



## Chaotic Endeavors: Gallienus' Efforts in Saving Rome from the Crisis of the Third Century

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## Chaotic Endeavors:

# Gallienus' Efforts in Saving Rome from the Crisis of the Third Century

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the Roman emperor Gallienus (r. 253-68) and his handling of the Crisis of the Third Century. Using both ancient and modern sources, Rome's third century crisis is detailed and Gallienus' actions during his reign are stated. I then list and discuss the many policies implemented by Gallienus and how they influenced the struggling empire. It is argued that he is responsible for the survival and eventual recovery of the state through his own actions and policies enacted. Even though the Crisis of the Third Century peaked during the reign of Gallienus as the empire teetered on collapse, this happened as a number of crises all occurred simultaneously and Gallienus is wrongfully scapegoated for this. I examine and explain the hostility primary sources have towards Gallienus and how they paint an inaccurate image of the emperor. I argue Gallienus was one of the most qualified Roman emperors and that despite the accumulation of crises during his reign, Gallienus was a highly successful emperor.

*Keywords:* Ancient Rome, Military History, Roman Empire, Gallienus, Roman Military, Equites, Crisis of the Third Century, Roman Emperor

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When a Thracian general seized power in 235, who went on to become the brutish emperor Maximinus Thrax (r. 235-38), he set the Roman Empire on a barbarous path when he murdered his predecessor, Alexander Severus, ushering in the era of Barracks Emperors. Between 235 and 284, disaster confronted the Roman Empire on nearly every front: politically, militarily, socially, and economically in what became the Crisis of the Third Century. Rome found the guillotine of fate nearly striking a final blow during the reign of the emperor Gallienus (r. 253-68) as the empire came to its breaking point, but despite the accumulation of crises during his reign, the empire never fell. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gallienus was painted as a selfish man who was apathetic by the responsibilities of empire. These opinions shared by the *Historia Augusta* and Edward Gibbon could not be further from reality. Modern scholars within the last century have in part rehabilitated Gallienus and question the authenticity of the primary sources available. Recent historians have attempted to explain his behavior and commonly have come to similar conclusions. Modern scholars attribute changes to the late empire to policies of Gallienus and agree he was a successful emperor but do conclude he did worsen the economy with inflation. Scholars such as Inge Mennen, Patricia Southern, John Bray, and Ilkka Syvärne all give favorable accounts of Gallienus, while Lukas de Blois is much more critical but still finds him as critical to the empire's survival. Gallienus' frenzied efforts and reforms brought a sense of stability and allowed Rome to maintain its integrity through chaos by recreating and relying on a mobile cavalry army, separating civilian from military command, debasement of coinage despite the consequences to civilians, coopting with Odaenathus of Palmyra to fight the Sassanids, eliminating weaker would-be usurpers, and coexisting with stronger usurpers who would defend the border against German tribes.

Prior to the start of Publius Licinius Egnatius Gallienus' reign the Roman Empire's run as the most dominant political, economic, and martial superpower had come to a halt resulting in the so-called Crisis of the Third Century. The historian Alaric Watson ingeniously defines the Crisis of the Third Century as "Not the story of a collapsing empire, rather, it is a testament to the remarkable ability of the Roman Empire to adapt and transform itself."<sup>1</sup> This remarkable feat was accomplishable primarily due to the policies of Gallienus.

The primary sources for the reign of Gallienus are *Historia Augusta*, Eusebius of Caesarea, Sextus Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Zosimus, and Joannes Zonaras. Despite the sizable number of sources many of them are just fragments. Not one source from the third century captures Gallienus' entire reign, and thus sources written centuries after the events must be consulted. The sources can be classified into two different categories: Latin and Greek. The Greek sources of Zosimus, Zonaras, and Eusebius tend to portray him in a positive manner and focus on the events of his reign. The Latin sources of Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, and the *Historia Augusta* negatively depict Gallienus, often focusing on Gallienus' hobbies and what the emperor did in his free time. The Latin sources similarly blame Gallienus for various crises and praise his usurpers. The bias of these sources comes from the relationship of Gallienus and the senate (see page 19).

The times had changed by the third century for the Romans. Before, battles were fought beyond the frontiers, and military victories promised wealth and territory. Now foreign invasions occurred at a frequent steadiness and battles were fought within the empire, and

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<sup>1</sup> Alaric Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century* (Routledge, 1999), 19.

victories promised only an unsteady peace.<sup>2</sup> The age of the Antonines was over; emperors and usurpers rose and fell with each passing year. Centuries prior, even if a defeat resulted in a serious setback, the Romans fought on until victory. But now any such decisive defeat would have thrown the empire into ruin. Not only was the third century a perilous time for both emperors and soldiers, but Rome's citizens also endured hardships unlike any time before. Inflation and debasement of coin brought the economy to its knees, taxation became burdening, persecutions affected large swaths of citizens, and if one could avoid dying in warfare, they could find themselves succumbing to famine or pestilence.<sup>3</sup> The Roman Empire exhibited signs of collapsing or at the very least, dangerously losing its grip over the Western world.

When Gallienus ascended to the purple alongside his father Valerian in 253 CE, they were preceded by political instability and military upheaval, the like of which the empire had not seen for at least 300 years. Following the end of the Severan dynasty, 11 different men over an 18-year span claimed the title of emperor or Augustus. Many emperors reigned only a few months and were themselves violently usurped power from their predecessor. By definition, these men constituted the term “Barracks Emperors,” because they served as generals or *duces* and rose to the purple through armed revolt. Gallienus’ father Valerian overthrew Aemilianus, his predecessor, in Oct. 253,<sup>4</sup> who in turn had revolted and mobilized the Moesian legions to topple the emperor Trebonianus Gallus (r. 251-53) three months prior.<sup>5</sup> This pattern goes as far

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<sup>2</sup> David J. Breeze, *The Frontiers of Imperial Rome* (Pen & Sword Military, 2019), 22.

