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# THE ROMAN EMPIRE

*SECOND EDITION*

COLIN WELLS

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Aurelius that their 'characters and authority commanded involuntary respect'. We saw them in Chapter 10 as men honest in their generation, using their position for the common good, as they saw it, 'pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws', to use once more a Gibbonian phrase. So they were. They were also stern upholders of the established order. Their reward was and is to be praised by those who consider that without order there is no security, no scope for culture and learning, no chance for people to lead their own lives and bring up their children in peace and security; that without order we risk returning to the state which Hobbes described, 'wherein every man is at war with every man, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. The price paid for the Antonine order, however, by the outcast, the dispossessed, or simply by those, like the Christians, who subscribed to a different set of values, was institutionalized terror on a scale unsurpassed until modern technology made it possible for twentieth-century dictatorships to apply terror even more widely and more efficiently.

## XI

### An Age of Transition: from Commodus to Maximinus the Thracian

WHEN MARCUS AURELIUS died in 180, his eighteen-year-old son Commodus already possessed all the imperial powers. For the last two and a half years he had been with his father on the Danube front. For some months his father's death meant little change. Commodus was the seventeenth emperor, and the first ever to have been born to a reigning emperor. He was the sixth emperor of the dynasty founded by Nerva, which thus went one better than the Julio-Claudians. Commodus's father had been generally popular and had enjoyed excellent relations with the Senate. Commodus himself was a brilliant athlete and outstandingly good-looking, with blonde, curly hair that shone in the sunlight, as if powdered with gold. He inherited his father's advisers, and every possible step had been taken to ensure a smooth succession and the continuation of established policies. Everything augured well for the new reign. But within a few months Commodus had abandoned the war on the Danube to return to the pleasures of Rome, without securing a lasting frontier settlement. He rapidly gave over enormous power and influence to his chamberlain (*cubicularius*, page 198), the Bithynian Saoterus, thus alienating the Senate and members of his own family. Within two years came the first plot to assassinate him, and his sister Lucilla, widow of Lucius Verus, was one of the prime movers. This was to be the pattern of the reign, with Commodus devoting himself to pleasure, abandoning power to a succession of favourites, and falling at last, after surviving a number of inefficient conspiracies, to a well-executed palace plot on the last day of 192.

The successful conspirators put it about that Commodus's murder was unpremeditated, done to forestall his own insane plan

to murder the new consuls, other leading senators, and members of his household the next day. This is the version of Dio and Herodian (Dio lxxii.22; Herodian i.17). But the *Augustan History* alleges long premeditation, and a number of minor details suggest that this is right. The throne was offered to Publius Helvius Pertinax, who had been deeply involved in the politics of the last few years, and who was Commodus's colleague in the consulship for 192, as well as being City Prefect. The *Augustan History*, no doubt following Marius Maximus, records him as having been implicated in the plot from the start (*Pertinax* 4); the official version makes the offer of the throne a surprise. But somebody had made haste to inform the aged Claudius Pompeianus of what was happening, and to get him to come to Rome before the night was over. Pompeianus had been one of Marcus Aurelius's trusted advisers, and was Commodus's mentor when he came to the throne. Superseded and disgusted by Commodus's conduct, he had for the past ten years lived in retirement on his country estates. Pertinax had been taken to the praetorian camp before midnight, and somewhat half-heartedly acclaimed emperor. He went straight on to a hastily summoned meeting of the Senate. While waiting for the meeting to begin, he was approached by Pompeianus, to whom he offered the throne. Pompeianus refused. By being there to receive the offer, and refuse it, he had played his destined part in the building of Pertinax's image. When the Senate meeting opened, Pertinax announced that he had been chosen emperor by the soldiers, but did not wish to serve. This too was a necessary part of the image. His unwillingness was not taken seriously. He was unanimously acclaimed and the usual titles and powers were voted. The praetorians were clearly restive, but Pertinax took measures to conciliate them, as well as to please the Senate and restore order to administration and finance. Among those designated for the following year's magistracies was Cassius Dio, as praetor (Dio lxxiii.12). Pertinax's reign, however, lasted less than three months. The praetorians staged two abortive coups, followed by one that succeeded. Pertinax was cut down in the palace portico. There was no obvious successor.

