The Crisis Ends: Diocletian (284-305 AD)

The man who would be known to history as the Emperor Diocletian was born as Diocles to a peasant family in the Balkans. He worked his way up the ranks of the military, and when the Emperor Numerius was murdered in 284 AD, the soldiers proclaimed Diocles emperor. Diocles executed the alleged murderer and changed his name to Diocletian, a name befitting a Roman Emperor. Next he had to fight a civil war against Numerius’ brother Carinus, who also claimed power. Diocletian triumphed, and in 285 became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

Political Reforms: Diocletian’s New Order

Diocletian inherited an empire in bad shape. The economy had failed, civil war was endemic, and Germanic and Persian invasions were a constant problem. The Emperor Aurelian had done much to try to put an end to the Crisis of the Third Century, but he had been killed before his work was complete and succeeded by men with far less vision. Diocletian, however, was devoted to fixing the problems afflicting the empire. To that end, shortly after his victory over Carinus, Diocletian named an old friend named Maximian as Caesar. The position of Caesar was a junior colleague; the meaning of Caesar evolved from previously meaning heir to including the responsibilities to rule as a sort of vice-emperor. Diocletian realized that the empire was too big for him to be everywhere at once to deal with problems, and the absence of the emperor often led regions to rebel. He put Maximian, who was a hardened soldier, in charge of the western half of the empire while he took control of the eastern half. While Diocletian defended the eastern provinces and negotiated a peace with Persia, Maximian was not so successful. When he issued a death warrant against one of his officers for theft, the man fled to Britain and raised an open rebellion there. In frustration, the troops proclaimed Maximian as Augustus in an act of rebellion against Diocletian. However, instead of letting civil war break out, Diocletian recognized Maximian’s new title and confirmed him as his equal in power.

This event actually gave Diocletian the framework for creating a whole new system of government. As attacks continued, over the Rhine and from desert tribes in the Sahara, as well as rebellions, such as the rebellion in Britain and another in Egypt, Diocletian realized that not even two emperors were enough to deal with all the simultaneous crises. He promoted two new men, Galerius and Constantius Chlorus, as Caesars to himself and Maximian, respectively. They would take command of imperial armies, and any law would be issued in the name of all four men. Besides acting as assistants to the two Augusti, these two Caesars would receive on the job training in ruling the empire. According to Diocletian’s plan, when he and Maximian were ready, they would step down from office and promote the two Caesars as emperors, who would in turn pick their own Caesars. This plan, known as the Tetrarchy (since there would always be four rulers, two senior and two junior) was aimed at ending the Roman government’s instability, and may have been inspired by the Antonine emperors, who had chosen their successors from among the empire’s most competent men and had prepared them for rule. Any new law would be issued in the name of all four emperors,
though each would command their own region of the empire. Since Diocletian had no sons, there was no temptation for him to create a dynasty, and instead he crafted this system aimed at allowing for smooth transitions of power without civil war.

Also, important to Diocletian in his attempt to minimize civil war and anarchy was the ideology of his power. He presented himself as Jupiter and styled his colleague Maximian as Hercules. This religious language upheld the legitimacy of his rule, and reflected the idea of his divine power. At the same time, he dispensed with all pretensions of being ruler of a republic. He exercised absolute power and the Roman senate essentially became obsolete. Indeed, he hardly spent time in Rome, preferring to stay closer to the frontiers. Diocletian adopted the title *dominus et deus*, lord and god, elevating himself to a position above other mortals. Diocletian was rarely seen in public, and anyone granted to be his audience was required to remain kneeling and kiss his garments, etiquette borrowed from the Persian court. This gave him an air of authority and otherworldliness. Diocletian also persecuted those who would not respect the imperial cult. Toward the end of his reign, he especially targeted Christians. Because they did not accept his religious ideology of imperial power, the Christians were deemed a threat, and he launched the Great Persecution, the most widespread and intense Roman persecution of Christians. Diocletian’s reign was remembered as the darkest period for Christians, when thousands were martyred.

