

The “Great Persecution”



Third Century Emperors

230s Maximinus Thrax(235-238) Magnus (235-238) Quartinus (235-238) Gordian I, II (238) Balbinus and Pupienus (238) Gordian III (238-244) 240s Sabinianus (240) Philip the Arab (244-249) Silbannacus (244-249) Sponsianus (244-249) Philip Junior (247-249) Pacatianus (248) Iotapianus (248) Decius (249-251) 250s T. Julius Priscus (250) Iulius Valens Licinianus (250) Herennius Etruscus (251) Hostilian (251) Gallus (251-253) Trebonianus Gallus (251-253) Volusianus (251-253) Uranus Antoninus (253)	Aemilius Aemilianus (253) Mareades (253-260) Valerian (253-260) Celsus (253-268) Saturninus(253-268) 260s Ingenūus (260) Regalianus (260) Macrianus Senior (260-261) Macrianus Iunior (260-261) Quietus (260-261) Piso (261) Valens (261) Ballista (261) Mussius Aemilianus (261) Memor (262) Aureolus (262, 268) Gallienus (254-268) Claudius II Gothicus (268-270) Censorinus (268-270) Claudius Gothicus (268-270) Gallic Emperors Postumus (260-269) Laelianus (269) Marius (269)	Victorinus (269-270) 270s Quintillus (270) Felicissimus (270-271?) Aurelian (270-275) Tacitus (275-276) Probus (276-282) Domitianus (271-272) Urbanus (271-272) Septimius (271-272) Vaballathus (272) Firmus (273) Tacitus (275-276) Florianus (276) Probus (276-282) Gallic Emperors Tetricus I (271-274) Faustinus (274) 280s Bonosus (280) Proculus (280-281) Saturninus (281) Carus(282-285) Carinus(282-285) Numerian (282-284)
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Diocletian

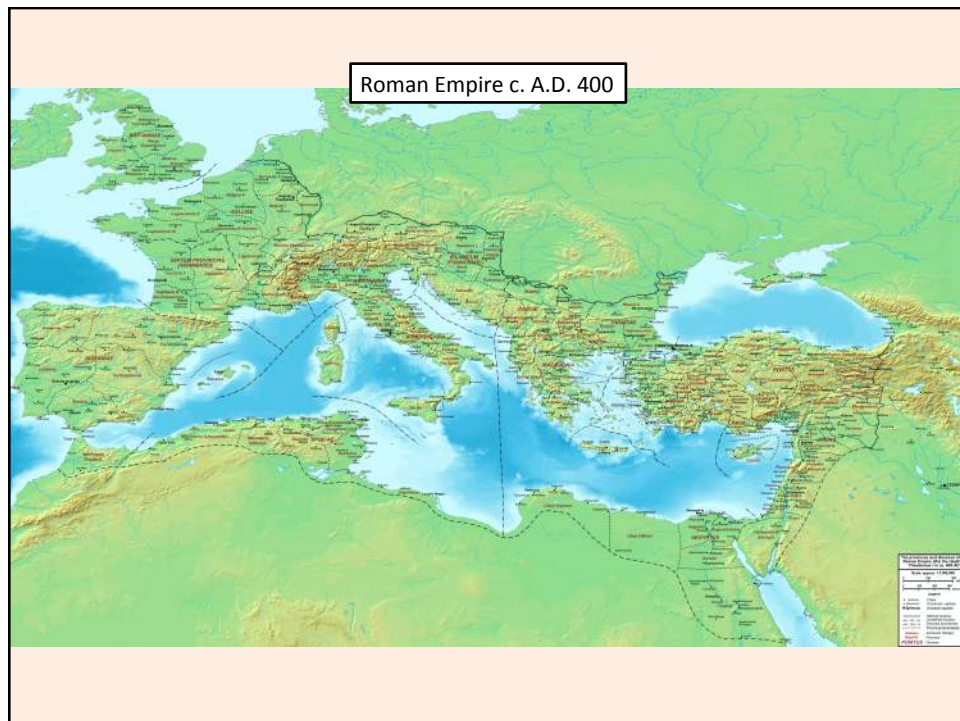
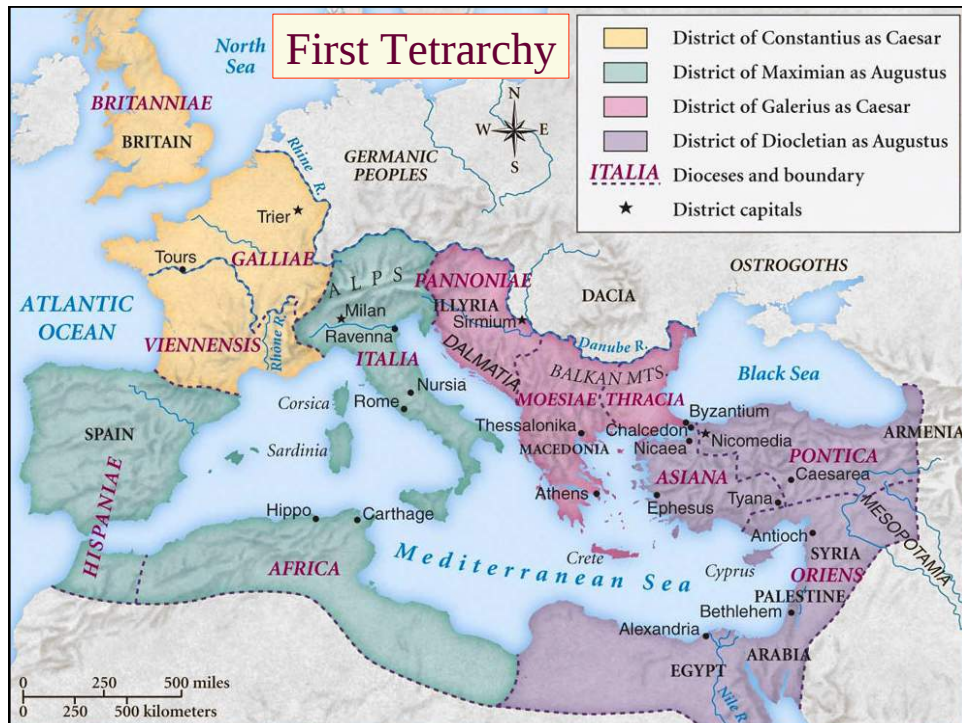


