

MAPPING THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

JOHN NICOLS

The Greek philosopher and sophist Protagoras would surely not mind this reuse of one of his most famous statements. "Concerning the crisis of the third century, I have no means of knowing whether there was one or not, or of what sort of a crisis it may have been. Many things prevent knowledge including the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life."¹ Within these proceedings one finds striking disagreement about whether there was a crisis as the term has been conventionally understood. And, if there was one, when did it begin? Dictionaries define our word crisis as: "An unstable condition, as in political, social, or economic affairs, involving an impending abrupt or decisive change". During the years 235 to 285, the Roman Empire surely did enter a period of instability. The patterns of 'emperor making and breaking' and of barbarian invasion during this period mark in my estimation the characteristics of a major political crisis. Indeed, when one compares the overall stability of the Roman imperial system and government of the mid-second to that of the mid-third century, the differences are readily apparent both in terms of leadership and defense.² In sum, that there was a 'crisis' is a fundamental assumption of this paper; but it is also a demonstrable proposition. I am moreover especially concerned here not only how to understand the nature of the crisis as a complex set of related events, but also how to explain the complexities of the crisis to others, especially to students.

One has only to read the standard textbooks on the subject to get a sense of the problem that has been examined within these proceedings. Some historians overwhelm the reader with details on the lives of emperors elevated and eliminated. Other historians try to grapple with the equally obscure accounts of the crisis as preserved in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. That the 'lives' of emperors for the period 238–252

¹ Originally in reference to the existence of the gods, *DK* 80b4 (*DK* refers to the edition by H.A. Diels and W. Kranz (eds.), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin 1966–1967).

² On this issue see Wim Jongman's contribution in this volume.

are missing from this collection does not facilitate the discussion. Mapping the crisis in a cartographic sense does, in my opinion, bring some much needed clarity to the problem, and that is the contribution of this paper. Here I am taking what economists would rightly label a macro approach to the crisis. In particular, I hope that by both mapping the events and graphing some of the factors we can arrive at a representation of the problem that focuses on the critical issues and also is comprehensible to students. It is also my hope that such an account may provide some guidance for scholars attempting to place their studies of individual elements into a larger perspective.

Generally speaking, the crisis had internal and external dimensions. As noted above, the most visible signs of the crisis were:

- the readiness of the soldiers to make and break emperors [a variant of the *arcantum imperii* thesis of Tacitus], and
- the increasingly invasive barbarian intrusions deep into the Roman Empire.

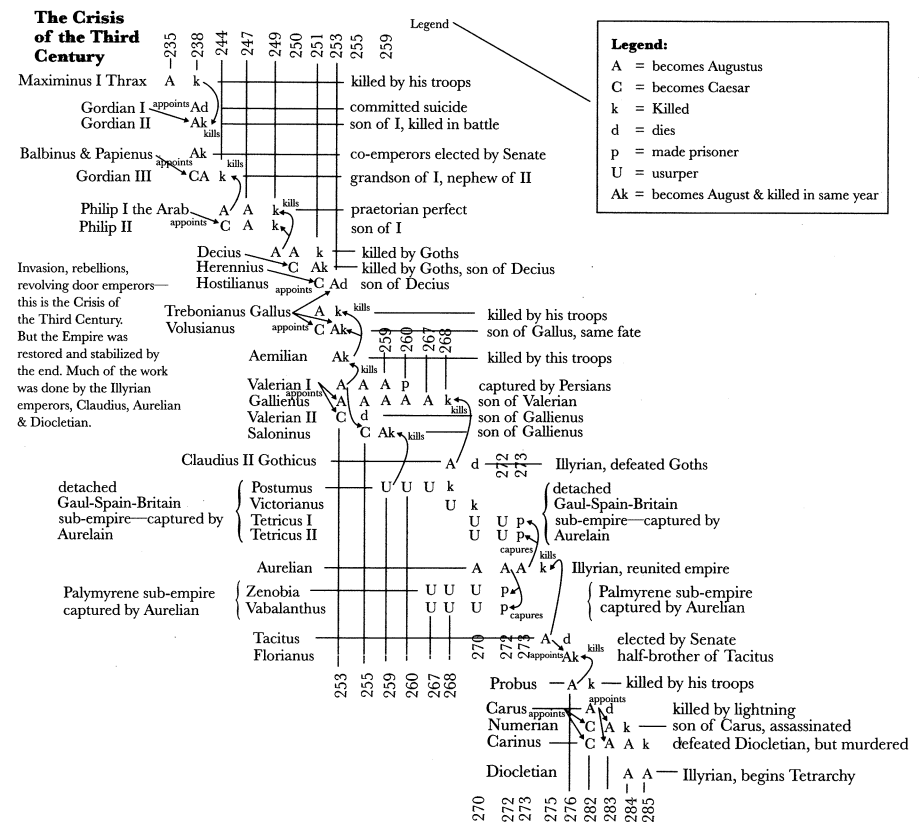
Indeed the two phenomena are closely related: increasing pressure on the frontiers made the martial prowess of the army more essential to the survival of the Empire, just as the readiness of the armies to compete with one another, each to place its own man at the head of the state, served to weaken the ability of the army to defend the Empire. How did these factors interact? And was one more important than, or prior to the other?

