

THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE



AVERIL CAMERON

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AD 284-430

AVERIL CAMERON

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Preface

THE MAIN IDEAS and emphases expressed in this book and its companion volume, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395–600*, Routledge History of Classical Civilization (London, 1993), have evolved over twenty or so years of teaching and lecturing. Although during that period the later Roman empire has become fashionable, especially in its newer guise of 'late antiquity', there is still, strangely, no basic textbook for students in English. I am very glad therefore to have been given this opportunity to attempt to fill that gap. My own approach owes a great deal to the influence over the years of my colleagues in ancient history, especially to those who have been associated with the London Ancient History Seminars at the Institute of Classical Studies. Not least among them is Fergus Millar, who initiated the seminars, and who both encouraged a broad and generous conception of ancient history and insisted on the great importance of lucid and helpful presentation. Most important of all, however, have been the generations of history and classics students, by no means all of them specialists, who have caused me to keep returning to the old problems, and to keep finding something new.

This book was written at speed, and with great enjoyment, partly as a relief from more difficult and recalcitrant projects. Though of course infinitely more can be said than is possible in this limited compass, I hope that it will at least provide a good starting point from which students can approach this fascinating period.

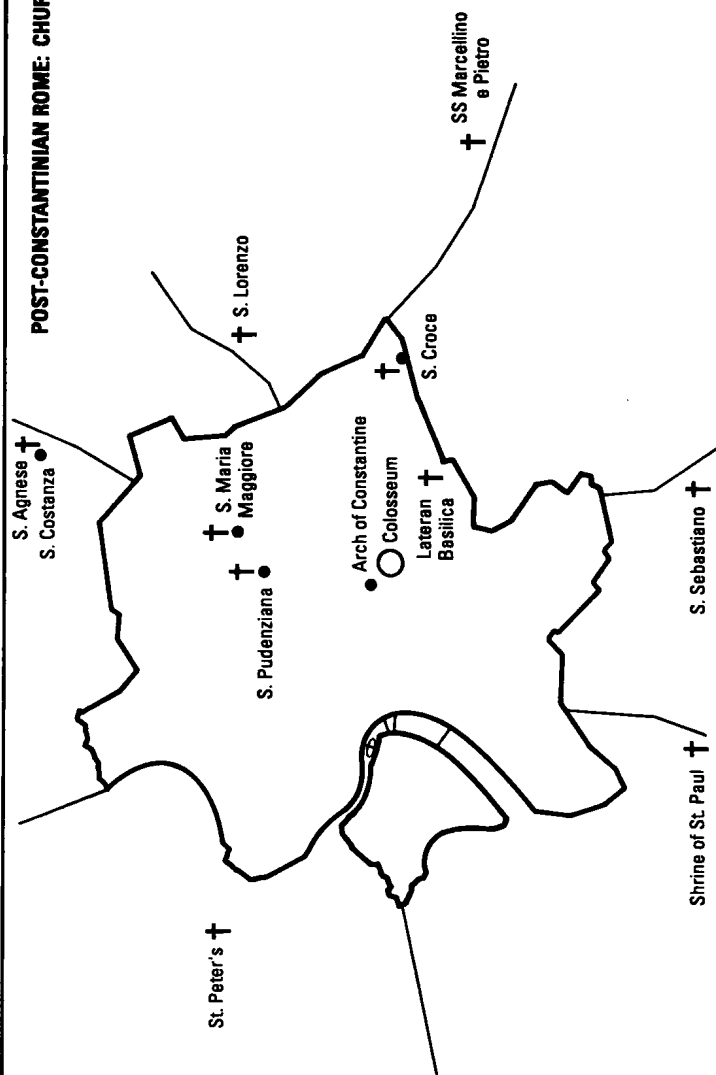
The Later Roman Empire is published in London as part of the Fontana History of the Ancient World. I am grateful to the editor

of the series, Oswyn Murray, for wise guidance, and to several others for various kinds of help, notably to Dominic Rathbone and Richard Williams. But they, needless to say, had no part in the book's defects. Following the principles of the Fontana series the book contains numerous translated excerpts from contemporary sources; in the case of Ammianus Marcellinus, such translations are taken from the Penguin edition by W. Hamilton.

