

Diocletian Biography

244

Born to a family of low status in the Roman province of Dalmatia. Diocletian's parents were of low status, and writers critical of him claimed that his father was a scribe or a freedman of a senator.

264

Diocletian rose through the ranks of the military to become cavalry commander to the Emperor Carus.

284

In confusion at death of Carus, generals and tribunes called a council for the succession, chose Diocletian as emperor. On 20 November 284, the army of east gathered on a hill 5 kil. (3.1 mi) outside Nicomedia, army unanimously saluted Diocletian as new augustus, Diocletian example of the soldier-emperor who will dominate rest of roman history. (Constantine)

284

After his accession, Diocletian and Lucius Caesonius Bassus were named as consuls and assumed the *fasces*

284

MILAN: Dio. made his way to northern Italy, but it is not known whether he visited the city of Rome at this time. some modern historians state that Diocletian avoided the city, and that he did so on principle, as the city and its Senate were no longer politically relevant to the affairs of the empire and needed to be taught as much. Diocletian dated his reign from his elevation by the army, not the date of his ratification by the Senate,

285 MILAN.

Diocletian raised his fellow-officer Maximian to the office of caesar, making him co-emperor. Diocletian was in a less comfortable position than most of his predecessors, as he had a daughter, Valeria, but no sons. His co-ruler had to be from outside his family, raising the question of trust. Some historians state that Diocletian adopted Maximian as his *filius Augusti*, his "Augustan son", upon his appointment to the throne, following the precedent of some previous emperors.

286

Diocletian wintered in Nicomedia. There may have been a revolt in the eastern provinces at this time, as he brought settlers from Asia to populate emptied farmlands in Thrace.

287

The following spring, as Maximian prepared a fleet for an expedition against Carausius, Diocletian returned from the East to meet Maximian.

288 In the East

In the East, Diocletian engaged in diplomacy with desert tribes in the regions between Rome and Persia. He might have been attempting to persuade them to ally themselves with Rome, attempting to reduce the frequency of their incursions. Some princes of these states were Persian client kings, a disturbing fact in light of increasing tensions with the Persian empire Sassanids.

290

Diocletian met Maximian in Milan in the winter of 290–91, meeting undertaken with a sense of solemn pageantry. emperors spent most of their time in public appearances. choice of Milan over Rome further snubbed the capital's pride. But then it was already a long established practice that Rome itself was only a ceremonial capital, as the actual seat of the Imperial admin determined by the needs of defense.

293

RISE OF CONSTANTIUS (250-306)FATHER OF CONSTANTINE

Some time after his return, and before 293, Diocletian transferred command of the war against Carausius from Maximian to Flavius Constantius, a former governor of Dalmatia and a man of military experience stretching back to Aurelian's campaigns against Zenobia (272–73). He was

Maximian's praetorian prefect in Gaul, and the husband to Maximian's daughter, Theodora. On 1 March 293 at Milan, Maximian gave Constantius the office of caesar.

293

In the spring of 293, in either Philippopolis Diocletian would do the same for Galerius, husband to Diocletian's daughter Valeria, and perhaps Diocletian's praetorian prefect. Constantius was assigned Gaul and Britain. Galerius was assigned Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and responsibility for the eastern borderlands.



294 TETRARCHY

This arrangement is called the tetrarchy, from a Greek term meaning "rulership by four". The tetrarchic emperors were more or less sovereign in their own lands, and they travelled with their own imperial courts, administrators, secretaries, and armies. They were joined by blood and marriage; Diocletian and Maximian now styled themselves as brothers. The senior co-emperors formally adopted Galerius and Constantius as sons in 293. These relationships implied a line of succession. Galerius and Constantius would become Augusti after the departure of Diocletian and Maximian. Maximian's son Maxentius and Constantius' son Constantine would then become caesars. In preparation for their future roles, Constantine and Maxentius were taken to Diocletian's court in Nicomedia.

294

War with Persia: Invasion, counterinvasion

299 PERSECUTION OF THE CHRISTIANS

At the conclusion of the Peace of Nisibis, Diocletian and Galerius returned to Syrian Antioch. At some time in 299, the emperors took part in ceremony of sacrifice and divination in an attempt to predict the future. The haruspices were unable to read the entrails of the sacrificed animals and blamed Christians in the Imperial household. The emperors ordered all members of the court to perform a sacrifice to purify the palace. The emperors sent letters to the military command, demanding the entire army perform the required sacrifices or face discharge. Diocletian was conservative in matters of religion, a man faithful to the traditional Roman pantheon and understanding of demands for religious purification, but Eusebius, Lactantius and Constantine state that it was Galerius, not Diocletian, who was the prime supporter of the purge, and its greatest beneficiary. Galerius, even more devoted and passionate than Diocletian, saw political advantage in the politics of persecution. He was willing to break with a government policy of inaction on the issue

302 ANTIOCH

Antioch was Diocletian's primary residence from 299 to 302. Diocletian returned to Antioch in the autumn of 302. He ordered that the Christian deacon Romanus of Caesarea have his tongue removed for defying the order of the courts and interrupting official sacrifices. Romanus was then sent to prison, where he was executed on 17 November 303. Diocletian left the city for Nicomedia in the winter, accompanied by Galerius. According to Lactantius, Diocletian and Galerius entered into an argument over imperial policy towards Christians while wintering at Nicomedia in 302. Diocletian argued that forbidding Christians from the bureaucracy and military would be sufficient to appease the gods, but Galerius pushed for extermination. The two men sought the advice of the oracle of Apollo at Didyma. The oracle responded that the impious on Earth hindered Apollo's ability to provide advice. Rhetorically Eusebius records the Oracle as saying "The just on Earth..." These impious, Diocletian was informed by members of the court, could only refer to the Christians of the empire. At the behest of his court, Diocletian acceded to demands for universal persecution

