

# East and West in Late Antiquity

*Invasion, Settlement, Ethnogenesis and  
Conflicts of Religion*

By

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## Was There a Crisis of the Third Century?\*

Why is this question worth asking? Generations of historians have described the long series of troubles experienced by the Roman Empire in the third century as the *crisis* of the Empire, and have felt no doubt whatsoever that the word *crisis* was an appropriate description of what was happening to the Empire in that century. But today many scholars positively reject the application of this word to this period. Continuity is stressed. Transformation is the preferred term, even ‘anarchy’ is acceptable, but ‘crisis’ is out.<sup>1</sup> With at least the basic facts of the story undisputed, why is there such radical disagreement about how they are to be assessed?

When we look at the way the ‘forbidden’ word was used by earlier historians we note that it was used naively. The old *Cambridge Ancient History*, volume 12 of 1939 is entitled *The Imperial Crisis and Recovery, A.D. 193–324*, implying a crisis of 131 years, but chapter 6, written by Andreas Alföldi, under the title: ‘The crisis of the Empire (A.D. 249–270)’, implies a crisis of merely 21 years. But neither in the title of the volume, nor in the text of the chapters of Alföldi, is the word ‘crisis’ used in a precisely defined sense. Rather, it is employed in a broad sense, as a convenient, indeed obvious, word to describe a period filled with dangerous problems,<sup>2</sup> irrespective of whether you think of the period as a single long crisis, or as a succession of many crises. For depending on the temporal perspective, the word is equally suited to describe a single critical episode or a long succession of emergencies. It was certainly not proposed as an explicatory ‘model’, a technique which ancient historians did not employ in 1938.

The word ‘crisis’ appears again in the title of Ramsay MacMullen’s *Roman Government’s Response to Crisis A.D. 235–337*, published in 1976. MacMullen does not put forward a ‘model’ either. He uses the word ‘crisis’ as a convenient

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\* This article was previously published in *Crises and the Roman Empire*, in Proceedings of the Seventh Workshop of the International Network Impact of the Empire), eds. Olivier Hekster, Gerda de Kleijn, Danielle Slotjes, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007, pp. 11–20.

1 That is why L. de Blois (who still finds the word ‘crisis’ useful) thought it worthwhile to write ‘The crisis of the third century A.D. in the Roman Empire: a modern myth?’, in L. de Blois and J. Rich (eds.) *The Transformation of Economic Life under the Roman Empire*. Impact of Empire 2 (Amsterdam 2002), 204–217.

2 German: Epochenbezeichnung.

word to sum up a situation in which the strategies long used by the empire to preserve its existence proved totally inadequate, and chronic emergency forced the Roman government to innovate. The focus of the book is not on the 'crisis', but on the government's response to the challenge offered by it.

It was in the book of Geza Alföldy, *Die Krise des römischen Reiches, Geschichte, Geschichtschreibung, und Geschichtsbetrachtung: ausgewählte Beiträge* of 1989, that the concept of 'crisis' itself moved into the centre of the picture.<sup>3</sup> Alföldy argues that individuals living through the disturbed years of the third century sensed that they were living in a period of 'crisis', that is through a period of drastic deterioration of many aspects of social life, with some individuals even going as far as to interpret their alarming experiences as foreshadowing the end of the world. Alföldy's argument is based to a very large extent on Christian texts, notably passages in the writings of Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen and Commodian, but also on verses of the eighth and thirteenth Sibylline oracles, which were composed in a tradition of Jewish apocalyptic writings. In addition he draws attention to some passages from the pagan historians Dio Cassius and Herodian, which convey an extremely gloomy view of contemporary Rome.<sup>4</sup> So for Alföldy 'crisis' is the right word to describe the circumstances of the third century because crisis was what contemporaries thought that they were experiencing.