What followed has become notorious, but there is no reason to doubt the basic truth of the account. Two men claimed the vacant throne. One was Pertinax's father-in-law, Flavius Sulpicianus,

whom Pertinax had appointed City Prefect; the other was an elderly senator, Didius Julianus, perhaps the senior consular then living, apart from Claudius Pompeianus. They bid against each other for the support of the praetorians, Julianus winning with a bid of 25,000 sesterces per man. Later that day, he was confirmed by the Senate. But he had no real support anywhere. The provincial armies and their commanders were not likely to accept a new emperor just because he had bought the support of the praetorians.

The first provincial governor to move was Lucius Septimius Severus, governor of Pannonia Superior and commander of three legions. His earlier career had been generally undistinguished, and his appointment to Pannonia Superior seems to have owed less to outstanding merit or to his having served previously in the posts which would naturally lead up to so important a command, than to his African connections. He came from a leading family of Lepcis Magna, and owed his advancement to another African, Aemilius Laetus, Commodus's last praetorian prefect. Africans were strongly entrenched in positions of influence at this period, and providing mutual support, like Scotsmen in London in Dr Johnson's day. Septimius could count on well-placed supporters. Twelve days after Pertinax's murder, he staged a ceremony whereby he was proclaimed emperor by the legion stationed at Carnuntum, declared his intention of avenging Pertinax, and added Pertinax's name to his own, styling himself Imperator Caesar Lucius Septimius Severus Pertinax Augustus. Of the western governors, the one whose potential reaction caused Septimius most concern was Decimus Clodius Albinus, governor of Britain. Albinus was another African, from Sousse, which was also the home of Didius Julianus's mother. He had formerly governed Lower Germany, where he might therefore still have support, and if he crossed the Channel, he might pose a serious threat. Septimius therefore offered him the title of Caesar, which he accepted, and which marked him out as Septimius's potential successor. Meanwhile he remained in Britain, and bided his time.

It was AD 69 all over again. Septimius had the Rhine and Danube armies on his side, notionally those of Britain also, and the support of the legions in Spain and Africa. But popular demonstrations had already been organized at Rome on behalf of Gaius Pescennius Niger, governor of Syria, who could count on the support of the

eastern armies. Ignoring this threat, however, Septimius marched on Rome, taking Aquileia and Ravenna without resistance. Julianus's authority melted away, his efforts at conciliation came to nothing, Septimius's agents were active in Rome, and finally the Senate met to condemn Julianus to death and to proclaim Septimius emperor, before he had even arrived in the city. Julianus had reigned for 66 days, an even shorter time than Pertinax. A deputation of one hundred senators went out to meet Septimius, and were received by him armed and surrounded by armed guards. The source of his power was thus made obvious. Of the two new praetorian prefects, one was another African. They were to command a new guard, for one of Septimius's first actions on arriving in Rome, and one of his most dramatic, was to trick the old guard into parading unarmed outside the city, where they could be surrounded by armed men of Septimius's Danubian legions, whereupon Septimius ignominiously disarmed and disbanded them. The praetorians had remained preponderantly Italian over two centuries, while the legions were now almost wholly recruited from the provinces. The new guard was chosen from the men of Septimius's own legions. The old guard had exercised a disproportionate influence on the Empire's affairs, and the change was symptomatic of Italy's decline.

Septimius's entrance into Rome was spectacular (Dio lxxiv.1). The next day he addressed the Senate. Again his armed guard was in evidence. Again he declared himself the avenger of Pertinax; he also asked for a decree that no senator be put to death without the Senate's approval. The soldiers received a donative, and Pertinax a most magnificent funeral. Coins were struck in the name of Septimius and of Albinus, who were designated to hold the consulship jointly for 194. Then, after less than a month in Rome, Septimius left for the East, and after hard fighting Pescennius Niger was killed (spring 194). His eastern supporters suffered deprivation and confiscation, and some cities were punished, notably Antioch, while the province of Syria was divided into two. Early in the spring of 195, Septimius crossed the Euphrates and invaded Parthia. Dio says his motive was glory; another motive will have been to unite Niger's legions with his own in a campaign against a common enemy. Septimius may also have harboured long-term ambitions in this area. He had served here earlier in his

career as legate of one of the Syrian legions, and had married Julia Domna, a very capable woman from the old royal stock of Emesa (Homs), who accompanied him on this campaign. Septimius gained three imperatorial salutations, took the titles Arabicus and Adiabenicus, accepted a triumphal arch, but refused a triumph. Part of the territory which he had conquered became a new province, the first significant accretion of territory since Trajan's day.

