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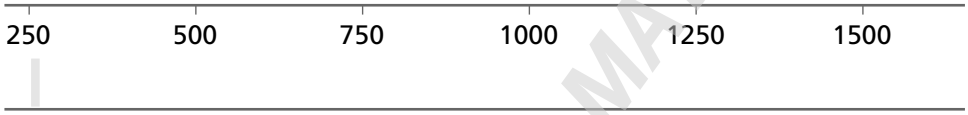
The Crisis of the Third Century



253–268 Gallienus

The Byzantine Empire does not have a proper "beginning" since it was, in fact, the continuation of the Roman state, which had begun (according to tradition) in 753 BC. A convenient starting date is the reign of Constantine, but the events of his reign cannot be understood without a consideration of the events and problems of the third century after Christ, since those set the scene for the restructuring and "revival" of Rome in the years that followed. We begin our survey, therefore, with the crisis that affected the Roman world in the middle years of the third century.

The 50 years between the death of Severus Alexander and the accession of Diocletian (235–284) witnessed the near collapse of the whole Roman way of life, from the government and military structure to the economy and the thought system that had characterized the ancient world until then. In political terms, no emperor during this entire period was secure, and nearly every one of them died a violent death at the hands of rebels. The frontiers of the empire gave way, the enemies of the state, especially in the north and the east, came flooding in, and various parts of the empire became essentially independent. Meanwhile, the economy collapsed, inflation drove prices up, and the coinage became virtually worthless. Not surprisingly, amid these difficulties there developed what we may call a cultural crisis, characterized by changes of style in art, literature, and religion. Historians often describe this period as one of "military anarchy," since few of the emperors reigned long enough to establish

dynasties or even firm policies; most of these ephemeral rulers were rough soldiers without much in the way of education or preparation for ruling the empire.

It is not entirely clear what precipitated this crisis. It has been customary to blame the emperors of this period, but it is difficult to know what could have been done, given the nearly complete collapse of the fabric of the empire. Some have pointed to a "constitutional" problem, in the sense that the Roman Empire never developed a clear means to provide for the succession – despite the fact that the empire had become essentially an autocracy. In this situation there were no clear-cut ways for an emperor to establish legitimacy, except, of course, for the "normal" situation in which an emperor selected his successor during his reign. In the first century and after AD 180 this tended to be along family lines, especially with son succeeding father, although in the second century, the "Five Good Emperors" had no sons and they arranged the succession through the choice of the "best man." When the emperor died without naming an heir, however, no clear mechanism existed for the selection of a new emperor, although this was normally achieved either by members of the civil administration (the court, the bureaucracy, and the Senate) or by the army (especially the Praetorian Guard and, rarely, the frontier troops).

On a number of occasions in the first two centuries the change of emperor was accomplished by a palace or military coup or, occasionally, through a civil war. In the period after AD 235, however, civil war became endemic and no emperor was on the throne long enough to establish his own legitimacy.

Some historians have cited other political problems to help explain the difficulties of the third century. One particularly interesting approach is to point out that the Roman Empire had never developed sophisticated or entirely adequate institutions for provincial government: instead the early Roman Empire was essentially a "federation of cities," in which the cities of the empire provided local government, while the Roman governor and the army looked after the collection of taxes, the administration of Roman justice, and defense. The local council (*curia*) was administered, and local expenses provided, by the local aristocracy, the so-called *curiales*, who had come to identify Roman interests with their own and who competed among themselves in giving gifts to the cities and providing most of the maintenance the cities required.

In the course of the second century AD, however, it became clear that the local councils were having difficulties, especially in terms of meeting the necessities of proper urban life. The ultimate cause of this phenomenon is difficult to ascertain, but it may have to do with the tendency for aristocratic families either to die out or to rise to the higher level of the imperial service and thus leave local responsibilities to the poorer families who were less able to bear the financial burden.

In this situation, the central administration had little choice except to step in – always unwillingly – to fill the void and to expend money to provide essential services and local government. All of this, of course, came at a price. The imperial administration and the imperial treasury were now required to provide resources which they had never been set up to supply and – like the unfunded mandates of modern governments – these became an enormous burden for the

central government. As a result, the government had to place a greater tax burden on its citizens to pay for increased administration at the same time as increased resources were needed to meet the military problems of the age. Regardless of the cause, the state became ever more demanding of its citizens and ruthless in the means of tax collection, while the fabric of Roman society essentially came unstuck.