We now come to the 'enemies of crisis'. The opposition to the use of the word is comparatively recent. As far as I know, Karl Strobel's *Das Imperium Romanum im 3. Jahrhundert: Modell einer historischen Krise?*, published in 1993,<sup>5</sup> was the first important study to take this line. Incidentally it was also the first book to consider that the word 'crisis' when applied to the third century, was not just a convenient description or an evocative metaphor, but a 'model',

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3 This work by Alföldy is a collection of essays including 'The crisis of the third century as seen by contemporaries', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 15 (1974), 89–111.

4 In fact Dio Cassius certainly thought that the death of Marcus Aurelius was a turning point in that the condition of the Romans from that point onwards descended from a golden to an iron age (73.36.4). The deterioration showed itself in the tyranny of successive emperors, and above all in the repeated breakdown of discipline in the army (see especially 80.4–5 on his own experience in 229 A.D.). There is no final and systematic assessment of the condition of the empire, perhaps because of the fragmentary state of the last books of the History, but I suspect that Dio Cassius did think that there was a chronic crisis of military discipline. This would not have been an objective assessment, though certainly one based on personal experience.

5 K. Strobel, *Das Imperium Romanum im 3. Jahrhundert*, (Stuttgart, 1993).

using the term rather loosely.<sup>6</sup> His finding is that the model does not fit. But his book is not really aimed at any 'crisis model'. His approach is rather to discuss and, to his own satisfaction, refute the arguments of Geza Alföldy. His basic case is that the statements cited by Alföldy as evidence that contemporaries had reached the conclusion that they were living through a crisis of the Roman world, showed nothing of the sort. They merely record instinctive reactions to particular dangerous or threatening experiences. So the Christian texts are a response to the Decian persecution, which seemed to them to confirm the doctrine of the approaching end of the world and the subsequent second coming of Christ. Likewise the pessimistic utterances of Herodian and Dio Cassius reflect personal disappointments. Strobel argues that none of these testimonies expresses considered anxiety for the future of the empire. He also points out that by its very nature a crisis can normally only be recognized when it is over, and that this fact makes it unlikely that any Roman of the third century was in a position to diagnose a state of crisis.

Doubt whether Romans who had lived through most of the third century could in fact have reached the considered diagnosis that their society was passing through a crisis, does not rule out the possibility that a crisis had in fact occurred. Strobel addresses this issue also, but rather casually. He has not analyzed the events of the third century anything like as thoroughly as he has analyzed the texts discussed by Alföldy. He does however conclude that the events of the third century did not amount to a crisis. He even insists that, relatively speaking, the Roman world of the third century was a remarkably stable system.<sup>7</sup> He goes as far as to reject even the description of what happened in the third century as "accelerated change" (*beschleunigter Wandel*) and concludes that "change, that is structural change" (*Wandel bezw. Strukturwandel*) is the appropriate term.<sup>8</sup>

In 1999, Christian Witschel produced a social and economic survey of the condition of the Roman world in the third century, synthesising not only literary but also archaeological evidence. He is not so much concerned with the history of emperors and political and military history, as with registering the

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6 Strobel's problem is, "ob das '3. Jahrhundert' als Modell einer historischen Krise gesehen werden kann, also nicht nur in einer sachlichen Retrospektive des Historikers, sondern in der erlebten Gegenwart in der Geschichtswahrnehmung der Zeitgenossen." Strobel 1993, op. cit. (n. 5), 32.

7 "Aber selbst im Vergleich mit dem mittelalterlichen und dem neuzeitlichen Europa haben wir in der betrachteten Periode ein bemerkenswert stabiles System vor uns", Strobel 1993, op. cit. (n. 5), 347.