303 NICOMEDIA

23 February 303, Diocletian ordered that the newly built church at Nicomedia be razed. He demanded that its scriptures be burned, and seized its precious stores for the treasury. The next day, Diocletian's first "Edict against the Christians" was published. The edict ordered the destruction of Christian scriptures and places of worship across the empire, and prohibited Christians from assembling for worship. When Christians in the church at Nicomedia refused to leave the Roman soldiers set it on fire and burned the people inside. Before the end of February, a fire destroyed part of the Imperial palace. Galerius convinced Diocletian that the culprits were Christians, conspirators who had plotted with the eunuchs of the palace. An investigation was commissioned, but no responsible party was found. Executions followed anyway, and the palace eunuchs Dorotheus and Gorgonius were executed. One individual, Peter Cubicularius, was stripped, raised high, and scourged. Salt and vinegar were poured in his wounds, and he was slowly boiled over an open flame. The executions continued until at least 24 April 303, when six individuals, including the bishop Anthimus, were decapitated. Although further persecutory edicts followed, compelling the arrest of the Christian clergy and universal acts of sacrifice, the persecutory edicts were ultimately unsuccessful; most Christians escaped punishment, and pagans too were generally unsympathetic to the persecution. The martyrs' sufferings strengthened the resolve of their fellow Christians.

Constantius and Maximian did not apply the later persecutory edicts, and left the Christians of the West unharmed

NOV 303 ROME

Diocletian entered the city of Rome in the early winter of 303. On 20 November, he celebrated, with Maximian, the twentieth anniversary of his reign (*vicennalia*), the tenth anniversary of the tetrarchy (*decennalia*), and a triumph for the war with Persia. **Diocletian soon grew impatient with the city**, as the Romans acted towards him with what Edward Gibbon, following Lactantius, calls "licentious familiarity". The Roman people did not give enough deference to his supreme authority; it expected him to act the part of an aristocratic ruler, not a monarchic one. On 20 December 303, Diocletian cut short his stay in Rome and left for the north. He did not even perform the ceremonies investing him with his ninth consulate; he did them in Ravenna on 1 January 304 instead. There are suggestions in the *Panegyrici Latini* and Lactantius' account that Diocletian arranged plans for his and Maximian's

future retirement of power in Rome. Maximian, according to these accounts, swore to uphold Diocletian's plan in a ceremony in the Temple of Jupiter. recognizable

304-305 NICOMEDIA

From Ravenna, Diocletian left for the Danube. There, possibly in Galerius' company, he took part in a campaign against the Carpi. He contracted a minor illness while on campaign, but his condition quickly worsened and he chose to travel in a litter. In the late summer he left for Nicomedia. On 20 November, he appeared in public to dedicate the opening of the circus beside his palace. He collapsed soon after the ceremonies. Over the winter of 304–5 he kept within his palace at all times. Rumors alleging that Diocletian's death was merely being kept secret until Galerius could come to assume power spread through the city. On 13 December, he seemed to have finally died. The city was sent into a mourning from which it was only retrieved by public declarations of his survival. When Diocletian reappeared in public on 1 March 305, he was emaciated and barely recognizable

305 RETIREMENT

Galerius arrived in the city later in March. According to Lactantius, he came armed with plans to reconstitute the tetrarchy, force Diocletian to step down, and fill the Imperial office with men compliant to his will. Through coercion and threats, he eventually convinced Diocletian to comply with his plan. Lactantius also claims that he had done the same to Maximian at Sirmium. On 1 May 305, Diocletian called an assembly of his generals, traditional companion troops, and representatives from distant legions. They met at the same hill, 5 kilometres (3.1 mi) out of Nicomedia, where Diocletian had been proclaimed emperor. In front of a statue of Jupiter, his patron deity, Diocletian addressed the crowd. With tears in his eyes, he told them of his weakness, his need for rest, and his will to resign. He declared that he needed to pass the duty of empire on to someone stronger. He thus became the first Roman emperor to voluntarily abdicate his title. Most in the crowd believed they knew what would follow; Constantine and Maxentius, the only adult sons of a reigning emperor, men who had long been preparing to succeed their fathers, would be granted the title of caesar. Constantine had traveled through Palestine at the right hand of Diocletian, and was present at the palace in Nicomedia in 303 and 305. It is likely that Maxentius received the same treatment. In Lactantius' account, when Diocletian announced that he was to resign, the entire crowd turned to face Constantine. It was not to be: Severus and Maximin were declared caesars. Maximin appeared and took Diocletian's robes. On the same day, Severus received his robes from Maximian in Milan. Constantius succeeded Maximian as augustus of the

West, but Constantine and Maxentius were entirely ignored in the transition of power. This did not bode well for future security of the tetrarchic system

305-311 **Retirement and death**

Diocletian retired to his homeland, Dalmatia. He moved into the expansive Diocletian's Palace, a heavily fortified compound located by the small town of Spalatum on the shores of the Adriatic Sea, and near the large provincial administrative center of Salona. The palace is preserved in great part to this day and forms the historic core of Split, the second-largest city of modern Croatia