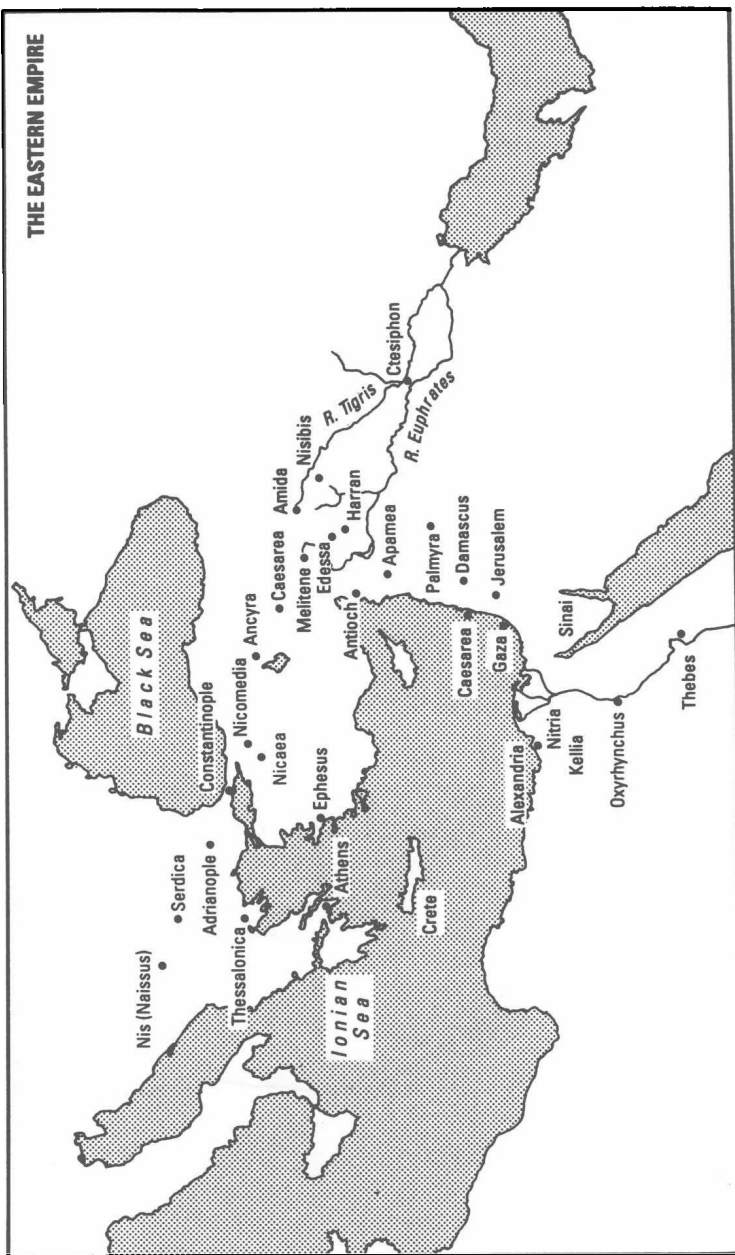
London, August 1992

Maps

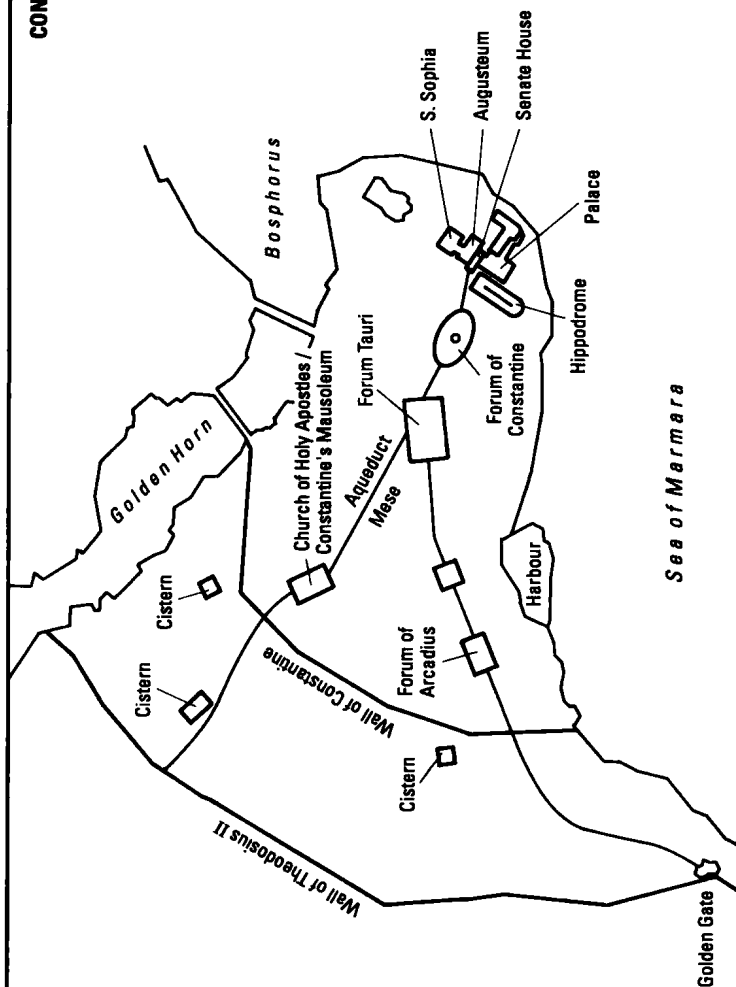
POST-CONSTANTINIAN ROME: CHURCHES



THE EASTERN EMPIRE



CONSTANTINOPIE



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I

Introduction

THE THIRD-CENTURY BACKGROUND

IT IS A MARK OF the dramatic change that has taken place in our historical perceptions of the ancient world that when the new Fontana series was first launched, the later Roman Empire, or, as it is now commonly called, late antiquity, was not included in it; now, by contrast, it would seem strange to leave it out. Two books of very different character were especially influential in bringing this change about, so far as English-speaking students were concerned: first, A. H. M. Jones's massive *History of the Later Roman Empire. A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey* (Oxford, 1964), and second, Peter Brown's brief but exhilarating sketch, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971). Of course, the subject had never been neglected by serious scholars, or in continental scholarship; nevertheless, it is only in the generation since the publication of Jones's work that the period has aroused such wide interest. Since then, indeed, it has become one of the major areas of growth in current teaching and research.

The timespan covered in this book runs effectively from the accession of Diocletian in AD 284 (the conventional starting date for the later Roman empire) to the end of the fourth century, when on the death of Theodosius I in AD 395 the empire was divided between his two sons, Honorius in the west and Arcadius in the east. It is not therefore so much a book about late antiquity in general, a period that can plausibly be seen as running from the fourth to the seventh century and closing with the Arab invasions, as one about the fourth century. This was the century of Constantine, the first emperor to embrace and support Christianity, and the founder of Constantinople, the city that was