Septimius now proceeded to dispense with his temporary ally and erstwhile potential successor, Albinus, making it clear that he was designating his own son to succeed him. Albinus had supporters in the Senate. Herodian and the *Augustan History* suggest that Septimius now sent agents to assassinate Albinus; the story may be fiction. Septimius himself put out propaganda against Albinus, alleging that he had been behind the murder of Pertinax. Albinus decided to fight. The chronology is obscure, but before the end of 195 Albinus had proclaimed himself emperor and had been declared a public enemy by the Senate. The Senate had little choice, but Dio reports a popular demonstration in the Circus Maximus against renewed civil war (page 252). Septimius returned from the East with admirable speed, visited Rome, where coins record his generosity to the people and his holding of lavish games, and then marched through Pannonia, Noricum, Raetia, and Upper Germany to attack Albinus's forces, which were based on Lyon. Two battles brought Septimius victory. His army entered Lyon, sacked and burnt it. Albinus committed suicide. Septimius behaved with a notable lack of generosity in his victory. Albinus's body was mutilated and thrown into the Rhône, his wife and sons were put to death, and his supporters hunted down. Extensive confiscations increased the imperial holdings: for instance, much Spanish oil production seems to have passed under imperial control, and it has been suggested, though with too little evidence, that Gaulish production of terra sigillata was seriously affected. Septimius returned to Rome, where he appalled the Senate by demanding the deification of Commodus, his 'brother', since Septimius now called himself 'son of Marcus'. He is said to have praised cruelty, decried clemency, and attacked the senators for their hypocrisy and loose living (Dio lxxv.8, an eye-witness). Twenty-nine senators were put to death, over a third of whom had

links of birth or property to Africa; were these Albinus's connections? Septimius's son Antoninus, better known as Caracalla, was proclaimed emperor-designate. The usual largesse was distributed to the urban populace. Septimius then set out again to resume his campaigns in the East.

The struggle between Septimius and Albinus was notable for the use both made of coinage. This gives us a truer picture of where both men stood than what the writers say about them. Septimius is known to have struck at least three hundred and forty-two different issues in the first three years of his reign. They advertise his military successes, his generosity, the loyalty of the legions (a theme that had a habit of appearing on the coinage whenever their loyalty was in doubt), and, as the break with Albinus approached, the dynastic pretensions of Septimius's family. Coins struck for Caracalla (it is convenient to call him by this name to avoid confusion) celebrate 'perpetual security' and 'perpetual hope'. Septimius made no attempt to conceal the real bases of his power, which were military might and the favour, or at least acquiescence, of the urban populace. Albinus on the other hand used the mint at Lyon to proclaim his confidence in the result of the coming struggle, and to lay claim to the virtues which might endear him to the Senate, notably 'clemency' (CLEMENTIA) and 'fairness' (AEQUITAS). The Senate might well have preferred Albinus, but it was the army which decided the issue.

Before returning to the East, Septimius raised three new legions. In a significant break with tradition, all were placed under equestrian prefects instead of senatorial legates, and one of them was left behind in Italy, stationed only twenty miles from Rome. The downgrading of the Senate's importance and the loss of Italy's privileged position were thus made obvious. Septimius moved with his usual speed, established himself at Nisibis by late summer 197, built a fleet on the Euphrates, launched an amphibious operation down the river, found Seleucia and Babylon abandoned, marched on the Parthian capital, Ctesiphon on the Tigris, and took it by storm on 28 January 198, the centenary of Trajan's accession. Septimius assumed the title of Parthicus Maximus, Caracalla became Augustus, Septimius's younger son Geta was named Caesar. Septimius did not try to annex all of the new territory which he had overrun. The army withdrew, laden with booty. It

stopped to lay siege to Hatra, between the Tigris and the Euphrates, but failed to take it. There were heavy casualties, and some disaffection in the army. A purge of possible rivals brought several of the emperor's close associates to death, including Julius Laetus, the general to whom he owed most but who had now become so popular with the soldiers that they 'used to say that they would not go on another campaign unless Laetus led them' (Dio lxxv.10).

