



Summary :

One of the most important developments during Diocletian's reign was the degradation of senators for the benefit of a new class of highly proficient courtiers and state officials. But the result was an extremely bureaucratic system of administration, which burdened heavily the state budget.

Date

284-305 AD

1. Diocletian's Administration

During Diocletian's reign, particularly after the system of the Tetrarchy was introduced, there was an important development in the Roman Empire. A series of reforms was adopted, which soon spread to all sectors of economy, society and administration, modified the existing structures and actually created a new empire. Thus, the year 284 A.D., when [Diocletian](#) was proclaimed emperor, is considered by the historians as the starting point of what is now widely called "Late Antiquity".¹ The greatest breakthrough of Diocletian was the administrative system of the Tetrarchy, according to which the empire was governed by two emperors (Augusti) and two regents (Caesars). In this way greater administrative control was achieved. Besides that, and for the benefit of stability, Diocletian introduced [a series of measures](#) that changed the relations between the state authority and the [senate](#) as well as the composition of the upper classes and the state mechanism of administration.

At first, like other emperors before him, Diocletian wanted to be surrounded by "his own people". Therefore he appointed both his compatriot Dalmatians and –much more– his fellow military officers to the upper and top state positions. He had realised that in order to promote his reforms, he needed trusty and competent people in key posts. The motive behind the selection of the people was to establish a system of administration based on meritocracy rather than a closed hierarchical system ruled by him and blindly followed by his officials.

2. Degradation of Senators

According to [Augustus'](#) system, the traditional separation of authority distributed the provinces almost equally between the senate (the [senators](#) ruled and economically exploited the so-called senatorial provinces) and the emperor (who appointed the governors and received the income from the imperial provinces). Diocletian's administrative reforms had as an immediate result the undermining of senatorial families, who often subverted the state's unity and abused power in the provinces they ruled. [Gallienus](#) (253-268 A.D.) was the first to degrade the senate by depriving its members of their exclusive right to command the military units, which would be governed by professional officers from then on. Diocletian, who had been benefited by those changes of Gallienus and admired his predecessor, took one step further and deprived senatorial families also of their privileges over the administration of the provinces.

The members of those families, who considered their ascension to public posts an evident fact, according to the law of inheritance and the privileges of their class, started to worry. After the reorganisation of the provinces the former senate provinces were divided and the resulting smaller administrative districts were controlled more effectively by their governors, the [procuratores](#), who tried to prevent the senators from profiteering and exploiting the people. The



command of the new large administrative units, the **diocesis**, was assigned to **vicarii**, who also belonged to the class of **equites**. Finally, the systematic inventory and the reorganisation of the tax system put an end to the uncontrollable economic pressure on local populations, mainly farmers.

Rome and a district within a ten-mile radius around was the only shelter for the senate. Because that region did not present any agrarian surplus but only consumed imported products, Diocletian exempted it from taxation and appointed a **praefectus Urbis** Romae as governor. However, that was the first time Rome had not been the actual capital of the empire, since Milan became the new tetrarchic capital.

3. New Order in Central Administration

Diocletian's reformative spirit penetrated all administrative sectors and actually formed a new order and a new class. Both in the army and the administration the once privileged classes were not favoured anymore. People of humble origin, just like the emperor, had the chance to ascend quickly to the higher and highest positions of the state. There was one condition, however, for this ascension and this was their loyalty to the imperial authority and its projects, to carry out successfully their tasks, to be morally impermeable and strict towards those who attempted to corrode the state mechanism. In this way, an extensive bureaucracy as well as a state and military hierarchy was formed, controlled by the crown. There was one condition, however, for this ascension and this was their loyalty to the imperial authority and its projects, to carry out successfully their tasks, to be morally impermeable and strict towards those who attempted to corrode the state mechanism.² This state aristocracy created a class of state servants with relatively low prospects and lack of initiative. That means that one of the qualities of the "new people" (novi homines), as they were called by those who mistrusted them, who emerged after Diocletian's reforms, was a scientific approach, which often became thorough, as well as faith in state ideals, which sometimes was reduced to complete commitment to a hierarchical system.³

The resulting hierarchical system was complicated. A group of specially trained counsellors called "consistorium" surrounded the emperor. The various administrative sectors were assigned to different offices or districts, the so-called "scrinia".⁴ At the same time, the post of the magister was introduced, indicating a kind of minister or special attaché. The most common posts were the "magister libellorum" and the "magister epistolarum", who handled imperial correspondence, the "magister rerum" privatarum and the rerum publicarum, who were responsible for financial services, etc.