Still, an ideology of unity under the emperor was no guarantee against rebellion. The rebellions in Britain and Egypt prove this. After Diocletian and Maximian crushed these rebellions, Diocletian made some practical reforms to help prevent further rebellion and civil war. He broke the provinces up into much smaller units, significantly increasing the number of Roman provinces. This gave the governors of provinces smaller territory and less power. In addition, he split the provincial governments into separate civilian and military branches, so that no one man had absolute authority in any province.

*Military and Economic Reforms: Ending the Crisis of the Third Century*

Diocletian increased the size of the military significantly and reformed the defense of the empire. Instead of stationing all the soldiers on the borders, he organized the troops in defensive layers, with mobile field armies (which a good deal of fast-moving cavalry) to respond quickly to threats when a sector of the frontier was breached. The effectiveness of this new military system was confirmed in 295-298, when the Roman army emerged victorious in a war against the Persians, Rome’s most tenacious and sophisticated enemies.

To pay for this new, expanded army, Diocletian needed more revenue for the government. Perhaps the most impressive achievement of his reign was his massive reform of the tax system. Up until his reign, the Roman tax system was disorganized, and many provinces simply continued the same system of taxation that had existed in the region before the Roman’s conquered it. In addition, regions that had resisted the Romans, or which were particularly wealthy, tended to have higher tax burdens than others. Italy, the homeland of the Romans, was exempt from many taxes. Diocletian sought to reform this system and establish a single fair and uniform system of taxation.
over the entire empire. He was not just doing this to be just; the complex tax system meant that it was difficult for the Roman government to know how much money it would take in from year to year. And with the collapse of the economy, the coins with which the subjects paid taxes were essentially worthless. The government was bankrupt had to requisition supplies from the provinces in order to survive. A new tax system was necessary.

Diocletian created a new system by which the state would actually collect taxes in the form of goods instead of money (“in kind”), in place of requisitioning those goods. He sent agents out to assess the provinces one by one, over a long period of time. Finally, he had a census of all the people, land, and animals in the empire. Diocletian and his administrators came up with a basic unit of taxation, *iuga* (also called the *capita*). The *iuga* was based on land and labor, but in order to be fair it also took into account the fertility of the land, the value of the local crops, the available work animals, etc. With this information, the Roman government could calculate the expected productive output of the Roman Empire on a year to year basis. New censuses would update the information every 5-15 years. When the government calculated its needs, such as how much food, wine, and tunics the army needed, it simply had to determine how much each *iugum* had to produce and then divide that among the tax payers. All provinces were theoretically to have an equal burden per *iugum*. The Roman government could plan ahead in a way they never had been able to before.

In order to ensure the continued production reflected in his censuses, Diocletian sought to tie people to their jobs, especially if those jobs produced goods deemed essential to the Roman state and army. Thus, the *coloni*, tenant farmers, were legally bound to the land in an attempt to ensure that the land was farmed. Subsequently, bakers, supply ship captains, arms makers, textile workers, and others were also legally required to continue their trade for the rest of their lives, and their sons were required to take up the same trade.

Diocletian tried to put an end to inflation by creating an Edict of Prices, a list limited how much anyone could charge for any good or service (though this plan failed and simply drove goods onto a black market). He also introduced high-quality gold and silver coins. This new, more stable currency helped the Roman economy recover to some degree.

*The Breakdown of the New Order*

By the early years of the fourth century, Diocletian suffered from illness. By 305, a rumor spread that he was dead. He was still alive, but on May 1, 305 he stepped down from power and forced Maximian to step down as well. With the retirement of the two Augusti, the two Caesars, Galerius in the east and Constantius Chlorus in the west, took their places and set about selecting their own Caesars.