A second attempt to take Hatra in the autumn 198 also failed; Dio blames Septimius for failing to press home the attack (lxxv.11-12). The war may have dragged on thereafter, but Septimius himself left for Egypt, organizing part of his conquered territory as a new province of Mesopotamia under an equestrian prefect instead of a senator. In Egypt Septimius indulged in sightseeing, carried out a number of religious rites, and overhauled the administration. In particular, he allowed Alexandria and other major cities to have a council, like cities elsewhere in the Empire, and rectified another anomaly by permitting Egyptians to enter the Senate, which had previously been forbidden to them. Egypt was becoming a province like the others. Papyri record numerous legal rulings made by Septimius, but the account in the *Augustan History* of his supposed edict against proselytizing by Jews or Christians is fictional.

From Egypt Septimius went to Syria, where he assumed the consulship for 202 with Caracalla as his colleague. Caracalla was only thirteen, and never before had two co-emperors assumed the consulship together. It was not unusual for a consul to enter office while away from Rome, but still rare for both ordinary consuls to be away. Septimius and Caracalla celebrated their inauguration with due pomp at Antioch. No opportunity was lost of bringing Caracalla into prominence. It strengthened Septimius's own position to have a recognized successor. The conspiracies in which Caligula, Nero, Domitian and Commodus had met their ends would have been hampered, had there been a co-emperor possessed already of the necessary powers to assume sole authority.

The new consuls returned to Rome overland through Asia and the Danubian provinces. Dio relates anecdotes connected with the journey which illustrate the enormous power and growing

arrogance of Plautianus, the praetorian prefect. Like Septimius a native of Lepcis Magna and a boyhood friend, he had been constantly at Septimius's side since his accession. On their arrival in Rome, Plautianus's daughter was married to Caracalla with vast ostentation, although Caracalla loathed his new wife and father-in-law. There were spectacular shows and lavish donations to the praetorians and the people. But once again Septimius left Rome after only a few weeks there, this time for his native Africa. He spent the winter of 202–3 at Lepcis, which he embellished with a vast building programme, and where the first signs of estrangement between Septimius and Plautianus became apparent, apparently because Septimius saw Plautianus getting too much of the hometown adulation which Septimius felt should be his. There were visits to other parts of the province and a campaign against the desert tribes. Lepcis, together with Carthage and Utica, was granted the *ius Italicum*, or immunity from provincial taxation. For the past five years the legate of the 3rd Legion *Augusta* at Lambaesis had been extending and strengthening frontier works along the edge of the desert. Septimius now created the province of Numidia out of what had been *de facto* since Caligula's time the independent military command of the legionary legate (page 132), and inscriptions suggest that he may himself have visited Lambaesis, probably on a tour of inspection of the new frontier works (*CIL* viii.2702, 18250).

Septimius's return to Rome was marked by fresh celebrations, including the dedication of his great arch in the forum, between the Senate House and the Rostra. Preparations were also set on foot to celebrate the Secular Games in the following year (204), calculated to be two *saecula* of one hundred and ten years apiece since the Augustan celebration of the Games. This was to be the seventh and, as it proved, the last celebration. For the year after (205), Caracalla and Geta were to share the consulship. Plautianus's position was weakened. Details are obscure. None of our sources is as satisfactory as for the earlier part of the reign. Dio, however, continues to record significant anecdotes and scenes of which he was often an eyewitness. His account of Plautianus's fall is detailed enough, and no doubt true in substance, although it leaves a number of questions unanswered. Caracalla set up an apparent plot by Plautianus against himself and Septimius, and when

Plautianus appeared to answer the accusation, Caracalla had him killed on the spot, Septimius not interfering (Dio lxxvi.2). Herodian's version smacks of official apologetics. Plautianus's confiscated wealth was so enormous that a special procurator was appointed to administer it.

