

Persecutions of Christians by Romans

Although Roman persecutions for Christians continued for about three centuries and never stopped during that era, the historians used to assign it into ten great persecutions happened by ten Roman Emperors, will be mentioned later. Many scholars connected these ten persecutions with the ten plagues that happened to Egyptians in the Old Testament and the ten horns of the beast mentioned in the Holy Book of Revelation.

(1) Nero:

He began the first persecution for Christians where St. Peter and St. Paul got the crown of martyrdom and apostleship. This persecution began in 64 AD and in the 10th year of his reign. Nero was the Emperor to whom St. Paul sent his petition “So Paul said, I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged” (Acts 25-11).

Nero, the last Roman emperor (reigned 54-68) of the Julian-Claudian line, was the son of Domitius Ahenobarbus and Julia Agrippina, niece of Emperor Claudius. After the violent death of his first wife, Valeria Messalina, Emperor Claudius married Julia, adopted her son Nero and gave him in marriage his own daughter, Octavia. Nero's mother had a mind to commit any crime to put him on the throne, and to prepare him for this station she had L. Annaeus Seneca appointed his tutor, and caused the freedman Afranius Burrus, a rough but experienced soldier, to be made commander of the Praetorian guard. These men were the advisers and chief supporters of Nero on his becoming emperor, after the sudden death of Claudius. Nero was born in Antium on 15 December, A.D. 37, and was seventeen years old when he became emperor. He believed himself to be a great singer and poet. All the better dispositions of his nature had been stifled by his sensuality and moral perversity. Agrippina had expected to be a partner of her son in the government, but owing to her autocratic character, this lasted only a short time. The first years of Nero's reign, under the direction of Burrus and Seneca, the real holders of power, were auspicious in every way. A series of regulations either abrogated or lessened the hardships of direct taxation, the arbitrariness of legislation and provincial administration, so that Rome and the empire were delighted, and the first five years of Nero's government were accounted the happiest of all time, regarded by Trajan as the best of the imperial era.

The first 5 years of his reign were the most glorious times of Roman Empire (54 AD- 59 AD), while the rest of his reign was horrible where Nero became a symbol of evil during that age as he killed his brother “Britannicus”, his mother “Agrippina”, his wives “Octavia” and “Poppaea”, his counselor “Seneca” and many Romans leaders and Generals. Nero with his mates rioted by night through the city, attacking men, assaulting women, and filled the vacant positions at the imperial Court from the dregs of the city. In the civic administration extravagance was unbounded, in the court luxury unbridled. Financial deficits grew over night; the fortunes of those who had been condemned at law, of freedmen, of all pretenders by birth filled the depleted exchequer, and the coin was deliberately debased. All efforts to stem these disasters were vain, and the general misery had reached its highest, when in A.D. 64 occurred the terrible conflagration which burnt entirely three, and partly seven, of the fourteen districts into which Rome was divided. The older authors, Tacitus and Suetonius, say clearly, and the testimony of all later Christian writers, that Nero himself gave the order to set the capital on fire, and that the people at large believed this report. Nero was in Antium when he heard that Rome was in flames, he hastened thither, and is said to have ascended the tower of Maecenas, and looking upon the sea of flame in which Rome lay engulfed, to have sung on his lyre the song of the ruin of Ilium. In place of the old city with its narrow and crooked streets, Nero planned a new residential city, to be called Neronia. For six days the fire ravaged the closely built quarters, and many thousands perished in the flames; countless great works of art were lost in the ruins. Informers, bribed for the

purpose, declared that the Christians had set Rome on fire. Their doctrine of the nothingness of earthly joys in comparison with the delights of immortal souls in heaven was an enduring reproof to the dissolute emperor. There began a fierce persecution throughout the empire, and through robbery and confiscation the Christians were forced to pay in great part for the building of the new Rome. In this persecution Saints Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome in A.D. 67.

