Thesis Approved

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SOME ASPECTS OF LACTANTIUS'S CREDIBILITY AS SEEN
IN THE DE MORTIBUS PERSECUTORUM

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. EXTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE WORK OF LACTANTIUS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. EARLY PERSECUTORS: NERO AND DOMITIAN</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THIRD CENTURY PERSECUTORS: DECpatial, VALERIAN, AND AURELIAN</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. DIOCLETIAN AND HIS ASSOCIATES</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. THE CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION UNDER THE DIOCLETIAN REGIME</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. THE DEATH OF THE PERSECUTORS</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present work is to determine through a comparative study of the works of other men the historical accuracy of Lactantius in his De Mortibus Persecutorum. To accomplish this aim clearly, yet concisely, I shall first set forth a biographical sketch of the author. Then I shall consider the following questions: What factors may have influenced the thinking of Lactantius? In what points and to what extent does Lactantius agree with other historians? Where does he differ? Along this procedure, I shall follow Lactantius in his treatment of the persecution and the death of the Roman emperors—Nero, Domitian, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian with his associates. The Diocletian persecution, however, I shall treat at a greater length.

Few facts are known concerning the life of Lactantius. The place and time of his birth, even his name, have been a subject of much discussion. St. Jerome asserts that "Firmianus, who is also called Lactantius, was a pupil of Arnobius."¹ Arnobius enjoyed great

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¹Jerome, De Viris Illustribus lxx. 1: "Firmianus, qui et Lactantius, Arnobi discipulus . . ." Quoted from
repute as a rhetorician in Africa, for St. Jerome writes:

During the reign of Diocletian Arnobius very successfully taught rhetoric at Sicca in Africa and wrote books, *Adversus gentes*, which are still extant. ²

In a letter to a certain orator in Rome, St. Jerome supports these statements with a reference to Arnobius' seven books *Adversus gentes* and his pupil Lactantius composing the same number. ³ Critics generally accept St. Jerome's view and conclude that Lactantius was a native of Africa. ⁴

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²Ibid., lxxix: "Arnobius sub Diocletiano principi Sicca apud Africam florentissime rhetoriam docuit, scripsitque adversum gentes, quae vulgo exstant, volumina."


⁴(ª) Pierre de Labriolle, History and Literature of Christianity (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), p. 200: "... From St. Jerome's notice of him ... we may conclude he was an African."

(b) Otto Bardenhewer, *Patrology*, trans. by Thomas J. Shahan (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1908), p. 203: "Lucius Caesar Firmianus Lactantius ... a disciple of Arnobius, and unquestionably a native of Africa ..."

(c) Lietzmann, "Lactantius": "... Er [Jerome] ist auch ... unsere Hauptquelle über die Lebensumstände des Lactantius. ... Er war also wohl Africaner von Geburt wie er ja auch als Schüler des Africaners Arnobius ... bezeichnet wird." (Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopadie der Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft* [Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagbuchhandlung, 1925], XII, 351.)

(d) Martin Schanz, *Geschichte der Römischen*
St. Jerome continues his account of Lactantius stating that in the reign of Diocletian Lactantius, accompanied by a certain Fabius, journeyed to Nicomedia where he taught rhetoric. Because it was a Greek city, Latin students were few. Apparently, excessive need forced him to take up writing. Among the works of Lactantius, St. Jerome mentions the Symposium already written in his youth. Later when traveling from Africa to Nicomedia, he composed in hexameter verse a poem entitled, "Hodoeporium." Very probably in Nicomedia he wrote his grammar. There are still extant his more important works—the De Ira Dei, the De Opificio Dei, the seven books, De Divinis Institutionibus, which place Lactantius among the Church Fathers, and one book on the persecutions, the subject of this thesis.

The exact date on which Lactantius died, like

Litteratur (München: C. H. Beck'sche, 1905), VIII, 445: "Auch Lactantius ist ein Afrikaner. Zwar hat es nicht an Versuchen gefehlt, ihn für Italien zu reklamieren, allein das, was man für diese Ansicht beigebracht, ist unhaltbar."

5De Viris Illustribus lxxx. 1: "... sub Dio-
cletiano principe accitus cum Flavio Grammatico. .... Nicomediae rhetoricam docuit, et penuria discipulorum ob Graecam videlicet civitatem, ad scribendum se con-
tulit. Habemus ejus Symposium, quod adolescentulus scripsit; Odoeporium de Africa usque Nicomediæ, hexametrîs scriptum versibus, adversum gentes libros septem ... de persecutione librum unum ... de Opici-
ficio Dei, vel formatione hominis, librum unum."
that of his birth, is unknown. Again St. Jerome’s ac-
count seems the only source from which a possible date
can be drawn. He merely states that

In extreme old age, he [Lactantius] was the
teacher of Emperor Constantine’s son, Crispus,
who resided in Gaul...6

Since St. Jerome refers to Lactantius as "far
advanced in years" (extrema senectute) about 315 or
317, Lactantius was probably born about the middle of
the third century.7 His death could not have taken
place too many years after 315 A.D. Fletcher, however,
places it as far back as 325 A.D.8

Our author’s full name is generally given as
Lucius Caelius Firmianus Lactantius.9 That he attained

6Ibid., p. 689. "... Hic extrema senectute
magister Caesaris Crispi, filii Constantini, in Gallia
fuit..."

7William Fletcher, D.D., "Introductory Notice"
of the translation of Lactantius cited by the Rev. Alex-
ander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson. "Introductory
Notice" of The Ante-Nicene Fathers, VII (New York:
Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 5.
(Nota: All translations cited from Lactantius
are taken from this volume. Latin quotations from the
De Mortibus Persecutorum are cited from the small edi-
tion of Al. Slypen, S.J., and M. van Everdingen, S.J.,
Scriptores Latini Christiani [Noviomagi-Ultrajecti:
Dekker and Leuven, 1925]. They in turn followed the
Vienna text, 1890-1897, of Brandt and Laubmann, in
Corpus Script. ecol. Lat., XIX, XXVII.)

8Ibid., p. 6.

9Otto Seeck, Geschichte des Untergangs der
antiken Welt, Band I Anhang (Stuttgart: J.B.MeZlersche,
to great eminence as a rhetorician is obvious. He himself relates that "... When I was teaching rhetorical learning in Bithynia having been called thither ..."  

Certainly Diocletian would invite to the imperial city for so important a position only a man of high repute. It occurred at a time when the province was teeming with unrest, about the year 303, the eve of the Christian persecution. Lactantius himself relates "... and it had happened that at the same time the temple of God was overthrown ..."  

Whether or not Lactantius had been converted to Christianity at this time is not known. Endless
conjectures have arrived at conclusions no more final, perhaps, than the one deduced by Martin Schanz which he draws from Lactantius’s *De Divinis Institutionibus* and St. Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*. Schanz believes Lactantius embraced Christianity later in life.

That Lactantius was a Christian at the time he wrote the *De Mortibus Persecutorum* is self-evident. The strength of his faith reveals itself in his writings. Among these is the *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, as I stated above. To it I shall now turn my attention.

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CHAPTER II

EXTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE WORK
OF LACTANTIUS

The authenticity of any historical production depends in a greater or lesser degree upon certain external influences. In treating the date and the place for the writing of the De Mortibus Persecutorum, I shall quote Seeck. He has presented his arguments more fully than the greater part of other authors, but he fixes the date at a later period. Seeck\(^1\) maintains that the book could not have been written in Bithynia. Lactantius would not have dared to express feelings so freely, in an almost hateful tone, against Licinius so long as he

resided in the latter's province. Prudence would have directed against such a dangerous step. Furthermore, the slanderous remarks against Galerius must have placed Lactantius in a dangerous position. Leaders knew that in all his dealings Licinius was counseled by Galerius. Quoting Lactantius's *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, Chapter 42, Seeck points out that the work was written after the death of Diocletian, December 3, 316 (the date 303 is also accepted), shortly before Lactantius was summoned to teach in Gaul. Hence the date would certainly fall within the time spent at Gaul, but before Licinius began the Christian persecution in 320. The originator, Licinius, appears in the *De Mortibus Persecutorum* as defender of the still new faith; therefore, Seeck concludes

If our calculations are correct, we must say the book was written in 320 when persecution was threatening, or had already begun, but still could have been prevented . . .

2*Ibid.*, p. 461: "Haben wir richtig gesehen, so wird man die Entstehung des Büchleins in das Jahr 320 zu setzen haben, d. h. in die Zeit, wo die Christenverfolgung zwar drohte oder selbst schon begonnen hatte, aber doch noch abwendbar schien.—Die Eile, welche unter diesen Umständen bei der Abfassung der Schrift erforderlich war, erklärt es wohl auch, dass Lactanz bei den gallischen Staatsmännern, die ihn damals umgaben, gar keine oder doch sehr wenige Erkundigungen eingezogen hat und fast nur dasjenige niederschreibt, was ihm von seinem Aufenthalt in Nicomedia her in der Erinnerung geblieben war."
To give weight to his arguments he adds:

The haste demanded by the occasion of this work makes it clear that Lactantius, surrounded by Gallic statesmen, received no information or very little about Nicomedia and was forced to rely on his own memory.

Tillemont supports Seeck regarding the time of the writing. He comments:

It seems at the beginning he had written it as soon as God had given peace to the Church, before Licinius began his persecution.\(^3\)

In the chapter entitled "The Authorship of the De Mortibus Persecutorum," Lawlor expresses a similar opinion somewhat more specifically when he relates that

There is much force in the contention that Lactantius did not become the tutor of Crispin at Trier till 317, and that there is nothing to hinder us from supposing that he returned for a time to Nicomedia, and was there from 311 until the De Mortibus was written (313-314).\(^4\)

Drawing data and inferences from the De Mortibus Persecutorum itself, Lietzmann arrives at the conclusion that the work was written before the outbreak of the war between Constance and Licinius, October, 314, asserting.

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\(^3\) M. Lenain de Tillemont, Mémoires Pour Servir A. L'Histoire Ecclesiastique (Paris: Charles Robustel, 1704), XVI, 209: "Il semble par le commencement de cet ouvrage, qu'il l'ait fait aussitost que Dieu eut rendu la paix a l'Eglise."

that this view is generally accepted. In this opinion he is supported by Schanz who makes a similar conjecture and who cites the opinion of critics.

It can be readily seen that the dates for the composition of the *De Mortibus Persecutorum* vary so widely among critics that they do not allow for a definite year. However, it may be safely concluded that 313 or 314 is the more widely accepted date.

More influential than the time and the place of a literary production can be the author's purpose in writing. In the opening words of the *De Mortibus Persecutorum* which Lactantius addresses to Donatus, he states:

> Of the end of those men [the persecutors] I have thought good to publish a narrative, that all who are afar off and all who shall arise

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6Martin Schanz, *Geschichte der Römischen Literatur* (München: C. H. Beck'sche, 1905), VII, 467: "Da das 7. Buch der Institutiones nach dem Mailänder Toleranzedikt (313) abgeschlossen wurde und gleich darauf 'de ira' folgte, werden wir die Broschüre ins Jahr 314 und zwar in die zweite Hälfte zu rücken haben ...

"... Ebert ... ist der Ansicht, dass die Schrift in das Jahr 315 ... nach Görres ... ist die Schrift im September 314 vollendet worden, nach Belser ... fällt der Abschluss in den Dezember 314 ..."
hereafter may learn how the Almighty manifested
His power and sovereign greatness in rooting out
and utterly destroying the enemies of His name.
And this will become evident when I relate who
were the persecutors of the Church from the time
of its first constitution, and what were the
punishments by which the divine Judge, in His
severity, took vengeance on them. 7

Through this message some commentators interpret
only ideas formulated by words. Others read into it a
deeper meaning. I shall cite examples of each. The
opinion of Michaud 8 concurs with that of Tillemont when
the latter maintains:

Lactantius does not undertake to write a his-
tory of the time. But his principal design is to
make the justice of God adored in the punishment
and death of Diocletian and of the other princes
who had been authors of the persecution. 9

Seeck believes that the De Mortibus Persecutorum
is didactic, not historic, and is written for a definite

7De Mortibus Persecutorum l: "De quo exitu
scripto eorum testificari placuit, ut omnes qui procul
remoti fuerunt vel qui postea futuri sunt, acirent,
quatenus virtutem ac maiestatem suam in extinguendis
delendisque nominis sui hostibus Deus summus ostenderit.
Ab re tamen non est, si a principio, ex quo est Ecclesia
constituta, qui fuerint persecutores et quibus poenis in
eos caelestis iudicis severitas vindicaverit, exponam."

8Michaud, Biographie Universelle (Paris: Charles
Delagrave et Co.), XXII, 418.