Two new praetorian prefects were appointed, one a soldier, formerly Prefect of Egypt, the other the distinguished jurist, Papinian (Aemilius Papinianus). The *Augustan History* records that 'some say' that he was related to Septimius through his second wife (*Augustan History, Caracalla* 8), which would imply that he was from the East, if the second wife was Septimius's. But the passage is ambiguous, and may in any case be fiction. Certainly the other two great jurists of the age, Ulpian (Domitius Ulpianus) and Julius Paulus, were both easterners. Septimius himself gave much time and care to administering the law, as Dio records; he himself was one of Septimius's legal advisers. To Ulpian we owe the definitive formulation of the principle that the emperor is above the law (page 212), but Septimius and Caracalla nonetheless declared their intention to live in accordance with the laws. This did not however prevent them from putting senators to death without trial, and Dio's stories vividly attest the terrorized attitude of the Senate as a whole. Septimius's position was secure, but the arrogant behaviour of his two sons and their evident mutual hostility augured badly for the future. When news arrived from Britain in the course of 207 that 'the barbarians there were rebelling, overrunning the country, taking away booty and creating destruction' (Herodian iii.14), Septimius took the chance to get himself and his sons away from the demoralizing atmosphere of Rome.

The governor of Britain was yet another African, Lucius Alfenus Senecio from Cuicul (Djemila), that most beautiful and idyllic of Roman sites (plate 7b); he had been governor of Coele Syria and was presumably a man of proved military talent. Albinus had stripped Britain of troops in 196, and the northern tribes had seized their opportunity to plunder and destroy. Archaeology suggests that the destruction was widespread, involving even the legionary base at York, although the dating of some of the evidence is controversial, and restoration work in the Pennines had still not been finished as late as 205 (*AE* 1963, 281, from Bainbridge).

Senecio took over in that year, and had some military success over the next two years, but something more was needed if the situation was to be fully restored. So he asked for 'reinforcements . . . or a visit from the emperor' (Herodian iii.14). Septimius decided to bring the reinforcements himself, although his health was no longer good, and for most of the journey he had to ride in a litter. Commemorative coins naturally portray him on a horse, like David's portrait of Napoleon crossing the Great St Bernard Pass on a prancing white charger, familiar from Courvoisier brandy advertisements. In fact Napoleon rode a donkey. Septimius's mind was still active, and he still struck like lightning. The rebellious tribes sued for peace at his approach, but their overtures were rejected. Septimius was aiming at a signal and decisive victory.

The campaign cannot be reconstructed in detail. Dio's account is fragmentary, Herodian's is vague. Archaeology reveals something of the careful logistical preparation. The fort at South Shields, for instance, on the Tyne estuary, was transformed into a massive supply base, and there is evidence of great new building at Corbridge, perhaps with the same end in view, perhaps to create a new legionary headquarters. Marching camps revealed by air photography extend through the Lowlands and up the east coast of Scotland almost to the Moray Firth. Those in the Lowlands are some 165 acres (67 hectares) in extent, and those north of the Firth of Forth fall into two series, of 120 and 63 acres (49 and 26 hectares) respectively, perhaps representing two separate divisions of the army, or possibly two successive campaigns. In any case the scale of operations is impressive, and the construction of a permanent base at Carpow on the south bank of the Tay suggests that Septimius intended to advance the Roman frontier to the Antonine Wall once more, and indeed beyond.

Caracalla shared with his father the front-line command, Geta was left in charge of the lines of supply. Caracalla's hatred of his brother was unconcealed, and Dio has a story, scarcely credible, but for that reason unlikely to be altogether untrue, that Caracalla once threatened to kill his father in full view of the army (Dio lxxxvi.14). Septimius had no illusions about Caracalla's character, and Dio alleges that he even thought of putting him to death while there was still time, as he claimed Marcus Aurelius ought to have done with Commodus, but he could not bring himself to do it. He

made Geta co-emperor, belatedly, it might be thought, since he was less than a year younger than his brother; but perhaps it might have been thought that it would cause practical problems to have three co-emperors at once. Now it did not matter. Septimius knew he had not long to live. During the winter of 209-10 he returned to York, where he continued to attend to the routine business of the Empire, such as legal rulings and embassies (how long did it take to get a despatch from Antioch to York and back? cf. page 139). When rebellion broke out again, Caracalla went north alone to deal with it, and allegedly used the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the army. Septimius died at York on 4 February 211. His last words, which Dio claims to give *verbatim*, were to his sons: 'Do not disagree with each other, enrich the soldiers, despise everyone else' (Dio lxxvi.15).