It was now that the weakness of the tetrarchy was revealed. Diocletian had no sons, so there was no pressure for him to form a dynasty, but Maximian did have a son, who was named Maxentius. Maxentius thought he would be made Constantius’ Caesar, but he was passed over for a man named Severus, who was deemed more competent. In addition, Constantius Chlorus had a son, Constantine.
Constantius Chlorus died soon after taking up office as Augustus, his troops demanded that Constantine replace him without first going through the rank of Caesar, instead of promoting Severus. Maxentius raised an army, defeated Severus, and demanded a position in the tetrarchy. Maxentius brought his father out of retirement, and they declared themselves joint Augusti. The tetrarchy devolved into chaos.

In order to salvage the situation, in 308 the rival claimants to power called a conference at Carnuntum on the Danube to reach a compromise, with Diocletian in attendance. They begged Diocletian to return to power and restore order, but he refused, claiming that he was happier farming cabbage than ruling the empire. Instead, he ordered that Maximian return to retirement, that Maxentius step down, and that a new man named Licinius be made the Augustus of the west. Constantine was to suffer a demotion to the rank of Caesar of the west. This compromise satisfied no one. Shortly after the compromise, all the major figures were at war with one another, including the new addition Licinius. The tetrarchy ended in more civil war, which Diocletian had sought to avoid. In the end, Constantine emerged victorious over all his rivals and became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. The tetrarchy was dead.

Diocletian himself died at some point during this civil war. He may have killed himself in despair over the collapse of his carefully planned new order. Nonetheless, his reforms were not all as short-lived as the tetrarchy, and many of them rejuvenated the Roman Empire and gave it a new lease of life. Certainly, he changed the Roman Empire radically, like no other emperor before him. He significantly increased the power of the Roman government over its people, which gave it a lot more control over the economy and society but also required an expanded bureaucracy, and he essentially turned the Roman people from citizens to subjects. His reforms built on the efforts of previous emperors, especially Aurelian, but Diocletian succeeded where others failed in putting his reforms in place, and Diocletian thus built the groundwork for the late Roman and early Byzantine world. By stepping down from power, becoming the only emperor to willingly retire, Diocletian demonstrated that his reforms were not meant to for self-aggrandizement or to increase his own power, but because he truly believed that they were necessary for the stability of the Roman state.

Summary:

- Diocletian came to power in 284 AD after the assassination of Emperor Numerius, and then he defeated Carinus in a civil war to secure control over the Roman Empire.
- Diocletian made his loyal friend, Maximian, his partner in power, giving Maximian control over the western half of the Roman Empire. The empire was too large for a single man to effectively govern, and Diocletian knew he had to share power.
- Diocletian created a system called the tetrarchy: it consisted of two senior Augusti who ruled the Roman Empire jointly, each assisted by one of two Caesars, or junior partners. The system was designed so that the Caesars would gain experience ruling, and when the Augusti stepped down or died, the Caesars would replace them, creating a smooth system of succession.
• Diocletian increased the religious importance of the emperor and heightened his power by taking on the title *dominus et deus* and adopting eastern court rituals that cast the emperor as superior to other mortals.

• Diocletian tried to reduce the threat of civil war by breaking up the provinces and dividing the provincial administration between separate civilian and military branches.

• Diocletian increased the size of the Roman army and reorganized the frontier on a system of defense in depth with fast-moving mobile armies ready to respond to emergencies.

• Diocletian reformed the Roman tax system and economy to give the Roman state much more control, and he bound farmers and workers to their professions for life.

• Diocletian retired in 305 and forced Maximian to step down as well. With the retirement of the two Augusti, the two Caesars took their places and set about selecting their own Caesars. However, without Diocletian’s guidance, the tetrarchy quickly broke down into civil war as sons battled to inherit their fathers’ positions. By the time Diocletian died, the tetrarchy was in tatters.

• Though the tetrarchy system fell apart, many of Diocletian’s other reforms remained in place and shaped the late Roman and early Byzantine world.