9Tillemont, op. cit., p. 209: "Lactance n' entre-
prend pas d'y faire l'histoire de la persecution; mais
son principal dessein n'est que de faire adorer la
justice de Dieu dans la punition & la mort de Diocletien
& des autresprinces qui avaient été auteurs de la per-
secution."
purpose. He observes that since the book is addressed to Donatus of Nicomedia who at that time resided in the court of Licinius, it was to be circulated in the residence of the ruler in order to influence Licinius not to persecute the Christians or at least to mitigate their sufferings. 10

Some critics combine this dual aim—to honor God in His justice and to lessen the sufferings of the Christians by preventing future persecutions. Lactantius himself mentions only the first, but, as has already been noted, his position was a dangerous one. Expressing the second objective could have defeated its own end.

In bringing this chapter to a close, I shall consider briefly the place to which critics ascribe Lactantius as an historian. Just as there is a wide divergence of opinions in the elements I have thus far considered, so here also writers differ widely in their criticisms of the De Mortibus Persecutorum. Evaluations range from genuine admiration of some to an almost opposite view of...

10 Seeck, op. cit., pp. 460-61: "Da das Buch an den Nicomedenser Donatus gerichtet ist, also in der Residenz des Licinius verbreitet werden sollte, darf man wohl vermuten, dass sein eigentlicher Zweck war, diesen von einem neuen Vorgehen gegen die Christen abzuschrecken. Denn offenbar haben wir es hier nicht mit einer schlichten historischen Erzählung, sondern mit einer tendenziösen Gelegenheitschrift zu tun; die Frage nach ihrem Zweck und Anlass ist also sehr berechtigt."
others. Milman regards Lactantius as one "who may sometimes be admitted as an evidence of public facts though very seldom of private anecdotes."\(^\text{11}\)

In the words of Michaud, Lactantius "often adopts, lightly enough, ordinary gossip."\(^\text{12}\) Indirectly Bardenhewer admits inaccuracies in Lactantius by formulating an excuse. He states:

\[
\ldots \text{It has not been proved that the narrator Lactantius has anywhere consciously perverted the truth of history} \ldots \text{irritated sentiment and impassioned tone are easily understood from the nature of the subject matter.}\(^\text{13}\)
\]

Not only "the nature of the subject matter" but the man himself arouses in Bardy a sympathetic sentiment. He purposes that

One must not, however, forget that Lactantius himself had suffered too much to be strictly impartial. He nourished a fierce hatred against Diocletian and his associates which is constantly apparent and injures the sanity of his judgment. Then too he is more anxious to prove a thesis than to write an historical account. But his rhetorical gifts are wonderfully intensified by his personal feelings, and it is just the expression of these that makes the writings so

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\(^\text{11}\)See footnote in Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Philadelphia: Henry Coates and Company), I, 450.

\(^\text{12}\)Michaud, op. cit., p. 418.

extraordinary vivid.\textsuperscript{14}

On the other hand, there are those critics who likewise admit that Lactantius is inaccurate; but, at the same time, they rate highly the \textit{De Mortibus Persecutorum}. Nor do they fail to recognize the importance of the document.

The editors of the \textit{Ante-Nicene Fathers} see in the treatise

\ldots a most precious relic of antiquity, and a striking narrative of the events which led to the conversion of the Empire so called \ldots\textsuperscript{15}

To enable one to arrive more accurately at a true evaluation of Lactantius in the \textit{De Mortibus Persecutorum} entails a closer analysis.

In the next chapter, I shall discuss the persecutions of the Christians under Nero and later under Domitian, and the death of these persecutors.


Lactantius relates the persecution and death of two first-century Roman emperors. Foremost in the rank of persecutors he places Nero. "He it was," Lactantius asserts, "who first persecuted the servants of God; he crucified Peter and slew Paul."\(^1\)

Suetonius, however, claims that about the year 50 the Emperor Claudius expelled from Rome the Jews who, at the instigation of a leader called Chrest, were guilty of riots.\(^2\)

In his translation of the *Annals* of Tacitus, Murphy comments on this point. He states that Brotier observes that the Jews, in that period of time, were guilty of great enormities; and the distinction between them and the Christians not being understood, all were considered in the same light, despised and hated by the Romans.\(^3\)

\(^1\) *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 2: "... et primus omnium persecutus Dei servos Petrum cruci affixit, Paulum interfecit."

\(^2\) Suetonius *Vita Claudius* 25: "Iudeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantes Roma expulit." Quoted by Murphy in his translation and notes on Tacitus' *Annals* xv, 433.

Consequently, when the Jews were ordered by Claudius to depart from Rome, Murphy continues,

All of that nation, who professed themselves followers of Christ, were without distinction, included in the number.4

Palma, in his Historical Lectures, is of the opinion, states Parsons, that

... this ejection of the 'Jews' should not be classed among the Christian persecutions, because the alleged cause of the edict was the tumultuousness of the victims, not their religion. But, continues Parsons, very frequently the Pagan authorities, in assigning a reason for their assaults upon the Christians, made no mention of religion; nay, they not seldom put forth purely political motives as an excuse. And if, as seems probable, by the Chrest of Suetonius was meant the Lord of the Christians, the religious motive is plainly indicated.5

There is a universal agreement that Nero is the first persecutor of the Christians as professors of a new religion. But the time of the outbreak, likewise its cause, is disputed. Regarding both elements Lactantius's statement is indefinite. He writes:

... and while Nero reigned, the Apostle Peter came to Rome, and through the power of God committed unto him, wrought certain miracles, and by turning many to the true religion, built up a steadfast temple unto the Lord. When Nero heard of those things, and observed that not

4Ibid., note c.

only in Rome, but in every other place, a great multitude revolted daily from the worship of the idols, and condemning the old ways, went over to the new religion, he . . . sprung forward to raze the heavenly temple and destroy the new faith . . . 6

It was in the year 67 that St. Peter and St. Paul were martyred at Rome. 7 The persecution, however, was then raging fiercely. According to Tacitus, whom critics quote as an important source at this instance, the outburst followed swiftly upon the burning of Rome in the year 64, 8 for Nero ascribed the cause of the Fire to the Christians. Both Suetonius and Tacitus stress the fact that Nero himself gave the order to set fire to the Capitol. In the Annales Tacitus relates how Nero attempted to clear himself of this suspicion by

6 De Mortibus Persecutorum 2: "Cumque iam Nero imperaret, Petrus Romam advenit et editis quibusdam miraculis, quae virtute ipsius Dei data sibi ab eo postestate faciebat, convertit multos ad iustitiam Deoque templum fidele ac stabile collocavit. Qua re ad Neronem delata cum animadverteret non modo Romae, sed ubique cotidie magnam multitudo damnata vetusta transire . . . prosiluit ad excidendum caeleste templum delendamque iustitiam . . . ".

7 Karl Hoeber, "Nero," The Catholic Encyclopedia, X (1910), 753.

means of propitiatory sacrifices to the gods and liberal donations. Failing in his enterprise, he determined to transfer the guilt to others. Then Tacitus continues:

For this purpose he punished with exquisite torture, a race of men ... commonly called Christians... Nero proceeded with his usual artifice. He found a set of profligate and abandoned wretches, who were induced to confess themselves guilty... They were put to death with exquisite cruelty, and to their sufferings Nero added mockery and derision. Some were covered with skins of wild beasts, and left to be devoured by dogs; others were nailed to the cross; numbers were burned alive, and many covered over with inflammable matter, were lighted up, when the day declined, to serve as torches during the night.9

It was probably this writing or certainly similar information which induced Lactantius to term Nero an "execrable and pernicious tyrant" who did not escape the wrath of God. He attests that

... the tyrant, bereaved of authority, and precipitated from the height of empire, suddenly disappeared, and even the burial place of that noxious wild beast was nowhere to be seen. This has led some persons of extravagant imagination to suppose that, having been conveyed to a distinct region,

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9 Tacitus Annalium xv. 44: "ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit, quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat. ... igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud proinde in crimen incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt. et pereuntibus addita ludibria, ut ferarum tergis contecti laniatu canum iterarent, aut crucibus adfixi aut flammendi, atque, ubi defecisset dies, in usum nocturni luminis urerentur." (H. Pitman, ed; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925.)
he is still reserved alive. 10

While Lactantius enshrouds Nero's death in mystery and uncertainty, other early historians present a graphic picture of his last hours. Tacitus, 11 Suetonius, 12 and Dio Cassius 13 concur in recounting the final attempt of Nero to murder the Senate of the city, then to flee into Egypt. These historians relate how, frustrated in his plans, Nero turns to friends near at hand only to find himself forsaken by all but three freedmen. By them a picture of Nero's downfall is forcefully drawn. Tacitus relates that

Nero saw the sad reverse of his affairs. From his arms he could expect no support . . .

In his desperate situation Nero looked around for assistance, but he looked in vain. He wandered through the apartments of his palace, and all was solitude. He, who but a few days before was the god of the Senate and the people, was now in dread of being their victim. Conscience began to exercise her rights. Her voice was heard; Nero reviewed his crimes, and shuddered with horror and remorse. He repeated in despair and anguish of heart, a line, which, when personating Oedipus,

10 De Mortibus Persecutorum 2: "Deiectur itaque fastigio imperii ac devolutus a summo tyrannus impotens nusquam repente comparuit, ut ne sepulturae quidem locus in terra tam malae bestiae appareret."

11 Tacitus Annalium xvi. 48.

12 Suetonius in Neron. S. 48; quoted by Murphy, op. cit., p. 461.

he had often declaimed on the public stage; 'My wife, my father, and my mother doom me dead.' Of all his courtier-fry, and all his instruments of guilt, not one adhered to him in the hour of distress, except Sporus, the eunuch; Phaon, an enfranchised slave; and Epaphroditus, his secretary. He gave order to the soldiers on duty to proceed with all expedition to Ostia, and prepare a ship, that he might embark for Egypt. The men were not willing to obey. One of them asked him, in half a line from Virgil, 'Is it then so wretched a thing to die?' He went to the Servilian gardens, carrying with him a vial of swift-speeding poison, which had been prepared by the well-known Locusta; but his resolution failed. He returned to his chamber, and threw himself on his bed. The agitations of his mind allowed no rest. He started up, and called for some friendly hand to end his wretched being. That office no one was willing to perform; and he himself wanted fortitude. Driven to the last despair, and frantic with remorse and fear, he cried out in doleful accents, 'My friends desert me, and I cannot find an enemy.' He rushed forth from the palace, as if with intent to throw himself into the Tiber. He changed his mind, and thought of flying into Spain, there to surrender at discretion to the mercy of Galba. But no ship was ready at Ostia. Various projects presented themselves to his mind, in succession, increasing the tumult of his passions, and serving only to distract him more. . . . What course could he pursue? Where could he hide himself? He looked around in wild despair, and asked his remaining companions, 'Is there no lurking place? no safe recess, where I may have time to consider what is to be done?' Phaon, his freedman, proposed to conduct him to an obscure villa, which he held in his possession, at the distance of about four miles from Rome.

Nero embraced the offer. There was no time to be lost. He went forth in all his wretchedness; without a shoe to his feet; nothing on him but his close tunic, no outside garment; no imperial robe. In order to disguise himself, he snatched an old rusty cloak, and, throwing it over his shoulders, covered his head, and held
a handkerchief before his face. In that condition he mounted his horse, submitting with a dastard spirit to an ignominious flight, without any attendants except Phaon, the freedman; Epaphroditus, the secretary; and Sporus, the eunuch, with another, whose name Aurelius Victor says was Neophytus. In this manner Nero passed the last of his nights. At the dawn of day the praetorian guards deserted their station at the palace, and joined their comrades in the camp, where, by the influence and direction of Nymphidius, Galba was proclaimed emperor. The Senate met, and, after a short debate, confirmed the nomination of the praetorian guards . . .14

The account of Dio Cassius bears testimony to that of Tacitus. On Nero's flight from Rome, Dio reports:

But when he perceived that he had been deserted also by his body-guards (he happened to be sleeping in a certain garden), he undertook to flee. Accordingly he put on shabby clothing, mounted a horse no better than his attire, and with his head covered he rode while it was yet night towards an estate of Phaon, an imperial freedman, in company with Phaon himself, Epaphroditus and Sporus . . . . Being recognized, they say, in spite of his disguise, and saluted as emperor by someone who met him, he turned aside from the road and hid himself in a place full of reeds. There he waited till daylight, lying flat on the ground so as not to run the risk of being seen. Everyone who passed he suspected had come for him; he started at every voice, thinking it to be that of someone searching for him; if a dog barked anywhere or a bird chirped, or a bush or a branch was shaken by the breeze he was greatly excited. These sounds permitted him no rest, and he dared not speak a word to any one of those that were with him for fear someone else might hear; but to himself he

14Tacitus, Annalium xvi. 48.
lamented and bewailed his fate.