End of the Severan Dynasty and the Beginning of Anarchy

Until the early third century, a series of family-based dynasties ruled the Roman world, frequently with a son succeeding a father. The last of these dynasties was that of the Severi, who reigned from 196 to 235. The last member of the dynasty was Severus Alexander, who attempted some significant reforms, in part to restore the ancient Roman Senate to a semblance of power. Severus, however, encountered difficulty when he sought personally to command a joint force, made up of troops from both east and west against the Alamanni (a Germanic people) on the Rhine frontier. The emperor constructed a bridge over the river, but he then hesitated and sought a negotiated settlement. The troops rebelled against Severus, proclaimed their commander Maximinus as emperor, and murdered the old emperor. C. Julius Verus Maximinus, usually known as Maximinus Thrax (Maximinus the Thracian) was an obscure provincial, the son of a peasant who had risen in the army thanks partly to his physical strength and size. He was the first of the so-called "Barracks Emperors," rulers, commonly from the more underdeveloped areas of the empire, who rose from the ranks of the army to seize power by force.

The Senate, although certainly upset at the loss of Severus, could do nothing other than accept the fait accompli and recognize Maximinus. The new emperor stabilized the military situation, which had been left in confusion at Severus' death, and carried out a difficult but successful campaign against the Germans, after which he had his son elevated as co-emperor. Nevertheless, opposition developed against Maximinus, especially on the part of former supporters of Severus and those who looked back with longing to the rule of a civilian emperor. There was at least one serious conspiracy, and Maximinus responded by removing most senators from positions of military command and punishing those he thought were disloyal to him.

The ancient sources are almost universally hostile toward Maximinus, in part because of the contrast he posed to the last of the Severan emperors. They accuse him of avarice and of collecting taxes using harsh and unjust measures. We may doubt that Maximinus was personally avaricious, but the needs of the state, especially military requirements, made necessary the infusion of considerable amounts of cash, and Maximinus probably could have done little else. These methods led to a revolt in the province of Africa in 238, which was supported by Gordian, the proconsul of Africa, who was a member of an old senatorial family and an educated man who had been appointed by Severus Alexander. Despite the support of the Senate, the revolt of Gordian I (and his

son Gordian II) failed, and both were killed. The Senate sought to maintain control in its own name, but the situation deteriorated after the appointment of Gordian's grandson as emperor (Gordian III), and a three-way civil war ensued, resulting in the death of Maximinus and the elevation of Gordian III by the Praetorian Guard.

The new emperor was only 13 years old, and the Senate seems to have continued to be very influential at the outset of his reign. The new government sought to curb abuses and limit the insolence and political power of the soldiers. The German frontier was at first stable, thanks to the successes of Maximinus, but the growing power of Sassanid Persia – Rome's great rival in the East – began to press on Roman territory in that direction.

In 241 Gordian appointed the equestrian Timistheus as praetorian prefect. An eloquent and well-educated man, he had served the empire in a wide variety of offices and his daughter was married to the young emperor. For three years Timistheus was the real power behind the throne and he wielded this carefully and wisely. The appearance of Timistheus came at an especially fortunate time, for in 241 Shapur I acceded to the throne of Persia and undertook an ambitious campaign against Roman territory, pushing far into Syria and threatening Antioch itself. In 243 Timistheus arrived in the East, accompanied by the young emperor, and the tide of battle turned. The Romans were successful and the whole of Mesopotamia fell again into Roman hands. A campaign against the Persian capital of Ctesiphon was contemplated, but Timistheus suddenly died, and the situation changed completely.

M. Julius Philippus, usually known as Philip the Arab, was appointed to succeed the loyal Timistheus. Philip was the son of an Arab sheik and had already attained a high position in Rome. He seems to have begun plotting against the emperor almost immediately. Food shortages among the army gave him an opportunity and, when Gordian III was assassinated by the troops in March of 244, Philip became emperor.

Philip wished most of all to have his position confirmed by the Senate, so he made a hasty peace with the Persians and returned quickly to Rome. He honored the memory of his predecessor, and the Senate had no alternative but to recognize the new emperor. Contemporaries hoped for a revival of a liberal regime under Philip and, at first, they were not disappointed. He attempted to control the troops and to reform the administration in the direction of greater fairness. Philip also sought to promote the interests of his family, and he had his young son crowned first as Caesar and then as Augustus. He was able to wage successful campaigns against the Carpi across the Danube and in 248 he presided over the celebration of the thousandth anniversary of the founding of Rome. He proclaimed the beginning of a new *saeculum* (a new millennium or a new era), and some observers might have felt optimism about the future. Nevertheless, there was considerable dissatisfaction among various parts of the army, and revolts broke out in the Danube regions and in the East. Philip offered to resign his office, but was persuaded to stay on. In this difficult situation he appointed the city prefect, Decius, as commander in the Danube area. Decius distinguished himself in this command and was therefore

proclaimed by the troops in June of 249. Even though both sides might have been willing to compromise, a civil war ensued, and Philip was defeated and killed.