Finally the emperor started on a pleasure tour through lower Italy and Greece; as actor, singer, and harp player he gained the scorn of the world; he heaped upon his triumphal chariots the victor-crowns of the great Grecian games, and so dishonored the dignity of Rome that Tacitus through respect for the mighty ancestors of the Caesar would not once mention his name. Outbreaks in the provinces and in Rome itself now presaged the approaching overthrow of the Neronian tyranny. Julius Vindex, Proconsul of Gallia Lugdunensis, with the intent of giving Gaul an independent and worthy government, raised the banner of revolt, and sought an alliance with the Proconsuls of Spain and the Rhine Provinces. Sulpicius Galba, Proconsul of Hispania Tarraconensis, who was ready for the change, agreed to the plans presented to him, declared his fealty to Nero ended, and was proclaimed emperor by his own army. L. Verginius Rufus, Proconsul of Upper Germany, was offered the principate by his troops, and led them against the usurper Vindex. In a battle at Vesontio (Besancon) Vindex was defeated, and fell by his own sword. In Rome the praetorians dazzled by the exploits of Galba deserted Nero, the Senate declared him the enemy of his country, and sentenced him to the death of a common murderer. Outlawed and forsaken, he committed suicide in the house of one of his freedmen, June, A.D. 68. At once and everywhere Sulpicius Galba was accepted as emperor. The sudden disappearance of Nero, whose enemies had spread the report that he had fled to the East, gave rise to the later legend that he was still living, and would return to sit again upon the imperial throne.

(2) Domitian (TITUS FLAVIUS DOMITIANUS):

He was a Roman emperor and persecutor of the Church, son of Vespasian and younger brother and successor of the Emperor Titus. He was born 24 Oct., A.D. 51, and reigned from 81 to 96. In spite of his private vices he set himself up as a reformer of morals and religion. He was the first of the emperors to deify himself during his lifetime by assuming the title of "Lord and God". After the revolt of Saturninus he organized a series of bloodthirsty proscriptions against all the wealthy and noble families. A conspiracy, in which his wife joined, was formed against him, and he was murdered, 18 Sept., 96 AD.

When the Acts of Nero's reign were reversed after his death, an exception was made as to the persecution of the Christians (Tertullian). He was the Emperor who exiled St. John to Patmos where he saw his revelation. Among the more famous martyrs in this Second Persecution were Domitian's cousin, Flavius Clemens, the consul, and M' Acilius Glabrio who had also been consul. Flavia Domitilla, the wife of Flavius, was banished to Pandataria. The book of the Apocalypse was written in the midst of this storm, when many of the Christians had already perished (St. Irenæus). Rome, "the great Babylon", "was drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus". St. Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians was also written about this time. The Roman Church continued loyal to the empire, and sent up its prayers to God that He would direct the rulers and magistrates in the exercise of the power committed to their hands (Clement Epistle 9, Romans 13, 1 Peter 2). Before the end of his reign Domitian ceased to persecute.

(3) Trajan:

Emperor of Rome (A.D. 98-117), born at Italica Spain, 18 September, 53; d. 7 August, 117. He was descended from an old Roman family, and was adopted in 97 by the Emperor Nerva. Trajan was one of the ablest of the Roman emperors; he was stately and majestic in appearance, had a

powerful will, and showed admirable consideration and a chivalrous kindness. He gained a large amount of territory for the empire and laid the foundations of civilization all over the provinces by the founding of municipal communities. He established order on the borders of the Rhine, built the larger part of the boundary wall (*limes*) between Roman and Germanic territory from the Danube to the Rhine, and with great determination led two campaigns (101-2 and 105-7) against the Dacian king, Decebalus, whose country he converted into a new province of the empire. Two other provinces were conquered, although neither proved of importance subsequently. The Governor of Syria conquered Arabia Petraea and Trajan himself entered Armenia during the Parthian War (114-7).

In his internal administration Trajan was incessantly occupied in encouraging commerce and industries. The harbour of Ancona was enlarged and new harbours and roads were constructed. Numerous stately ruins in and around Rome gave proof of the emperor's zeal in erecting buildings for public purposes. The chief of these is the immense Forum Trajanum, which in size and splendour casts the forums of the other emperors into the shade. In the middle of the great open space was the colossal equestrian statue of Trajan; the free area itself was surrounded by rows of columns and niches surmounted by high arches. At the end of the structure was the Bibliotheca Ulpia, in the court of which stood the celebrated Trojan's Column with its relief representing scenes in the Dacian wars. Later Hadrian built a temple to the deified Trajan at the end of the Forum towards the Campus Martius.

