

Imperial Weakness Invites Barbarian Aggression

Source: Zosimus I.1.11–17. Translated by Anonymous. In *Arrian's History of Alexander's Expedition: Translated from the Greek; with Notes Historical, Geographical, and Critical*. London: Printed for R. Lea; J. Nunn; Lackington, Allen, and co.; White, Cochrane, and co.; J. Faulder; and J. Walker and co, 1814.

The army has confronted the emperor Alexander Severus (reigned 222–235) with disaffection and a challenger to his throne, which has the effect, says Zosimus, of making Alexander more avaricious for wealth and power.

While his affairs were thus unfortunately situated, the armies in Pannonia and Moesia, which were far from respecting him previously, now became more disposed to revolt, and being therefore determined on an innovation, raised to the empire Maximinus, the captain of a Pannonian troop. Having collected all his forces, he marched into Italy with the utmost speed, thinking it the safest to attack the emperor by surprise. But Alexander, who was then in the vicinity of the Rhine, having received intelligence of their intended revolt, proceeded to Rome without loss of time. He offered pardon to the soldiers and to Maximinus upon the condition that they would desist from their attempt; he could not however appease them, and therefore desperately exposed himself to death. Mamaea his mother, and the prefects, who issued from the palace to allay the tumult, were likewise murdered. Maximinus thus became well established in the throne, but the people universally regretted the change of a moderate emperor for a cruel tyrant.¹ Maximinus was of obscure birth, and therefore on his exaltation to the imperial dignity, his excessive insolence in his new authority eclipsed those good qualities with which nature had endowed him. He thus became intolerable to all men, not only doing injuries to those that were in honorable offices, but being guilty of the greatest cruelties in the exercise of his power, bestowing favors only upon sycophants who laid information against quiet persons, by charging them with being debtors to the imperial treasury. At length he went so far as to murder persons out of avarice, before he heard them plead in their own defense, seized on the towns as his own, and plundered the inhabitants.

The nations subject to the Romans being unable to endure his monstrous cruelty, and greatly distressed by the ravages he committed, the Africans proclaimed Gordianus and his son of the same name,² emperors, and sent ambassadors to Rome, one of whom was Valerianus, a man of consular rank, who afterwards himself became emperor. This was highly gratifying to the senate, which deliberated how to remove the tyrant, inciting the soldiers to revolt, and reminding the people of the injuries they sustained as well in their individual capacities, as in that of members of so mighty a state. Having thus agreed how to act, they selected out of the whole senate twenty persons who understood military discipline, and out of

that number appointed two, Balbinus and Maximus, to hold the chief command, and proceeded towards Rome, being ready for an insurrection. But Maximinus, hearing of their intention, marched with great precipitation towards Rome, with the Moors and Gauls that were under his command, and on the way laid siege to the garrison of Aquileia, because they closed their gates against him. His own party, at length consulting the public benefit, with great reluctance consented to those who wished to put him to death, and he was thereby reduced to such extremity, as to be under the necessity of making his son a petitioner in his behalf, supposing that his tender age would abate their anger and incline them to compassion. But at this they became more enraged, and after they had murdered the boy in a most barbarous manner, they dispatched the father likewise; on which one of them cut off his head, and carried it to Rome, as an evidence and a trophy of their victory. Being thus delivered from all their apprehensions, they waited for the arrival of the two emperors from Africa.

These princes being wrecked in a storm, the senate conferred the supreme direction of affairs on Gordianus, the son of one of them.³ In his reign, the Romans relaxed a little from their former melancholy, being treated by the emperor with plays and other amusements. But awaking as it were from a profound sleep, they formed a secret conspiracy against the emperor, instigated by the counsel of Balbinus and Maximus, who incited some of the soldiers against him. This being detected, the heads of the conspiracy, and many of the accomplices, were put to death.

Soon after this, the Carthaginians became discontented with the emperor, and attempted to substitute Sabianus in his stead; but Gordianus raised a force in Africa, which quickly caused them to submit.⁴ Upon this they delivered up the intended usurper, solicited pardon for their offences, and were freed from the danger that hung over them. Meantime Gordianus married the daughter of Timesicles, a man in high estimation for his learning, and appointed him prefect of the court; by which he seemed to supply the deficiency of his own youth in the administration of public affairs. Having secured the empire, he was in continual expectation that the Persians would make an attack on the eastern provinces, Sapores having succeeded in that kingdom to Artaxerxes, who had restored the government to the Persians from the Parthians. For after the death of Alexander the son of Philip,⁵ and of his successors in the empire of the Macedonians, at the period when those provinces were under the authority of Antiochus, Arsaces a Parthian, being exasperated at an injury done to his brother Teridates, made war upon the satrap of Antiochus, and caused

¹ Maximinus Thrax or Maximinus I, was Roman Emperor from 235 to 238 CE. He was the first of the so-called barracks emperors.