- c. A.D. 260–316; ruled as emperor A.D. 284–305
- With the reign of Diocletian one enters the “Later Roman Empire” or the early “Byzantine Period”
- Was a native of Dalmatia, on the Adriatic coast (modern day Yugoslavia)
- Was the commander of the body guard of the emperor Numerian (A.D. 82 – 284); when Numerian was assassinated he was advanced by the army as the next emperor
- In A.D. 285 he defeated Numerian’s brother, Carinus, in battle and became the sole emperor
- Since A.D. 235 Rome had been beset by civil wars, assassinations, and barbarian incursions
- He greatly expanded Roman bureaucracy and introduced the “tetrarchy;” additionally, he subdivided the 50 Roman provinces into 100



First Tetrarchy

<u>Emperor (East)</u>	<u>Emperor (West)</u>
Diocletian	Maximian
<u>Caesar</u>	<u>Caesar</u>
Galerius	Constantius



Edict of Maximum Prices (*Edictum De Pretiis Rerum Venalium*)



Porphyry's *Against the Christians*

- Neoplatonic Philosopher who lived c. A.D. 235–305
- He studied in Athens and Rome from c. A.D. 263–269
- Porphyry was a prolific author who wrote about the whole range of topics. There are some sixty works attributed to him, but most of them are now lost or survive in mere fragments.
- Wrote a work entitled *Against the Christians* that represented a philosophical and scriptural attack on the Christians

Against the Christians

1. Miscellaneous Objections
2. Critique of the Gospels and Their Authors
3. The Ruler and End of the World
4. The Life and Works of Jesus
5. The Sayings of Jesus
6. An Attack on Peter the Apostle
7. An Attack on Paul the Apostle
8. Attack on Christian Apocalyptic Hopes
9. The Kingdom of Heaven and The Obscurity of Christian Teaching
10. The Christian Doctrine of God
11. Critique of the Resurrection

Eusebius on Porphyry

“Now, as witnesses also to his achievements in this direction, we have the Greek philosophers themselves who flourished in his day, in whose treatises we find frequent mention of the man [i.e. Origen]. Sometimes they would dedicate their books to him, sometimes submit their own labours to him for judgment, as to a master. But why need one say this, when even Porphyry, who settled in our day in Sicily, issued treatises against us, attempting in them to slander the sacred Scriptures, and mentioned those who had given their interpretations of them. And since he could not by any means bring any base charge against our opinions, for lack of argument he turned to deride and slander their interpreters also, and among these Origen especially. He says that in his early manhood he had known him; and he tries to slander the man, but unknown to himself really commends him, telling the truth in some cases, where he could not speak otherwise, in others telling lies, where he thought he could escape detection; and at one time accusing him as a Christian, at another describing his devotion to the study of philosophy.”

