involved heavily increasing military spending in order to improve their popularity with the soldiers. In addition to paying for frequent wars against foreign threats, the emperors also had to pay for increased pay for the soldiers, extra rations, and frequent gifts to the men. Since higher taxes could not fully pay for the boost in military expenditure, the emperors needed to debase the coinage. The coins of this period consisted of substantially less precious metal than those of previous eras. This enabled the emperors to create more coins to pay for the government's expenses, but it also heavily contributed to inflation.⁸⁸ As a result, prices rose heavily. The purchasing power of the Roman currency was substantially reduced, the coins not being worth as much with such a small precious metal content.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, this helped to feed the Roman Empire's overspending on its military. The soldiers frequently demanded higher pay and special gifts from the emperors. The emperors were not prepared to

⁸⁸ Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64-65.

⁸⁹ Aurelio Bernardi, "The Economic Problems of the Roman Empire at the Time of its Decline," in *The Economic Decline of Empires*, ed. Carlo M. Cipolla (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970), 39.

refuse, since their lives depended upon the goodwill of the soldiers. However, they needed to debase the Roman currency in order to pay for these favors. This ultimately created inflation, raising prices. This, in turn, reduced the purchasing power of the coins. Because the coins had less value, so too were the wages and gifts granted to the Roman soldiers.⁹⁰ Despite the increased benefits granted to them by fearful emperors, the rampant inflation meant that benefits themselves were less valuable. This of course, led to a snowball effect, in which the soldiers kept demanding more money, which in turn was less valuable as a result of inflation, which, in turn, led to the soldiers demanding more money.⁹¹ It was these two economic problems feeding each other, overspending on the military and inflation as the result of currency debasement, that ultimately did the most damage to the Roman Empire during the Crisis of the Third Century.

Rome's ruinous monetary policy thus combined with the emperors' favoritism towards its military to severely harm the Roman economy. While the Roman currency was quite stable in the early days of the empire, Septimius Severus and the emperors who succeeded him debased the currency to pay for military expenditures, reducing its value. The emperors of the Severan dynasty heavily expanded military spending as a result of their dependence on the army for political power, and the emperors who followed during the Crisis of the Third Century followed in their footsteps. They debased the Roman coinage until it was almost worthless. This led to inflation and higher prices, which led to the extra money sought by the legionaries being worth less,

⁹⁰ Potter, *Emperors of Rome*, 177.

⁹¹ Clifford Ando, *Imperial Rome AD 193-284: The Critical Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 225.

despite the increasing amounts of it being given to them. The two economic problems therefore contributed to each other, each one making the other worse. These factors were the root of the problems that sprang up during the third century. The soldiers would kill any emperors who failed to give them what they wanted, leading to great political instability. Emperors rarely survived more than a few years after the end of the Severan dynasty. The inflation that resulted from the emperors trying to save themselves from a greedy and poorly disciplined military also created instability throughout the empire. The people of Rome soon came to realize that their currency was increasingly less valuable, and lost their faith in the government's monetary policy. Instead, they chose to hoard the older, more valuable, coins, while paying their taxes with the less valuable, newer coins, likely resulting in a decline in state revenues. The overspending and inflationary monetary policy of the third century ultimately resulted in an era of depression from which the empire never completely recovered.

Chapter 6

THE END OF AN EMPIRE

Of course, the economic policies of the emperors of the time were not the only factors that contributed to the Crisis of the Third Century. There were myriad aspects of the state of the Roman Empire in the third century that contributed to the decline. Civil war, foreign invasions, disease, and a decline in the prosperity of the Roman citizenry also played major roles.⁹² However, these additional factors were likely caused by the aforementioned economic problems. The frequent civil wars of the period were often the result of the soldiers finding new emperors more willing to give them more money. A poorly disciplined army increased the empire's vulnerability to foreign attack. Inflation would have resulted in food costing more, creating famine and disease. These factors, combined with a period of global cooling that made farming difficult, ultimately resulted in the difficulties of the third century. Of course, the Crisis of the Third Century did not immediately destroy the Roman Empire. After a brief period in which a number of reformers ruled the empire and attempted to halt the decline, the Roman Empire split in two. The Eastern Roman Empire went on to become the Byzantine Empire, and survived for over a millennium before Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Meanwhile, the Western Roman Empire limped on for another two centuries before the city of Rome itself was sacked

⁹² Ermatinger, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, xxiv-xxvii.

and the last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was overthrown.⁹³ However, the chaos of the third century shook the Roman Empire from its position of strength. Rome was no longer the unconquerable lord of the Mediterranean that it had been during the days of the Pax Romana. A century of economic depression and corruption in the military had left the empire vulnerable to attack from outside its borders and internal strife. While the Crisis of the Third Century did not immediately erase the Roman Empire from the map, it created the conditions that caused it to fall over the course of a few centuries.