<sup>3</sup> John Jefferson Bray, *Gallienus: A Study in Reformist and Sexual Politics* (Wakefield Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Zos. 1.30.1; Zonaras 22.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Grant, *Collapse and Recovery of the Roman Empire* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 11; Eutr. *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.6.

back as the Emperor Maximinus Thrax, who in the year 235 CE overthrew Alexander Severus.<sup>6</sup>

Not only did this political instability waste both men and resources on civil war, it severely deteriorated Rome's frontiers of soldiers and primed the Western borders for Germanic offensives.<sup>7</sup> Because this disastrous cycle repeated itself multiple times, when Valerian and Gallienus surveyed the Western provinces, they found themselves undermanned and overwhelmed on every front.

The first act of the emperor Valerian (r. 253-60) was to promote his son Gallienus to co-Augustus in 253.<sup>8</sup> There was little time to enjoy their spoils of ascendancy as Rome was threatened on every front. Valerian arrived in the Eastern provinces in 254, and Gallienus remained in the Balkans on the Danube frontier, where he achieved victories over various Germans and Dacians.<sup>9</sup> In 255, Gallienus needed to rush back to the Rhine front to repulse incursions made by the Franks and Alemanni. He set up his headquarters in Cologne in 256 and was joined by Valerian as they both managed the defenses of large-scale invasions.<sup>10</sup> From Cologne, both men realized that what few forces they had were spread too thinly over the empire and that their deployments needed to be reorganized.

After surveying the empire, the two emperors planned a new deployment: Valerian would oversee the Eastern provinces and march on Sassanid Persia; Gallienus manned the Rhine, while Gallienus' son Valerian II manned the Danube with the *dux* Ingenuus.<sup>11</sup> Gallienus'

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<sup>6</sup>This precedent follows Septimius Severus' wars against Niger and Albinus in 194 and 197, as well as Vitellius' seizure of power on 1 January 69 CE. During the third century, these military revolts became a common occurrence.

<sup>7</sup> Ilkka Syvärne, *The Reign of Emperor Gallienus* (Pen & Sword Military, 2019), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Bray, (1997), 16; Eutr. 9.7.

<sup>9</sup> Eutr. 9.8; Zon. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Syvärne, (2019), 62.

<sup>11</sup> Aur. Vict. *Epitome De Caesaribus* 32.2.

personal presence was required in Gaul, the most threatened region thanks to the super confederations of the Franks and Alemanni.<sup>12</sup> After successfully defending the Balkans for several years, Ingenuus seized power and had Valerian II killed during the revolt.<sup>13</sup> Hearing of the insurrection on the Danube, Gallienus marched at once to face down Ingenuus.<sup>14</sup> He left the *dux* Postumus in command on the Rhine and promoted his younger son, Salonius to Caesar. Salonius remained at Cologne under the watch of the praetorian prefect Silvanus and Postumus.<sup>15</sup> After quashing the revolt at the Battle of Mursa in late 258, Gallienus returned to Gaul in 259 to repulse Frankish incursions.<sup>16</sup> Around this same time or shortly after, Valerian suffered a decisive defeat at the battle of Edessa in 260 and was shamefully captured alive by Shapur the Great. He eventually died in captivity.<sup>17</sup>

Not long after the failed revolt of Ingenuus, the remnants of his supporters with the Moesian legions declared the *dux* of Illyria, Regalianus, their new emperor.<sup>18</sup> As Gallienus marched again to the Danube to reassert his control, the Moesian soldiers began to fear his retribution. Before his arrival, the legions assassinated Regalianus, and Gallienus headed back to the Rhine.<sup>19</sup> While he was defending the Rhine from the Germans, the Alemanni overwhelmed the province of Raetia and trespassed into the home province of Italy.<sup>20</sup> One group of Germans marched all the way to Rome, but a militia overseen by the senate repulsed

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<sup>12</sup> Samuel Tatnell, “Was the Crisis of the Third Century the Result of Military Threats or Internal Invasions,” (University of Manchester PHD Thesis, 2017), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 9.2.

<sup>14</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 9.3; Zon. 24; Eutr. 9.8.

<sup>15</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 3.1; Zon. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Inge Mennen, *Power and Status in the Roman Empire, AD 193-284* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 218.

<sup>17</sup> Zon. 23; Aur. Vict. 32.5.

<sup>18</sup> Aur. Vict. 32.3; Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 10.1.

<sup>19</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 10.2.

<sup>20</sup> Zos. 1.37.1; Eutr. 9.8.

them.<sup>21</sup> However, the independence of the senate hardly encouraged Gallienus (see page 23). A large horde besieged the city of Milan, but Gallienus and his cavalry army swiftly arrived and defeated them. After successfully ridding Italy of the Alemanni, Gallienus surveyed his empire as its lone ruler and shouldered a true cataclysmic dilemma. He found that two thirds of his empire had revolted, and he now controlled only the domains of Italy, the Balkans, Africa, and parts of Asia Minor.