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.19.1–3

Surge in anti-Christian Propaganda

Porphyry, Hierocles, Maximin (who assumed the title of Augustus in 310) had school children taught the *Acts of Pilate* in School to discredit the Christians (Eusebius 9.5.1)

“Having forged, to be sure, Memoirs of Pilate and our Saviour, full of every kind of blasphemey against Christ, with the approval of their chief they sent them around to every part of his dominions, with edicts that they should be exhibited openly for everyone to see in every place, both town and country, and that the primary teachers should give them to the children, instead of lessons, for study and committal to memory.”

Josephus explains how Pontius Pilate was given the administration of Judaea in the twelfth year of Tiberius (for he had succeeded to universal sovereignty after Augustus had held the government for fifty-seven years), and for ten whole years he remained in office, almost until the death of Tiberius. So that there is clear proof of the forgery of those who recently or formerly have issued a series of Pilate's Reports about our Saviour; for in them the dates mentioned convict the forgers of untruth. They relate that the crime of the Saviour's death fell in the fourth consulship of Tiberius, which was the seventh year of his reign, but at that time it has been shown that Pilate was not yet in charge of Judaea, if Josephus may be used as a witness, for he clearly shows, in the writing quoted from him above, that it was actually in the twelfth year of the reign of Tiberius that Pilate was appointed procurator of Judaea by Tiberius.

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.9.3–4

Lactantius

c. A.D. 250–325



- Christian Latin Apologists from North Africa
- Converted to Christianity and was made teacher of rhetoric in Nicomedia by Diocletian
- In A.D. 303 he lost his post because of the “Great Persecution”
- In c. A.D. 317 made his way to Trier and became the tutor of Crispus, the oldest son of Constantine
- Author of about seven treatises
 - ***Divine Institutes*** (c. A.D. 305–310): offers a philosophy of religion, refuting attacks on Christianity and setting forth its doctrine and worship with extensive consideration of eschatology.
 - ***The Deaths of the Persecutors*** (A.D. 314–315): is intended to demonstrate that all persecutors must meet with a bad end; the focus is on such contemporaries as Diocletian, Galerius, and Maximinus Daia.

Outbreak of the Persecution

Diocletian, as being of a timorous disposition, was a searcher into futurity, and during his abode in the East he began to slay victims, that from their livers he might obtain a prognostic of events; and while he sacrificed, some attendants of his, who were Christians, stood by, and they put the *immortal sign* on their foreheads. At this the demons were chased away, and the holy rites interrupted. The soothsayers trembled, unable to investigate the wonted marks on the entrails of the victims. They frequently repeated the sacrifices, as if the former had been unpropitious; but the victims, slain from time to time, afforded no tokens for divination. At length Tages, the chief of the soothsayers, either from guess or from his own observation, said, “There are profane persons here, who obstruct the rites.” Then Diocletian, in furious passion, ordered not only all who were assisting at the holy ceremonies, but also all who resided within the palace, to sacrifice, and, in case of their refusal, to be scourged. And further, by letters to the commanding officers, he enjoined that all soldiers should be forced to the like impiety, under pain of being dismissed the service. Thus far his rage proceeded; but at that season he did nothing more against the law and religion of God. After an interval of some time he went to winter in Bithynia; and presently Galerius Caesar came thither, inflamed with furious resentment, and purposing to excite the inconsiderate old man to carry on that persecution which he had begun against the Christians. I have learned that the cause of his fury was as follows.

Lactantius, *DMP* 10

“ . . . the persecution commencing with the brethren in the army.”

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8.1.7

The “Great Persecution,” A.D. 303–305

Beginning February 23, A.D. 303 Diocletian and his successors issued a series of four edicts against the Christians.

Edict 1

The first edict ordered that churches were to be destroyed throughout the empire, the scriptures were to be collected and destroyed, and Christians of the upper classes (*honestiores*) were to lose their privileges. (Euseb. *Mart. Pal.* 3.1.)

