6.11: The Third-Century Crisis, and Late Antiquity

While the second century CE was a time when the Empire flourished, the third century was a time of crisis, defined by political instability and civil wars, which ultimately demonstrated that the Empire had become too large to be effectively controlled by one ruler. Furthermore, the increasing pressures on the frontiers, which required emperors to spend much of their time on campaigns, resulted in the decline of the importance of the city of Rome. By the end of the third century, an experiment with dividing the empire showed a different model of rule, one which lasted, albeit with some interludes, until the last Western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed in 476 CE. While the political narrative of the third century and Late Antiquity could be described as a story of decline and fall of the Roman Empire (as the British historian Gibbon famously called it), nevertheless, it was a period in which culture, and especially Christian culture, flourished and replaced the traditional Roman pagan mode of thinking. Far from being culturally a time of “decline and fall,” Late Antiquity, rather, was looking forward to the world of the Middle Ages. It was also the period of Roman history that produced some of its most influential leaders, most notably, Constantine.

6.11.1: The Third-Century Crisis and Diocletian

Although composed during a time of prosperity in the Empire, Apuleius’ novel Metamorphoses showed tensions in the provinces, indicative of the failure of Empire to govern all portions equally effectively. While not visible in the larger urban centers until the third century CE, these tensions manifested themselves clearly during the third-century crisis, a period of almost fifty years (235 – 284 CE) that was characterized by unprecedented political, social, and economic upheaval across the Empire. In effect, the third-century crisis was the year 69 CE repeated, but this time it stretched over half a century. The same secrets of power that 69 CE revealed for the first time—that armies could make emperors and that emperors could be made outside of Rome—were now on display yet again.

In 235 CE, the emperor Severus Alexander was assassinated by his troops on campaign, who then proclaimed as emperor their general Maximinus Thrax. Over the subsequent half-century, twenty-six emperors were officially...
recognized by the Roman Senate, and a number of others were proclaimed emperors but did not live long enough to consolidate power and be officially accepted as emperors by the Senate. Most of these new emperors were military generals who were proclaimed by their troops on campaign. Most of them did not have any previous political experience and thus had no clear program for ruling the empire. The competing claims resulted in the temporary breaking away from the Roman Empire of regions to the East and the Northwest.

The political instability that resulted was not, however, the only problem with which the Empire had to contend. In addition to political upheaval and near-constant civil wars, the Empire was also dealing with increasing pressures on the frontiers, a plague that devastated the population, a famine, and rampant inflation. Roman emperors, starting with Nero, had been debasing the Roman coinage, but not until the third-century crisis did the inflation hit in full force.

The third-century crisis showed that a single emperor stationed in Rome was no longer equipped to deal with the challenges of ruling such a vast territory. And, indeed, so recognized the man who ended the crisis: the emperor Diocletian. Born to a socially insignificant family in the province of Dalmatia, Diocletian had a successful military career. Proclaimed emperor by his troops in 284 CE, Diocletian promptly displayed a political acumen that none of his predecessors in the third century possessed. Realizing that, as the third-century crisis showed, a single emperor in charge of the entire empire was a “sitting duck,” whose assassination would throw the entire empire into yet another civil war, Diocletian established a new system of rule: the Tetrarchy, or the rule of four. He divided the empire into four regions, each with its own capital.

It is important to note that Rome was not the capital of its region. Diocletian clearly wanted to select as capitals cities with strategic importance, taking into account such factors as proximity to problematic frontiers. Of course, as a Dalmatian of low birth, Diocletian also lacked the emotional connection to Rome that the earliest emperors possessed. Two of the regions of the Tetrarchy were ruled by senior emperors, named Augusti (“Augustus” in the singular), and two were ruled by junior emperors, named Caesares (“Caesar” in the singular). One of the Augusti was Diocletian himself, with Maximian as the second Augustus. The two men’s sons-in-law, Galerius and Constantus Chlorus, became the two Caesares. Finally, it is important to note that in addition to reforming imperial rule, Diocletian attempted to address other major problems, such as inflation, by passing the Edict of Maximum Prices. This edict set a maximum price that could be charged on basic goods and services in the Empire. He also significantly increased the imperial bureaucracy. In a nutshell, as some modern historians have described him, Diocletian was the most significant Roman reformer since Augustus.
Diocletian's political experiment was most clearly successful in achieving one goal: ending the third-century crisis. The four men were able to rule the empire and restore a degree of political stability. A statue column of the Tetrarchs together displays their message of unity in rule: the four men are portrayed identically, so it is impossible to tell them apart. Showing their predominantly military roles, they are dressed in military garb, rather than the toga, the garb of politicians and citizens, and each holds one hand on the hilt of his sword and hugs one of the other Tetrarchs with the other.
While it succeeded in restoring stability to the Empire, inherent within the Tetrarchy was the question of succession, which turned out to be a much greater problem than Diocletian had anticipated. Hoping to provide for a smooth transition of power, Diocletian abdicated in 305 CE and required Maximian to do the same. The two Caesares, junior emperors, were promptly promoted to Augusti, and two new Caesares were appointed. The following year, however, Constantius Chlorus, a newly minted Augustus, died. His death resulted in a series of wars for succession, which ended Diocletian’s experiment of the Tetrarchy. The wars ended with Constantius’ son, Constantine, reuniting the entire Roman Empire under his rule in 324 CE. In the process, Constantine also brought about a major religious shift in the Empire.