When Gallienus left to defend Italy, the Frankish incursions did not stop. The *dux* Postumus successfully defeated them and then appropriated the captured booty from the Franks.<sup>22</sup> He dispersed the wealth among his men and simultaneously disobeyed the prefect Silvanus. The Rhine legions then proclaimed him emperor in defiance. Postumus marched on Cologne and had Silvanus and the young Caesar Salonius killed.<sup>23</sup> He modeled himself as a Gallic emperor with responsibility to maintain the Rhine frontier; the provinces of Britain and Spain joined his new Gallic Empire. In Syria, the general Ballista and secretary Macrianus revolted and declared Macrianus' sons, Quietus and Macrianus II, as emperors.<sup>24</sup> Ballista and Quietus oversaw the eastern provinces while the two Macriani marched west through Asia Minor and the Balkans to face down Gallienus.<sup>25</sup> Gallienus was now beset by serious usurpers on two fronts. In 260 Gallienus marched to the passes of Gaul and dispatched the general Aureolus, commander of the cavalry, to crush the advancing Macriani.<sup>26</sup> Gallienus' campaign in Gaul came to a standstill when he was wounded in a siege, but he managed to retake Raetia and

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<sup>21</sup> Zos. 1.37.2.

<sup>22</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 3.1; Zon. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 3.4; Zos. 1.38.2; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 4.3.

<sup>24</sup> Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 2.5; Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 12.1

<sup>25</sup> Euseb. *Eccles.Hist.* 7.23; Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 12.12.

<sup>26</sup> Zon. 24; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 4.4.

established a beachhead in Gaul. Shortly after the Gallic campaign, Aureolus defeated and killed the two Macriani.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the Palmyrene prince Odaenathus, who was given command of the east after repulsing Shapur's invasion, advanced and defeated the remaining usurpers.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship of Odaenathus and Gallienus warrants additional analysis (see page 21).

Although stability was reached, Gallienus had lost the Western provinces, authority in the East belonged to Odaenathus, and his current domain lay ripe for invasions.

In the summer of 261, Gallienus dispatched his general Theodotus to suppress an insurrection in Egypt while he marched to the Balkans, both to repulse invading Goths and to face down a revolt of his general Aureolus.<sup>29</sup> With exception of Postumus, usurpers had little impact politically other than weakening the already porous borders.<sup>30</sup> Gallienus came to terms with and pardoned Aureolus, whom he needed for the war in Gaul.<sup>31</sup> Gallienus' reasons for sparing the usurper are left up to one's best guesses. No conclusive battle was fought, and one can assume that Aureolus was able to out-maneuver Gallienus and force him to come to terms.<sup>32</sup> Unable to draw him in battle, Gallienus came to an understanding with Aureolus and reinstated him to a position of command. At the same time, he dispatched his general Marcianus to drive the rampaging Goths out of Thrace.<sup>33</sup> For the rest of his reign, Gallienus launched several campaigns to retake Gaul, but none resulted in a decisive victory for either

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<sup>27</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 12.13; Zon. 24; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 3.6.

<sup>28</sup> Zon. 24; Zos. 1.39.1; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 3.3.

<sup>29</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 22.8; Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 12.2; Zos. 1.37.1; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 4.2; Aur. Vict. 32.4.

<sup>30</sup> Grant (2013), 13.

<sup>31</sup> Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 4.6; Zos. 1.38.1.

<sup>32</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 11.3.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher P Jones, "Further Fragments of Dexippus" (Harvard University) 5.

side.<sup>34</sup> After celebrating his decennial in 263, Gallienus put down another revolt in Thrace.<sup>35</sup> As he reorganized the defenses in Italy and the Danube, insurrections arose in Africa, Libya, and Isauria, but they were put down by local commanders<sup>36</sup>. Gallienus overcame all these disasters which would have undone a lesser emperor, and following all these efforts, the year of 265 became a year of rest for the emperor.

Just as Gallienus once again planned to campaign in Gaul against Postumus, massive migrations of Goths, Heruls, and Scythians assailed the central empire.<sup>37</sup> From 266-268, three different tribes invaded Roman territory: the Goths plundered Thrace, the Heruls ravaged Achaea, and the Scythians penetrated Asia Minor.<sup>38</sup> The Goths and other factions continuously invaded Roman territory due to two factors: their success at the Battle of Abritus in 251 and success from raiding.<sup>39</sup> For two years Gallienus and his talented generals used a combination of guerilla warfare and famine along with their navy and cavalry deployments to defeat the barbarian invasions.<sup>40</sup> Towards the end of the war against the Germanic invaders, Gallienus received unwelcomed but predictable news for the third century, in 268 his general Aureolus again revolted and allied with Postumus.<sup>41</sup> Gallienus raced back to Italy to stop Aureolus from advancing further south and won a small battle at the bridge Pontirolo outside Mediolanum. When Aureolus retreated to the city of Mediolanum, Gallienus besieged the city. As his army surrounded the city, a conspiracy of his officers led to Gallienus' assassination in September of

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<sup>34</sup> Syvärne (2019), 114.

<sup>35</sup> Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 7.4.

<sup>36</sup> Mennen (2011), 227.

<sup>37</sup> Zos. 1.39.1.

<sup>38</sup> Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 11.1; Eutr. 9.8

<sup>39</sup> Grant (2013). 18.

<sup>40</sup> Syvärne (2019), 150; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 7.3; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 13.6.

<sup>41</sup> Aur. Vict. 32.4; Zon. 25; Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 11.4.

268.<sup>42</sup> Several theories exist of how he was assassinated and who the main conspirators were, but what is certain is that he was 50 years old and was emperor for a turbulent 15 years.<sup>43</sup> Gallienus succeeded in his mission in keeping the central empire together and paved a way for success for those who inherited his position.<sup>44</sup> Despite his best efforts, the Roman Empire remained divided.