After a long time, as no one was seen to be searching for him, he went over into the cave, where in hunger he ate bread such as he had never before tasted and in his thirst drank water such as he had never drunk before. This gave him such a qualm that he said: 'So this is my famous cold drink!' 15

A similar woeful tale is recounted by Suetonius. He depicts the misery of the last hours of Nero’s life in the following narrative.

He [Nero] took some water out of a ditch and drank, saying, 'Haec est Nerois decocta.' Being taken into the house, creeping on his hands and knees through a hole that was made for him, he lay on a mean bed, and with tattered coverlet thrown over it, and being both hungry and thirsty, he refused some coarse bread that was brought to him, but drank a little warm water. 16

The death of Nero climaxes his criminal life according to Tacitus. 17 He attempted suicide but his cowardice held him back. A messenger arrived with the papers bearing the sentence of "death by ancient usage" for the Emperor, yet he hesitated. Finally the sound of approaching horsemen induced him to thrust a dagger in his throat. The stroke was too feeble. A freedman

15 Dio Cassius Roman History, Epitome of Book lxiii. 27.
16 Suetonius: "Quadrupes per augustias affossae cavernae receptus in proximam cellam, decubuit super lectum modicella culcita et vetere pallio strato instructum. Fameque interim et siti interpellante, panem quidem soridum oblatum aspernatus est, aquae autem tepidae aliquantulum bibit."
17 Tacitus Annalium xvi. 14.
assisted in the deed and struck a mortal blow. Tacitus continues:

A centurian entered the room, and seeing Nero in a mangled condition, ran immediately to his assistance, pretending that he came with friendly hand to bind the wound, and save the emperor's life. Nero had not breathed his last. He raised his languid eyes, and faintly said, 'You come too late; is this your fidelity?' [Nero: et haec est fides?] Those were his last words. He spoke and expired. The ferocity of his nature was still visible in his countenance. His eyes fixed and glaring, and every feature swelled with warring passions, he looked more stern, more grim and terrible than ever.

... Icelus consented that Nero's body should be committed to the flames at the place where he died. The funeral rites were performed without delay, and without pomp. His remains were conveyed to the monumental vault of the Domitian family, his paternal ancestors. The urn was carried by two female servants and Acte, the famous concubine. The secrecy, with which the obsequies was performed, was the cause of some untoward consequences, that afterward disturbed the commonwealth. A doubt remained in the minds of many, whether Nero had not made his escape into Asia or Egypt. The men, who, under a corrupt and profligate reign, had led a life of pleasure, and were, by consequence, enamoured of Nero's vices, paid every mark of respect to his memory, willing, at the same time, to believe that he still survived.18

These closing remarks of Tacitus throw some light on the conclusions Lactantius draws in reference to the end of Nero. Historians present no additional facts; they do present varied conjectures.

Lactantius introduces Domitian (81-96) as

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18Ibid.
"another tyrant no less wicked than Nero whose government was exceedingly odious," and who "for a very long time oppressed his subjects, and reigned in security, until at length he stretched forth his impious hands against the Lord."\(^\text{19}\)

Tertullian, however, writes of Domitian, as inheriting a "portion of the Neronian cruelty."\(^\text{20}\) Among the historians are those who class Domitian a second Nero, or, a tyrant "even more usurping and cruel than Nero."\(^\text{21}\)

Pliny describes Domitian in these words:

The tyrant in his close retreat, brooding over mischief, like a savage beast in his den, and never issuing from his solitude, but to make a worse solitude round him. He secluded himself within the walls of his palace; but he carried with him the malice of his heart, his plans of future massacre and the presence of an avenging God.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{19}\)De Mortibus Persecutorum 3: ". . . alter non minor tyrannus. . . . Qui cum exerceret invisam dominationem, subsectorem tamen cervicibus incubavit quam diutissime tutusque regnavit donec impias manus adversus Dominum tenderet."

\(^{20}\)Tertullian Apol. 5: ". . . portio Neronis de crudelitate." Quoted in Luigi Cappadelta, A Manual of Churh History, trans. by Dr. F. X. Funk (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1910), I, 40.


\(^{22}\)Pliny Paneg. Traj. S. 49: "Non audire quisquam, non alloqui audebat, tenebras semper secretumque captantem, nec unquam, ex solitudine sua prodeuntem, nisi ut
Although Murphy, in his "Introduction" to the works of Tacitus, remarks that

... Tacitus makes no complaints against Domitian; he mentions no personal injury; he received marks of favour and he acknowledges the obligation... 23

Tacitus writes in his Agricola that

Domitian, leaving now no interval or breathing time, but, as it were, with one continuous blow drained the life-blood of the Commonwealth. 24

In the following chapter his complaint mounts.

He holds that

... it was our wretched lot to behold the tyrant, and to be seen by him; while he kept a register of our sighs and groans. With the fiery visage, of a dye so red, that the blood of guilt could never cover his cheek, he marked the pale languid countenance of unhappy victims, who shuddered at his frown. 25

The persecution of the Christians under Domitian is referred to by other historians. Schanz declares it


23 Ibid.

24 Tacitus Agricola 44: "... Domitianus non iam per intervalla ac spiramenta temporum, sed continuo... velut uno ictu rem publicam exhaust." 25

25 Ibid. 45: "praecipua sub Domitianus miseriae pars erat videre et aspici, cum suspiria nostra subscriberentur, cum denotandis tot hominum palloribus sufficeret saevus ille vultus et rubor, quo se contra pudorem muniebat."
was the first persecution directed against the Chris-
tians because of their belief. 26 According to Tertul-
lian, St. John, the Apostle, at this time suffered per-
secution and exile. 27 To safeguard his sovereignty,
Domitian caused the surviving relatives of our Lord to
be brought to Rome. 28 The distrustful emperor went so
far as to shed the blood of his own relatives. This
atrocious deed Dio Cassius relates. He writes that

... Domitian slew, along with many others,
Flavius Clement, the Consul, although he was a
cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who
was a relative of the emperor's. 29

From the comments that follow it becomes evident
that the cause of these deaths was Christianity. Dio
Cassius continues:

The charge brought against them both was that
of atheism, a charge on which many others who
drifted into Jewish ways were condemned. Some of
these were put to death, and the rest were at
least deprived of their property. 30

Such was the reign and the tyranny of the second

26Schanz, op. cit., p. 244: "Die erste Verfolgung
der Christen um ihres Glaubens willen hat unter Domitian
stattgefunden."

27Parsons, op. cit., p. 45.

28Hegesippus ap. Eus. iii. 19. 20. Quoted by
Cappadela, op. cit., p. 40.

29Dio Cassius Roman History xlvii. 145.

30Ibid., xlvii. 14. 2.
persecutor, according to the early writers. Their criticisms are more severe than those of Lactantius. From them comes a detailed account of the end of Domitian. Observing the sovereign's death, Lactantius narrates:

Having been instigated by evil demons to persecute the righteous people, he was then delivered into the power of his enemies, and suffered due punishment. To be murdered in his own palace was not vengeance ample enough; the very memory of his name was erased. For although he had erected many admirable edifices, and rebuilt the Capitol, and left other distinguishing marks of his magnificence, yet the senate did so persecute his name, as to leave no remains of his statues, or traces of the inscriptions put up in honour of him; and by most solemn and severe decrees it branded him, even after death, with perpetual infamy.31

In his history Tacitus outlines the plot in detail. He affirms:

A conspiracy at length was formed in the palace of the domestic servants. Domitian fell under repeated wounds on the 18th of September A.U.C. 849, of the Christian era 96, in the forty-fifth year of his age, and the fifteenth of his reign.32

31De Mortibus Persecutorum 3: "Postquam vero ad persequendum iustum populum instinctu daemonum incitatust est, tunc traditus in manus inimicorum luit poenas. Nec satis ad ultionem fuit quod est interfectus domi: étiam memoria nominis eius erasa est. Nam cum multa mirabilia opera fabricasset, cum Capitolium aliaque nobilia monumenta fecisset, senatus ita nomen eius persecutus est, ut neque imaginum neque titulorum eius relinquaret ulla vestigia, gravissime decretis etiam mortuo notam inure-ret ad ignominiam sempiternam."

32Tacitus Annalium i. 2.
Dio Cassius reviews in still greater detail the actual murder of the emperor. He states:

As soon as he Domitian rose to leave the court-room and was ready to take his afternoon rest, as was his custom, first Parthenius removed the blade from the sword which always lay under his pillow, that Domitian should not have the use of it, and then he sent in Stephanus, who was stronger than the others. Stephanus smote Domitian, and though it was not a fatal blow, the emperor was nevertheless knocked to the ground, where he lay prostrate. Then, fearing he might escape, Parthenius rushed in, or, as some believe, was sent in by Maximus, a freedman.33

As I have noted above, Lactantius shows that an attempt was made to erase even the memory of the man. To this Suetonius also bears witness.34 Not only the senate passed measures to that effect, but Nerva, who forbade the erection of any statue to himself, "sold all those raised to Domitian."35

With the accession of Nerva (96-98) began, what Lactantius terms, a "long" period of peace which was interrupted afterwards by Decius, "an accursed wild beast,

33Dio Cassius Roman History lxvii. 17.


to afflict the Church." 36

However, the treatment of the third century persecutors I shall assume in the next chapter. Let it suffice to note here that thus far Lactantius in his De Mortibus Persecutorum has been generally supported by early writers. His opinions concur fundamentally with those of others; differences occur only in minor details.

36 De Mortibus Persecutorum 4: "Extitit enim post annos plurimos execrabile animal, Decius, qui vexaret Ecclesiam."
Lactantius passes over a period of time covering more than a century, from Domitian to Decius, without mentioning any particular persecutor. He states that

... the commands of the tyrant [Domitian] having been rescinded, the Church was not only restored to her former state, but she shone forth with additional splendour, and became more and more flourishing. And in times that followed, while many well-deserving princes guided the helm of the Roman empire, the Church suffered no violent assaults from her enemies ... The long peace, however, was afterwards interrupted. Decius appeared [249-251] ...

Yet during the entire period of the "long peace," the position of the Christian was always one of great danger, being, as it were, at the mercy of every person ill-disposed towards him. Without a warning, such a malicious person could cite the Christian before the nearest tribunal, although this practice was not encouraged.  

1De Mortibus Persecutorum 3: "Rescissis igitur actis tyranni non modo in statum pristinum Ecclesia restituta est, sed etiam multo clarius ac floridius enituit, secutisque temporibus, quibus multi ac boni principes Romani imperii clavum regimenque tenuerunt, nullos inimicorum impetus passa ... "Sed enim postea longa pax rupta est."

Under the mild rule of Nerva, the faithful were expressly permitted to follow their manner of life in peace. 3 In the words of Tacitus, "Nerva Caesar blended things once irreconcilable." 4 But the slaughter of the Christians was again resumed in the reign of Trajan (98-117).

Among the ten persecutions which he enumerates, St. Augustine terms Trajan's the third. 5 The authenticity of this statement is corroborated by the correspondence between the Emperor and Pliny the Younger, the pro-consul of Bithynia. The number of Christians astounded Pliny. After he had tortured and executed some of them he appealed to Trajan for further instructions. The reply came that the Christians were not to be sought out, but when denounced they were to be punished unless they consented to relinquish their superstitions. 6 During


6 Pliny Epistles x. 96. 3: "Interim in iis qui ad me tanquam Christiani deferebantur hunc sum secutus modum interrogavi ipsos an essent Christiani confitentes
Trajan's reign happened the martyrdom of the Supreme Pontiffs, St. Clement, Evarist, and Alexander, also St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (107).  

In the reign of Hadrian (117-138), no new edicts were issued against the Christians, yet martyrdoms were frequent. In the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-161) was clement but not free of persecution.  

Eusebius mentions the fact that Hadrian (117-138) issued a tolerance edict; yet Christians frequently were put to death in his reign also. St. Augustine does not include Hadrian among the persecutors; however, he mentions as fourth the persecution under Antoninus


8 Ibid., pp. 47-48.

9 Cappadelta, op. cit., p. 41.


Pius (138-161). After it, he gives that of Severus (193-211), followed by Maximinus Thrax (235-238), then Decius.

According to Eusebius, the fourth persecution took place under Marcus Aurelius (161-180). Critics generally regard Marcus Aurelius as a persecutor. Likewise do they consider Septimus Severus and Maximinus Thrax among offenders.

When Decius was made emperor, he raised such a persecution that Dionysius terms it "well nigh the most terrible of all." In a letter he writes:

It was not with the imperial edict that the persecution began amongst us, but it preceded it by a whole year; and that prophet and creator of evils for this city, whoever he was, was beforehand in stirring and inciting the masses of the heathen against us, fanning anew the flame of their native superstition . . .