The Reformers

The Roman Empire finally gained a respite from the Crisis of the Third Century in 284, when Diocletian rose to overthrow the emperor Carinus and rule the empire. Diocletian instituted a number of reforms before he retired in 305. Most notably, he split the empire, sharing his with three other emperors and creating the Tetrarchy, rule by four men. He ruled in the Roman East as the Augustus, or senior emperor, with Galerius as his Caesar. Maximinian ruled in the Roman West as Augustus with Constantius as his Caesar.⁹⁴ His plan was to put an end the severe succession crises of the past, as well as to divide the empire into more manageable pieces for each emperor to rule. He also instituted a number of economic reforms in an attempt to prevent future crises. He reformed the coinage by increasing the weight of gold coins, creating a coin of pure silver called the argenteus, and a bronze coin called the follis.⁹⁵ He also made reforms to the bureaucracy and civil administration. In

⁹³ Ibid., 41-66.

⁹⁴ Ibid., xxvii-xxviii.

⁹⁵ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 265-266.

addition to these reforms to the government, he also took steps to secure the empire from future attack from outside its borders and within them by stationing cavalry units along the frontiers with the more customary infantry-based Roman legions.⁹⁶

Diocletian was thus able to restore some stability to the empire after a century of misery and bloodshed. His reign, which lasted more than two decades, saw the restoration of the Roman coinage from its state of worthlessness, as well as a measure of stability to the Roman Empire that it had not enjoyed in nearly a century. As a result, he was one of the most successful emperors since Augustus. His reforms to the coinage, the government, and the military brought the empire back from the brink of destruction. With a healthier economy and more stable government than the empire had possessed in decades, the future of the empire was far less grim.

Unfortunately, Diocletian's attempt to prevent a succession crisis by dividing the empire among four rulers ultimately failed. About a year after his retirement, the Tetrarchy collapsed and the empire descended into civil war. After a few years of chaos, Constantine emerged victorious. Like Diocletian, Constantine also made reforms to the governance of the empire. Perhaps the most notable of these was his decision to move the capital of the Roman Empire. No longer would the center of power in the empire be located in the city of Rome itself, but instead in the city of Byzantium, which was soon renamed as Constantinople.⁹⁷ This moved the center of the empire from the Roman West to the Roman East, which was, as a center of trade, more prosperous. He also made a number of military reforms, as Diocletian did. Under

⁹⁶ Ermatinger, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, xxvii.

⁹⁷ Potter, *Emperors of Rome*, 177.

Constantine, there was an increased sense of division between the *limitanei*, the units on the frontier, and the *comitatenses*, the strategic reserve units. The military was also divided among three separate military commands, the West, the East, and the Balkans. Each of these commands had their own master of infantry and master of cavalry. The end result was a more regionalized military that was likely easier to manage. Additionally, he legalized Christianity in the empire, freeing up resources that had been spent persecuting Christians in the process.⁹⁸ Constantine's reforms, therefore, were also quite extensive. His decision to move the capital from Rome to Constantinople would represent a permanent shift in the center of imperial power. As the Roman East rose in prominence and prosperity, the West would fall into decline. His military reforms, meanwhile, were along the lines of those of Diocletian's. On the whole, both Diocletian and Constantine were able to save the Roman Empire from the ruination of the Crisis of the Third Century. However, not all of their reforms were successful or particularly resilient.

Although the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine succeeded in bringing an end to the Crisis of the Third Century, their reforms were not entirely successful in restoring Rome to its golden age. Some of their reforms were not entirely successful, and some even had unintended consequences. Diocletian's coinage reform is a good example of this. It was an important and necessary step to combat the extreme currency debasement of the third century. However, it was not wildly successful. During and after his reign, the silver coinage that he introduced was debased heavily, as was the case with the denarius during the third century, creating similar problems

⁹⁸ Ibid., 188-195.

during the fourth century. Of course, the solidus, a gold coin introduced after Diocletian's reign, remained stable, and future emperors took some steps to halt the debasement of the silver coinage.⁹⁹ However, Diocletian's coinage reform was ultimately unsuccessful at ending currency debasement and inflation, though it did reduce it for a time. Another attempt by Diocletian to control inflation was his Edict on Maximum Prices, which he instituted in 301. The Edict on Maximum Prices instituted price controls in the Roman Empire, but this proved to have a number of negative unintended consequences. For one, most merchants preferred to set their own prices rather than those chosen by Diocletian, so the result was the rise of a black market.¹⁰⁰ His policies also heavily reduced upward social mobility, a bad situation considering that the empire was exiting a depression.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine were mostly successful in ending the Crisis of the Third Century. The Roman Empire and its economy were much more stable as a result of their reforms. However, their reforms were sometimes unsuccessful, or created other problems. Ultimately, while they succeeded in restoring the empire to a state of peace after the third century, they were unable to stop the eventual fall of the empire. The Roman Empire, at least in the Roman West, would end in the next two centuries.