Art and learning flourished during Trajan's reign. Among his literary contemporaries were Tacitus, Juvenal, and the younger Pliny with whom the emperor carried on an animated correspondence. This correspondence belonging to the years 111-3 throws light on the persecution of Christians during this reign. Pliny was legate of the double Province of Bithynia and Pontus. In this territory he found many Christians and requested instructions from Trajan. In his reply, Trajan considers the confession of Christianity as a crime worthy of death, but forbade a search for Christians and the acceptance of anonymous denunciations. Whoever shows by sacrificing to the gods that he is not a Christian is to be released. Where the adherence to Christianity is proved the punishment of death is to follow. The action he prescribed rests on the coercive power of the police, the right of repression of the magistracy, which required no settled form of procedure. In pursuance of these orders measures were taken against Christians in other places also. The most distinguished martyrs under Trajan were Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, and Simeon, Bishop of Jerusalem.

(4) Marcus Aurelius:

Roman Emperor, A.D. 161-180, born at Rome, 26 April, 121; died 17 March, 180. His father died while Marcus was yet a boy, and he was adopted by his grandfather, Annius Verus. In the first pages of his "Meditations" he has left us an account, unique in antiquity, of his education by near relatives and by tutors of distinction; diligence, gratitude and hardiness seem to have been its chief characteristics. From his earliest years he enjoyed the friendship and patronage on the Emperor Hadrian, who bestowed on him the honor of the equestrian order when he was only six years old, made him a member of the Salian priesthood at eight, and compelled Antoninus Pius immediately after his own adoption to adopt as sons and heirs both the young Marcus and Ceionius Commodus, known later as the Emperor Lucius Verus. In honor of his adopted father he changed his name from M. Julius Aurelius Verus to M. Aurelius Antoninus. By the will of Hadrian he espoused Faustina, the daughter of Antoninus Pius. He was raised to the consularship in 140, and in 147 received the "tribunician power".

His co-reign with Lucius Verus was between 161 and 169. After death of Lucius Verus in 169 he reigned alone till his death in 180. He was a great philosopher. Niebuhr calls him the noblest character of his time. It is true that the most marked trait in his character was his devotion to

philosophy and letters. Philosophy became a disease in his mind and cut him off from the truths of practical life. He was steeped in the grossest superstition; he surrounded himself with charlatans and magicians. The highest offices in the empire were sometimes conferred on his philosophic teachers, whose lectures he attended even after he became emperor. In the midst of the Parthian war he found time to keep a kind of private diary, his famous "Meditations", or twelve short books of detached thoughts and sentences in which he gave over to posterity the results of a rigorous self-examination.

In his dealings with the Christians, Marcus Aurelius went a step farther than any of his predecessors. Throughout the reigns of Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius, the procedure followed by Roman authorities in their treatment of the Christians has that outlined in Trajan's prescript to Pliny, by which it was ordered that the Christians should not be sought out; if brought before the courts, legal proof of their guilt should be forthcoming. It is clear that during the reign of Aurelius the comparative leniency of the legislation of Trajan gave way to a more severe temper. In Southern Gaul, at least, an imperial prescript inaugurated an entirely new and much more violent era of persecution (Eusabius). In Asia Minor and in Syria the blood of Christians flowed in torrents. In general the recrudescence of persecution seems to have come immediately through the local action of the provincial governors impelled by the insane outcries of terrified and demoralized city mobs. If any general imperial edict was issued, it has not survived. It seems more probable that the "new decrees" mentioned by Eusebius were local ordinances of municipal authorities or provincial governors; as to the emperor, he maintained against the Christians the existing legislation, though it has been argued that the imperial edict against those who terrify by superstition "the fickle minds of men" was directed against the Christian society. It is clear, however, from the scattered references in contemporary writings (Celsus, *Contra Celsum*", Melito, in Eusabius; Athenagoras, "*Legatio pro Christianis*",) that throughout the empire an active pursuit of the Christians was now undertaken. In order to encourage their numerous enemies, the ban was raised from the *delatores*, or "denouncers", and they were promised rewards for all cases of successful conviction. The impulse given by this legislation to an unrelenting pursuit of the followers of Christ rendered their condition so precarious that many changes in ecclesiastical organization and discipline date, at least in embryo, from this reign.