Gallienus defended the Roman Empire from fate as it appeared to be on the brink of total collapse.<sup>45</sup> He retained imperial power through 15 chaotic years, longer than any of the many emperors between Septimius Severus and Diocletian, owing to his military prowess and the policies he enacted. Throughout the Crisis of the Third Century, two common variables feature: the emperor himself was forced to suppress usurpers or battle back incursions among the frontiers and never had Rome's armies played such a significant role in king-making.<sup>46</sup> No longer did the senate or Praetorian Guard have a say, the legions held all the power now.<sup>47</sup> In order to gain and stay in power, then one needed to command and rely upon the loyalty of the legions. Gallienus understood this and embodied this as emperor.

Gallienus' upbringing prepared him well for imperial power. He came from an old senatorial family and with it, the standard high education in Greek and Latin with the addition of a vigorous military education.<sup>48</sup> Dr. Ilkka Syvärne suspects that Gallienus participated in the *cursum honorum* even though it was in a state of disarray during the third century. There is a

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<sup>42</sup> Lukas De Blois, *The Policy of the Emperor Gallienus* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 7; Zon. 25; Eutr. 9.11; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 14.8.

<sup>43</sup> Aur. Vict. *Epitome De Caesaribus* 33.3.

<sup>44</sup> Patricia Southern, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine* (Routledge, 2015), 108.

<sup>45</sup> Grant (2013), 25.

<sup>46</sup> Mennen (2011), 238; De Blois (1976), 18.

<sup>47</sup> Ilkka Syvärne, *The Military History of Late Rome*, Vol. 1 (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2018), 157.

<sup>48</sup> Bray (1997), 27.

favorable chance that Gallienus fought on the side of the Senate against Maximinus Thrax and participated in the ill-fated Persian campaign of Gordian III.<sup>49</sup> Even if he did not, he held various military commands from 238-53, serving under Valerian's governorship, and commanded *Legio III Gallica* along the Rhine.<sup>50</sup> These experiences made Gallienus a fine military commander, attested by his military record, and capable of spotting talent and amassing a highly skilled company of officers. The latter of these two will be analyzed additionally along with his policy of promotion. His military postings, experience on campaigns, history of directing legions, and his formal education made Gallienus one of the most qualified emperors of the third century, and Rome needed it.

Gallienus deserves credit and praise for the expansion of a mobile cavalry army for Rome. Dr. Syvärne argues that Gallienus rebuilt and recreated the cavalry army lost by Decius at the disastrous battle of Abritus in 251. Gallienus recreated a mobile cavalry army, and it made up a majority of his armed forces throughout his reign. He did this by plucking the cavalry detachments of infantry forces and regrouping them with a combination of auxiliaries and new recruits.<sup>51</sup> This new company of horse remained permanently separated and operated under a single commander.<sup>52</sup> Gallienus made permanent this separation of infantry and cavalry commanders, these would later become the titles of *Magister Equitum* and *Magister Peditum* respectfully.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Syvärne (2019), 27.

<sup>50</sup> Jona Lendering, *Legio III Gallica* (Livius, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> Southern (2015), 89.

<sup>52</sup> Mennen (2011), 144.

<sup>53</sup> Syvärne (2018), 169.

Gallienus began the recruiting for his *equites* as soon as he came to power in 253, and by 258, they became a fully functional branch of his armed forces and operated alongside his legions.<sup>54</sup> Scholars believe in an estimation of a 30,000 strong cavalry based on findings in the *Strategikon*. This is a rough estimation but corresponds to the cavalry tactics and deployments of the times. Gallienus' personal cavalry army ranged in size depending on the situation and year from 10,000 to 45,000.<sup>55</sup> The Balkans were the primary recruiting ground for draftees into the cavalry army, but manpower was quite limited during his reign. Detachments and auxiliaries from across the empire along with green recruits went into assembling his cavalry. Lancers and mounted archers made up the two main classes of horsemen and varied with Germanic, Dalmatian, Moorish, Sarmatian, Oshroenian, Palmyrene, Armenian, and Persian cavalrymen.

Gallienus' *equites* operated either of two ways: accompanying the emperor on military campaigns or deployment at strategic choke points within the empire.<sup>56</sup> The Roman military apparatus had already begun trending towards heavier usage of cavalry.<sup>57</sup> Eastern cataphracts and mounted archers proved to be effective against Germanic tribes, and cavalry was superb at putting enemy armies to flight and hacking down its remnants. Most invading Germanic tribes included both women and children and would be in the hundreds of thousands if we are to believe the ancient sources. Cavalry would be the only answer when fighting against groupings of this size. In 260, Gallienus defeated a large horde of Alemanni around the city of Milan with a numerically inferior cavalry squadron. As the cavalry charged and attacked an enemy

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<sup>54</sup> The definition of *equites* has changed by this time in Roman history. *Equites* was now a broader and general term for Roman cavalry rather than someone of the *equestrian* status or a mounted Roman nobleman.

<sup>55</sup> Syvänen (2019), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (John Hopkins University Press, 2016), 150.

<sup>57</sup> John W. Eadie, "The Development of Roman Mailed Cavalry" (Journal of Roman Studies, 1967), 168.

encampment, the inhabitants fled to another nearby encampment. The cavalry attack provoked a panicked flight from all. By picking off groupings one at a time, he would be able to use his elite cavalry to ensure a mass route and a total victory.<sup>58</sup> He used this same tactic against the Gothic and Herul invasions towards the end of his reign, where the Romans defeated tens of thousands of people in a horde.