Caracalla tried to get the army to accept him as sole emperor, but failed. Geta was popular, partly because he looked very like his father. Caracalla then made peace, abandoned the territory that had been won, including the new and as yet unfinished base at Carpow, and returned to York, where he and Geta acquiesced in a show of reconciliation, on the urging of their mother Domna. Then they left for Rome, where they made little attempt to conceal their mutual hostility. Geta appears to have been the more cultured and was preferred by the Senate. It did him little good. Before the end of the year Caracalla had had him murdered, and proceeded to obliterate his portraits and inscriptions. He himself reigned for just over five years, until murdered in April 217 by one of the praetorian prefects, Opellius Macrinus. Dio hated him, and neither his nor Herodian's account of the reign is reliable.

It is ironical that an emperor so little loved and who achieved so little should nonetheless be responsible for one of the landmarks of Roman history, the issuing of an edict, granting Roman citizenship to virtually all free inhabitants of the Empire. This edict, the so-called *constitutio Antoniniana*, dating from 212 (attempts to prove another date do not succeed), may have been the idea of one of Caracalla's legal advisers, rather than his own. Papinian had died in the purge of Geta's presumed supporters, but Ulpian and Paulus were still active. It has proved a gold mine for modern scholarship. Dio claims that its purpose was to raise money by making everyone liable to taxes on citizens, such as inheritance taxes, which were

doubled, and taxes on the manumission of slaves (Dio lxxviii.9). It may seem more significant to posterity than it seemed at the time. It is not even mentioned on the coinage. The distinction between citizen and non-citizen had already been replaced in practice by that between *honestiores* and *humiliores* (page 214). The precise scope of the edict is unclear, particularly the meaning of *dediticii*, who were excluded from its provisions. Nor is it clear that it really promoted popular identification with Rome in a sort of supranational patriotism, as is sometimes claimed. The upper classes already knew where their interests lay, and to the lower classes it no longer made much difference.

Macrinus did not last long. He was the first emperor from outside the Senate, and Dio is predictably horrified by his disregard for established custom. But he was also incompetent, and lost the respect of the troops. Julia Domna had been ousted by Macrinus from any position of influence, and committed suicide, but her sister, Julia Maesa (plate 8a), who was at Emesa, did not give up so easily. The eldest of her grandchildren, aged fourteen, had succeeded to the hereditary priesthood of Elagabalus in that city. He closely resembled his cousin Caracalla. He was proclaimed to be Caracalla's illegitimate son and acclaimed emperor under the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, although he is always known to posterity by the name of his god, Elagabalus. Macrinus was defeated in battle near Antioch on 8 June 218, and the Senate accepted the new emperor. He proved to be a religious fanatic with bizarre sexual proclivities. We must disallow most of the stories in the *Augustan History*, but they show what a fertile imagination could invent when presented with so suggestive a subject. Elagabalus forfeited any support, and to preserve her own position his grandmother prudently had him murdered (12 March 222), having previously arranged for him to adopt his cousin, another grandson, who succeeded under the name Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander.

Severus Alexander reigned for thirteen years. His grandmother Maesa soon died, but his mother, Julia Mamaea (plate 8a), became his adviser. Details cannot be recovered. The *Augustan History* life of Severus Alexander is one of the most fictional. In fact, the most important event of the reign happened outside the Empire. In 226, after a dynastic struggle, Ardashir (Artaxerxes)

was crowned king, not of Parthia, but of the Persian Empire. Dio records the alarm inspired by the prospect of a newly expansionist power beyond the Euphrates. In 230 Ardashir invaded the province of Mesopotamia and threatened Syria. Severus Alexander took the field, and apparently restored the *status quo*. But in the meantime the Germans were making trouble. Alexander returned to Rome and thence went on to take command on the Rhine. By early 235 he was ready for war, but tried to avoid it by negotiation and the offer of subsidies. The troops refused to accept this, and murdered him. His successor, the Thracian Maximinus, had risen from the ranks. Physically enormous, he was brutal and uncultured, a sort of Idi Amin. He did not last long, and the next fifty years of military anarchy were the nadir of the Empire, with the different provincial armies making and murdering emperors and pretenders virtually at will. The reforms of Diocletian, emperor 284–305, were continued by Constantine, and the fourth century saw new beginnings, although the changes were more gradual and less extensive than scholars have often assumed (Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire*, Chapter 1).

