

Notes on Quiz #9: Third Century Crisis

1. Just what was the “Third Century Crisis”? What were some of the factors that brought it about?

The most obvious feature of the Third Century Crisis was the instability of the principate, especially in the years 235 to 285. At the same time, the empire was experiencing widespread economic disaster, involving spiraling inflation tied to a shortage of metal, continual debasement of the coinage, and the financial drain of standing armies at Rome’s frontiers, which Rome increasingly could not afford to man or supply. Vanishing markets for finished goods also meant the disappearance of skilled laborers, delaying the economy’s ability to recover when markets began to resurface without the craftsmen to supply them.

This political, economic, and military weakness encouraged invasions on multiple fronts, so that by mid-century many of Rome’s frontier provinces were occupied and had to be retaken. Natural disasters further weakened Rome’s strength and delayed its recovery, including two virulent plague epidemics that wiped out broad swaths of the population, eliminated both skilled and unskilled labor.

2. Marcus Aurelius carefully prepared Commodus for the principate. What went wrong?

First, Marcus Aurelius expected his experienced advisors to guide Commodus, but they divided over issues like whether to continue Aurelius’s war with the Marcomanni; this division carved the royal family, important senators, and military leaders into antagonistic factions.

Second, Commodus’s reliance on the Greek freedman chamberlain Saoterus aroused jealousy among the Roman elite, and fed the senators’ sense that Commodus scorned them.

Third, his inexperience and willfulness reminded the Roman elite of previous young, inexperienced emperors whose reigns were disastrous, like Caligula, Nero, and Diocletian.

Fourth, Commodus’s ending his father’s great wars deprived senatorial generals of opportunities for glory and advancement, arousing resentment.

Fifth, Commodus’s marriage failed to produce an heir, encouraging others to try for the throne.

Finally, his quest for popular adoration through gladiatorial shows was expensive, and his participation in them was thought undignified.

EC1. All of the following are true of Palmyra EXCEPT:

- (a) It was a major recruitment center for the Roman armies
- ✓ (b) It was the site of Rome’s watershed victory against the Seleucids back in the days of the Republic
- (c) It is an oasis in the Syrian desert around which formed an important city
- (d) When it rebelled and massacred its garrison in 273, Aurelian slaughtered its people and destroyed the city

EC2. What is a codex book? Why was its introduction significant?

The spread of education and literacy created a need for a less expensive and less cumbersome alternative to the large rolls on which books had always been produced, and which were mainly useful to the elite man of leisure.

The parchment codex introduced the modern idea of a book: a stack of individual leaves of paper (or parchment, in this case) bound together on the left side. It was better for taking notes and doing exercises as a student, but even more importantly, the codex was cheap and convenient, making learning much more accessible to a wider public. The codex was an important means by which the Christians spread their gospel.