Not only would his large cavalry army provide a military response to invaders, but it also worked as a psychological response to the times. Beginning with the obvious, highly mobile cavalry armies could travel at a much faster pace across the empire.<sup>59</sup> Gallienus' *equites* could arrive in time to provide relief to a siege or surprise an enemy force with their speed. In the revolt of Ingenuus, the sudden arrival of Gallienus' army took the wind out the usurper's sails, and soon after, Ingenuus was killed by his own troops. The fast-acting nature of the cavalry meant that even if the legions became overwhelmed on the frontier, the cavalry was enroute. This acted as a psychological booster for the ordinary soldier and provided a rapid response to insurrections. Deployments of cavalry regiments occurred at locales such as Cologne, Trier, Sirmium, and Byzantium. Gallienus' *Tagmatas* were famously stationed at the key city of Mediolanum, where they could monitor the movements of Postumus in Gaul, watch the northern frontier of Raetia, and remain equidistant to the Rhine and Danube borders.<sup>60</sup>

Defensive strategy for the Roman Empire had always been the maintaining of imperial forts and garrisons along the border and the use of diplomacy to keep neighboring tribes divided and weak. By the third century this method was no longer possible. The tribes outside

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<sup>58</sup> Syvänen (2019), 96.

<sup>59</sup> Mennen (2011), 144.

<sup>60</sup> Mennen (2011), 234.

the empire began to form into confederations and grow to impressive sizes, the frontier garrisons were gradually abandoned as Germanic tribes overwhelmed the borders, and Roman civil wars reduced the number of frontier troops.<sup>61</sup> To combat this, Gallienus deployed a “defense in depth” strategy where in lieu of occupying the frontiers, highly mobile armies operated from fortified garrisons within the empire. With this system Rome no longer took the war to the enemy through offensive campaigns, now it acted as a reactive and defensive force.<sup>62</sup> This went against centuries of Roman strategy, and it was not what the Roman military machine was designed for, but it was Gallienus’ only feasible solution. New styles of forts were constructed during the late third century featuring higher and thicker walls, external bastions, and small but heavily fortified gates.<sup>63</sup> These strongholds were designed to withstand an enemy siege and holdout till the cavalry lifted the siege, playing into the hands of Gallienus’ mobile cavalry army. He was not the first to post a defensive strategy, but Gallienus created more strongholds within the empire than any other emperor.<sup>64</sup> Typically, Rome’s strategic goals and policies depended on the personality of the emperor, but Gallienus had no choice in his strategy, he simply reacted to events around him with what ensured the empire’s survival.

As Gallienus’ was harassed on the frontiers by barbaric invasions and internal insurrection, the empire’s infrastructure crumbled around him. Agriculture formed the basis of the Roman economy and most of the tax income relied on the harvest of Rome’s farmers. Another major source of revenue was trade with the East. All these lucrative sources of income (tax, agriculture, and trade) become critically weakened when war is waged. Twenty years of

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<sup>61</sup> Syvärne (2018), 7.

<sup>62</sup> Luttwak (2016), 152.

<sup>63</sup> Breeze (2019), 198.

<sup>64</sup> Syvärne (2019), 24.

foreign invasions, civil war, and war in the east severely reduced the Roman economy just as Gallienus took power and these problems continued throughout his reign. To make matters worse, disease and famine depopulated the empire when citizens were needed to either farm the fields or serve in the legions.<sup>65</sup> Debasement of coins over the decades and high inflation exacerbated all monetary problems and combined with all the previous factors, Gallienus' reign was a time of economic crisis.<sup>66</sup> This was a colossal burden for him as he needed more money than any of his predecessors to pay his legions, raise new troops, and to purchase treaties.

As mentioned before, wars fought in the third century now occurred within the provinces. The Danube and Rhine provinces now became the battlegrounds for repelling foreign infiltrations as well as internal civil wars for Rome. Large scale conflicts occurring almost year after year led to the destruction of farmland for the empire. Small landowners left their ravaged farms and worked for large landowners or *magnates*, effectively becoming *coloni* and hid under the protection of the rich landowners.<sup>67</sup> These magnates could shield citizens from tax burdens as well as proscriptions to join the army. Because magnates happened to be wealthy enough to bribe tax officials, tax income became a dwindled source of revenue for Gallienus. People in urban centers began to flock to the countryside as they could no longer bear the tax burden of the empire, making the massive estates also industrial centers and thus weakening the economy of cities. The middle class dwindled in both prosperity and size, which left the remaining tax base unable to afford taxes. War in the East halted the valuable trade routes through Persia and constant warring with barbaric factions left little to be gained from

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<sup>65</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Modern Library, 2003), 162.

<sup>66</sup> Bray (1997), 2.

<sup>67</sup> Syvänen (2019), 44.

trade. The army's commandeering of ships, wagons, and oxen for use in warfare aggravated economic dilemmas further. These problems were all worsened by the shameless state of debasement in Roman coins.