To understand what follows it is important for the reader to turn to the Mapping History site on the Internet. This project, supported by grants from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and various private donors in the United States, provides a set of interactive and animated maps on a variety of historical problems. The URL is: <http://mappinghistory.uoregon.edu>.

Open the section devoted to European history, and select the module entitled "Crisis of the third Century". The two elements mentioned above, namely emperor making and invasions, have been summarized in a variety of maps and charts. Following a brief introduction to the problem (I), the user turns to a set of maps (II) that illustrates the ebb and flow along the frontiers. From the principate of Augustus until the mid second century, it was the Romans who took the initiative on the frontiers. From 150 until about 230, the frontiers stabilized and a rough balance of power was established. After 240, the Roman frontiers broke down at many points from the North to the Black Seas and beyond. In the following section (III) the course of the third century is

displayed in more detail. Most importantly, the sequence of events is displayed in a manner that lends support to the theory that it was first and foremost the breakdown of internal order that undermined the defense of the empire. Thereafter (IV), data are presented that summarize visually many of the chief components of the crisis. Specifically, we consider the changes in wages of soldiers [rising], the silver content of coinage [declining], and changes in climate that might have affected the barbarians along the northern frontier. Finally we offer a general model to explain the crisis.

Before going into the details of the module, it is worth considering how the basic problems are typically represented. Regarding the changes in regime, consider the attached chart (reused with permission of the author Kelley Ross). Here the details can overwhelm even an advanced student. When I show this chart to students who are uninitiated into the study of the crisis, their immediate response is: "It is a mess! Do I have to know the details?"



More to the point: After the stable transfer of power during the second century, the readiness of the armies to replace the emperor violently is striking and undeniable. The events of 41, 69, 96 and 193 certainly may be perceived as anticipating the wave of imperial assassinations that characterize the mid third century. Nonetheless the earlier events, though in some cases traumatic, had been brief and in each case the imperial system had stabilized and produced yet another generation of stability. In this sense the events of the third century have to be seen as a categorical departure from the earlier pattern [see below].

Regarding the invasions, consider this map.