Decius (249–251)

Decius wished to secure his claim to the throne, so he withdrew toward Italy, essentially abandoning Dacia to its fate. By so doing he left the frontier open to the Germanic peoples, primarily Goths, who were being pushed against Roman territory by the Alans, a nomadic people from the steppes of Asia. The Goths thus ravaged the whole of the Balkans as far south as Thrace. Decius sought to drive the invaders out, but was twice defeated by a Gothic leader named Cniva in the Dobrudja (the Danube delta in modern Romania). The Roman defeat was facilitated by the disloyalty of some of the Roman commanders, and Decius was killed in the second battle (251).

Decius is perhaps best known as one of the fiercest persecutors of the Christians. He began his persecution almost immediately after his accession and may have been the first Roman emperor who sought actively to destroy Christianity. The clergy were singled out for special attention, and the bishop of Rome was one of the first to be executed. But the persecution was widened, and ordinary citizens were questioned about their religious affiliation. In some parts of the empire the emperor required everyone to obtain a certificate saying they had sacrificed to the gods (the Romans knew that the Christians would by no means agree to this), and many of these certificates have been found, especially in Egypt. Nevertheless, despite its initial ferocity, the persecution faltered when the emperor's attention turned to the invasions, and it ceased upon his death. Further, many local officials were hesitant to carry out the imperial order and many Christians escaped with their lives.

Valerian (253–260)

The death of Decius led to civil war among the surviving commanders, and no one was able to gain a secure hold on the throne until 253. At that time P. Licinius Valerianus was nominated by the troops. He was the last representative of the old Republican aristocracy to hold the imperial office, and he sought to rule by cooperating with the Senate and by controlling the worst excesses of the soldiery. Unfortunately, the military chaos of the past 20 years had led to the complete collapse of the empire's frontier. Goths and Alamanni crossed the Danube, while the Franks first appeared in 256 and quickly overran the Rhine frontier; in the far northwest the Saxons began to attack the British coast. Meanwhile Shapur and the Persians attacked in the East. The Sassanids overran Syria and seized Antioch in 256. Valerian hastened to the East and recovered the city. He sought a negotiated settlement with the Persians in 259, but at the critical moment the Persians broke their faith and seized the

unfortunate emperor, who ended his life in captivity. As if this were not enough, in the midst of the difficulties a great plague spread over the empire.

Valerian had appointed his son Gallienus as Augustus and as his co-ruler; he had left him in Rome during the eastern campaign, and during this time Gallienus had to put down at least nine usurpers.

Secessionist states

Odenathus was the king of Palmyra, an important desert city on the empire's eastern frontier. His small state depended almost entirely upon trade, and it had developed a friendly, if dependent, relationship with Rome. Besides his economic power, however, Odenathus had assembled a considerable military force, dominated by mobile archers and heavy mailed cavalry similar to those that were the mainstay of the Persian army. Odenathus had assisted Valerian in the war against Shapur, and had received high honors from him. Gallienus then sought to make Palmyra the focus of Roman military policy in the East. Gallianus encouraged Odenathus to adopt Roman titles; the king styled himself *imperator* and *corrector totius Orientis* (supervisor of the whole East) and he was allowed to wear the laurel crown of the emperor. Palmyra defeated the Persians twice, but then Odenathus suddenly fell victim to the knife of an assassin, who may have been acting in the interests of Rome, since the king's ambitions had begun to overshadow his usefulness to Rome. Odenathus was then succeeded by his widow Zenobia, a woman every bit his equal, who ruled in the name of her young sons.

While this was going on in the East, similar developments took place in the West. Postumus, one of Valerian's best generals in the struggle against the Germans, sought the throne after the emperor's death. Civil war broke out between Gallienus and Postumus, without either side being able to defeat the other. Vast resources were directed to the civil war, at the expense of defense against the barbarians. Postumus declared himself emperor, even though he held only the northwestern provinces; he struck his own coins, had his primary residence at Trier, and set up an administration and court that paralleled that of Gallienus. This independent "Gallic Empire" was to outlast Postumus himself and to provide a dangerous precedent for the division of the empire.