8 Strobel 1993, op. cit. (n. 5), 346–347.

condition of the different regions of the empire, and assessing the character and extent of change that took place in each during the course of the century.<sup>9</sup> His investigation is extremely thorough, and would seem to present a fair summary of the current state of scholarly research. Throughout his investigation he emphasizes the great variety of the changes that took place in different parts of the empire, insisting that there were positive as well as negative developments. He agrees that the empire in the fourth century was in important ways significantly different from that of the second century, but he stresses that basic structures—such as the empire itself, the literary culture of the elite, the foundations of the economy and the essentials of life in cities and countryside—remained the same. He also points out that many of the developments of the third century can be shown to have their first origins in the second century. He is prepared to allow others to apply the concept of ‘crisis’ for the extensive troubles that affected the empire in the years 250/60 and 280/90,<sup>10</sup> but this clearly is not what he thinks himself. His overall conclusion is that there was no overall crisis.<sup>11</sup> I think it is fair to say that Witschel thinks that generally speaking the concept of ‘crisis’ is one the historian of the third century can do without.

Reluctance to talk of crisis is more than the personal choice of a few individuals. It is a part of the intellectual atmosphere of the last twenty years or so. Volume 12 of the new edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History* still has a chapter “Maximinus to Diocletian and the ‘crisis’” But John Drinkwater, the author of this chapter, also notes that much recent work has taken the line that the word ‘crisis’ should not be applied to what happened in the Empire in the third century, and that the appropriate description is transformation and change.<sup>12</sup> This also seems to be the view taken by David Potter in his recent monumental *The Roman Empire at Bay A.D. 180–395*.<sup>13</sup> He too sees history as

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9 C. Witschel, *Krise, Rezession, Stagnation?: der Westen des römischen Reiches im 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Frankfurt am Main 1999), 24: “Insgesamt gesehen erscheint mir das römische Reich vom 2./1. Jh. bis zum 5./6.Jh. geprägt durch ein recht stabiles Gesamtsystem”.

10 Witschel 1999, op. cit. (n. 9), 375.

11 Witschel 1999, op. cit. (n. 9), 377, “Das römische Reich sah also im 4. Jh. an nicht wenigen Punkten anders aus als im 2. Jh. Viele dieser Veränderungen betrafen eher Äußerlichkeiten, während die politischen, sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Grundstrukturen in einem bei der Schwere der militärischen Probleme im 3. Jh. erstaunlichen Umfang erhalten blieben”. Whether we see these changes as superficial or profound is of course a matter of perspective.

12 J. Drinkwater, *CAH*<sup>2</sup> 12, 28–66, relevant 64.

13 D.S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay A.D. 180–395* (London 2004). The book includes a very detailed narrative history of the third century, which in many ways complements

a process of gradual change and transformation.<sup>14</sup> So also Averil Cameron: “these days scholars (...) will not be concerned with crisis, but rather with the myriad changes on the ground that coincide with the passing of centuries”.<sup>15</sup>

Light on the reasons for this widespread rejection of ‘crisis’ is thrown by another sentence of Averil Cameron: “There is a kind of consensus today that the concept of crisis is somehow no longer appropriate, and that instead we should use terms which are relatively value-free, such as ‘change’ or ‘transformation’”.<sup>16</sup> The word ‘crisis’ is rejected because it is not thought to be value free, because it is thought judgemental. Strobel makes essentially the same point. In his view, even a naïve application of the term crisis to the circumstances of the third century involves both preconceptions (*Vorgaben*) and value-judgements (*Wertungen*), and both of these are bound to have a distorting effect on the interpretation of the evidence.<sup>17</sup> In other words the use of ‘crisis’ offends because it is taken to be an example of judgementalism,<sup>18</sup> a state of mind the condemnation of which is deeply rooted in contemporary academic culture of the English speaking world, and in northern Europe generally.

Why the concept of ‘crisis’ should be considered ‘judgemental’ and therefore ‘politically incorrect’, is not at all obvious. After all the resolution of a medical crisis, or indeed any other crisis, need not result in the patient’s condition becoming worse. The crisis might be resolved with the affected subject being destroyed, or weakened, but also with its being restored to its previous condition, or even becoming stronger. The metaphor captures the magnitude and climacteric character of the danger, not the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of its

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the social and economic history of Witschel. Unlike Witschel, Potter does not discuss the relevance of general concepts, but generally speaking the concept of ‘crisis’ has no place in his history, except in a very limited descriptive sense as for the tide of the chapter on the consequences of the murder of Commodus.