to become the capital of the Byzantine empire and to remain such until it was captured by the Ottoman Turks in AD 1453. Edward Gibbon's great work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, carries the narrative to the latter date, regarding this, not AD 476, when the last Roman emperor in the west was deposed, as the real end of the Roman empire. Few would agree with Gibbon now, but historians are still quarrelling about when Rome ended and Byzantium began, and in their debate Gibbon's highly-coloured perception of the moral decline which he thought had set in once the high point of Roman civilization under the Antonine emperors in the second century AD was passed remains highly influential. All writers on the fourth century must take a view about what are in fact highly subjective issues: was the regime of the later empire a repressive system which evolved in response to the chaos which had set in in the third century? Can we see in it the signs of a decay which led to the collapse and fragmentation of the Roman empire in the west in the fifth century? Did Constantine's adoption of Christianity somehow assist a process of decline by finally abandoning earlier Roman values, as Gibbon thought?

All these views have been and still are widely held by historians, and permeate much of the writing on the period. It will soon be clear that this book takes a different approach. Preconceptions, and especially value judgements, cannot be avoided altogether in a history, but they certainly do not help either the historian or the student. Moreover, we are much less likely today, given the challenge to traditional values which has taken place in our own society, to hold up the Principate as the embodiment of the classical ideal, and to assume that any deviation from it must necessarily represent decline. Finally, we are perhaps more wary than earlier generations of historians of the power and the dangers of rhetoric, and less likely than they were to take the imperial rhetoric of the later Roman empire at face value. The period from Diocletian onwards is sometimes referred to as the 'Dominate', since the emperor was referred to as *dominus* ('lord'), whereas in the early empire (the so-called 'Principate'), he had originally been referred to very differently, simply as *princeps* ('first citizen'). But the term *dominus* was by no means new; moreover, what the fourth-century emperors wanted, and how they wanted to appear, was one thing; what kind of society the empire was as a whole was quite another.