A popular influx of income for Roman emperors was the confiscation of property from wealthy senators or landowners. Gallienus did not have this option as Valerian had already purged the supporters of the previous regime and began persecuting Christians to fund his war in the East.<sup>68</sup> Gallienus abandoned the practice as it disenfranchised a large segment of the population in his Eastern provinces.<sup>69</sup> Lacking estates to confiscate, he resorted to the debasement and overproduction of coins. Debasement of coins had been occurring for decades but became detrimental to Gallienus in the 260s. Just a century before, the Roman *denarius* had a silver purity of 75%. During the reign of Gallienus the silver purity dropped to less than 5%, as the coin was almost worthless at face value.<sup>70</sup> He debased them further after the loss of provinces in 260. Silver coins became so worthless in foreign markets to the extent that merchants from Germania and India no longer accepted them.<sup>71</sup> The excess minting of debased coins rendered the savings of the middle class worthless, this ultimately devastated the middle class. The wealthy began to horde gold coins, as they alone held any value and became incredibly expensive for the empire to buy back. In combination with wild debasement and increased production of coins to pay for the legions, Gallienus experienced a monetary chaos the likes of which had never been seen by an emperor. As he struggled to keep the empire from

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<sup>68</sup> Zon. 22.

<sup>69</sup> Euseb. 7.13.

<sup>70</sup> Jeff Desjardins, "Currency and the Collapse of the Roman Empire" (Business Insider, 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Syvänen (2019), 45.

collapsing from both internal and external pressures, Gallienus had to shoulder Rome's building financial crisis to ensure its survival.

To further dwindle the population of the empire, pestilence and famine marred the Roman empire during the 250s and 260s. Between 249 and 262 the Cyprian plague, named after the bishop of Carthage, who documented the pestilence, terrified the Roman Empire.<sup>72</sup> The plague hit Alexandria, Italy, and Greece particularly heavily and depopulated cities either by infecting and killing citizens or from people fleeing in terror. With populations dropping by thousands a day, a shortage of manpower reduced harvesting.<sup>73</sup> The shortage caused famine to rear its ugly head, and the Roman people lived in a downtrodden state. When Gallienus needed men both for the legions and to harvest crops, pestilence created a shortage of men for the emperor.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, Rome experienced climate dilemmas during Gallienus' reign as earthquakes struck in 262 and 264.<sup>75</sup> Unrest grew in Africa as continued drought worsened the harvest of each passing year, resulting in a series of minor revolts over his reign.<sup>76</sup> When both foreign invasions and imperial usurpers occupied Gallienus, the internal finances and populations of the empire experienced their own crises.

The core argument of the paper is tied to the next subject of Gallienus' reign, and that is the notion that several primary sources label him a negligent ruler.<sup>77</sup> The *Historia Augusta* accuses him of relishing in his father's capture and living a life of luxury and gluttony while the

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<sup>72</sup> Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2019), 130.

<sup>73</sup> Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 5.5.

<sup>74</sup> Zos. 1.37.3; Zos. 1.36.1.

<sup>75</sup> Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni*. 5.2.

<sup>76</sup> De Blois (1976), 8.

<sup>77</sup> Eutr. 9.8.

empire lived in a state of disarray.<sup>78</sup> These designations grossly exaggerate the vices of the emperor Gallienus. Even if one suspects that the primary sources negatively exaggerate and suspect fabrications, it is a historian's job to tell what the sources say. His poor image in the primary sources is due to a combination of two factors: the chaotic and disastrous nature of the times and that a senatorial bias grew due to policies enacted by Gallienus. The *Historia Augusta*, written between the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine, portrays him negatively in an effort to prop up his successor Claudius II. Historian Edward Gibbon follows suit and even diminishes his efforts by bulking up the accomplishments of his rival Postumus.<sup>79</sup>

The first to examine is Gallienus' reputation for debauchery and his consorting with the destitute of Rome such as prostitutes and actors.<sup>80</sup> This can be reasoned more thoroughly when one steps back and analyzes who Gallienus was. Even though he came from a senatorial family (see page 9), Gallienus was a soldier at heart. He was trained in combat and often personally led cavalry charges (suffering a battle wound in Gaul). Gallienus even challenged his opponent to single combat in an effort to settle conflicts, including once to Postumus. Like his fellow soldiers, he frequented bars and brothels, no different from a legionnaire who faced the very real threat of dying in battle. This way of life endeared him to his soldiers but repulsed the upper class who thought that an emperor should be above that lifestyle. He was so admired by the legions that upon hearing of his assassination, the soldiers threatened mutiny.<sup>81</sup> Fittingly, Gallienus' marriage to his wife Salonia took place much later than was typical for a senatorial nobleman. He sired his first son Valerian II when he was around 32 years old. He was too

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<sup>78</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants*. 9.1.

<sup>79</sup> Gibbon, (2003), 152.

<sup>80</sup> Eutr. 9.8.

<sup>81</sup> Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 15.1.

preoccupied with war and had lived too loosely to settle down before his marriage. Though one's standard for an emperor might exclude the hobbies of Gallienus, they remained a piece of what it took to be a soldier in the third century.

Hearing of his soldier lifestyle and the notion that the legions loved Gallienus, one could argue against this through the number of usurpers throughout his reign. The troops that belonged to Gallienus' personal army adored him but maintaining loyalty amidst the legions was difficult during the crisis. Legions deployed elsewhere revolted when pay or supplies endured shortcomings, and when someone promised more pay. Soldiers' pay had reached astronomical heights thanks to prior emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla. They each had doubled the pay of legionnaires and now left an impossible monetary standard to achieve.<sup>82</sup> Any emperor who reduced pay and did not live up to the financial expectations of the army was overthrown by a man who could promise more. With such a crippled economy, paying the legions became extremely difficult and therefore loyalty dwindled as well. To avoid this, wherever Gallienus marched his army, the imperial mint followed and produced the necessary coins to pay his men. These coins appealed to the legions by depicting recent messages proclaiming victories, celebrating his cavalry, or displaying the god Mars. Coins were Gallienus' number one source of propaganda. But because of the overhaul of silver coins in the empire through debasement (see page 14), copper coins became useless as they now shared the same value of silver.<sup>83</sup> Because of this new predicament, Gallienus closed copper mines, which angered their senatorial owners.