Another significant fact, pointing to the growing numbers and influence of the Christians, and the increasing distrust on the part of the imperial authorities and the cultured classes, is that an active literary propaganda, emanating from the imperial surrounding, was commenced at this period. The Cynic philosopher Crescens took part in a public disputation with St. Justin in Rome. Fronto, the preceptor and bosom friend of Marcus Aurelius, denounced the followers of the new religion in a formal discourse and the satirist Lucian of Samosata turned the shafts of his wit against them, as a party of ignorant fanatics. No better proof the tone of the period and of the widespread knowledge of Christian beliefs and practices which prevailed among the pagans is needed than the contemporary "True Word" of Celsus (ORIGEN), a work in which were collected all the calumnies of pagan malice and all the arguments, set forth with the skill of the trained rhetorician, which the philosophy and experience of the pagan world could muster against the new creed. The earnestness and frequency with which the Christians replied to these assaults by the apologetic works (ATHENAGORAS, MINUCIUS FELIX, THEOPHILUS OF ANTIOCH) addressed directly to the emperors themselves, or to the people at large, show how keenly alive they were to the dangers arising from these literary or academic foes.

From such and so many causes it is not surprising that Christian blood flowed freely in all parts of the empire. The excited populace saw in the misery and bloodshed of the period a proof that the gods were angered by the toleration accorded to the Christians, consequently, they threw on the latter all blame for the incredible public calamities. Whether it was famine or pestilence, drought or floods,

the cry was the same (Tertullian, "Apologeticum", V, xli): *Christianos ad leonem* (Throw the Christians to the lion).

The pages of the Apologists show how frequently the Christians were condemned and what penalties they had to endure, and these vague and general references are confirmed by some contemporary "Acta" of unquestionable authority, in which the harrowing scenes are described in all their gruesome details. Among them are the "Acta" of Justin and his companions who suffered at Rome (165), of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonica, who were put to death in Asia Minor, of the Scillitan Martyrs in Numidia, and the touching Letters of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne in which is contained the description of the tortures inflicted on Blandina and her companions at Lyons. Incidentally, this document throws much light on the character and extent of the persecution of the Christians in Southern Gaul, and on the share of the emperor therein.

(5) Septimius Severus

Founder of the African dynasty of Roman emperors, borne at Leptis Magna in Africa, 11 April, 146; died at York, England, 4 February, 211. Severus came from a family that had become Roman citizens. In his career as an official at Rome and in the provinces he had been favored by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. In the reign of Commodus he was appointed legate of the fourth legion on the Euphrates; this gave him the opportunity to become acquainted with affairs in the East. He married Julia Domna, a member of a priestly family of Emesa, who was the mother of Caracalla and Geta. When the Emperor Pertinax was killed by the mutinous soldiers at Rome, Severus, who was then governor of Upper Pannonia, was proclaimed emperor. During the reign of Severus the fifth persecution of the Christians broke out. He forbade conversion to Judaism and to Christianity. The persecution raged especially in Syria and Africa. In 203 Saints Perpetua and Felicitas and their companions suffered martyrdom at Carthage. Lionidas, Origen's father, Putamnia, Basil the solidier were of the famous martyrs during his reign.

(6) Caius Julius Verus Maximinus Thrax:

He reigned as Roman Emperor 235-8. He was barbarian and evil in his persecution to Christians.

(7) Decius:

Roman Emperor 249-251. He was borne, date uncertain, near Sirmium in Pannonia of a Roman or a Romanized family. Practically nothing is known about his career, but the greater part of his life seems to have been passed in the army. He was the first of the great soldier-emperors from the Danubian provinces under whom the senatorial regime ended and the government became an absolute monarchy. Problems of administration, internal as well as external, at once claimed his attention. Oblivious of the changes wrought by time and the march of ideas, he pinned his faith to the almost abandoned paganism of old Rome as the solution of the problems of his time. Such sweeping reforms necessarily brought into prominence the growing power of the Christian Church, and made it clear that any attempt to realize or enforce the absolutism of earlier Roman politics must necessarily be futile as long as any considerable body of citizens professing the Christian creed was allowed the free exercise of their religion. Belief in the freedom of conscience and the higher estimate of religion found among the Christians could find no part in such schemes as those of Decius and would necessarily prove an insuperable obstacle to the complete realization of his plans. Various reasons have been assigned for the emperor's hatred of Christianity, some seeing in it an evidence of innate cruelty, others a desire to be avenged on the friends of his predecessor; but there can be little doubt that the main motives for his hostility were political, conceived not in the form of fanaticism but in purposes of political expediency. The scope of the anti-Christian legislation of Decius was broader than that of his predecessors and much more far-reaching in its effects. The text of his edicts has not survived but their general tenor can be judged from the manner in which they were executed. The object of the emperor was not the