. . . And, what is more, the edict arrived, and it was almost like that which was predicted by our Lord, well-nigh the most terrible of all, so as, if possible, to cause to stumble even the elect.

Both Cyprian and Eusebius admit the Christians

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12Augustine xviii. 52.
13Eusebius iv. 16; v. 5.
14Schanz, op. cit., pp. 251-54; Cappadelta, op. cit., pp. 41-44; Parsons, op. cit., pp. 48-53.
15Eusebius vi. 39.
did fall away in crowds.\textsuperscript{16} In his life of Gregory Thaumaturgus, St. Gregory of Nyssa explicitly states that

\begin{quote}
\ldots the emperor ordered the prefects and magistrates to force the Christians by terror and by every kind of torture, to the worship of the gods.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

However, it was not alone the inhuman torture which caused so great a number to apostatize. A certain system of certificates was devised through which the Christians might escape torture, death, and open denial of his faith.\textsuperscript{18} By this means a person or his agent might obtain from the official a certificate stating that "the bearer had offered sacrifice to the gods."\textsuperscript{19} From St. Cyprian's \textit{De lapsis}, one learns that this practice caused much confusion. It was difficult or, in certain instances, impossible to distinguish the good from the unfaithful Christian. Thus the Decian persecution surpassed all previous ones in cruelty because of the systematic manner and the ruthless energy

\textsuperscript{16}Cyprian \textit{De lapsis} 7. 9; Eusebius vi. 41. Quoted by Cappadelta, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 44.

\textsuperscript{17}Gregory of Nyssa \textit{Vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi} (46, 944, Migne), quoted by Parsons, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 54; also Schanz, \textit{op. cit.}, VIII, 256.

\textsuperscript{18}Parsons, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 121.
with which it was conducted throughout the entire realm by Imperial command. 20

Healy contends that Decius spent the greater part of his reign at the head of his troops attempting to repel the Gothic invaders, by whom he was defeated "in the marshes of Dobrudsha in which he lost his life."

Then he adds:

This overthrow, attributed by some writers to the treachery of some of the Roman generals, was so complete that the emperor's body was never recovered. 21

Another story describing the death of the emperor has him routed near Forum Trebonii, in Moesia, and surrounded by the Goths. Seeing his plight and his own son killed, Decius plunged his horse into a marsh where horse and rider were "instantly swallowed up and seen no more." 22

Alfoldi discredits this tale in maintaining that Healy succeeded in luring the Emperor, who walked incautiously into the trap laid for him, into a marshy place near Abrittus (Aptaat-Kalesi) in Dobrudja and in inflicting upon him a decisive

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defeat. After Herennius Etruscus had died bravely, Decius fought on until he too fell on the field of honor.23

Eusebius gives no particulars. He merely states:

When Decius had reigned for an entire period of less than two years, he was forthwith murdered along with his sons, and Gallus succeeded him.24

Lactantius holds a still worse fate for Decius by enlarging on details which no other writer mentions. He affirms that

... having undertaken an expedition against the Carpi, who had then possessed themselves of Dacia and Moesia, he [Decius] was suddenly surrounded by the barbarians, and slain, together with a great part of his army; nor could he be honored with the rites of sepulture, but, stripped and naked, he lay to be devoured by wild beasts and birds.25

Gallus succeeded Decius, but Lactantius turns immediately to Valerian (253-260) and declares him a persecutor, "in a mood alike frantic ... and although his time was short, shed much righteous blood."26


24Eusebius viii. 1.

25De Mortibus Persecutorum 4: "Nam profectus adversum Carpos, qui tum Deciam Moesiamque occupaverant, statimque circumventus a barbaris et cum magna exercitus parte deletus ne sepultura quidem potuit honorari, sed exutus ac nudus, ut hostem Dei oportebat, pabulum feris ac volucribus iacuit."

26Ibid. 5: "Non multo post Valerianus quoque non dissimili furore corruptus ... multum quamvis brevi tempore iusti sanguinis fudit."
That Valerian caused innocent blood to flow is an historic fact established by reliable authorities. Critics also hold that his reign opened with a period of peace and a strong feeling of tolerance toward the Christians. But Alföldi protests that as Decius's chief lieutenant he probably shared his emperor's hostility to the Church. Only the preoccupation with the empire delayed his actions. If the decision against the Christians lay with Valerian, continues Alföldi, and not with Macrianus, as Dionysius suggests, then one can conjecture that Valerian sought, like another Nero, "to turn popular indignation against the Christians and avert it from himself." For Valerian through military losses had turned the indignation of his subjects against himself. Alföldi attests:

... and he now proceeded to intensify the harshness of his measures against them [Christians]. Hatred was again allowed to run riot against a background of general disaster and danger, exactly as under Decius.

To accomplish his purpose Valerian issued two

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27 Alföldi, op. cit., p. 205.
28 Eusebius vii. 10. 3, 4.
29 Alföldi, op. cit., p. 205.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 171.
edicts against the Christians. In the *Acts of St. Cyprian*, the Proconsul Paternus writes that Valerian and Gallienus have ordered that "those who do not follow the Roman religion should at least acknowledge the Roman ceremonies." He also added:

> They have moreover commanded that no assemblies be held in any place, and that no one enter the cemeteries; if anyone violate this precept, he shall be beheaded.32

The second edict, more severe than the first, Cyprian quoted in his letter to Bishop Successus. This rescript commanded the immediate execution of the clergy. The high ranking laity suffered confiscation and death. The property of women was also seized, and the owners were exiled.33

32 *Acts of St. Cyprian* 1: "\( ^\text{c} \) . . . praeceperunt (Valerianus et Gallienus) eos qui Romanam religionem non colunt, debeat Romanae caeremoniae recognoscere; \( ^\beta \) non solum de episcopis, verum etiam de presbyteris mihi scribere dignati sunt; \( ^\gamma \) . . . praeceperunt etiam, ne in aliquibus locis conciliabula fiant nec coemeteria ingrediantur, si quis itaque hoc tam salubre praeceptum non observaverit, capite plectetur." Quoted by Schanz, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

33 *Cyprian Epist.* 80: "rescripsisse valerianum ad senatum ut episcopi et presbyteri et diacones in continent animadvertantur, senatores vero et egregii viri et equites Romani dignitatem amissa etiam bonis spolien- tur et si ademptis facultatibus Christiani persevera- verint, capite quoque multentur, matronae ademtis bonis in exilium relegentur, Caesariani autem quicumque vel prius confessi fuerant vel nunc confessi fuerint confis- centur et vincit in Caesarianas possessiones descripti mittantur."
It was during this period that St. Cyprian was martyred in Carthage; in Rome Pope Sixtus II and his deacon, St. Lawrence, met death. But with the accession of Gallienus the edicts of Valerian were revoked.34

Regarding the end of Valerian, the account Lactantius gives is supported in general by critics. Lactantius relates that

He [Valerian], having been made prisoner by the Persians, lost not only that power which he had exercised without moderation, but also the liberty of which he had deprived others; and he wasted the remainder of his days in the vilest condition of slavery: for Sapor, the king of the Persians, who had made him prisoner, whenever he chose to get into his carriage or to mount on horseback, commanded the Roman to stoop and present his back; then setting his foot on the shoulders of Valerian, he said with a smile of reproach, "This is true, and not what the Romans delineate on board or plaster."35

Lactantius further embellishes his account by describing the death of Valerian. He relates:

Valerian lived for a considerable time under the well-merited insults of his conquerors. . . . This also was added to the severity of his punishment, that although he had an emperor for his son, he

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34 Cappadela, op. cit., p. 45.

35 De Mortibus Persecutorum 5: "Hic captus a Persis non modo imperium, quo fuerat insolentur usus, sed etiam libertatem, quam ceteris ademerat, perdidit vixitque in servitute turpissime. Nam rex Persarum Sapor, is qui cum imperator, si quando libuerat aut vehiculum ascendere aut equum, inclinare sibi Romanum iubebat ac terga praebere et imposito pede super dorsum eius illud esse verum dicebat, exprobans ei cum risu, non quod in tabulis aut parietibus Romani pingerent."
found no one to revenge his captivity. . . . When he had finished this shameful life . . . he was flayed, and his skin stripped from the flesh, was dyed with vermillion, and placed in the temple of the gods of the barbarians.\textsuperscript{36}

Christensen cautions against "statements of Christian sources with their story of a cruel and humiliating treatment of the captive Emperor." He declares that it must be accepted with great reserve.\textsuperscript{37} Eusebius dismisses the subject in one sentence. He states:

But not long afterward Valerian underwent slavery at the hands of the barbarians and his son succeeding to the sole power [260 or 261] conducted the government with more prudence, and immediately by means of edicts put an end to the persecutions against us.\textsuperscript{38}

But this peace to which Eusebius refers was cut short by what is usually termed the Diocletian Persecution.\textsuperscript{39} Before passing on to it Lactantius mentions

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.: "Ita illae dignissime triumphatus aliquidiu vixit. . . . Etiam hoc ei accessit ad poenam, quod cum filium haberet imperatorem, captivitatis suas tamen ac servitutis extremae non inventit ultorem nec ommino repetitus est. Postea vero quam pudendam vitam in illo dedecore finivit, derepta est ei cutis et exuta visceribus pellis infecta rubro colore, ut in templo barbarorum decorum . . . ."


\textsuperscript{38}Eusebius vii. 1.

\textsuperscript{39}Parsons, op. cit., p. 56.
another blood-thirsty emperor whose perpetrations re-
mained unrealized however. Death came before Aurelian’s 
(270-275) decrees were effective, for Lactantius asserts 
that

He [Aurelian] was not, however, permitted to ac-
complish what he devised. 40

In the Scriptores Augustae Historia, the author
refers to Aurelian as a stern, a savage, and a blood-
thirsty prince. 41 Eusebius affirms:

[Aurelian] was now being moved by certain
counsels to stir up persecution against us . . .
as he was just on the point of so doing and was
putting his signature to the decrees against us,
the divine Justice visited him. 42

Lactantius describes the death of Aurelian
briefly. He relates:

... just as he began to give a loose to his
rage, he was slain. His bloody edicts had not yet
reached the more distant provinces, when he him-
self lay all bloody on the earth at Caenophrurium
in Thrace, assassinated by his familiar friends,
who had taken up groundless suspicions against him. 43

40 De Mortibus Persecutorum 6: "Verum illi ne per-
ficere quidem quae cogitaverat licuit ... ."

41 "The Deified Aurelian," Scriptores Augustae
Historia xxxvi. 1, 2. Trans. David Magie, ed. T. E. Page
et al. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1930).

42 Eusebius xxx. 20.

43 De Mortibus Persecutorum 6: "... sed pro-
tinus inter initia sui furoris extinctus est. Nondum
ad provincias ulteriores cruenta eius scripta pervene-
rant, et iam Caenofrurii, qui locus est Thraciae,
A similar view is given by the writer of "The Deified Aurelian." Aurelian had declared war on the Persians and was on his way there, when, contends the author,

... he was murdered at Caenophrurium ... through the hatred of his clerk but by the hand of Mucapor. 44

Then followed a period of comparative peace for the Christians. It was a time when internal revolts and barbarian foes were harassing the Empire. Several emperors followed each other in quick succession before Diocletian began the last and the most bitter persecution of the Christians under the Roman emperors. This period is sometimes termed the "Era of Martyrs." 45 In it were involved two emperors and three Caesars. These I shall consider in the next chapter.

cruentus ipse humi iacebat falsa quadam suspicione ab amicis suis interemptus."

44 Scriptores Augustae Historiae xxxv. 5: "sed cum iter faceret, apud Caenophrurium ... malitia notarii sui et manu Mucaporis interemptus est."

CHAPTER V

DIOCLETIAN AND HIS ASSOCIATES

In 284 when the army elected Diocletian emperor of the Roman domains\(^1\) the honor carried with it heavy burdens. Among the many problems were scars of civil war, a lack of financial stability, and uprisings in the provinces.\(^2\) Besides, the Empire had grown too large for the rule of one man.\(^3\) As a result, Diocletian inaugurated a new policy by investing the government of the realm in four men. To this change Lactantius alludes in the *De Mortibus Persecutorum* when he complains:

This man Diocletian by avarice partly, and partly by timid counsels, overturned the Roman empire. For he made choice of three persons to share the government with him.\(^4\)

After Diocletian, Maximian, "an old companion in arms," ranked first.\(^5\) On the authority of Eutropius,\(^6\)...

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\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 326-27.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 325.

\(^4\) *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 7: "Hic orbem terrae simul et avaritia et timiditate subvertit. Tres enim participes regni sui fecit . . . ."