⁹⁹ Katsari, *The Roman Monetary System*, 102.

¹⁰⁰ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 65.

¹⁰¹ Brauer, *The Age of the Soldier Emperors*, 266.

Chaos in the Empire

The fourth and fifth centuries saw the Roman Empire in the West fall into decline. This was the result of a number of factors. For one, the threat of foreign invasion was looming increasingly large as time went on. Rome was threatened by numerous Germanic tribes, as well as other invaders in its last centuries of life. Older tribes were pushed into Rome's domain by newer tribes moving in from the East. These tribes often unified to form larger tribes, which were often powerful enough to be a serious threat to Rome. The Franks, Saxons, Burgundians, and Sarmatians formed in this matter, and the Romans experienced tensions with all of them, often losing territory as a result. Another major barbarian force faced by the Romans were the Goths, who were driven westward by the Huns a few decades after the death of Constantine. The Visigoths, the Western Goths, threatened the city of Rome itself. Eventually, they sacked it in 410, under the command of their king, Alaric. The Vandals moved from Europe to North Africa, and sacked Rome again in the 450s. The Huns, who were spreading from Asia to Europe, invaded Italy under their ruler, Attila. Attila was only stopped his invasion because of the intervention of Pope Leo I. Rome was sacked a final time by Odoacer in 476, signaling the end of the Western Roman Empire.¹⁰² Rome was thus beaten down by an endless stream of barbarian invasions in the fourth and fifth centuries. It could not sustain an eternal war against the Germanic tribes and its other enemies, and ultimately collapsed under the pressure. The empire failed in no small part due to its military's lack of ability to respond to these new threats from outside its borders. However, foreign invasions were not the only thing that brought down Rome after its brief resurgence.

¹⁰² Ermatinger, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 42-48.

The Roman Empire also continued its decline after the death of Constantine due to a number of internal factors. As already mentioned, the debasement of the silver coinage continued after Diocletian's reforms to the currency. While the stability of the golden solidus and the policies of later emperors prevented inflation from getting out of control, the debasement of silver did create problems similar to those that were common in the third century.¹⁰³ Additionally, the Roman bureaucracy was becoming an increasingly severe blight on the empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. It was exceedingly greedy and corrupt, with many bureaucrats taking bribes. The bureaucracy also interfered with the military, making defense of the empire more difficult. Furthermore, the bureaucracy was in an almost constant state of growth after the end of Constantine's reign. With the empire having become more fragmented as a result of its divide, this eventually resulted over separate bureaucracies in the empire fighting over limited resources. The emperors of the time also contributed to the continuation of the decline. Of course, the frequent killing of emperors by the military during the third century had been halted. Diocletian had restored some discipline to the army, and Constantine had restored dynastic rule. However, intrigues among the families of later emperors resulted in the weakening of the empire. Not helping matters was the fact that the West and the east were becoming increasingly less cooperative with each other.¹⁰⁴ Internal factors, therefore, played just as great a role in the fall of the Western Roman Empire as the barbarian invasions did. A newly debased silver coinage, a corrupt bureaucracy, political intrigue, and an increasing division

¹⁰³ Katsari, *The Roman Monetary System*, 102.

¹⁰⁴ Ermatinger, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 48-52.

between the Eastern and Western Roman Empires all ensured that the empire's brief recovery from the Crisis of the Third Century was not a permanent one. Rome's decline soon continued unabated.

Rome, therefore, rotted away as a result of both external and internal factors. Foreign invasions were, of course, a serious problem for the empire after the end of the reign of Constantine. The number of times that the city of Rome itself was threatened is proof enough of that. With the Huns invading Italy, and the Visigoths and Vandals sacking Rome, it was clear that the barbarians could no longer be managed by the empire, despite the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine. Of course, internal problems within the empire contributed to the empire's inability to stem the flow of invaders attacking Rome. The bureaucracy of the empire grew out of control, becoming increasingly corrupt and interfering with the military, impeding the empire's responses to the barbarians. Additionally, the emperors of the later days of the Roman Empire were not particularly helpful. Instead of responding to the threat of invasion in an effective manner, they were oftentimes preoccupied by court intrigue. The two halves of the empire were also becoming increasingly less unified, acting independently of one another as relations between them declined. Of course, the eastern emperors would have had some difficulty saving Rome from the tide of invaders due to their own conflicts with the Sassanid Persians, but increasing tensions between the East and the West would not have helped matters.¹⁰⁵ What resulted was a downward spiral for Rome. Despite the best efforts of Diocletian and Constantine, the empire was not fully able to recover from the disaster that was the third century. After