Admittedly, the map itself covers a much longer period than the one under discussion, but the problem is the same, namely the map (and others like it) gives the impression that the European part of the Roman Empire was subject to constant invasion over a two hundred year period.³ Yet this scenario clearly exaggerates the nature of the crisis in respect to invasions. We are not dealing with continuous and devastating incursions, but rather with raids that affected certain parts of the Empire more dramatically than others. Moreover, it is readily apparent that many parts of the Empire had no direct contact with the invaders. Of course, this is not to deny that anxiety about invasion was wide-spread or that those who were spared direct attacks, were unaffected by disaster elsewhere.⁴

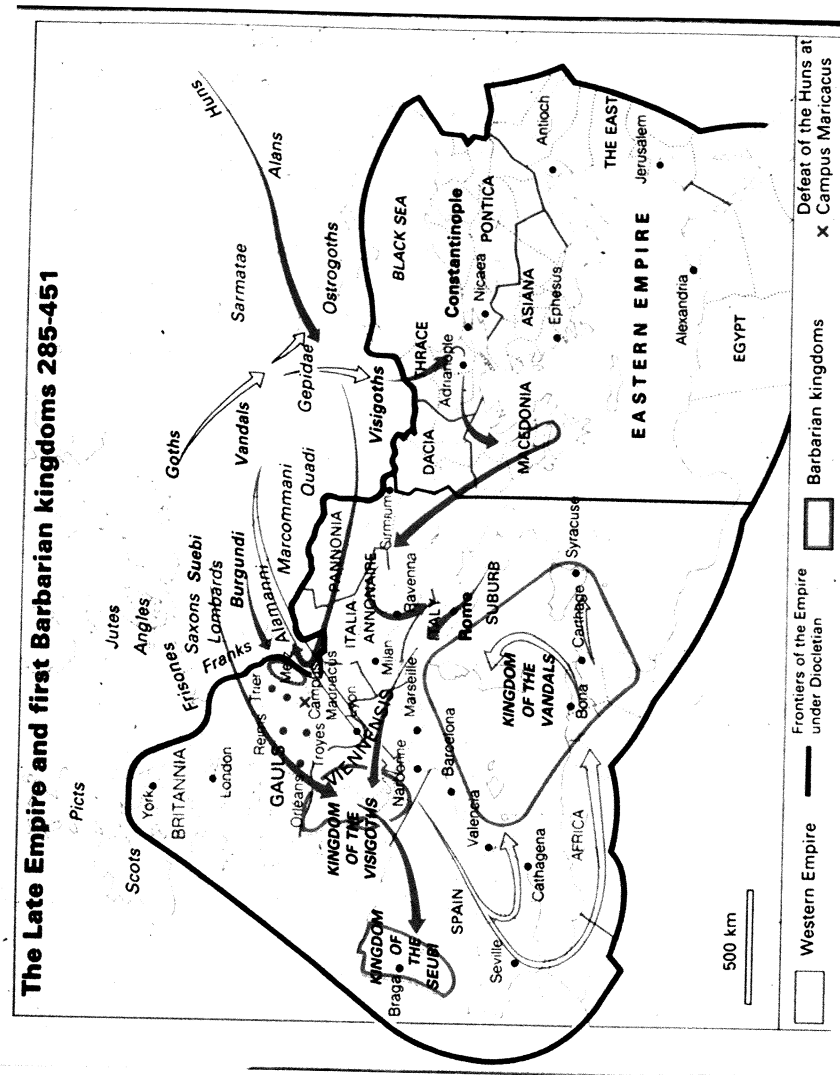
In the Mapping History project, we have tried to expand on the conventional representations of the problems in two ways. First, we have developed animated maps that illustrate the evolution of the problem more effectively than static maps can. Second, we have tried to use a variety of graphic images to illustrate the underlying nature of the historical problem.⁵

A closer look at the period from 200 to 285 (III) provides more insight into the problem. In this set of maps, we illustrate both the events on the frontiers and the emperor-making tendencies of the Roman armies. As the crisis evolves, it is more and more apparent that the emperor 'making and breaking' was already frequent before the major barbarian incursions penetrated deeply and widely into the

³ This map has been circulating on the internet for many years, and I have not been able to trace its origin or credit its author.

⁴ Cf. for instance the article by Werner Eck in these proceedings.