Seeck maintains that in the beginning Maximian was raised to the dignity of Caesar.\(^6\) Scarcely more than two years after the accession of Diocletian to the throne, Maximian was also vested with the purple. By 286, therefore, Rome had two emperors.\(^7\) To assist Maximian in the West, Diocletian appointed Constantius Chlorus his Caesar; while he, in the East, associated himself with Galerius and made him Caesar likewise.\(^8\) Thus the Empire was quartered and each man governed a part. Because of this division, Lactantius points out,

... armies were multiplied, and each of the four princes strove to maintain a much more considerable military force than a sole emperor had done in times past.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 448-49: "Die Zeit von Maximians Erhebung zum Augustus bestimmt sich dadurch, dass er nach der ursprünglichen Rechnung zwei tribunicische Jahre weniger regierte, als Diocletian. ... Er kann also nicht vor dem 1. Januar 286 den neuen Titel angenommen haben, doch wahrscheinlich auch nicht sehr viel später, da er schon am 24. Mai dieses Jahres auch im Reichsteil Diocletians als Augustus anerkannt war."

\(^8\) Mattingly, op. cit., p. 328.

\(^9\) De Mortibus Persecutorum 7: "... orbe diviso et multiplicatis exercitibus, cum singuli eorum longe maiorem numerum militum habere contenderunt, quam priores principes habuerant, cum soli rem publicam gererent."
Lactantius continues that tax incomes decreased because there "began to be fewer men who paid taxes than there were who received wages."\(^{10}\) The minute portions into which the provinces were divided made necessary "a multitude of inferior officers" who lay heavy taxes on each territory. Added to this misery were daily condemnations, frequent forfeitures, and repeated taxes on numberless commodities.\(^{11}\)

In his treatise of "The Reforms of Diocletian," W. Ensslin discusses at length the division of the Empire and the increase of official positions.\(^{12}\) He terms Lactantius's statement on the increase of the army a "gross exaggeration"; however, he asserts:

\[
\ldots \text{we can hardly suppose that the number of troops under arms had been doubled.}\(^{13}\)
\]

Yet he admits that

Diocletian carried further the reform of the army begun by Gallienus, and greatly increased

\(^{10}\)Ibid.: "Adeo maior esse coeperat numerus accipientium quam dantium . . ."

\(^{11}\)Ibid.: "... multi praesides et plura officia singulis regionibus . . . sed condemnationes tandem et proscriptiones frequentes, exactiones rerum innumerabilium . . ."


\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 397.
the number of troops under arms.\textsuperscript{14}

Treating the cause of the financial distress, Ensslin quotes G. Mickwitz in his \textit{Geld und Wirtschaft im römischen Reich des 4 Jahrhunderts}. He maintains that

Because of the terrible debasement of the coinage, the receipts from taxation could not cover the needs of the State . \textsuperscript{15}

Lactantius argues that these burdens might have been endured had Diocletian utilized the funds of the imperial treasury. But his avarice drove him to hoard his wealth, while he made excessive extortions and endless exactions from the provinces for his multiplied building projects and varied undertakings.\textsuperscript{16}

In this point also Ensslin allows that

The carrying-on of wars and the increase in the size of the army, as well as the increase in the administrative apparatus, with the heightened expenditure of the court, and finally the cost of new buildings put a very heavy burden on the finances. For besides fortresses and other military buildings, Diocletian himself, and, in imitation of him or at his suggestion, his co-regents also, did much building . . . the vast ruins of the Baths of Diocletian in Rome, still today

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 399.

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{De Mortibus Persecutorum} 7: "Idem insatiabil\textit{a} avarit\textit{a} thesauros numquam minui volebat . . . H\textit{u}c a\textit{c}-c\textit{e}\textit{d}ebat \textit{in}finita qua\textit{e}dam cupid\textit{it}as aedific\textit{i}\textit{a}d\textit{i}, non mi\textit{n}or prov\textit{inc}\textit{i}ar\textit{u}m exactio . . . ."
perpetuate the splendid ideas of their builder and at the same time give permanent expression to the effort in taxes and labour--services, which his government demanded from the subjects for their erection.17

G. Rodenwalt attributes to Diocletian and his co-regents the imperial residences in Nicomedia, Thessalonica, Milan, and Treves, and "in addition to these the shifting imperial courts and headquarters."18 All these stand as silent monuments among the elaborate structures erected at this time. Nor, continues Rodenwalt, is it the mere numbers, "but rather the size and boldness of the architectural conceptions in these structures that is remarkable."19

Ensslin's discussion of taxation supports Lactantius's contention of the heavy taxes imposed for the maintenance of the Empire.20 This, according to Mattingly, proved a burden only toward the end of the Diocletian's reign; in the beginning, it had been mitigated "by the moderation of the rulers."21 Eusebius likewise describes the times preceding the outbreak of

17 Ensslin, op. cit., p. 399.
19 Ibid.
20 Ensslin, op. cit., pp. 399-405.
21 Mattingly, op. cit., p. 329.
the persecution as a period of peace and prosperity, especially for the Christians.22 And, he adds:

... also those who held the chiefest places in a world-empire completed the decennalia and vicennalia of their principate, and used to pass their days in festivals and public games, in the most joyous feasts and gaieties, possessing complete, well established peace.23

Even during this period of "well established peace" when he lived at the Nicomedian court, Lactantius could recognize only a blood-stained picture of Diocletian tyranny. He paints it thus:

I omit mentioning how many perished on account of their possession or wealth. ... But this is peculiar to him [Diocletian] that whenever he saw a field remarkably well cultivated, or a house of uncommon elegance, a false accusation and a capital punishment were straightway prepared against the proprietor; so that it seemed as if Diocletian could not be guilty of rapine without also shedding blood.24

When comparing Diocletian with his colleague, Maximian Herculius, Lactantius depicts them "close faithful friends." From this, he concludes, can be


23 Ibid.

24 De Mortibus Persecutorum 7: "Sed in hoc fuit praecipuum, quod ubicunque cultiorem agrum viderat aut ornatus edificium, iam parata domino calumnia et poena capitalis, quasi non posset rapere aliena sine sanguine."
inferred a similarity "of inclination and purpose" and a "corresponding will and unanimity in judgment." Only in so far did the two emperors differ that Diocletian was "more avaricious and less resolute"; while Maximian, with less avarice possessed "a bolder spirit, prone not to good but to evil." 25

Gibbon contends that the brutal forwardness of Maxentius throws a false light on "the personal courage of the emperor Diocletian." 26 Opposing the view of Lactantius that Diocletian manifested cowardice in certain acts, Gibbon holds that

It would not be easy to persuade us of the cowardice of a soldier of fortune, who acquired and preserved the esteem of legions. . . . (But he makes an admission) Yet even calumny is sagacious enough to discover and to attack the most vulnerable spot. 27

In the same breath, as it were, Gibbon both emulates and denounces Diocletian. He confesses that

25 Ibid. 8: "Quid frater eius Maximianus qui est dictus Heroulius? non dissimilis ab eo: nec enim possent in amicitiam tam fidelem cohaerere, nisi esset in utroque mens una, eadem cogitatio, par voluntas, aequa sententia. Hoc solum diererent, quod avaritia maior in altero fuit, sed plus timiditatis, in altero vero minor avaritia, sed plus animi, non ad bene faciendum, sed ad male."

26 Edward Gibbon, Esq., The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. M. F. Quizot (Cincinnati: J. A. James, 1844), p. 128.

27 Ibid.
His abilities were useful rather than splendid; a vigorous mind, improved by the experiences and study of mankind; dexterity and application in business; a judicious mixture of liberality and economy of mildness and rigour; profound dissimulation under the disguise of military frankness; steadiness to pursue his ends; flexibility to vary his means; and, above all, the great art of submitting his own passions, as well as those of others to the interest of his ambition with the most specious pretences of justice and public utility.  

Furthermore, Gibbon expresses the opinion that "suspicious jealousy of power found no place" among Diocletian and his co-regents.29 Seeck does not hold this view. He argues that statistics seem to indicate that Diocletian had kept secret for some time the elevation of Maximian. If such was the case, then the act appears suspicious. At the same time, the silence of the panegyrist Eumenius seems to confirm this suspicion. Eumenius passes over in silence the fact that Diocletian raised Maximian to the rank of Augustus only a year after he had made him Caesar. When so great an honor, bestowed on an individual in such quick succession, is left unmentioned in a eulogy, then, holds Seeck, one can safely conclude that the act was performed against the will of the older man.30

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 129.
30 Seeck, op. cit., p. 448: "Danach kann die Rangerhöhung des Caesar nicht feierlich im ganzen Reiche
Taking another view, Seeck states that Diocletian always reserved for himself first place in governmental affairs, yet Eumenius allows no differences in rank among these same rulers. Moreover, another point noteworthy is that from Eumenius escaped the statement that mutual concord gradually waxed stronger: an admission, ponders Seeck, that such a need existed. 31

That Diocletian ranked himself above his co-regents Lactantius shows especially when he relates the conversation in which Galerius urged the Emperor to abdicate. Diocletian replied:

... that it was unfit for one who has held a rank eminent above all others and conspicuous.
to sink into obscurity. 32

Lactantius uses the same incident to point out a weakness and timidity characteristic of Diocletian which led him to consent to the proposals of Galerius. Then later, he again speaks of the Emperor "as being of a tim­orous disposition" and "a searcher into futurity," 33 or "apt to be low-spirited and timorous in every commotion." For example, fearing a fate similar to that of Valerian, he sent Galerius against the Persians while he himself halted anxiously watching the event. 34

Another trait Lactantius attributes to Diocle­tian is the ungovernable dread of incurring displeasure and his insatiable love of fame. In Chapter Eleven he states:

... whenever he [Diocletian] determined to do good, he did it without advice, that the praise might be all his own; but whenever he determined to do ill, which he was sensible would be blamed, he called in many advisers, that his own fault

32De Mortibus Persecutorum 18: "Ille vero aiebat et indecens esse, si post tantum sublimis fastigii claritatem in humilis vitae tenebras decidisset ... ."

33Ibid. 10: "... erat pro timore scrutator rerum futurarum ... ."

34Ibid. 9: "Tunc Diocletianus, ut erat in omni tumultu meticulosus animique dejectus, simul et exemplum Valeriani timens, non ausus est obviam tendere, sed hunc [Galerius] per Armeniam misit ipse in Oriente subsistens et auhaps exitus rerum."
might be imputed to other men.\textsuperscript{35}

It is this very irresoluteness and superstitious fear in Diocletian against which Lactantius hurls his invectives and which he blames for inaugurating a fresh persecution.\textsuperscript{36} But both Lactantius and Eusebius stamp Galerius as instigator.\textsuperscript{37} According to Lactantius, Galerius, the son-in-law of Diocletian, was worse "than all the bad princes of former times." He writes:

Of stature tall, full of flesh, and swollen to a horrible bulk of corpulency; by his speech, gestures, and looks, he made himself a terror to all who came near him.\textsuperscript{38}

Hearnshaw, a writer of recent times, depicts Galerius "a fourth-century Hitler." In his article he maintains that

It would be difficult to believe that human nature could sink to such depths of cruelty and barbarity as the minions of Galerius and Daza displayed...

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid. 11: "Nam erat huius malitiae: cum bonum quid facere decrevisset, sine consilio faciebat, ut ipse lauderetur, cum autem malum, quoniam id reprehendendum sciebat, in consilium multos advocabat, ut aliorum culpae adscriberetur quicquid ipse deliquerat."

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid. 10.

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid.: ". . . advenit, ut ad persequendos Christianos instigaret senem vanum, qui iam principium facerat . . . "; Eusebius viii. 16. 3.

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid. 9: "Erat etiam corpus moribus congruens, status celsus, caro ingens et in horrendam magitudinem diffusa et inflata."
were it not for the fact that the agents of the Nazi Gestapo today have manifested the same fiendish ingenuity in the infliction of torture upon helpless victims of a perverted government. 39

Hearnshaw then compares the influence of the tyrant upon the senile Hindenburg to that exercised upon Diocletian who was induced to resign. Further, he adds that the excuse forged by Galerius and Hitler for the purpose of arousing indignation and hate have a similar aspect. The burning of the German Reichstag buildings in 1933 is a striking parallel to the fire in the imperial palace at Nicomedia in 303. 40 That Galerius, like another Nero, employed this means of turning Diocletian against the Christians is held by Lactantius.

He states:

But Galerius, not satisfied with the tenor of the edict, sought in another way to gain on the emperor. That he might urge him to excess of cruelty in persecution, he employed private emissaries to set the palace on fire; and some part of it having burnt, the blame was laid on the Christians as public enemies; and the very appellation of Christian grew odious on account of that fire. 41

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40. Ibid., p. 181.