14 It could however be objected that the ‘The Empire at Bay’ in his tide might be thought to be almost interchangeable with ‘the empire in crisis’.

15 Averil Cameron, ‘The perception of crisis’, in *Settimane di studio del centro italiano sul alto medioevo* 45 (1998), 9–31, citation is on 31. A related view is expressed in P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea, a Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford 2000), 339, “Mediterranean historiography should attempt to forego the luxury of the vision of the past in which differences can readily be explained by pointing to major, sudden, discontinuities”. But theirs is an ecological history, which is not quite the same.

16 Cameron 1998, op. cit. (n. 15), 10.

17 Strobel 1993, op. cit. (n. 5), 346–47.

18 On this tendency see my ‘Late Antiquity, and the rejection of “decline”, and multiculturalism’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 45 (2001), 1–11 (= *Decline and Change in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot 2006), no. xvii).

resolution.<sup>19</sup> But if many Roman historians today assume that to describe the condition of the Roman empire in the third century as undergoing a ‘crisis’ is equivalent to condemning the empire that emerged from the crisis as inferior, this is explicable from the historiography of the subject.

Since the Renaissance, classical Greek and Roman literature, art and politics were seen as uniquely valuable examples, and were upheld as such in the schools and universities of Europe. But this exemplary classical culture seemed to have ended around the turn of the second century. That is why what came after was characterized by Edward Gibbon as “decline and fall”, and as “senile decay of classical life and culture” (*Alterung des Antiken Lebens und seiner Kultur*) by Jacob Burckhardt.<sup>20</sup> In this perspective, the numerous troubles of the third century could be seen as the ‘crisis’ which had set classical civilization on its fatal downward path. A most influential exposition of this view was Mikhail Rostovtzeff’s *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, first published in 1926. Rostovtzeff interpreted the events of the third century in the light of the Russian revolution, and argued that the instability of the third century was essentially a class war in which the peasantry, represented by the army, fought against and confronted the middle and upper classes, and destroyed them and their culture.

The reader of Rostovtzeff’s book is led to the conclusion that the third century and its crisis, or crises, more or less finished Roman civilization. In fact however Rostovtzeff was mistaken. The famous last chapter is historically the weakest part of his great work, but the idea that ‘crisis’ necessarily involves decline has remained, and since today for many of our colleagues ‘decline’ has become a dirty word, so has crisis.<sup>21</sup> In fact quite a lot of Witschel’s case against ‘crisis’ is made up of arguments that neither at the start of the third century nor at its end was the condition of the empire weaker or inferior to what it had been in the first two centuries.<sup>22</sup>

Whether this is right or not, the fact remains that the word crisis clearly and compactly sums up a good deal of what happened in the third century. Among

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19 The mere act of diagnosing the presence of disease might—I suppose—be considered a value judgement.

20 J. Burckhardt’s title of chapter 7 in, *Die Zeit Konstantins des Grossen* (Leipzig 1852).

21 Cf. the rejection of ‘catastrophe’ in Purcell and Horden 2000, op. cit. (n. 15), 339: ‘The relatively frequent repetition of events studied—their normality—makes us want to associate ourselves with those who are reluctant to use the notion of catastrophe’.