² Gordian I and his son Gordian II, co-emperors in early 238.

³ Gordian III, emperor 238–244.

⁴ Sabinius's rebellion: 240 CE.

⁵ I.e., Alexander III of Macedon, son of Philip II.

the Parthians to drive away the Macedonians, and form a government of their own. The emperor therefore made all possible preparations for marching against the Persians. Although he appeared in the first battle to have obtained the victory, yet the confidence of the emperor in the success of this enterprise was considerably diminished by the death of Timesicles, the prefect of the court. Philip being chosen in his place, the emperor's popularity in the army was gradually dissipated and vanished.

Philip was a native of Arabia, a nation in bad repute, and had advanced his fortune by no very honorable means. As soon as he was fixed in his office, he aspired at the imperial dignity, and endeavored to seduce all the soldiers that were disposed to innovation. Observing that abundance of military provisions was supplied, while the emperor was staying about Carrae and Nisibis, he ordered the ships that brought those provisions to go further up the country, in order that the army, being oppressed with famine, might be provoked to mutiny. His design succeeded to his wish; for the soldiers, under pretence of want of necessaries, surrounded Gordianus in a violent manner, and having killed him, as the chief cause of so many perishing, conferred the purple on Philip according to their engagement.⁶ He therefore made peace with Sapoires, and marched towards Rome; and as he had bound the soldiers to him by large presents, he sent messengers to Rome to report that Gordianus had died of a disease. On his arrival at Rome, having made the senate his friends, he thought it most politic to confer the highest preferments on his near relations. From this motive he made his brother Priscus general of the army in Syria, and entrusted the forces in Moesia and Macedonia to his son-in-law Severianus.

Thinking that he had by these means established himself in the possession of the empire, he made an expedition against the Carpi, who had plundered all the country about the Ister. When an engagement took place, the Barbarians not being able to withstand the impetuous charge of the Romans, fled into a castle in which they were besieged. But finding that their troops, who were dispersed in various directions, had again rallied in a body, they resumed their courage, and sallying from the castle attacked the Roman army. Being unable to bear the brisk onset of the Moors, the army solicited for peace, to which Philip readily assented, and marched away. As there were at that time many disturbances in the empire, the eastern provinces, which were uneasy, partly, owing to the exactions of exorbitant tributes, and partly to their dislike of Priscus, their governor, who was a man of an intolerably evil disposition, wished for innovation, and set up Papianus for emperor, while the inhabitants of Moesia and Pannonia were more inclined to Marinus.

Philip, being disturbed by these events, desired the senate either to assist him against such imminent dangers, or, if they were displeased with his government, to suffer him to lay it down and dismiss him quietly. No person making a reply to this, Decius, a person of illustrious birth and rank, and moreover gifted, with every virtue, observed, that he was

unwise in being so much concerned at those events, for they would vanish of themselves, and could not possibly long subsist. And though the event corresponded with the conjecture of Decius, which long experience in the world had enabled him to make, Papianus and Marinus being taken off, yet Philip was still in fear, knowing how obnoxious, the officers in that country were to the army. He therefore desired Decius to assume the command of the legions in Moesia and Pannonia. As he refused this under the plea that it was inconvenient both for Philip and himself, Philip made use of the rhetoric of necessity, as the Thessalians term it, and compelled him to go to Pannonia to punish the accomplices of Marinus. The army in that country, finding that Decius punished all that had offended, thought it most politic, to avoid the present danger, and to set up a sovereign who would better consult the good of the state, and who, being more expert both in civil and military affairs, might without difficulty conquer Philip.

For this purpose they clothed Decius in purple, and notwithstanding all his apprehensions of future mischances, compelled him to assume the supreme authority. Philip therefore, on hearing that Decius was thus made emperor, collected all his forces to overpower him. The supporters of Decius, though they knew that the enemy had greatly the advantage in numbers, still retained their confidence, trusting to the general skill and prudence of Decius in affairs. And when the two armies engaged, although the one was superior in number, yet the other so excelled it in discipline and conduct, that a great number of Philip's partisans were slain and he himself amongst them, together with his son, on whom he had conferred the title of Caesar. Decius thus acquired the empire.⁷