To gauge the difference, we must start not with Diocletian or the 'tetrarchic' system which he instituted in an attempt to restore political stability – according to Diocletian's plan, two emperors (*Augusti*), were to share power, each with a Caesar who would in due course succeed him. We must start rather with the third century, the apparent watershed between two contrasting systems. Here, traditionally, historians have seen a time of crisis (the so-called 'third-century crisis'), indicated by a constant and rapid turnover of emperors between AD 235 and 284, by near-continuous warfare, internal and external, combined with the total collapse of the silver currency and the state's recourse to exactions in kind. This dire situation was brought under at least partial control by Diocletian, whose reforming measures were then continued by Constantine (AD 306–37), thus laying the foundation for the recovery of the fourth century. In such circumstances, for which it is not difficult to find contemporary witnesses, it is tempting to imagine that people turned the more readily to religion for comfort or escape, and that here lie the roots of the supposedly more spiritual world of late antiquity. But much of this too is a matter of subjective judgement, and of reading the sources too much at face value. Complaints about the tax-collector, for instance, such as we find in rabbinic sources from Palestine and in Egyptian papyri, tell us what we might have expected anyway, namely that no one likes paying taxes; they do not tell us whether the actual tax burden had increased as much as they seem at first sight to imply. While there certainly were severe problems in the third century, particularly in relation to political stability and to the working of the coinage, nearly all the individual components of the concept of 'third-century crisis' have been challenged in recent years. And if the crisis was less severe than has been thought, then the degree of change between the second and the fourth centuries may have been exaggerated too.

'The third-century crisis', 'the age of transition', 'the age of the soldier-emperors', 'the age of anarchy', 'the military monarchy' – whatever one likes to call it, historians are agreed that the critical period in the third century began with the murder of Alexander Severus in AD 235 and lasted until the accession of Diocletian in AD 284. The first and most obvious symptom to manifest itself was the rapid turnover of emperors after Severus – most lasted only a few

months and met a violent end, often at the hands of their own troops or in the course of another coup. Gallienus (253–68) lasted the longest, while Aurelian (270–5) was the most successful, managing to defeat the independent regime which Queen Zenobia had set up at Palmyra in Syria after the death of her husband Odenathus. But Valerian (253–60) was captured by Shapur I, the king of the powerful dynasty of the Sasanians who had succeeded the Parthians as the rulers of Persia in AD 224, while from AD 258 to 274, Postumus and his successors ruled quasi-independently in Gaul (the so-called ‘Gallic empire’).

This turnover of emperors (the distinction between emperor and usurper became increasingly blurred) was intimately linked with the second symptom of crisis, constant warfare, which furnished an even greater role for the army, or armies, than they had already played under the Severans. The Sasanians presented a serious and unforeseen threat to the east which was to last for three hundred years, until the end of their empire after the victories of Heraclius in AD 628. Conflict with the Sasanians was to exact a heavy toll in Roman manpower and resources. Their greatest third-century king, Shapur I (AD 242–c.272), set a pattern by invading Mesopotamia, Syria and Asia Minor in AD 253 and 260, taking Antioch and deporting thousands of its inhabitants to Persia; he recorded his victories in a grandiose inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam, with reliefs showing the humiliated Emperor Valerian. To the north and west Germanic tribes continued to exert the pressure on the borders which had caused such difficulty for Marcus Aurelius, and, before Valerian’s capture by Shapur, Decius had already been defeated by the Goths (AD 251). The underlying reasons for the continued barbarian raids and the actual aims of the invaders are still far from clear. It is a mistake to think in apocalyptic terms of waves of thousand upon thousand of barbarians descending on the empire, for the actual numbers on any one occasion were quite small. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in these incursions the third century saw the prototype of another problem which was to assume a great magnitude in the later empire, and to which was to be accorded, by many historians, primary responsibility for the fall of the western empire. At one time or another virtually all the northern and western provinces suffered barbarian invasion, as did Cappadocia, Achaea, Egypt