41. De Mortibus Persecutorum 14: "Sed Caesar non contentus est edicti legibus: aliter Diocletianum aggregi parat. Nam ut illum ad propositum cruelissimae persecutionis impelleret, occultis ministris palatio
Lactantius devotes three chapters of the *De Mortibus Persecutorum* to the cruelties Galerius inflicted upon his subjects. Eusebius styles him a perpetrator of evils, while Mattingly characterizes him as "uncompromising, merciless, and excessively ambitious." But he believes that a defect even more fatal was Galerius's "false standard of values as seen most tragically in his religious policy." Galerius also exhibited this very trait in his choice of associate rulers at the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian on May 1, 305. His personal ambition prompted him to effect the appointment of Maximin Daia and Severus against that of Constantine and Maxentius.

At that time, according to Lactantius, Daia (305-313) was "a young man, half-barbarian," but later, an aggressive tyrant transcending all former

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subiecit incendium, et cum pars quaedam conflagrasset, Christiani arguebantur velut hostes publici et ingenti invidia simul cum palatio Christianorum nomen ardebat."

42 See Chapters 21, 22, and 23.
43 Eusebius viii. 16. 3.
46 *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 18, 19.
47 *Ibid.* 18: "... adolescentem quendam semi-barbarum ..."
emperors in debauching women. Eusebius confirms the statement of Lactantius when he declares that in "debauchery and riotous living he suffered none to surpass him." He continues:

In fact he could not pass a city without continually ravishing and abducting virgins.

Eusebius pronounces Maximin Daia and Maxentius "brothers in wickedness." While the former tyrannized in the East, the latter usurped the government of Rome in the West and indulged in similar cruelties. Eusebius states:

... he drove headlong into every form of wickedness, and there is not a single abominable and dissolute act that he has left undone, committing adulteries and all kinds of rape. ... All cowered before him, people and rulers, famous and obscure, and were worn out by his terrible tyranny.

Maxentius, in the words of Lactantius, was "a man of bad and mischievous disposition," a man so proud "that he would never pay the wonted obeisance either to his father or father-in-law" (Maximian and Galerius respectively).

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48 Ibid. 38.
49 Eusebius viii. 14. 11.
51 Ibid. 14. 1, 2.
52 De Mortibus Persecutorum 18: "... homo
In characterizing Diocletian I have mentioned the boldness and brutality of Maximian, emperor of the West. Preceding his son, Maxentius, the elder man plunged excessively into sensual pleasures. Lactantius writes:

Add to all this the incontinency of that pestilent wretch, not only in debauching males . . . but also in the violation of the daughters of the principal men of the state; for wherever he journeyed virgins were suddenly torn from the presence of their parents. In such enormities he placed his supreme delight, and to indulge to the utmost his lust and flagitious desires was in his judgment the felicity of his reign. 53

The treachery and deceit of Maximian are clearly revealed in the story of his plot against his son-in-law, Constantine. Previous attempts to secure supreme power for himself having failed, Maximian conspired to murder Constantine by the stroke of his own hand. 54 Writers draw in sharp contrast the pictures of the co-emperor of Diocletian and his Caesar, Constantius Chlorus. Authors unanimously agree that Constantius was a man more noble in character than the other rulers. To Lactantius he

permicious ac malas mentis, adeo superbus et contumax, ut neque patrem neque socerum solitus sit adorare . . ."

53 Ibid. 8: "Iam libido in homine pestifero odiosa ac detestabils. His rebus beatum se iudicabat, his constare felicitatem imperii sui putabat, si libidini et cupiditati malae nihil denegaret."

54 Ibid. 29; Eusebius viii. 13. 11.
was "a prince unlike the others, and worthy to have the sole government of the empire." Eusebius speaks of the emperor Constantius "who all his life long was most mildly and favourably disposed towards his subjects." Then he goes on:

He indeed was the only one of our contemporaries who passed the whole period of his principate in a manner worthy of his high office; and in other respects displayed himself in most favourable and beneficent light toward all ... Non-Christian writers are equally lavish in their praise of the father of Constantine. Eutropius affirms that "he was not only amiable but even benevolent toward the Gauls refusing to subject them to the cruelties of his co-regents." Even Gibbon admits that Clemency, temperance, and moderation distinguished the amiable character of Constantius ... Instead of imitating their eastern pride and magnificence, Constantius preserved the modesty of a Roman prince.

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55 De Mortibus Persecutorum 8: "Constantium prae-tereo, quoniam dissimilis ceterorum fuit dignusque qui solus orbem teneret."

56 Eusebius vii. 13. 12.

57 Ibid. viii. 13. 13.

58 Eutropius Breviarium xi: "Hic non modo amabilis, sed etiam venerabilis Gallis fuit; praecipii quod Diocletiani suspectam prudentiam, et Maximiani sanguinoriam violentia imperio ejus evaserunt." Quoted by Gibbon, op. cit., p. 142.

59 Gibbon, op. cit., p. 142.
Seeck favors the view that Constantius was a Christian. He points out the admission of Constantine to that effect which Eusebius quotes in his *Life of Constantine* ii. 49. Seeck holds that Eusebius may have overdrawn his point, but it still contains some truth. To Seeck's knowledge only a Christian would name his daughter Anastasia, an appellation that had originated at the time of the Resurrection. Constantius had a daughter by that name. Nevertheless, it is commonly held that although the Emperor adored one God he was not a Christian. Lactantius is silent on this point; nor does Eusebius mention it in his history.

The conversion of Constantine to Christianity, however, is an established fact. Both Lactantius and Eusebius relate the story of his dream and his consequent victory over the tyrant Maxentius, which indicate his belief in the God of the Christians. Pichón raises

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60 Seeck, *op. cit.*, p. 475: "Constantin selbst behauptete später geradezu, sein Vater sei Christ gewesen... Dies wird übertrieben, aber nicht ganz unrichtig sein; denn sonst hätte Constantius nicht eine seiner Töchter Anastasia benannt (Amm. xxvi. 6. 14; Anon. Vales. 5. 14), ein Name, der von der Auferstehung hergeleitet ist und meines Wissens sonst nur bei Christen vorkommt."


62 De *Mortibus Persecutorum* 44; Eusebius ix. 9.
the question of the extent of Constantine's Christianity and then answers thus:

His baptism in articulo mortis, and especially the murder of his wife and son, make it impossible to believe that he had a deep faith like that of his mother, who was baptized at about the same time, or that his faith was applied in the conduct of his private life. In public life, however, it would seem clear that he realized how powerful a factor the new religion could be in his imperial policy of reorganization and renewed imperial greatness . . .

Nothing can give us a better insight into the thinking of Constantine in his conduct toward the Church than his conception and construction of the Vatican Basilica.63

 Authorities agree that "in Constantine we meet one of those rare personalities who leave a decisive mark on history."64 Mattingly states further:

His great vigour of mind and body, his personal courage and soldierly ability were in themselves enough to bring him to the fore. But to these were added rare gifts of quality. He was a born organizer and leader of men, with an immense capacity for forming schemes and finding the means for carrying them out.65

In comparing him with Diocletian, Mattingly says:

It is with full justice that he ranks with Diocletian a joint founder of the new Empire. But he had something beyond this that Diocletian never had. . . . he could submit to the influence of new ideals on his own inner thought and life.66

64 Mattingly, op. cit., p. 348.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
Lactantius in the main is supported in his characterization of young Constantine who then was at the court of Diocletian in Nicomedia. He describes the son of Constantius thus:

... Constantine, a young man of very great worth, and well meriting the high station of Caesar. The distinguished comeliness of his figure, his strict attention to all military duties, his virtuous demeanor and singular affability, had endeared him to the troops, and made him the choice of every individual.67

Gwatkins differs with Lactantius on the good qualities of the young Caesar. As a general he ranks him with Severus and Aurelian.68 However, this critic depicts Constantine as a merciless victor in the wars on the Rhine. He writes:

... even heathen feeling was shocked when he gave barbarian kings to the beasts, along with their followers by thousands at a time.69

Pagan writers are generous in their praise of the purity of Constantine;70 on the other hand, Eusebius

67 De Mortibus Persecutorum 18: "Constantio quoque filius erat Constantinus, sanctissimus adolescens et illo fastigio dignissimus, qui indigni et decoro habitu corporis et industria militari et probis moribus et comitate singulari militibus amaretur, a privatis et optaretur."

68 H. M. Gwatkins, "Constantine and His City," The Cambridge Medieval History. I (1936), 8, 23.

69 Ibid., p. 3.

70 Eumenius Paneg. vi. 4; ix. 4; 7; Nazar. Paneg. x. 5, 9, 34. Quoted by Seeck, op. cit., p. 447.
is rather conservative on this point; Lactantius is silent. This is an indication, in the opinion of Seeck, that the chastity of Constantine may be questioned. 71

But regardless of the defects of character in Constantine, his high place of honor among the Roman emperors is undisputed by critics. None doubt his superiority over his co-regents. Both Severus and Licinius were able generals, and no more. Mattingly states:

Licinius appears first as a mere piece in the game of Galerius, a good soldier devoted to his cause. But, as his later career was to show, he was, perhaps, the most detestable of all the hard men of his age, self-seeking, unimaginative and coldly cruel. 72

Having considered each of the rulers more or less involved in the so-called Diocletian persecution, I shall now treat of the sufferings inflicted on the Christians by each of these men.

71 Eusebius Laud. Const. 5. 1; 5. 4; Vita Constantin i. 19. 2. Quoted by Seeck, op. cit., pp. 477-78.
72 Mattingly, op. cit., p. 348.
CHAPTER VI

THE CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION UNDER THE DIOCLETIAN REGIME

Both Lactantius and Eusebius were eye witnesses of the events they are recounting. As I noted in Chapter I, Lactantius states this fact in his De Divinis Institutionibus; while Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, remarks:

... under them [Diocletian and his associates] was accomplished the persecution of our day and the destruction of churches therein.¹

Again, further on, he definitely asserts:

All things in truth were fulfilled in our day, when we saw with our very eyes the houses of prayer cast down to their foundations from top to bottom, and the inspired and sacred Scriptures committed to the flames in the midst of the market-places, and the pastors of the churches, some shamefully hiding themselves here and there, while others were ignominiously captured and made mockery by their enemies...²

This is a reference to the first edict issued by Diocletian against the Christians, which inaugurated the bloodiest persecution of all³ and "threw into mourning

²Ibid. viii. 2. 1.
the whole of Christendom."4 The event took place in 303 and the persecution continued seven years after the abdication of Diocletian in 305, a clear indication. Scannell believes, that "the persecution should be attributed to the influence of Galerius."5 Both Lactantius and Eusebius were convinced that through the intrigues of Galerius Diocletian was finally aroused against the Christians and consequently persecuted them, as I stated above. But Hassatt reasons that the persecutions in the early centuries were inevitable. He maintains that

Acceptance of the national religion in antiquity was an obligation on all citizens; failure to worship the gods of the state was equivalent to treason. This universally accepted principle is responsible for the various persecutions suffered by Christians before the reign of Constantine.6

Martin Schanz arrives at the same conclusion in summarizing the early Christian persecutions. He sees under the Diocletian regime the final systematic attempt to root out Christianity and reinstate the national

4Luigi Cappadella, A Manual of Church History, trans. Dr. F. X. Funk (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1910), I, 47.


6Hassatt, op. cit., p. 737.
cult. Then Christianity triumphed. In the end the Roman emperors realized that their efforts were defeated and under Constantine and Licinius a permanent peace between Church and State was established through the proclamation of the Edict of Milan in 313. True, the persecutions did not end immediately; in fact, as I have previously mentioned in the treatment of Lactantius's aim when writing the De Mortibus Persecutorum, Licinius actually drifted into persecution. He drove the Christians from his court, prohibited meetings of bishops, and "meddled vexatiously with their worship." Finally, in 323, with the victory of Constantine over Licinius, persecution ceased.

In the meantime the ten-year conflict, nearing its end when death claimed Galerius in 313, was far more

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8 Ibid.: "Im Jahre 313 erschien zu Mailand ein Toleranzedikt der Augusti Licinius und Constantin für die Christen; dieses Edikt beruhte auf dem Grundsatz der allgemeinen Religionsfreiheit, auf der Gleichstellung des Christentums und des Heidentums."


10 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
cruel and extensive than belittlers of Christianity are wont to admit. Yet the following data may tend toward an opposite extreme. Both Eusebius and the Roman Martyrology refer to two groups of ten thousand martyrs.