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<sup>82</sup> Gibbon, (2003), 86.

<sup>83</sup> Syvänne (2019), 44.

Such critical times forced Gallienus to adopt desperate measures. Persecuting many citizens wasted resources and weakened the empire's populace, so he applied emergency measures to keep the empire from shattering at the expense of the senate. Gallienus desperately needed money and perhaps even more desperately needed men to fill the ranks of the ever-depleting legions. Gallienus enacted a policy used frequently by Caracalla in which the emperor claimed military victories and collected an *aurum coronarium* from the wealthy class of citizens in honor of his conquests.<sup>84</sup> These payments kept Gallienus' gold supply in excellent shape while he held office and went directly to financing his troops. As a form of taxes, Gallienus levied soldiers from the estates of the wealthiest landowners to fill the legions, depleted from both war and disease.<sup>85</sup> Both policies contributed to the hatred that grew for him from men of the senate. Gallienus was so hated by the senate that following his assassination his name was damned and his family members were tracked down.<sup>86</sup> None of Gallienus' remaining family survived the post-assassination purge.<sup>87</sup>

Since the primary sources are hostile to Gallienus, one must read between the lines to get to the truth. Despite the chaos and unreliable sources of income, Gallienus' army never suffered from lack of supplies or pay. This is more impressive given the fact that Gallienus' army was primarily cavalry, which required additional rations. What is not stated is how much energy Gallienus exerted to provision his army consistently. Gallienus knew his right to rule, and the continued existence of his sphere of the Roman Empire, relied on the presence of his imperial army. If the army were to go unpaid or ill-supplied, he would have been assassinated.

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<sup>84</sup> William Dunstan, *Ancient Rome* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 405.

<sup>85</sup> Syvänen (2019), 45.

<sup>86</sup> Claudius II would save Gallienus' name from being damned and insisted on his deification.

<sup>87</sup> Watson (1999), 41.

Nevertheless, Zosimus admits that Gallienus fought the Gothic invasions of 266 to 268 “with great ability” which one could restate as excellent command of the situation and eventual defeat of the invading Germanic tribes.<sup>88</sup> Even though he was outnumbered in all military engagements, Gallienus never suffered a defeat or fell victim to an ambush. Had Gallienus ever suffered a defeat or ambush, the sources would have certainly mentioned it and exaggerated Gallienus’ failure. Not even Aurelian, the man who reunified the empire, can make this claim.

The senatorial aristocracy harbored resentment for Gallienus and condemned his indulgence in leisure activities. A great deal of these began in 265 while Gallienus stayed in Rome and Greece. Gallienus suffered much personal trauma; seven years into his reign, constant warfare took his father and his two eldest sons from him. His only display of emotion came in the purges following the failed revolt of Ingenuus.<sup>89</sup> Other than this release of anger Gallienus did not have time to mourn his losses as he was too preoccupied with imperial crises. After five years of crisscrossing the empire, he must have been enervated. During that year, a relative peace beset the empire as Rome found itself between Gothic invasions and no imperial usurpers.<sup>90</sup> Gallienus famously visited Greece and toured Athens during his imperial vacation and enjoyed his hobbies of Greek culture and the arts. This was all looked on with disdain by his conservative contemporaries as in their words, “he abandoned the government.”<sup>91</sup> This year of rest was additionally a year of strategic planning and organizing. Evidence and reason suggest that time was spent planning for another campaign in Gaul against Postumus as well as

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<sup>88</sup> Zos. 1.40.2.

<sup>89</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 9.6.

<sup>90</sup> Tatnell (2017), 20.

<sup>91</sup> Eutr. 9.11.

strategically overlooking the Danube defenses.<sup>92</sup> Any criticisms for the year 265 should be dropped because as soon as the massive Gothic, Herul, and Scythian migrations occurred in 266, Gallienus dropped everything to come to Rome's defense.

Gallienus' contemporaries also took offense at the emperor's foreign policies, specifically, his relationship with the Palmyrene prince Odaenathus. Valerian's captivity in Sassanid hands locked Gallienus into a dreadful predicament. Shapur remained unchecked with the Eastern provinces laid before him. Odaenathus and the soldiers who flocked to his banner extinguished this threat. He waged war upon the Sassanids and put an end to Shapur's invasions into Syria.<sup>93</sup> Odaenathus acted as Gallienus' general, and Gallienus rewarded his victories with imperial titles of *dux Romanorum* and *imperator*. With these titles Odaenathus held control over the Eastern provinces, and this policy kept him content and loyal.<sup>94</sup> It was much safer and cheaper to give him titles and independence than it was to fight him. He proved his loyalty in suppressing the Macriani revolt in 260/61 and by campaigning into Persia, where he besieged Ctesiphon in 266, all in the name of the emperor Gallienus.<sup>95</sup> Despite his success in Persia, he had to abandon the siege when his presence was required to battle back the Scythian invasion into Asia Minor in 266. He proved to be an invaluable asset to Gallienus when he and Rome most needed it. Gallienus is also slandered for his affair or marriage with the Marcomanni princess Pipa. In a treaty with the Marcomanni king Attalus, Gallienus allowed members of the German tribe to settle within the depopulated province of Pannonia and serve

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<sup>92</sup> Sylwanne (2019), 123.

<sup>93</sup> Eutr. 9.10; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 10.1.