That day was the first which was the cause of death, the first which was the cause of ills’—ills which befell both them and the whole world. When this day dawned during the consulship of both the old men (the one being consul for the eighth, the other for the seventh time), suddenly while it was still twilight the prefect came to the church with military leaders, tribunes, and accountants; they forced open the doors and searched for the image of God; they found the scriptures and burnt them; all were granted booty; the scene was one of plunder, panic, and confusion. The rulers themselves from their vantage-point (the church was built on high ground and so was visible from the palace) argued with each other for a long time whether the building ought to be set on fire. Diocletian won the argument by warning that a large fire might cause some part of the city to go up in flames; for the church was surrounded on all sides by a number of large houses. So the praetorians came in formation, bringing axes and other iron tools, and after being ordered in from every direction they leveled the lofty edifice to the ground within a few hours.

Lactantius, *DMP* 13.1–5

First Edict of “Great Persecution”

It was the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian [A.D. 303], I and the month Dystrus, or March, as the Romans would call it, in which, as the festival of the Saviour’s Passion was coming on, an imperial letter was everywhere promulgated, ordering the razing of the churches to the ground and the destruction by fire of the Scriptures, and proclaiming that those who held high positions would lose all civil rights, while those in households, if they persisted in their profession of Christianity, would be deprived of their liberty. Such was the first document against us. But not long afterwards we were further visited with other letters, and in them the order was given that the presidents of the churches should all, in every place, be first committed to prison, and then afterwards compelled by every kind of device to sacrifice.

Eusebius, *Hist.eccl.* 8.2.4

Christians in the Army

“For when the supreme commander, whoever he was, was just making his first attempt at persecuting the soldiers—separating into classes and thoroughly sifting out those serving in the camps, giving them a choice whether they would obey and enjoy the rank they held, or else be deprived of it, if they continued to disobey the commandment—great many soldiers of Christ’s kingdom, without hesitation, unquestionably preferred to confess Him than retain the seeming glory and prosperity that they possessed. And already in rare cases one or two of these were receiving not only loss of honor but even death in exchange for their godly steadfastness, for as yet the instigator of the plot was working with a certain moderation and daring to proceed unto blood only in some instances.”

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8.4.3



P.Oxy. XXXIII 2673

February 5, A.D. 304

In the consulship of our lords the emperors Diocletian, for the ninth time, and Maximian, for the eighth time, the Augusti. To Aurelius Neilus also called Ammonius, (former-?) gymnasiarch, city-councilor (l. 5) and chief magistrate (*prytanis*), and to Aurelius Sarmates and Aurelius Matrinus, both (former-?) gymnasiarchs, city-councilors and judges (*syndicoi*), all from the famous and most illustrious city of the Oxyrhynchites, Aurelius Ammonius, son of Copeus, reader of the former church of the village of Chysis.

(l. 10) Since you (pl.) commanded me in accordance with the letter from Aurelius Athanasius, procurator of the private estate, as a result of an order of the most distinguished master of the private estate, Neratius Apollonides, concerning the surrender of all (l. 15) goods in the same former church, and since I declared that the same former church had no gold, silver, or coin, no clothing, no animals, slaves, or property, (l. 20) no real estate whether from gifts or from inheritances, apart from the bronze objects found and handed over to the auditor (*logistes*) for transport to the most illustrious Alexandria in accordance with the letter (l. 25) from our most eminent prefect Clodius Culcianus, I also swear by the guardian spirit (*tyche*) of our lords the emperors Diocletian and Maximian Augusti, and of the most renowned Caesars Constantius and Maximianus (Galerius) that these things are so and that I have not deceived you, (l. 30) otherwise may I be liable to the divine oath.

In the twentieth and twelfth year of our lords the emperors Diocletian and Maximian Augusti, and of the most renowned Caesars Constantius and Maximianus (Galerius), Mecheir 10.

(2nd hand) I, Aurelius Ammonius, swore the oath (l. 35) as stated above. I, Aurelius Serenos, wrote on his behalf since he does not know letters (i.e. is illiterate).

Christians and Law Courts



“... an edict was posted in which warning was given that those who adhered to this religion would be deprived of all official position and status, ... and that they would be unable to bring actions for wrongs done to them, for adultery, or for theft. ... and to stop justice being dispensed hastily against anyone, altars were set up in council-chambers and in front of tribunals, so that litigants could do sacrifice before pleading their cases; thus the judges would be approached in the same way as gods.”