22 Witschel 1999, op. cit. (n. 9), 375, “Auf keinen Fall war das Gesamtreich bereits um 200 von einer (Vor-)Krise erfaßt”, and 376, “Zahlreiche Kontinuitätslinien konnten durch diese global gesehen nur recht kurze Phase der Schwäche und Unsicherheit nicht nachhaltig gestört werden”.



the synonyms for the word crisis listed in the Oxford Compact Thesaurus are 'disaster', 'emergency', 'danger' and 'turning point'. There can surely be no argument that in the third century the Roman Empire faced situations of danger, emergency and disaster extremely frequently. For the first time in its existence it had to fight major wars on its eastern and western frontiers at the same time. There was an endless succession of usurpations. For some time it looked as if Gaul and the eastern provinces might break away into separate empires. There was serious inflation. The huge rise in prices following Aurelian's coinage reform can hardly be described as anything else than a currency crisis.<sup>23</sup> There were outbreaks of plague. Hardly anybody, not even Witschel, would deny, that the years 260–280 were years of extreme danger for the empire as a whole, so there is no reason why they should not be described as years of crisis. But the term could be just as properly applied to every one of the century's usurpations. Indeed the entire period from the murder of Alexander Severus to the rise of Constantine might be treated as a single, sustained crisis of the imperial office. It is in fact difficult to avoid using the term.

It is true that the empire survived and recovered. But it did so only with great effort.<sup>24</sup> In the course of the struggle a number of institutions and practices which had been basic to the functioning of the early empire were transformed. I might mention first of all the changed appearance of many city centres, and the great reduction in the use of civic inscriptions and of monuments commemorating public figures.

I have argued elsewhere that this is much more than a matter of fashion, but represents a profound transformation of the mentality of civic elites,<sup>25</sup> whose support had made it possible to administer a very large empire with very few paid officials. Then the city of Rome ceased to be the centre of the empire, and the Roman senate lost its place as the empire's deliberative assembly. Moreover

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23 M. Corbier, *CAH*<sup>2</sup> 12, 425.

24 Drinkwater is surely right to stress that the Romanisation and consequent coherence of the elite over wide stretches of the empire was a principal reason why the empire did not fall apart. See *CAH*<sup>2</sup> 12, 63, and *The Gallic Empire: Separatism and Continuity in the North-western Provinces of the Roman Empire A.D. 260–274* (Stuttgart 1987), especially 125–131, on the Roman character of the Gallic Empire.

25 Witschel 1999, op. cit. (n. 9), 376, "...allgemeines Unsicherheitsgefühl, so daß auch in nicht direkt von äußeren Eingriffen bedrohten Gebieten für eine Weile nur wenig Aktivitäten entfaltet wurden", is to my mind a totally inadequate explanation, as I have argued in 'Transformation and decline: are the two really incompatible?', in J.-U. Krause and C. Witschel (eds.), *Die Stadt in der Spätantike—Niedergang oder Wandel?* (Stuttgart 2006), 463–483, at 464. See also my *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford 2001), 11–19.

it became clear that the empire needed more than one emperor. Finally the traditional religion ceased to be taken for granted, and at the end of this period the emperor could afford to abandon and even persecute it. The abandonment of long established cults surely does reflect a change of mentality that is very profound indeed.

The word crisis implies that the dangerous pressure builds up to a climax, a decisive turning point. Difficulties of the empire in the third century built up to several climaxes, which were resolved in a succession of turning points. Nevertheless we can isolate a remarkably short span of time within which large areas of traditional civic behaviour disappeared. It was, by and large, in the years 240–250 that all over the empire the construction of monumental building and the setting up of new commemorative inscriptions (including—and this is surely significant—dedications to gods) very nearly stopped, never to be resumed on anything like the old scale. Of course if you search all over the Empire, and over decades of time, you will find exceptions to this development, and the transformation was not equally complete all over the Empire. The process was geographically and chronologically very uneven, but by and large the disappearance of evidence for monumental commemorations of civic patriotism and civic religion is far more striking than the exceptions. As far as visible remains are concerned, the period 240–250 marks the end of the early empire.