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 41-42.

the end of Constantine's reign, the decline of the Roman Empire continued unabated. Currency debasement and inflation, though less severe than during the third century, returned to the empire. Wars sapped the strength of the army. The bureaucracy interfered with the military and became more corrupt, becoming an increasingly heavy burden on the empire as a whole. The emperors of the time were increasingly incapable of facing the challenges of the period. The Crisis of the Third Century ultimately sapped the strength of the Roman Empire, leaving it unable to overcome later challenges.

The Fall of Rome

The decline of the Roman Empire can be said to have begun in 193, with the fall of Pertinax and the rise of Septimius Severus. Severus opened the doors for the Crisis of the Third Century to occur. Recognizing his status as a military dictator, and that he needed the soldiers to stay in power, Severus did his best to cater to the wishes of the army by increasing their pay and frequently giving them gifts. This resulted in a massive increase in military spending, which needed to be paid for. Because tax increases could not completely cover this increase in spending, Severus debased the currency by reducing the precious metal content of the coins. This practice resulted in the coins being worth less, which in turn created inflation. These policies remained in place after Severus died. The emperors who ruled after him continued to submit to the desires of the military at every opportunity. Because the soldiers would depose rulers who displeased them, Severus' successors soon came to realize that their lives depended upon the goodwill of the soldiers, so did everything they could to accede to their wishes. As a result, the two economic problems facing the empire in the third century, overspending on the military and inflation resulting from currency

debasement, contributed to each other. As the soldiers continued to demand additional donatives and higher pay, the emperors debased the currency, which contributed to inflation, which in turn resulted in the extra money of the soldiers having reduced purchasing power. Because their new money was worth less, the soldiers demanded extra donatives and higher pay, which resulted in the emperors debasing the currency even more, which led to more inflation. The consequence was a cycle of overspending and inflation that worsened as time went on, and any emperors who tried to break the cycle were killed by the greedy and rebellious soldiers. With an increasingly depressed economy and emperors dying constantly, it is little wonder that this period is called the Crisis of the Third Century. By the 270s, military spending had skyrocketed, the coinage was worthless, and few emperors had managed to survive for more than a few years. Though the empire enjoyed a brief revival under Diocletian and Constantine, the ills of the third century could not fully be cured, and Rome finally fell in 476.

Modern nations would do well to view the Crisis of the Third Century as a cautionary tale. Rome brought itself to monetary and budgetary ruin. Overspending on a spoiled and unreliable army and devaluing the coinage to the point that it was worthless broke the Roman economy, creating chaos throughout the empire. As a result, the empire was a broken shadow of its former self by the time the barbarians began attacking Italy in the fourth and fifth centuries. Although Rome had been one of the mightiest forces in the world, able to contend with such great generals as Hannibal and powerful nations such as Carthage, it was laid low by excessive spending and a ruinous monetary policy, leaving it unable to defeat invaders in later years. Inflation continued to reduce the purchasing power of the coinage, reducing its value to the point that it had none. The economic troubles of the Roman Empire proved to be the

foundations of its downfall, weakening it enough that it could not save itself from decline. The Crisis of the Third Century, therefore, serves as a prime example of how damaging overspending, currency debasement, and inflation can be to an economy, and to a country as a whole. Unless this is avoided by states in the present day, they could very well meet the same fate as Rome, and fall as the result of disastrous economic policies.

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Appendix

THE EMPERORS OF THE PERIOD

The emperors who ruled the empire during this time were as follows, with the dates showing the lengths of their reigns: Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Commodus (177-192), Pertinax (193), Didius Julianus (193), Septimius Severus (193-211), Caracalla (198-217), Geta (209-211), Macrinus (217-218), Elagabalus (218-222), Severus Alexander, (222-235), Maximinus Thrax (235-238), Gordian I (238), Gordian II (238), Pupienus (238), Balbinus (238), Gordian III (238-244), Philip the Arab (244-249), Trajan Decius (249-251), Herennius Etruscus (251), Hostilian (251), Trebonianus Gallus (251-253), Volusianus (251-253), Aemilian (253), Valerian (253-260), Gallienus (253-268), Saloninus (260), Claudius Gothicus (268-270), Quintillus (270), Aurelian (270-275), Tacitus (275-276), Florianus (276), Probus (276-282), Carus (282-283), Carinus (282-285), Numerian (282-284), and Diocletian (284-305).