The Severan dynasty had lasted for almost forty-two years, with the brief interlude of Macrinus's rule. What had it achieved? Septimius had been the greatest expander of the Empire since Trajan a century earlier. Perhaps he was lucky not to have to deal with strong attacks on the eastern and northern frontiers simultaneously; perhaps his own aggressive measures forestalled such attacks. It has been argued that by weakening Parthia he facilitated the rise of the new Sassanid dynasty that was to prove so difficult a neighbour to his successors. But his achievements suggest that Rome was not yet militarily or economically enfeebled to the point of being unable to defend her frontiers. It was the military anarchy of the half century from the death of Severus Alexander to the accession of Diocletian that so fatally weakened the defences of the Empire by turning the legions from their task of facing external foes to the more profitable pastime of civil war. The way that Albinus stripped Britain of its defences to serve his own ambition had already given a foretaste of what was to come, on a larger scale and at points on the frontier far more vital than Hadrian's Wall.

Economically, it is true, Severus's policies imposed a strain on the Empire's resources. He was, as we have seen, lavish with donations. His building activity was considerable, including major buildings at Rome, and Dio criticizes it as wasteful (lxxvi.16). He increased the size of the army and the soldiers' pay. Significantly, Ulpian defines the word *tributum* (tribute, taxes) as what is 'paid [tributum] to the soldiers' (*Digest* LV.xvi.27). The upkeep of the army was the most conspicuous form of government expenditure. Coinage, progressively debased, was issued primarily to pay the troops. But the Empire was still relatively prosperous: it was in the half-century of anarchy following the Severan dynasty that inflation became chronic, that taxes drove men to abandon their property, that the curial class found their responsibilities an unbearable burden (pages 220, 236).

Severus's contempt for the Senate is the chief impression left by his deathbed advice to his sons, and the Senate repaid him with dislike. This still redounds to his discredit with most modern historians, who unconsciously assume that they would have been senators if they had lived in Roman times. But did the Senate deserve respect? Individual senators may have been men of worth, but the Senate as a body was consistently servile and self-seeking. Dio, moreover, himself a leading senator, praises Septimius's intellect, though being rather patronizing about his lack of education; he recognizes also his loyalty to his friends, his foresight, his generosity and skilled financial management (lxxvi.16). Less can be said of his successors. Caracalla was a bad lot, Elagabalus worse, and Severus Alexander remains a vague figure for want of evidence. The women, after Septimius's death, were the backbone of the dynasty. It would be interesting to see what Tacitus would have made of them. Julia Domna and her sister Maesa in particular were women of guts and resource. Domna had intellectual interests, and it was she who encouraged Philostratus to compose his *Life of Apollonius*, though the extent of her 'circle' has been much exaggerated. Maesa's determination to secure her own and her family's position by ruling through a grandson suggests a grasp of political reality and a ruthlessness that in the outcome are impressive if not wholly admirable. The next generation, Maesa's daughters Soemias and Mammaea, are more shadowy figures, partly for want of evidence.

Two trends that did not begin with the Severans reach new heights under their rule: one is the development of Roman law, the other the power and influence of the provincials. Nothing better illustrates the importance which lawyers had acquired than their appointment, beginning with Papinian, as praetorian prefect. Papinian is often regarded as the greatest of all Roman lawyers. Papinian and the other two great lawyers of the Severan age, Ulpian and Paulus, between them account for over half the entries compiled three centuries later into Justinian's *Digest*, and it can plausibly be argued that they have had more influence on posterity than any other Latin writers, even Vergil, Cicero or Ovid. Their view of law, transmitted through Justinian's compilers, has shaped European law and society since the revival of legal studies in the twelfth century and still underlies the European legal tradition in its various national guises today.