I have argued that the word crisis is an appropriate description of what happened to the Roman Empire in the third century. This does not mean that Witschel and others who have assembled evidence for gradual change and transformation are wrong. History is after all a continuous process. One development leads to another. There never is a complete break. Any significant change in society can be shown to be the result of a chain of cause and effect going back a long time. So it is not at all surprising that Witschel is able to show that many features of the empire of the fourth century have their roots in the empire of the early third, or late second, or even earlier centuries. But to insist that the historian must restrict himself to observing gradualness is bound to produce a misleading picture. It seems to me at least that both Strobel and Witschel have consistently minimized the traumatic nature of much of the third century,<sup>26</sup> as well as the magnitude and significance of the changes involved in the restoration of stability.<sup>27</sup> Emergency and catastrophe are important aspects of the historical process, and Hekster, de Kleijn and

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26 See above the generalization of Strobel cited in n. 7.

27 See above the generalizations of Witschel cited in nn. 11 and 26.

others, 2007, contains numerous examples of the serious and lasting damage caused by the civil wars and invasions of the third century.<sup>28</sup>

To argue that 'crisis' is the right word to describe the many emergencies of the third century, is not to propose the word as a 'model'. Keith Hopkins defined the term 'model', as it is used by sociologists, as the simplification of a complex reality, designed to show the logical relationships between its constituent parts. Models allow us to construct whole pictures, into which the surviving fragments of ancient source material can be fitted.<sup>29</sup> I do not think there could be a 'crisis model' in Hopkins' sense. The word crisis covers far too wide a range of critical situations. If one wants to construct a model one has to be more specific. One can construct a model of the Principate, which will help to explain the crisis of the imperial office.<sup>30</sup> Marx constructed a model of ancient society founded on slavery. According to this model the troubles of the third century represent a crisis of a slave owning society. Rostovtzeff's treatment of the third century involves the use of a Marxist model against Marx, a class war model. A model that would satisfactorily demonstrate the logical relationship between the different phenomena that constitute our knowledge of the third century would have to be a model of the structure of the empire. It would not be a 'crisis model'.

To assert that there was a crisis, or a succession of crises, in the third century is in the first place an act of description. How far the blood and tears of a 'crisis' can work as a discrete *cause* remains an open question. If we look at our own time, nobody would deny that the 1914–1918 war could properly be described as a crisis, perhaps a crisis of the European nation-states.<sup>31</sup> But does that mean that it forced the development of Europe in a direction it would not otherwise have taken? Would the central European monarchies have survived without it? Would there have been no Russian revolution, no great depression? Or would the eventual outcome have been the same, only arrived at more slowly? One can similarly ask whether the prolonged and intensifying crisis of the third century was the principal reason why there is so conspicuous a difference

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28 The bias of Strobel and Witschel and other opponents of crisis is of course an example of the contemporary intellectual tendency which prefers to treat the end of the empire without any reference to catastrophe or decay, and even tends to imply that the Roman world never came to an end at all. See B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford 2005), especially 1–10 and 182–83.

29 K. Hopkins, 'Rome, taxes, rents and trade', in W. Scheidel and S. von Reden, *The Ancient Economy* (Edinburgh 2002), 190–230, at 191–92.

30 See the article of J. Drinkwater in Hekster and others, *Crises and the Roman Empire*, 67–74.

31 Even though in most of Europe the basic social institutions survived the Great War, just as many basic institutions of Roman society survived the third century.

between the classical Roman world and the world of the fourth century?<sup>32</sup> Is it conceivable that without the crisis of the third century there would have been no Late Antiquity, or would Late Antiquity have arrived all the same, only later?

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32 R. MacMullen 1976, *Roman Government's Response to Crisis, A.D. 235–337* (New Haven, 1976), vii: “He (the historian) emerges into a gradually clearing light, but into a different country—as if he had entered the depths of Monte Bianco and discovered an exit from Mont Blanc”. This of course is hyperbole. But general acceptance that the world of the later empire is in many important respects different has generated the idea of Late Antiquity.