On March 18 is commemorated the death of "ten thousand holy martyrs" executed by "the sword" at Nicomedia "for confession of Christ"; and on June 22 is recorded the crucifixion of another ten thousand martyrs on Mount Ararat. Christian blood flowed freely despite the fact that in the beginning Diocletian had determined against it. As a result of the two fires in the palace, however, the Emperor was infuriated and changing his decisions turned to the slaughter of the Christians. Lactantius states:

Presbyters and other officers of the Church were seized, without evidence by witnesses or confession, condemned, and together with their families led to execution. In burning alive, no distinction of sex or age was regarded; and because of their great multitude, they were not burned one after another, but a herd of them were encircled with the same fire; and servants, having

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13 De Mortibus Persecutorum 11: "... hanc moderationem tenere coactus est, ut eam rem sine sanguine transigi iuberet ..."
millstones tied about their necks, were cast into the sea.\textsuperscript{14}

The Church officials were not alone afflicted; for the rest of the Christians the persecution was equally severe. Lactantius affirms:

The prisons were crowded; tortures, hitherto unheard of, were invented; and lest justice should be inadvertently administered to a Christian, altars were placed in the courts of justice, hard by the tribunal, that every litigant might offer incense before his cause should be heard.\textsuperscript{15}

Upon the authority of Eusebius Lactantius is supported in his description of the issuance and promulgation of the edicts. Eusebius states:

It was the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian (303 A.D.), and the month of 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 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.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.} \textsuperscript{15}: "\textit{Comprehensi presbyteri ac ministri et sineulla probatone aut confessione damnati cum omnibus suis deducebantur. Omnis sexus et aetatis homines ad exustionem rapti, nec singuli, quoniam tanta erat multitude, sed gregatim circundato igni ambiebantur; domestici alligati ad collum molaribus mari mergebantur."

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}: "\textit{Pleni carceres erant, tormentorum genera inaudita excogitabantur, et ne cui temereius dicetur, arae in secretariis ad pro tribunali positaev, ut litigatores prius sacrificarent atque ita causas suas dicerent."

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Eusebius viii. 2. 4.}
The consequences of such an edict, commentators state, were carried out in their fullest rigor "for such was the discipline maintained" by Diocletian "that any order issued by him was executed to the minutest detail, the fullest extent of human endeavor." 17

Eusebius continues:

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, then afterwards compelled by every kind of device to sacrifice. 18

Then Eusebius describes these various forms of torture. He writes:

One would have his body maltreated by scourgings; another would be punished with the rack and torn to an unbearable degree. . . 19

After relating the incidents of the tearing down of the decree by "a certain person" at Nicomedia, 20 to which Lactantius also refers, and the fires at the imperial palace, 21 Eusebius recites a list of torments similar to those set forth by Lactantius. He asserts:

18 Eusebius viii. 2. 4.
19 Ibid. viii. 3. 1.
20 Ibid. viii. 5. 1.
21 Ibid. viii. 6. 6.
... and by imperial command the God-fearing persons there, whole families and in heaps, were in some cases butchered with the sword; while others were perfected by fire, when it is recorded that men and women leaped upon the pyre with a divine and unspeakable eagerness. The executioners bound a multitude of others, and [placing them] on boats threw them into the depths of the sea...22

Because previous edicts had failed to accomplish the purpose of the persecutors, the rulers issued a fourth decree in 304 offering the Christians the alternative of either sacrificing to the gods or suffering capital punishment.23

While the persecution raged under Diocletian and Galerius in the East, Maximian Herculius persecuted with equal fury in the West. However, Lactantius is occupied with the cruel torments inflicted by Galerius,24 and Maximin Daia25 upon the Christians. Even after Galerius had revoked his decree against the Christians and issued an edict of toleration,26 Maximin Daia persisted in the persecution and his hatred toward the Christians impelled him to order all meats exposed for sale in the marketplace

22Ibid.
23Eusebius De Martyribus Palaestrinae 3; as epitome to Hist. Eccles. to Book viii.
24De Mortibus Persecutorum 21.
25Ibid. 36, 37.
26Ibid. 34.
to be sprinkled with the water or wine used in pagan sacrifices in order that none would escape him. Finally, in 313, being hard-pressed on all sides, Maximin not only ceased the persecution against the Christians, but extended the privileges enjoyed under Constantine and Licinius to the Christians within his "own provinces." Eusebius states:

... those very persons who had for a long time committed acts of war against us, changed their mind in the most marvellous manner, and gave utterance to a recantation, quenching the fire of persecution that had blazed so furiously, by means of merciful edicts and the most humane ordinances. The edict promulgated by Constantine and Licinius after the death of the other rulers gave evidence of the signal triumph of Christianity. It not only gave freedom of worship to the Christians, but it provided for the restoration of confiscated Church property, as Lactantius points out. True, as I have already shown, Licinius turned once more against the Christians, but Constantine made a lasting peace after the death of his co-emperor in 324. 


27 Ibid. 37.
28 Eusebius Eccl. Hist. viii. 16. 1, 2.
29 Ibid.
30 De Mortibus Persecutorum 48.
31 See page 65, footnote 9.
The manner in which Licinius met death and the end of the other rulers in the Diocletian regime will be the subject of the next chapter. In concluding I draw attention to the fact that in essential points Lactantius agrees with historians, only in stating the intensity of the persecutions does he differ.
CHAPTER VII

THE DEATH OF THE PERSECUTORS

Lactantius and Eusebius are the principal sources on the death of the men I have been considering in the last two chapters. Consequently, I shall compare their writings mainly in the following treatment.

Of all these rulers whose death Lactantius discusses, Constantius Chlorus alone met a happy end. In the last days he had with him his son, Constantine, upon whom he conferred sovereign power with the ratification of the army. After this, he died in peace and quiet, states Lactantius, on July 25, 306. Eusebius writes:

... he Constantius took no part in the war against us. ... So he has had as his reward a happy and thrice-blessed issue of his life; for he alone enjoyed a favorable and glorious end while he was still emperor with a lawful son ... to succeed him.

In regard to Diocletian, Lactantius refers to the seriousness of his ill health even before his

\[\text{1N. H. Baynes, "The Great Persecution," Cambridge Ancient History, XII, 646.}\]
\[\text{2De Mortibus Persecutorum 24.}\]
\[\text{3H. Mattingly, "The Imperial Recovery," Cambridge Ancient History, XII (1939), 340.}\]
\[\text{4Eusebius The Ecclesiastical History viii.}\]
He maintains that Diocletian . . . set out instantly for Rome, there to celebrate the commencement of the twentieth year of his reign. That solemnity was performed on the twelfth of the kalends of December [November, 20] and suddenly the emperor . . . peevishly and impatiently burst away from the city . . . Having, however, begun his journey in winter amidst intense cold, and incessant rains, he contracted a slight but lingering disease . . . Then, at the close of summer he made a circuit along the banks of the Danube, and so came to Nicomedia. His disease had now become more grievous and oppressing . . . prayers for his life were put up to all the gods. Then suddenly, on the ides of December [December 13], there was heard in the palace sorrow, and weeping, and lamentation, and the courtiers ran to and fro; there was silence throughout the city, and a report went out of the death, and even of the burial, of Diocletian: but early on the morrow it was suddenly rumoured that he still lived.

Lactantius then speaks of the mysterious absence of Diocletian and his sudden reappearance on the first day of the following March. In the closing lines of Chapter Seventeen, Lactantius explains that

The fit of stupor, resembling death, happened on the ides of December; and although he in some

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5Mattingly, "The Imperial Recovery," op. cit.

6De Mortibus Persecutorum 17: "Diocletianus . . . perrexit statim Romam, ut illic vicennalium dieum celebraret, qui erat futurus a. d. duodecimum Kalendas Decembris . . . impatians et aeger animi prorupit ex urbe impendentibus Kalendis Ianuariis . . . sed profectus hiem saeviente, frigore atque imbrisus verberatus morbum levem, at perpetuum contrxit . . . Deinde ita longuore oppressus, ut per omnes deos pro vita eius regaretur, donec Idibus Decembris lucus repente in palatio, maestitia et lacrimae iudicium, trepidatio et silentium tota civitate. Iam non modo mortuum, sed etiam sepultum diecebant, cum repente mane postridie pervagari fama quod viveret . . . ."
measure recovered, yet he never attained to perfect health again, for he became disordered in his judgment, being at certain times insane and at others of sound mind.  

In Chapter Forty-two Lactantius relates the final events in the life of Diocletian. Living in obscurity as a private citizen, the powerful regent who swayed the destinies of Rome for a period of twenty years in the end witnessed a disgrace which no other ruler had experienced in previous years. Constantine, at this time, commanded that the statue of Maximian Herculius be thrown down and his portraits removed. Since the two former emperors were generally depicted in one piece, their portraits were removed at the same time. Lactantius continues that "under the double load of vexation of spirit and bodily maladies," he resolved to die. Not able to find rest and incapable of receiving food, likewise being "worn out with anguish of mind" Diocletian expired.  

Eusebius supports Lactantius in the above account. He admits that

Those [Diocletian and Maximian] were the more advanced in age and honor retired from the principate not two whole years after the persecution began . . . and passed the remainder of their existence like

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7Ibid.: "Et ille Idibus Decembris morte sopitus animum receperat, nec tamen totam. Demens enim factus est, ita ut certis horis insaniret, certis resipisceret."

8De Mortibus Persecutorum 42.
ordinary citizens. . . . The one [Diocletian] who had attained the chief place in honour and age fell a victim to a prolonged and most painful infirmity of the body; while he who held the second place to him ended his life by strangling.9

Seeck points out the fact that Lactantius and Eusebius disagree on the manner of the death of Diocletian. Eusebius, supported by Paschal in his Chronicles, ascribes to Diocletian a natural death; Lactantius, in concurrence with Aurelius Victor and Zosimus, states that the Emperor committed suicide.10 But, maintains Seeck, of the three authorities, the most important one, Lactantius, contradicts himself when he proposes that Diocletian met death at his own hand as a result of the destruction of his image together with that of Maximian. This event, Seeck believes, could have taken place no later than 310; yet, in Chapter Forty-one, Lactantius has Diocletian still living after the death of Galerius which took place in 311.11

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9 Eusebius viii. Appendix 3.
11 Ibid.: "Der wichtigste dieser drei Zeugen, Lactanz, steht zudem auch mit sich selbst in Widerspruch. Denn einerseits knüpft er den Selbsmord Diocletians an
Diocletian is generally given as 316.12

In referring to the death of Maximian, Lactantius agrees with Eusebius in asserting that Maximian obtained leave to choose the manner of his own death and selected strangling. Lactantius adds further that he "had his neck broken and thus ended his life by a base and ignominious death."13

Both Eutropius and Aurelius Victor record the treachery of Maximian which resulted in his ignoble but "just" death14 in 310.15

In the last illness of Galerius Christian Apologists were reminded of the sufferings of another persecutor, Herod of Judea.16 Lactantius relates that in the

dem Umsturz der Denkmäler Maximians, der nicht nach 310 stattgefunden haben kann, andererseits lässt er den alten Kaiser noch längere Zeit nach dem Tode des Galerius (Mai 311) Botschaften mit Maximinus Daza wechseln."

13De Mortibus Persecutorum 30.
14Eutropius x. 3: "Inde ad Gallia profectus est (Maximian) dolo composito, tanquam a filio esset expul- sus, ut Constantino genero jungeretur; moliens tamen Con- stantinum reperta occasione interficere, poenas dedit justissimo exitu." Aurelius Victor de Cassare 40. 22: "Cumque specie afficii, dolis compositis, Constantinum generum tentaret acerbe, jure tamen interierat." Quoted by Gibbon in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Cincinnati: J. A. James, 1844), p. 147.
eighteenth year of his reign Galerius was struck with a malignant ulcer which physicians were unable to heal. Remedies applied to the diseased spots only aggravated and increased them. The infected parts spread to the intestines and worms were generated in his body. Lactantius continues that the "stench was so foul as to pervade not only the palace, but even the whole city."