As for the growing power and influence of the provincials, which naturally implies a reduction in the special privileges of Italy, we have already mentioned the number of Africans prominent in public life. Septimius's rise to the throne is part of the African surge, not a cause of it. It has been calculated that out of 106 men most prominent in the reign of Septimius Severus, and of whom 76 can be identified with at least some probability as to their place of origin, 35 were African (nearly half). But Italians continue to be found in positions of authority, along with men from the other western provinces. We should not attribute to Septimius a conscious policy of 'provincialization' of the Senate, nor did he set out deliberately to favour provincials and exclude Italians elsewhere in the public service. Similarly, it has been calculated that the Severan period saw a striking increase in the number of provincials holding procuratorships, equestrian posts in the army and centurion's rank, but again it cannot be shown that this was deliberate policy rather than the continuation of a trend already begun. It is true that more centurions now come from the more backward areas of the Empire, particularly from the Danubian provinces, and that equestrian commissions were now more freely given to men risen from the ranks, so that army officers in general were of lower social standing and less allied to the propertied classes of the Empire than before. It is also true, as we have seen, that Septimius disbanded the old praetorian guard, which had

been largely the preserve of the Italians. This foreshadows the total eclipse of Italy and the split between army and civilian in the later Empire. The Severan age, in this as in so many respects, is one of transition, carrying on trends already well established over the preceding centuries, and at the same time pointing the way towards the Empire of Diocletian, Constantine and their successors. In the West, the Empire fragmented under the impact of barbarian invasions, and the Arabs overran the eastern provinces, but much that was Roman survived (Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire*, Chapter 12). The shift of the capital of the Caliphate from Damascus to Baghdad was more disruptive than the conquest itself, just as the conquest of North Africa had less immediate impact than the Arabs' subsequent introduction of new crops such as sugar cane and new agricultural techniques.

The medieval West may have seen itself as Rome's heir, but we know it better than the Caliphate, and commonly underestimate Rome's influence on the latter. Children seldom learn how backward Europe was at the time of the Crusades, compared to the Middle East. As for Byzantium itself, though the rulers worked and thought in Greek, they thought of themselves as 'Romaioi', and are so remembered: 'Banish then, O Grecian eyes, the passion of the waiting West! / Shall God's holy monks not enter on a day God knoweth best / To crown the Roman king again, and hang a cross upon his breast?' We find still stronger testimony to Rome's power over the imagination in *Y Gododdin*, when Celtic warriors rode out from Edinburgh to confront Germanic invaders in Yorkshire at a time when there was no longer any Roman authority in the whole island, and felt and called themselves Roman. Charlemagne had himself crowned emperor of Rome on Christmas Day 800 to found what was to become the Holy Roman Empire. Rome inspired awe: 'What wert thou, Rome, unbroken, when thy ruin / Is greater than the whole world else beside?' (Hildebert of Lavardin [1056-1133], trans. Helen Waddell, *More Latin Lyrics*, 263). By the early twentieth century, the German Kaiser and the Tsar of Russia still rejoiced in the title of Caesar, though ruling from capitals which had never been part of the Roman Empire, so strong was the imprint of Rome's authority and the magic of her name.

Latin remained for centuries the common tongue of Europe, and

for several more the language of the Catholic Church. From Roman law flowed both canon and secular law codes, and even in the nineteenth century it was to Roman law that the slave states of the South turned to frame their laws for the 'peculiar institution'. Classical Latin poetry and Roman oratory were models in a living tradition, echoed and imitated: 'The great Age of the Augustans', wrote Helen Waddell, 'is to us a thing set in amber, a civilization distinct and remote like the Chinese . . . To the mediaeval scholar, with no sense of perspective, but a strong sense of continuity, Virgil and Cicero are but the upper reaches of the river that still flows past his door' (*The Wandering Scholars*, p. ix). Paradoxically, it was the once persecuted Christians who absorbed, preserved and transmitted what remained of Rome's heritage in the West. Although the Church had a wholesome fear of the power of pagan literature, 'and not only pagan literature, but the whole sensible appearance of things', as Paulinus of Nola warns us, it was the Church that continued to teach the classics, and but for the Church, to quote Helen Waddell again, 'the memory of them would have vanished from Europe'.