extermination of the Christians, but the complete extinction of Christianity itself. Bishops and priests were unconditionally punished with death. To all others was given an opportunity to recant and, to ensure the abandonment of Christianity, all were compelled to submit to some test of their loyalty to Paganism, such as the offering of sacrifice, the pouring of libations, or the burning of incense to the idols. The unexpectedness of the attack, coupled with the fact that an appalling amount of laxity and corruption had manifested themselves during the long peace which the Church had just enjoyed, produced the most deplorable effect in the Christian fold. Multitudes presented themselves to the magistrates to express their compliance with the imperial edict and to these apostates tickets were issued attesting the fact that they had offered sacrifice or burned incense, while others, without actually performing these rites, availed themselves of the venality of the magistrates to purchase certificates attesting their renunciation. These defections, though numerous, were more than counterbalanced by the multitudes who suffered death, exile, confiscation, or torture in all parts of the empire. The Decian persecution was the severest trial to which the Church up to that time had been subjected and the loss suffered by the Church in consequence of apostasy was almost as damaging as the losses by martyrdom.

(8) Valerian:

He was a Roman emperor (253-60). Member of a distinguished family, he had held several offices before the army proclaimed him emperor in 253 at Rhaetia. Weak and irresolute, his abilities were unequal to the difficulties of the times; his son and coregent, Gallienus, was lacking also in force. Christian tradition regards him as the originator of the persecution of the Christians under Decius. In 257 Valerian issued a rescript, in kindly language, taking from Christians the right to hold assemblies or to enter the subterranean places of burial, and sending the clergy into exile. In 258, by a new and absolutely merciless edict, bishops, priests, and deacons were executed immediately, men of senatorial and equestrian rank were punished with degradation and confiscation of goods to be followed by death if they refused to offer heathen sacrifice, women were threatened with confiscation of their property and exile, and Christians in the imperial household were sent in chains to perform forced labor on the imperial domains. In this persecution Christian Rome and Carthage lost their leaders: Bishop Sixtus of Rome was seized on 6 August, 258, in one of the Catacombs and was put to death; Cyprian of Carthage suffered martyrdom on 14 September. Another martyr was the Roman deacon, St. Lawrence. In Spain Bishop Fructuosus of Tarragona and his two deacons were put to death on 21 January, 259. There were also executions in the eastern provinces. Taken altogether, however, the repressions were limited to scattered spots and had no great success. Valerian was finally captured by the Persians and died a prisoner. Macrianus and his two sons were killed in the struggle for the throne. Gallienus, who became Valerian's successor, annulled at once his entire father's laws hostile to Christianity.

(9) Aurelian:

Roman Emperor, 270-275, born of humble parents, near Sirmium in Pannonia, 9 September, 214; died 275. At the age of twenty he entered the military service, in which, because of exceptional ability and remarkable bodily strength his advancement was rapid. On the death of Claudius he was proclaimed Emperor by the army at Sirmium, and became sole master of the Roman dominions on the suicide of his rival Quintillus, the candidate of the Senate. During the early years of his reign Aurelian exhibited remarkable justice and tolerance towards the Christians. In 272, when he had gained possession of Antioch, after defeating Zenobia in several battles, he was appealed to by the Christians to decide whether the "Church building" in Antioch belonged to the orthodox bishop Domnus, or to the party represented by the favorite of Zenobia, Paul of Samosata, who had been deposed for heresy by a synod held three or four years before. His decision, based probably on the Edict of Gallienus, was that the property belonged to those who were in union with the bishops of Italy and of the city of Rome. As

this act was based on political motives, it cannot be construed into one of friendliness for the Christians. As soon as he was at liberty to carry out his schemes for internal reform Aurelian revived the polity of his predecessor Valerian, threatened to rescind the Edict of Gallienus, and commenced a systematic persecution of the followers of Christ. The exact date of the inauguration of this policy is not known. It is summer of 275 and dispatched to the governors of the provinces, but Aurelian was slain before he could put it into execution.