The Scythians, taking advantage of the disorder which every where prevailed through the negligence of Philip, crossed the Tanais, and pillaged the countries in the vicinity of Thrace. But Decius, marching against them, was not only victorious in every battle, but recovered the spoils they had taken, and endeavored to cut off their retreat to their own country, intending to destroy them all, to prevent their ever again, making a similar incursion. For this purpose he posted Gallus on the bank of the Tanais with a competent force, and led in person the remainder of his army against the enemy. This expedition exceeded to his utmost wish; but Gallus, who was disposed to innovation, sent agents to the Barbarians, requesting their concurrence in a conspiracy against Decius. To this they gave a willing assent, and Gallus retained his post on the bank of the Tanais, but the Barbarians divided themselves into three battalions, the first of which posted itself behind a marsh. Decius having destroyed a considerable number of the first battalion, the second advanced, which he likewise defeated, and discovered part of the third, which lay near the marsh. Gallus sent intelligence to him, that he might march against them across the fen. Proceeding therefore incautiously in an unknown place, he and his army became entangled in the mire, and under that disadvantage were so assailed by the missiles of the Barbarians, that not one of them escaped with life. Thus ended the life of the excellent emperor Decius.

⁶ Philip the Arab, emperor 244–249.

⁷ Decius, emperor 249–251. His son Herennius Etruscus was co-emperor in 251, but was killed in battle.

To him succeeded Gallus;⁸ who declared his son Volusianus his associate in the empire, and published an open declaration, that Decius and his army had perished by his contrivance. The Barbarians now became more prosperous than before. For Gallus not only permitted them to return home with the plunder, but promised to pay them annually a sum of money, and allowed them to carry off all the noblest captives; most of whom had been taken at Philippopolis in Thrace.

Gallus, having made these regulations, came to Rome, priding himself on the peace he had made with the Barbarians. And though he at first spoke with approbation of Decius's mode of government, and adopted one of his sons, yet, after some time was elapsed, fearing that some of them who were fond of new projects might recur to a recapitulation of the princely virtues of Decius, and therefore might at some opportunity give the empire to his son, he concerted the young man's destruction, without regard either to his own adoption of him, or to common honor and justice.

Gallus was so supine in the administration of the empire, that the Scythians in the first place terrified all the neighboring nations, and then laid waste all the countries as far by degrees as the sea coast; not leaving one nation subject to the Romans unpillaged, and taking almost all the unfortified towns, and many that were fortified. Besides the war on every side, which was insupportably burdensome to them, the cities and villages were infested with a pestilence, which swept away the remainder of mankind in those regions; nor was so great a mortality ever known in any former period.

At this crisis, observing that the emperors were unable to defend the state, but neglected all without the walls of Rome, the Goths, the Borani, the Urugundi, and the Carpi once more plundered the cities of Europe of all that had been left in them; while in another quarter, the Persians invaded Asia, in which they acquired possession of Mesopotamia, and proceeded even as far as Antioch in Syria, took that city, which is the metropolis

of all the east, destroyed many of the inhabitants, and carried the remainder into captivity, returning home with immense plunder, after they had destroyed all the buildings in the city, both public and private, without meeting with the least resistance. And indeed the Persians had a fair opportunity to have made themselves masters of all Asia, had they not been so overjoyed at their excessive spoils, as to be contented with keeping and carrying home what they had acquired.

Meantime the Scythians of Europe were in perfect security and went over into Asia, spoiling all the country as far as Cappadocia, Pesus, and Ephesus, until Aemilianus, commander of the Pannonian legions, endeavoring as much as possible to encourage his troops, whom the prosperity of the Barbarians had so disheartened that they durst not face them, and reminding them of the renown of Roman courage, surprised the Barbarians that were in that neighborhood. Having destroyed great numbers of them, and led his forces into their country, removing every obstruction to his progress, and at length freeing the subjects of the Roman empire from their ferocity, he was appointed emperor by his army. On this he collected all the forces of that country, who were become more bold since his successes against the Barbarians, and directed his march towards Italy, with the design of fighting Gallus, who was as yet unprepared to contend with him. For Gallus had never heard of what had occurred in the east, and therefore made only what accidental preparations were in his reach, while Valerianus went to bring the Celtic and German legions. But Aemilianus advanced with great speed into Italy, and the armies were very near to each other, when the soldiers of Gallus, reflecting that his force was much inferior to the enemy both in number and strength, and likewise that he was a negligent indolent man, put him and his son to death, and going over to the party of Aemilianus, appeared to establish his authority.⁹

⁸ Trebonianus Gallus, emperor 251–253.

⁹ Aemelian, emperor Aug.–Oct. 253.