6.11.2: From Constantine to the Last Pagans of Rome

While traditional Roman religion was the ultimate melting pot, organically incorporating a broad variety of new cults and movements from the earliest periods of Roman expansion, Christianity’s monotheistic exclusivity challenged traditional Roman religion and transformed Roman ways of thinking about religion in late antiquity. By the early fourth century CE, historians estimate that about ten percent of those living in the Roman Empire were Christians. With Constantine,
however, this changed, and the previously largely underground faith grew exponentially because of the emperor’s endorsement. The emperor’s conversion must have seemed nothing short of miraculous to contemporaries, and a miracle is told to explain it in contemporary sources. Before a major battle in 312 CE, Constantine reportedly had a dream or a vision in which Christ himself told Constantine to place the Greek letters X and P (Chi, Rho, the first two letters of Christ’s name in the Greek alphabet) on his soldiers’ shields in order to assure victory.

![Figure 2: Constantine’s Military Standard](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Book%3A_World_History_-_Cultures_States_and_Societies_t...)

Grateful for his subsequent victory, Constantine proceeded to play a major role in the government of the church over the course of his rule, although he was not baptized himself until he was on his deathbed. Constantine, for instance, summoned the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, which gathered major bishops from all over the Empire. The Council settled, among other issues, the question of the relationship of God the Father and God the Son, declaring them to have been one being from the creation of the world, thus affirming the doctrine of the Trinity. The Council set a significant precedent for communication of bishops in the Empire. It ended up being merely the first of seven major ecumenical councils, the last of them being the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE. The councils allowed the increasingly different churches of the Eastern and Western parts of the Roman Empire to work together on key doctrines and beliefs of the church.

Last but not least, Constantine’s rule marked the end of the city of Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire. Upon reuniting the Empire in 324 CE, Constantine established his capital at the old location of the Greek city of Byzantium, but renamed it Constantinople (the location of Byzantium appears on Map ![Map Index(2)]()). The location had strategic advantages for the Empire at that stage. First, it had an excellent harbor. Second, it was close to the Persian frontier, as well as the Danube frontier, a trouble area that required attention from the emperor. Finally, building this new city, to which he also referred as “New Rome,” allowed Constantine to send the message that his rule was a new beginning of sorts for the Roman Empire, which was now to be a Christian empire.

With the Emperor’s backing, Christianity seems to have grown exponentially over the course of the fourth century CE,
much to the chagrin of Julian the Apostate, Rome’s final pagan emperor, who tried hard to restore traditional Roman paganism during his brief rule (361 – 363 CE). Finally, the Emperor Theodosius gradually banned paganism altogether by 395 CE. Thus a mere eighty-three years after Constantine’s initial expression of support for Christianity, it became the official religion of Rome. Paganism continued to limp on for another century or so, but without state support, it slowly died out.

6.11.3: The Decline of the Empire—Looking Forward while Looking Back with Augustine and the Last Pagans of Rome

Imagine that you are a citizen of the greatest empire on earth. In fact, you reside in the greatest city of the greatest empire on earth. You feel protected by the pact that was made between the founders of your state and the traditional gods. The pax deorum, or peace with the gods, struck a clear bargain: as long as you and your state worshipped the gods and maintained peace with them, they would make it prosper. And prosper it did! Starting out as a tiny village on the marshes of the Tiber, the Roman Empire at its height encircled the entire Mediterranean, extending to Britain and the Rhine and Danube frontiers to the north, and including a wide strip of North Africa in its southern half. But something went so terribly wrong along the way, testing the gods’ patience with Rome. A new sect started out in Judaea in the first century CE, one which followed a crucified Messiah. Spreading outward like a wildfire to all parts of the empire, this sect challenged and gradually replaced the worship of the traditional gods, bringing even the emperors into its fold, starting with Constantine in the early fourth century CE. This outright violation of the thousand-year old pact between the Romans and their gods could have only one outcome: the ultimate punishment would come from the gods upon this rebellious state. And come it did; in 410 CE, the unthinkable happened. The city of Rome, untouched by foreign foe since the early days of the Republic, was sacked by the Goths, a Germanic tribe, led by the fearsome Alaric. How could something so terrible happen? And how could the Roman Empire recover from it? Such was the thought process of the typical Roman pagan, and especially the pagan aristocrat, as few of those as were left by 410 CE. And it was in response to these questions that Augustine, veteran theologian, philosopher, and bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote the final magnum opus of his career, the monumental twenty-two-book effort that he appropriately titled De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos, or On the City of God against the Pagans.
It is no coincidence that Peter Brown, the scholar credited with creating the academic field of study of Late Antiquity, began his career as a researcher by writing a biography of Augustine. Indeed, no other figure exemplifies so clearly the different culture that emerged in Late Antiquity, a culture of rethinking the Roman past, with an eye to a future in which Rome no longer existed as the capital of the Roman Empire. Born in North Africa in 354 CE, Augustine was educated in Rome and Milan, and, after a wild youth—about which he tells us in his Confessions—he rose to the post of the Bishop of Hippo in 396 CE. A famous figure by 410 CE, he was ideally suited to address the tragedy of the sack of Rome and the concerns that this event inspired in Christians and pagans alike.

In his book, Augustine presented an argument that challenged the core of Roman traditional beliefs about the state. Challenging the fundamental Roman pagan belief that Roman success was the result of the *pax deorum*, Augustine effectively argued that there was nothing special about Rome. It only prospered in its earlier history because God allowed it to do so. Furthermore, argued Augustine, obsession with Rome, emblematic of obsession with the earthly kingdom and way of life, was the wrong place for turning one's attention. The City of God was the only place that mattered, and the City of God was most definitely not Rome. By turning away from this world and focusing on the next, one could find true happiness and identity as a citizen of God’s kingdom, which is the only city that is everlasting and
Augustine’s message would have made the Republican hero Cincinnatus weep. For Cincinnatus, nothing was more valuable than Rome. For Augustine, however, nothing was less valuable than Rome.