Attempts toward Recovery

Gallienus (253–268)

Gallienus has earned a reputation as the emperor who presided over the virtual dismemberment of the empire. In part this reputation is the result of his general disregard for the Senate. He took most military commands from the

senators and gave them to the *equites* (members of the Roman wealthy class that was below the senators in prestige); henceforth it was unusual for senators to command the army. Gallienus developed new cavalry troops, designed essentially to counter the heavily armored cavalry of the Persians, and for the first time the Roman army began to turn away from the system based on the legionary foot soldier.

Unlike most of the soldier-emperors of the third century, Gallienus was an educated man, and a "Gallienic Renaissance" has been identified under his reign. Gallienus found a brief respite from usurpations and invasions (even though the Gallic Empire still remained unreduced), and he gathered around his court the Neoplatonic followers of Plotinus. Gallienus also wanted a religious revival and hoped to satisfy the need of the people for intimate religion by reviving the Eleusinian mysteries, one of the ancient religions that offered its members a hope of immortality and could thus perhaps compete with Christianity. He realized that the persecution of Christianity had failed to secure its desired aims, so he called a halt to the policy and returned to a position of general toleration.

In many ways the reign of Gallienus set the stage for the recovery that was ultimately to come. Yet that event was still some time off. The emperor had expended considerable energy attempting to rebuild the defenses of the empire, both by constructing military fortifications and by rebuilding the effectiveness of the army and the navy. Nonetheless, in 267 the Goths and the Heruli broke into the Balkans. They got as far as the Aegean, sacked Athens, and even attacked the cities of the western coast of Asia Minor. Gallienus won a victory over them at Naissus, but he was called back suddenly to Italy, where a revolt had broken out. As Gallienus was occupied in the reduction of the enemy, his general staff conspired against him, and the emperor was murdered (268). The Senate and the people of Rome turned their wrath against Gallienus' family members in the city, and they were massacred. The army, however, revered the murdered emperor's memory, and even his assassins continued to follow the policies set by Gallienus.

Claudius Gothicus (268–270)

One of the murderers of Gallienus, an Illyrian officer named Claudius, seized imperial power. In marked distinction to the attitude of his predecessor, Claudius openly courted the support of the Senate. He briefly contemplated an attack on the Gallic Empire, but he realized that many of the Rhine legions were of doubtful loyalty, and the Goths were still at large in the Balkans. In a brilliant military maneuver Claudius intercepted the Gothic invaders and dealt them a crushing defeat, securing the Danube frontier for years to come. From this achievement Claudius accepted the epithet Gothicus, by which he is usually known. Yet, in 270, at this moment of success, the emperor died of the plague.

Aurelian (270–275)

Upon the death of Claudius the Senate proposed the election of his brother Quintillus as emperor. Quintillus, however, had no following among the soldiers and could never make his power secure. Thus, another of Gallienus' murderers, the commander of the cavalry, Aurelian, rose in revolt, spreading the rumor that Claudius had designated him, and not Quintillus, as his successor.

If Gallienus laid the foundations for ultimate restoration, Aurelian was the first to begin to revive the power of the Roman Empire. He was, like many of the other emperors of the period, an Illyrian soldier of humble origins. Although lacking in tact and refinement, he had the major virtues of strength and determination, and his nickname *manu ad ferrum* (with hand on hilt) says a good deal about how he appeared to contemporaries. At his succession the military situation was critical: the barbarians had not been driven out of the Balkans and the Juthungi invaded Italy itself. Aurelian caught up with the latter as they moved back toward the Danube and soundly defeated them; they returned later to plunder northern Italy and the emperor again dealt them a serious blow. He drove the Vandals from Pannonia and completed the control of the frontier. Yet he realized how serious the danger had been to Rome itself, and in 271 he ordered the refortification of the city. The capital that had long been protected only by the valor of the legions was once again dependent on defenses of bricks and mortar.

In 271 Aurelian made a major policy decision that has been seen by some historians as the beginning of the dismemberment of the empire. Feeling that he could no longer afford the military expenditure required to defend Dacia (the area of modern Romania), he withdrew Roman troops and citizens from the province, and re-established the Roman frontier along the Danube.