Finally, overcome by calamities, Galerius was obliged to acknowledge God. He cried loud in intervals of acute pain that he would rebuild the Church and make atonement for his sins. Less than a month before his death, he published the toleration edict, as I have noted above. But in May 311, having beseeched the Christians to pray to their God for his recovery, he died consumed by the loathsome disease.17

Eusebius's graphic account of the last days of Galerius coincides with that of Lactantius. He states:

A divinely-sent punishment, I say, executed vengeance upon him [Galerius], beginning at his very flesh and proceeding to the soul. For all at once an abscess appeared in the midst of his privy parts, then a deeply-seated fistular ulcer; which could not be cured and ate their way into the very midst of his entrails. Hence there sprung up an innumerable multitude of worms, and deadly stench was given off, since the entire bulk of his members had, through gluttony, even before the disease, been changed into an

17De Mortibus Persecutorum 33-35.
excessive quantity of soft fat, which then became putrid and presented an intolerable and most fearful sight to those that came near it.\textsuperscript{18}

Then Eusebius describes the futile attempts of physicians and their subsequent merciless murder by order of Galerius.\textsuperscript{19} In Chapter Seventeen of the same book, Eusebius agrees entirely with Lactantius in attributing the cause of the toleration edicts to the terrible physical condition of the wretched emperor. Eusebius writes:

And wrestling with such terrible misfortune he was conscience-stricken for the cruel deeds he had perpetrated against the godly. Collecting, therefore, his thoughts, he first openly confessed to the God of the universe; then he called those around him, and commanded them without delay to cause the persecution against the Christians to cease, and by an imperial law and decree to urge them to build their churches and to perform their accustomed rites, offering prayers in the emperor's behalf.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus, proclaims Eusebius, Galerius "so departed this life."\textsuperscript{21}

Likewise, Maximin Daia died of a horrible disease only two years after Galerius. Lactantius relates that when the news of the death of Galerius reached

\textsuperscript{18}Eusebius viii. 16. 4.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid. viii. 16. 5.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid. viii. 17. 1, 2.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid. viii. Appendix 1.
Maximin he hastened from the East to seize the dominions of Galerius. Evading a war, at that time, by striking an agreement with Licinius, Maximin turned to persecuting the Christians and to a life of self-indulgence which Lactantius describes in several chapters of his treatise.\(^{22}\)

Notwithstanding the treaty of peace between the two rulers, Maximin, when he learned of the betrothal of Licinius to the sister of Constantine, established a friendship with Maxentius at Rome against the two emperors, states Lactantius.\(^{23}\)

Maxentius, feigning to avenge his father's death, declared war on Constantine which ended in the famous battle of the Milvian Bridge, where in 312 the Roman tyrant and his army were routed and driven headlong into the Tiber.\(^{24}\)

Eusebius differs with Lactantius only in the actual description of the bridge and the drowning of Maxentius. He holds that

Maxentius . . . when he turned his back before the God-sent power that was with Constantine, and was crossing the river that lay in his path, which he himself had bridged right well by joining boats, and so formed into an engine of destruction against

\(^{22}\)De Mortibus Persecutorum 36-41.

\(^{23}\)Ibid. 43.

\(^{24}\)Ibid. 44.
himself. . . . Thus verily through the breaking of the bridge over the river, the passage across collapsed, and down went the boats all at once, men and all, into the deep; and first of all he himself . . . and then also the shield-bearers around him . . . sank as lead into the mighty waters. . . .25

Adding to the authenticity of the reports of the two contemporary writers on this decisive battle, Seeck establishes the point that the final struggle must necessarily have taken place on and near the Milvian Bridge and not at some other place as late historians would have it. Seeck cites Nazarius and Eumenius in support of his argument.26

Lactantius mentions the keen disappointment of Maximin Daia when learning of the defeat of Maxentius and of his disastrous march in the winter of 312 and 313 from Syria into Bithynia.27 According to Lactantius, Daia pressed on with his army of 70,000 strong. Near Adrianople he was intercepted by Licinius and his 30,000 men. It was at this point, on the eve of the battle, that, Lactantius states, an angel appeared to Licinius in sleep and exhorted him to beseech the "One Supreme God" for aid in the attack against Daia. On awaking, Licinius called a secretary to write the

26Seeck, op. cit., pp. 496-97.
27De Mortibus Persecutorum 44, 45.
prayer as he recalled it from the words of the angel. Copies were distributed amongst the soldiers of Licinius who recited it immediately preceding the battle on the following day.28

Seeck’s comment on the story is noteworthy. He admits that the tale concerning the dream is now commonly regarded as a fable. But, he advises, such a message produced very few years after the battle and in Nicomedia, a place near the battlefield, by one in a public station who was well informed in such matters cannot be lightly passed over. To express shamelessly and openly such a falsehood which would be read by authoritative persons would certainly provoke ridicule. Besides, affirms Seeck, in the letter published June 13, 313, Licinius himself speaks of the assistance given him by the God of the Christians a short time before.29

28Ibid. 46.

29Seeck, op. cit., pp. 503-04: "Die erzählung von dem Gebete wird jetzt fast allgemein für Fabel gehalten. Einen Bericht, der wenige Jahre nach der Schlacht aufgezeichnet ist und ausdrücklich dazu bestimmt war, in Nicomedia, d. h. in der nächsten Nähe des Schlachtfeldes, gelesen zu werden, hätte man nicht so leicht verwerfen dürfen. Wenn Lactanz einem Publikum, das über das Ereignis aufs Genaueste unterrichtet war, so unverschämte Lügen aufgetischt hätte, wie man annimmt, wäre er zum Gespött geworden. Auch redet Licinius in dem Erlass, den er am 13 Juni 313 verkündigen liess, selbst von der Hilfe des Christengottes, die er kurz vorher erprobt habe."
In the next chapter Lactantius infers that through the power of this prayer the army of Licinius defeated the enemy on the Campus Serenus. Daia fled. Finally, in Tarsus, where he had sought shelter, the tyrant determined to end his life. Lactantius states that first he "gorged himself with food," then he swallowed poison. Since the poison could not operate effectively on a full stomach, it produced "a grievous disease." The poison began to rage and "to burn up everything within him so that he was driven to distraction by intolerable pain." This lasted four days during which he would gather "handfuls of earth, and greedily devoured it." By dashing his head against the wall, he blinded himself. Then he imagined that God was sitting in judgment over him and he "roared out as men on a rack are wont," and exclaimed that others were guilty. In the end he acknowledged his own guilt and begged Christ for mercy. Then, concludes Lactantius, "amidst groans" he died a most horrible death.

Eusebius refers to the death of Daia by stating that

Maxentius fell at Rome at the hands of Constantine; while he [Maximin] of the East did not long survive him, for he too perished by a most disgraceful death at the hands of Licinius.

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30 De Mortibus Persecutorum 47, 49.
It is believed that Maximin Daia died in June or August 313, which date agrees with that referred to in the De Mortibus Persecutorum.

The death of Maximin has some aspects in common with that of Severus. The latter also took his own life while in the power of another Roman ruler, Maximian. However, he chose death by the favorite method of the ancients, namely, that of opening his veins. In fact, Lactantius states that he was compelled to that choice.

Seeck, on the other hand, remarks that writers differ in describing the details surrounding the death of Severus which occurred about 307.

Lactantius brings his treatise to a close by summarizing on the deaths of the surviving son, Candidianus, and the wife of Galerius with her mother, as also the death of the eight-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter of Maximin Daia by the command of Licinius. Later

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33 De Mortibus Persecutorum 47.

34 Ibid. 25.

35 Seeck, op. cit., p. 487: "Die näheren Umstände seiner Ermordung werden sehr verschieden überliefert."

36 De Mortibus Persecutorum 50, 51.
historians accept this account of Lactantius. For example, Gwatkin states:

The widows of the third century emperors fall into obscurity; but the widow of Galerius is first sought in marriage by Maximin Daza [a fact mentioned by Lactantius], then executed by Licinius, who also put to death the children of Severus, Daza and Galerius. 37

In general, the facts stated by Lactantius on the death of the emperors are supported by Eusebius and accepted by later writers. Differences occur mainly in minor details describing these events. As I mentioned previously, Lactantius's purpose in writing the De Mortibus Persecutorum would necessarily effect these differences.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The close of the De Mortibus Persecutorum leaves Licinius alone with Constantine in the realm of sovereignty. The Edict of Milan, drawn up by the two emperors in 313, gave full rights to the Christians to exercise their religious beliefs openly, as Lactantius has noted. However, heathenism and its associations with Roman law and society had by no means completely died out. Nor was national peace in the Empire secure. Licinius and Constantine were both ambitious. By 314 history records battles between the forces of the two rulers.¹ In a treaty drawn up in 317 a "hollow peace" was established which lasted for nearly eight years. A final struggle ensued and in October 325 Constantine ordered the death of Licinius.²

These facts do not appear in the De Mortibus Persecutorum for several reasons. If we accept the interpretation of Seeck and his school, Lactantius wrote his treatise to ward off the persecution into which Licinius

²Ibid., p. 8.
was drifting during the "eight-year peace" period. 3

Then, too, Lactantius wrote his work before the death of Licinius. Finally, the tone of the De Mortibus Persecutorum is moral rather than political or historical. What Lactantius sets out to do, he accomplishes. His descant on the sufferings of the Christians under Diocletian discloses an intimate acquaintance with affairs both at the court and in the places of torture. Still his authenticity is questioned both by reliable and unreliable authorities. For example, Gibbon discredits the conversation of Diocletian and Galerius as Lactantius narrates it in Chapter Eighteen. Gibbon protests:

Were the particulars of this conference more consistent with truth and decency, we might still ask, how they came to the knowledge of an obscure rhetorician ... 4

To this comment, the editor Quizot immediately replies:

This attack upon Lactantius is without foundation, Lactantius was far from being an obscure rhetorician, since he had taught rhetoric publicly and with the greatest success, first in Africa and afterward in Nicomedia. His reputation gained him the esteem of Constantine, who invited him to his court, and entrusted to him the education of his son Crispus. The facts he relates in his works, took place in his own time, and he cannot be accused of fraud and imposture—satis me vixisse arbitrabor et officium hominis implessae si labor

3 Ibid., p. 7.

4 Edward Gibbon, Esq., The Decline and the Fall of the Roman Empire (Cincinnati: J. A. James, 1844), p. 142.
meus aliquos homines ab erroribus liberatos, ad iter collecte direxit. (De opificio Dei, Chap. 20.) The eloquence of Lactantius gained for him the appellation of the Cicero of the Christians.5

This retort of Quizot adds force to the criticism Highet hurrs against Gibbon as an historian.6 Wherever he can, Gibbon opposes, or assents reluctantly to the views of Lactantius. Yet Lactantius knew what he was doing when he levelled his sarcasms against the gods and especially Jupiter and Hercules, declares Baynes; it was to many gods and to many local cults that Diocletian made his dedications.7 Consequently, we can accept the statement that the wrath of Diocletian was provoked when soothsayers failed to procure the desired information and the emperor turned his anger against the Christians, as Lactantius records in Chapter Ten.

Regarding his own time and contemporaries, Lactantius did not digress from important events as depicted by other historians. In matters of lesser importance or the circumstances surrounding them, I have found him to differ. For example, his remark on the increase

5Ibid.


in the number of the armies during the inauguration of
the Diocletian political scheme appears largely exag-
gerated.

Inaccuracies are apparent in Lactantius's ac-
count of earlier events as I have consistently pointed
out in this treatment. An instance is the episode of
Nero's death. Lactantius states that Nero suddenly dis-
appeared with neither the death nor the burial recorded.
Other writers describe his death in detail and the cre-
mation of his body. Furthermore, there may arise a
plausible inclination to question the authenticity of
Lactantius in making such broad statements, for example,
as

... she [the Church] extended her hands unto
the east and unto the west, insomuch that now there
was not any of the most remote corners of the earth
to which the divine religion had not penetrated
... 8

Yet in support of this very fact Alzog states:

... the eloquent accounts that have come down
to us of the condition of the Church at this time
[in the first epoch], though a little too rhetori-
cal, will not surprise us. The Fathers speak of it
with enthusiasm. 9

8De Mortibus Persecutorum 3: "... manus suas
in Orientem Occidentemque porræxit, ut iam nullus esset
terrarum angulus tam remotus quo non religio Dei pene-
trasset ..."

Thomas S. Byrne (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1883),
I, 174.
Alzog then quotes Justin Martyr: "There is no people, whether Greek or Barbarian, among whom prayers and thanksgiving are not offered to the Father and Creator of the world in the name of Christ crucified."

St. Irenaeus, too, specifies places to which the Church had extended; and Tertullian, asserts Alzog, speaks in a burst of enthusiasm: "Everywhere are to be found the disciples of the Crucified."

However, the sincerity of Lactantius is evident throughout the De Mortibus Persecutorum. In the final chapter he expresses fear that later historians may corrupt truth; therefore, he relates all these events "on the authority of well-informed persons." This narration, states Lactantius, he carries on for a two-fold reason: that the truth may be fully preserved and that proper thanks be given to God who mercifully has accepted the prayers and sacrifices of the faithful.

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
"Satis me vixisse arbitrabor, et officium hominis implesse, si labor meus aliquos homines ab erroribus liberatos, ad iter coeleste direxerit."

--De Opificio Dei, xx.

"And when I have accomplished this, I shall think that I have lived enough, and that I shall have discharged the duty of man, if my labor shall have freed some men from errors, and have directed them to the path which leads to Heaven."

--On the Workmanship of God, Chapter 20.
Books


**Articles**