(10) Diocletian:

He was a Roman Emperor and persecutor of the Church, borne of parents who had been slaves, at Dioclea, near Salona, in Dalmatia, A.D. 245; died at Salona, A.D. 313. Our Coptic Orthodox Church began its own calendar of Martyrs by the first year of his reign 284 AD.

He entered the army and by his marked abilities attained the offices of Governor of Mœsia, consul, and commander of the guards of the palace. In the Persian war, under Carus, he especially distinguished himself. When the son and successor of Carus, Numerian, was murdered at Chalcedon, the choice of the army fell upon Diocletian, who immediately slew with his own hand the murderer Aper (17 Sept., 284). His career as emperor belongs to secular history. The reign of Diocletian (284-305) marked an era both in the military and political history of the empire. The triumph which he celebrated together with his colleague Maximian (20 Nov., 303) was the last triumph which Rome ever beheld. Britain, the Rhine, the Danube, and the Nile furnished trophies; but the proudest boast of the conqueror was that Persia, the persistent enemy of Rome, had at last been subdued. Soon after his accession to power Diocletian realized that the empire was too unwieldy and too much exposed to attack to be safely ruled by a single head. Accordingly, he associated with himself Maximian, a bold but rude soldier, at first as Cæsar and afterwards as Augustus (286). Later on, he further distributed his power by granting the inferior title of Cæsar to two generals, Galerius and Constantius (292). He reserved for his own portion Thrace, Egypt, and Asia; Italy and Africa were Maximian's provinces, while Galerius was stationed on the Danube, and Constantius had charge of Gaul, Spain, and Britain. But the supreme control remained in Diocletian's hands. None of the rulers resided in Rome, and thus the way was prepared for the downfall of the imperial city. Moreover, Diocletian undermined the authority of the Senate, assumed the diadem, and introduced the servile ceremonial of the Persian court. After a prosperous reign of nearly twenty-one years, he abdicated the throne and retired to Salona, where he lived in magnificent seclusion until his death.

Diocletian's name is associated with the last and most terrible of all the ten persecutions of the early Church. Nevertheless it is a fact that the Christians enjoyed peace and prosperity during the greater portion of his reign. Eusebius, who lived at this time, describes in glowing terms "the glory and the liberty with which the doctrine of piety was honored", and he extols the clemency of the emperors towards the Christian governors whom they appointed, and towards the Christian members of their households. He tells us that the rulers of the Church "were courted and honored with the greatest subserviency by all the rulers and governors". He speaks of the vast multitudes that flocked to the religion of Christ, and of the spacious and splendid churches erected in the place of the humbler buildings of earlier days. At the same time he bewails the falling from ancient fervor "by reason of excessive liberty". Had Diocletian remained sole emperor, he would probably have allowed this toleration to continue undisturbed. It was his subordinate Galerius who first induced him to turn persecutor. These two rulers of the East, at a council held at Nicomedia in 302, resolved to suppress Christianity throughout the empire. The cathedral of Nicomedia was demolished (24 Feb., 303). An edict was issued "to tear down the churches to the foundations and to destroy the Sacred Scriptures by fire; and commanding also that those who were in honorable stations should be degraded if they persevered in their adherence to Christianity". Three further edicts (303-304) marked successive stages

in the severity of the persecution: the first ordering that the bishops, presbyters, and deacons should be imprisoned; the second that they should be tortured and compelled by every means to sacrifice; the third including the laity as well as the clergy. The atrocious cruelty with those edicts was enforced, and the vast numbers of those who suffered for the Faith are attested by Eusebius and the Acts of the Martyrs. We read even of the massacre of the whole population of a town because they declared themselves Christians. The abdication of Diocletian (1 May, 305) and the subsequent partition of the empire brought relief to many provinces. In the East, however, where Galerius and Maximian held sway, the persecution continued to rage. Thus it will be seen that the so-called Diocletian persecution should be attributed to the influence of Galerius; it continued for seven years after Diocletian's abdication.