<sup>94</sup> Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 10.4.

<sup>95</sup> Zon. 24; Hist. Aug. *Two Gallieni* 10.6.

as *federates* in the Roman army.<sup>96</sup> This unconventional marriage sealed the treaty, although it was seen as highly scandalous among the senatorial class.<sup>97</sup> Gallienus was an innovator and did not respect tradition, as the positives far outweighed the power vacuum left by the Marcomanni.

A fair and true criticism laid at Gallienus' feet is accepting the splitting of the Roman Empire. The Western provinces had their own respective senate and emperor and would maintain their independence for 14 years even though Gallienus did not recognize Postumus' legitimacy.<sup>98</sup> Although the situation with Palmyra in the East was cloaked under imperial titles and operated in his name, Odaenathus was free to do as he pleased. He was a foreigner, a very well educated and Romanized foreigner, but nonetheless from outside the empire. The fact that he wielded considerable power in the East was shocking to some Romans.

The fractioning of the empire better preserved its existence contrary to what the primary sources say. Usurpations happened from the empire's inability to repulse foreign incursions.<sup>99</sup> The division of the empire also created a division of labors for the separate factions: Palmyra handled the Sassanids, the Gallic Empire dealt with the Franks, and Gallienus was left with the Goths, Heruls, and Alemanni. The temporary capitulation of territory entailed a sharing of imperial burdens.<sup>100</sup> Gallienus had no choice in the abdication of territory as the empire's problems swelled too grand for one individual. It would have been impossible for one emperor to effectively defend all frontiers of the empire during this chaotic time without having

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<sup>96</sup> Aur. Vict. 33.1.

<sup>97</sup> Hist Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 3.4.

<sup>98</sup> Southern (2015), 100.

<sup>99</sup> Luttwak (2016), 148.

<sup>100</sup> Mennen (2011), 43.

to subdue countless revolts. Gallienus made the decision that the protection of the office of emperor was greater than the tranquility of empire.<sup>101</sup> The argument that he made the selfish or wrong choice is mistaken. If Gallienus had attempted to march to the East to reassert control or avenge his father, the empire would have fractured further and become overrun by Germanic tribes. Gallienus' campaigns in nearby Gaul had to be abandoned due to revolts and insurrections in the empire. This proves that Gallienus placed a greater emphasis on preserving what he still had domain over rather than winning back what he had lost. If he dared to campaign in the far East, surely it would have opened a Pandora's box of problems for Rome. With Postumus holding domain in Gaul, he held Germanic tribes on the Rhine at bay.<sup>102</sup> Gallienus found that coexisting with the separate empires was the only way to remain in power and keep some semblance of stability.

One policy that both immensely impacted the future of Rome and drew hatred from the Senate was Gallienus' abolishment of the posts *legati legionis* and *tribuni laticlavi*. Without these military posts, senators were now denied the chance of commanding a significant number of troops and familiarizing themselves with the system and military officers.<sup>103</sup> This came as retribution for the independence shown by the Senate during the Alemanni invasions of Italy, where they repulsed an advancing group of Germans from Rome itself (see page 5).<sup>104</sup> This caught Gallienus' eye since he himself had witnessed their independence when they had waged war on Maximinus Thrax and the role they played in his father's elevation to emperor. With their exclusion, Gallienus hoped to limit the number of possible usurpers and keep the

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<sup>101</sup> Tatnell (2017), 20.

<sup>102</sup> Hist. Aug. *Thirty Tyrants* 3.6.

<sup>103</sup> Syvänen (2019), 98.

<sup>104</sup> Zos. 1.37.2

hatred that the senate had towards him away from any real military power. Gallienus extended this towards the provinces where military men replaced non-loyal governors. At a time when the top of the imperial apparatus became more militarized, senators found themselves shut out from martial power. This became another crippling blow to the senate over its steady decline from real power. Edward Gibbon records that senators could care less about this stipulation but that is simply not true.<sup>105</sup> This policy now made Gallienus one of the most hated emperors and vengeance occurred through pen and paper. Now career military men that Gallienus promoted himself remained in control of the legions.

By promoting men of merit, Gallienus could trust his soldiers were in reliable hands. This was a crucial moment in Roman history when manpower was waning. He did not want to risk losing any legions through a fatal blunder of an inept senator who was in command because that was how it had been done centuries before. These were incomparable and imperative times. Gallienus needed the best and because of his policy, Rome had extremely capable men leading its armies in a critical time. Future emperors Claudius II, Aurelian, and Probus all would cut their teeth and rise through the ranks during Gallienus' 15-year reign.<sup>106</sup> One could reason that had it not been for Gallienus, these Illyrian officers never would have risen to the power and enjoyed the successes they did. For this alone he played a sizable part in the recovery of the empire.

Gallienus oversaw the Roman Empire during a time of true disarray and reigned longer than anyone else during the Crisis of the Third Century. With exception to possibly Honorius,

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<sup>105</sup> Gibbon (2003), 155.

<sup>106</sup> Syvärne (2019), 57.

Gallienus perhaps had the most difficult task of any emperor. The Roman Empire was headed to destruction with its fracture, economic anarchy, and relentless invasions, yet his stability kept the imperial bureaucracy from descending into chaos. He was forced to march from crisis to crisis all the meanwhile reforming policies and coming up with solutions to save Rome. He did not do all this to achieve his grand strategy, this was all done for survival of both him and the empire. Thanks to his tireless efforts and ad hoc reforms, Gallienus prevented Rome's collapse and allowed it to regain its footing and eventual return to dominance.

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