⁵ What I am presenting is best labeled as a 'work in progress' and, indeed, I welcome suggestions that would enhance the product.



empire. Of course to many historians this will not come as a startling revelation, but the representation here provides, we believe, a more intuitive sense of the process.

Even if we can map the crisis more effectively and generate a more compelling representation of the sequence of events, we still want to know what prompted the changes. The final section of the module (IV) summarizes some of the factors that historians have introduced to explain both the internal and external dimensions of the problem.⁶

The first tab graphs the relationship between soldiers' wages and the content of silver in Roman coinage. As the wages treble, the silver content dropped from 90 to 30% and then sank even lower. As the Roman soldiers themselves were responsible for so much of the violence and demanded ever greater bonuses, it is reasonable to believe that whatever gain the soldiers made in terms of pay was undermined by the decline in silver content in their wages. Admittedly, it is not easy or necessary to claim that one was the cause of the other; but the demands for ever higher wages, and the degradation in the real value of those wages, may have demoralized the soldiers and encouraged the cycle of violence.

The second tab graphs another indicator, namely the higher cost of imperial administration. One of the strategies that the emperors used to minimize the potential internal revolt was to increase the number of provinces and to make each smaller. In theory, then, the potential rebel would find it more difficult to secure the support needed to challenge the status quo. Indeed, as the crisis deepens, the number of provinces increases dramatically, indeed doubling during the critical years between A.D. 180 and 300. Whether the doubling of provinces actually doubled the costs of the imperial system is not clear, but it is readily apparent that the administrative structure changes as the crisis deepens and that there must have been some costs associated with the shift.

The third tab provides data on the changes of climate, primarily in the regions that drain into the Black Sea. The congruence between a relatively more benevolent climate in the first and second centuries and the peace and stability of the years of the principate stands in contrast

⁶ The scholarship on these tabs derives from a variety of publications, the most important of which are K. Greene, *The Archaeology of the Roman Economy*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1986); H.H. Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World* (London and New York 1982); and P.D. Jones and M.E. Mann, "Climate over Past Millenia" *Reviews of Geophysics* 42 (2002), 1-42.

to the comparably unfavorable conditions during the third century, suggesting that a changing and less benevolent climate may have been a factor in driving the northern barbarians to enter the Roman Empire. Again, it is difficult to make the case that changes in climate could be the sufficient cause to explain the movement of barbarians during this period, but when taken together with the other factors represented here, a more coherent pattern of cause and effect may be deduced.

In the final section we offer a model to explain the process. During the first and second centuries there were sufficient resources/surpluses available to cover the cost of defense and the development of the urban infrastructure. As the costs of government rose, the surpluses were transferred to cover the rising costs of defense, especially the demands of the military. As the crisis deepened, more resources were pulled out of the cities and we begin to see a genuine process of urban decline.

Of course, these are not all of the factors that may have affected the events of the third century. Regarding the role of the army, for example, the pattern of recruitment especially after A.D. 200 suggests that the soldiers were being drawn increasingly from the provinces, and perhaps also from less urban and less civilized contexts.⁷ In this case, they may have been less sensitive to the nuances of the Augustan settlements and the need to preserve the *arcantum imperii*.⁸ Even then, it is not readily apparent why the events of 69 and of 193 failed to produce the kind of chain reaction that characterized the events of the mid third century. In the next phase of development of this module, the material relative to the recruitment of the legions will be incorporated into the model.⁹

In sum, the Mapping History project offers a system to illustrate those historical problems that lend themselves to this kind of cartographic representation. Though funding was originally provided to make available material for instructional purposes, there is no reason why the same structure cannot be employed to illustrate the scholarly data on other historical problems.

⁷ G. Forni, *Il reclutamento delle legioni da Augusto a Diocleziano* (Rome 1953).

⁸ The argument of M. Rostovtzeff in the *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1957).

⁹ As stated before, this is work in progress and I am interested in suggestions that may help address this and related problems.