Lactantius, *Mort.* 13.1, 15.5



P.Oxy. XXXI 2601
Shortly after Feb. 23, A.D. 303

Copres to his sister Sarapias, very many greetings. Before all else I pray that you are well (l. 5) before the Lord God. I want you to know that on the 11th we arrived and it became known to us that those presenting themselves (l. 10) were being compelled to sacrifice and I made a power-of-attorney for my brother and as of yet we have (l. 15) accomplished nothing but we instructed an attorney on the 12th, so that on the 14th the matter concerning the *arourae* could proceed. (l. 20) If we should accomplish anything I'll write to you. I have sent nothing to you since I found that Theodorus himself is departing. (l. 25) I am sending it (i.e. the letter) to you by another person shortly. Write to us concerning the health of all of you (pl.) and (l. 30) how Maximina has been and Asena. If it is possible let him (her?) go with your mother (Verso) so that his (her?) lecoma may be healed, for I have seen others healed. Farewell, I pray for you. I greet all our (friends) by name. Deliver to my sister, from Copres 99.

Edict 2

Immediately after the promulgation of the first edict, a second edict was published requiring that all bishops and other leaders of the Christians were to be arrested and made to sacrifice. (**Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8.6.9**)

“an imperial command went forth that the presidents of the churches everywhere should be thrown into prison and bonds. And the spectacle of what followed surpasses all description; for in every place a countless number were shut up, and everywhere the prisons, that long ago had been prepared for murderers and grave-robbers, were then filled with bishops and presbyters and deacons, readers and exorcists, so that there was no longer any room left there for those condemned for wrongdoing.”



Edict 3

The third edict, enacted shortly afterward, ordered that the imprisoned Christian leaders were to be forced to offer sacrifice to the gods while in prison and then be set free. (**Lact. *Div. inst.* 5.11; Euseb. *Mart. Pal.* 1.1**)

Edict 4

The fourth and final edict issued in the spring of 304 CE ordered all Christians to sacrifice to the gods under penalty of death. (**Lact. *Mort.* 15**)

Christians Condemned to the Mines



Damnatio ad metalla



“Then orders were given that their eyes should be gouged out and one of their legs maimed. For this was in their opinion humanity and the lightest of punishments inflicted upon us. Hence, because of this humanity on the part of godless men, it is now no longer possible to tell the incalculable number of those who had their right eye first cut out with a sword and then cauterized with fire, and the left foot rendered useless by the further application of branding irons to the joints, and who after this were condemned to the provincial copper mines, not so much for service as for ill-usage and hardship, and withal fell in with various other trials, which it is not possible even to recount; for their brave and good deeds surpass all reckoning.”

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8.12.10

Acts of Phileas

- Bishop of Thmuis in the Nile Delta and martyr.
 - “Such also was Phileas, bishop of the church of the Thmuites, a man who was distinguished for the services he rendered to his country in public positions, and also for his skill in philosophy.” (*Hist. eccl.* 8.9.7)
- Eusebius preserved Phileas's letter from prison to his church (*Hist. eccl.* 8.10).
- *Acts of Phileas* preserve an account of the proceeding between Phileas and Claudius Culcianus the Prefect of Egypt
 - “such likewise was Culcianus, who had gone through every grade of office in the government, the same person who gloried in the murder of countless Christians in Egypt” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 9.11.4)

Martyrs of Palestine

"It is not our part to commit to writing the conflicts of those who fought throughout the world on behalf of piety toward the Deity, and to record in detail each of their happenings; but that would be the especial task of those who witnessed the events. Yet I shall make known to posterity in another work those with whom I was personally conversant."

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8.13.7

- The *Martyrs of Palestine* is extant in a Greek recension preserved as part of the eighth book of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*
- Record of martyrdoms in Palestine from A.D. 303 to 311
- Eusebius says the work comes from personal acquaintances (HE. 8.13.7), mentions eighty-three martyrs and refers to countless others who were maimed or sent to copper mines (HE. 8.12.10) and others who apostatized.
- The work indicates that persecution of those who refused to sacrifice to the emperor and eat sacrificial meat was worse under Maximinus Daia (308–313) than under Diocletian (284–305).

Martyrs of Palestine

- geographically this text covers the region of the coast of Palestine



Tetrarchy

Divided East and West
A.D. 305

Emperor (East)

Galerius

Emperor (West)

Constantius

Caesar

Maximinus

Caesar

F. Valerius Severus

Diocletian's Palace in Dalmatia on the
Adriatic Where he retired in A.D. 305



"If you could show the cabbage that I planted with my own hands to your emperor, he definitely wouldn't dare suggest that I replace the peace and happiness of this place with the storms of a never-satisfied greed."