Meanwhile Zenobia, the queen of Palmyra, had conquered almost all the East; she controlled Egypt and was moving troops into Asia Minor. Aurelian set out boldly against her in 271 and in a daring campaign moved quickly across Asia Minor, taking everything before him. Most cities opened their doors to the emperor and Egypt returned to allegiance, as Zenobia's supporters deserted her. At Antioch he first met organized resistance, including two Roman legions that had gone over to the Palmyrenes and the heavily armed cavalry that formed the core of Zenobia's army. But Aurelian countered the enemy with light-armed Moorish and Dalmatian cavalry, whom he ordered to feign withdrawal in order to tire out their opponents. This victory won, Aurelian moved to Emesa, where he narrowly won again, ascribing his success to the support of the sun-god. The emperor then besieged Palmyra itself and, when hoped-for relief did not come from the Persians, Zenobia lost her nerve and attempted flight. She was captured, the city surrendered, and the war was at an end (272). Aurelian returned to the Danube, but there he received word that Palmyra had again revolted. He quickly marched back again, reduced the city, allowed it to be sacked, and had its walls dismantled. The city was henceforth deserted.

Aurelian was then able to turn his attention to the Gallic Empire. The usurper Postumus had died in 268. He was succeeded by Victorinus and then by Tetricus. In 274 Aurelian marched to Gaul and defeated Tetricus' army after the would-be emperor had already surrendered. Aurelian returned to Rome to be honored by one of the greatest triumphal processions the Roman world had ever known: the captives included Zenobia (bound in golden chains) and both Tetricus and his son. Yet Aurelian was magnanimous in victory and he settled Zenobia in Italy and married her to a senator, while he rewarded Tetricus with a significant administrative post. Aurelian could rightfully claim the title of *restitutor orbis* (restorer of the world).

Freed from the immediate need of military emergency, Aurelian also attempted some internal reform. He sought to restore confidence in the Roman coinage, and severely punished evil-doers in both the civil and the military service of the state. He carried out significant public works programs, especially in Rome, and actively promoted the cult of the sun-god, which he apparently hoped to use as a basis for political loyalty to himself. Nonetheless, a conspiracy at court, probably formed for insubstantial reasons, led to the assassination of the emperor in 275. The next nine years were characterized by instability, with one emperor succeeding the other with unfortunate regularity. Various emperors in this period made attempts to change the governmental system and allow stability, but none was on the throne long enough to implement institutional reforms.

Political, Economic, and Social Problems

It is obvious that, in one way, the crisis of the third century was essentially military and political in nature. The political and military crisis of the third century, however, was accompanied by significant changes in economic and social life. Indeed, all these phenomena were clearly interrelated and they had an impact on the intellectual and spiritual fabric of the empire (see next section of this chapter).

The most notable phenomenon of the third century was the nearly continuous state of civil war and the uncertainty about who was, in fact, the emperor. Thus, it is indeed remarkable that the empire survived at all. The reasons behind that survival probably have to do with the continuities within the imperial bureaucracy, where the business of government probably went on more or less as usual.

The political and military crisis certainly exacerbated the economic problem. It has already been suggested, at the beginning of this chapter, that the state had a chronic fiscal problem, not so much because income declined, but because the demands on government increased and the state was required to do much more, which meant greater expenditure. At the same time, the demands of the military grew, not only because of the barbarian threat but because all claimants to the throne realized that their success or failure would

depend almost entirely on the loyalty of the troops. It was therefore imperative not only to make sure the soldiers were paid but that they were paid handsome gifts of coins: to celebrate the elevation of an emperor and every anniversary of that event, and on the occasion of victories or any other success that could possibly be celebrated.

In antiquity it was generally believed that coins had intrinsic value – the value of the amount of metal they contained (gold, silver, or copper). The head of the emperor and other state-based symbols were of course important instruments of propaganda, but they were also simply marks by the state guaranteeing that the weight and the purity of the metal were standardized. In the economic difficulties of the third century the temptation to devalue the coinage was simply too great. Thus, emperors took coins that were, for example, essentially silver (although they were always an alloy and pure silver was never used) and reduced the quantity of silver per coin. In the short run this produced a windfall for the state, since undebased coins were taken in (mainly as taxes) and then larger numbers of coins were turned out, using the same total weight of precious metal. Debasement thus proceeded apace and by the 270s the silver *denarius*, for example, had gone from a coin with 35 percent silver content to one that was only dipped quickly in silver to produce the appearance of a silver coin.

This phenomenon was naturally noticed by the moneychangers; the new, devalued coins were not accepted at "face value" and prices accordingly went up quickly. It is difficult to be certain about the meaning of this, but one estimate is that prices between 235 and 284 rose approximately 700 percent. The result of this is easy to predict: the unwillingness of consumers and merchants alike to use coins and the reversion of much of the economy to a barter system. This happened not only in the ordinary marketplace, but also in the taxes themselves, where the state didn't want to be paid in its own devalued coins, but instead collected taxes in kind (wheat, oil, wine, etc.) which could then relatively easily be transferred to the soldiers in the field and other places where they were needed.

As we have already seen, the difficulties of this period seem to have fallen especially hard on the local aristocracy, the *curiales*. A few curial families rose into the senatorial ranks, but many more lost their fortunes and fell from the curial lists for that reason. Not surprisingly, no one was willing to rush in to fill their role on the local city council.

Philosophy and Religion in the Third Century

The third century witnessed important changes and developments in intellectual and religious life. These included serious persecution of the Christians as well as the growth of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, movements that had a philosophical base but were essentially much more religious in character.

Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism, as its name suggests, was based loosely on the teachings of Plato, but we should remember that "Neoplatonism" is a modern term that is in some ways misleading. The "founder" of Neoplatonism was Plotinus (205–70), who studied in Alexandria and then set up a philosophical school in Rome. He had many followers among the senatorial class and was a friend of the emperor Gallienus. Like Plato, Plotinus emphasized the existence and importance of an immaterial world beyond that which we can see, a world that has ultimately greater importance. His greatest student was Porphyry (233–ca. 306), whose original name was Malchos. He studied philosophy at Athens under Longinus and then at Rome under Plotinus. Porphyry edited the works of Plotinus and wrote a biography of his teacher. Porphyry was very prolific; he had many students (such as Iamblichos) and was the author of some 78 works on a wide variety of topics, from vegetarianism to science. His book *Against the Christians* earned him the enmity of the church, despite his influence on Christian teaching, and the book was ordered to be destroyed. Porphyry's work is largely derivative, but it had considerable influence.

One of the basic teachings of Neoplatonism is the theory of "emanation," involving the way in which God (the One) reaches down to material creation: from the One through its *hypostases* (Intellect and Soul) to matter. In this regard it was possible to understand some manner of connection between the world of perfection and that of everyday human existence. The soul's search for salvation is clearly important; in general, it was felt that the individual soul could not easily be united to the universal Soul (God), but there was hope of such unification through the phenomenon of *epistrophe* (return) to God, through thinking, faith, truth, etc. Salvation was seen as "ascent" and was viewed as essentially an intellectual operation. Especially in its later forms, Neoplatonism was frequently connected with magic and theurgy.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism (from the word *gnosis*, "knowledge") is a modern term for a number of related approaches to religion and religious experience, from the Hellenistic period onward. Gnosticism is poorly understood, in part because it is not a single phenomenon and in part because most of the books in which it was expounded were destroyed by the Christians. The discovery of the so-called Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt, with many Gnostic texts, has increased our knowledge of this complex phenomenon. One branch of Gnosticism was associated with Hermes Trismegistos (Hermes Thrice-Greatest), the Greek name of the Egyptian Thoth, the god of wisdom. The texts described as the *Hermetica*

contain this group's teachings. They are concerned with magic, alchemy, philosophy, and astrology, and are considered the revelations of the god Hermes. The texts were the basis of many later magical compilations.

A basic tenet of Gnosticism is "dualism," the concept that there is a primary force of good and a primary force of evil (essentially two diametrically opposed gods). Gnostics associated the God of the Old Testament with Satan and taught that everything material was evil; this led some Gnostic sects to abolish marriage and even encourage suicide. Gnostic teaching was not unified, but varied widely, from decidedly non-Christian traditions to beliefs that combined Christian and pagan ideas (e.g., the Christian heretic Marcion). In the second century Gnosticism was a serious rival to Christianity, but by the third century it had begun to be absorbed into other traditions. Much of early Christian theology developed as a reaction to Gnosticism, and as Christian theologians sought to maintain belief in a single (good) God and the reality of Christ's Incarnation. Both Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, however, influenced the development of Christian thought, especially in the so-called "school" of Alexandria.

Overall, the crisis of the third century had ramifications in all areas of life, as a relatively stable political, economic, and cultural system was shaken to its very core. To a contemporary it must have seemed that the world was literally coming apart. As a reaction, some individuals sought stability in new ideas, institutions, and ways of looking at the world. Out of that attempt arose the world of medieval Byzantium.

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