4. State Officials

The separation between the military and the state power as well as the formation of several special posts and intermediate ranks led to a complex terminology and titulature. The military character of Diocletian's administration was obvious, since even state administration was known as militia, while its officials used to wear a military tunic, the sagum, instead of the traditional **toga**. The military hierarchy was now more accurately defined: it was called "militia armata". Apart from the complex titles describing the different ranks,⁵ there were also posts with particular names. The new code of the court bureaucracy included lots of "eminentissimi", "illustrissimi", "perfectissimi", "egreggii", and so on.

5. New Order in Imperial Cities



The formation of a central state bureaucracy had a direct impact on imperial cities as well. According to tradition, the major duty and privilege of the upper classes was to staff local positions and the order of the *curiales*. The economic crisis of the mid-3rd century had partially hit those classes too. Yet, the strict control over the system collecting and forwarding the taxes to the central administration as well as the fact that local officials were personally responsible for the smooth operation of the financial mechanism and were threatened with heavy penalties in case they did not fulfill their duties properly, made the members of those classes feel that their offices carried an intolerable burden rather than a privilege. Land aristocracy lost the enviable position it had held in both the hierarchical system of the empire and the entire Roman society. As a result, an increasing number of those aristocrats wanted to receive educational degrees in order to hold state positions. Therefore, provincial elites lost their power, although all provinces could more essentially be represented in central administration, which had previously been an exclusive privilege of the citizens of Rome.⁶

6. The Emperor: from Princeps to Dominus

Along with state bureaucracy –and probably as a result of it– Diocletian also changed the way in which the emperor presented himself before his subjects. Surrounded by the members of his board and his court as well as by objects and titles with a heavily symbolic character, he was no longer a simple soldier but a monarch with lots of elements borrowed from eastern monarchies.

7. Negative Effects of New Hierarchy

All those new offices and titles in administration made communication more difficult. The main disadvantage of the new system was that it created a centralised state with a huge number of servants, who did not actually produce anything and were supported by the productive classes of the empire. On the one hand, Diocletian managed to block misappropriations and secure foregone income, while on the other hand he did not manage to actually improve the empire's economy, since the largest part of the income was channeled to the maintenance of the bureaucratic state mechanism.

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1. Other similar terms used in international bibliography are Late Antiquity, Antiquité tardive, Späntike and Antichità tardiva, while the respective period is administratively-politically described as Later Roman Empire and Bas Empire.
 2. The field of education underwent great changes due to those changes in administration. Traditional fields, such as poetry and philosophy, started to shrink, while the new science of law started to take on. Although rhetoric remained, it had to redefine its purposes and methods.
 3. Typical examples of court officials were Hermogenianus and Gregorius. They were among the most important legists of the Late Roman Empire. Between 293 and 294 A.D. Hermogenianus held the office of magister libellorum. He compiled the *Codex of Hermogenianus*, one of the earliest attempts to digest the Roman Law. The *Codex* was completed in 295 A.D. and was a basic source for subsequent legislative codes, such as *Codices Theodosianus* and *Justinianus*. However, it was the basis for the writer's career, as he later held the office of "magister libellorum" in the West, before he was promoted in 298-302 A.D. to "praefectus praetorio". Around 298 A.D. his codex was released for a second time, while in 300 A.D. he released a second codex called *Iuris Epitomae* and in 320 A.D. he released the *Codex* for a third time, while being in the court of Licinius or at the Law School of Beirut. Gregorius did not make a similar progress. Between 284 and 290 A.D. he held the office of the "magister libellorum" at first in the West and later in the East. In 291 A.D. his epitome, *Codex Gregorianus*, was released; it was also used for compiling subsequent codices. However, the next offices he held were the "magister epistolarum" and the "magister memoriae". His codex was released again in 306 A.D., when he must have been teaching



at the school of Beirut.

4. The term "scrinium" comes from the boxes Diocletian and his court used for transporting and storing documents during their movements.

5. The following studies include information about those titles and offices: Kolb, F., *Diocletian und die Erste Tetrarchie: Improvisation oder Experiment in der Organisation monarchischer Herrschaft?* (Berlin 1987); Jones, A.H.M., *The later Roman Empire I* (Oxford 1964), pp. 37-76; Corcoran, S., *The Empire of the Tetrarchs: imperial pronouncements and government, A.D. 284-324* (Oxford 1996). However, none of the studies includes a collective and analytical table of those offices. Particularly useful, especially for the correlations between the terms, is also the study by Mason, R., *Greek terms for Roman Institutions* (Hakkert – Toronto 1977).

6. It should be noted that the road to the equalisation between the provinces and Rome had been opened by a Caracalla edict in 212 A.D., also known as *Constitutio Antoniniana*, through which all the free inhabitants of the empire received the Roman citizenship.

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Glossary :

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| | curiales Curiales were the members of the city councils (gr.: <i>boule</i>) in the late Roman Empire. They belonged to the local aristocracy and were officials of the municipal administration, responsible for the normal functioning of the city's institutions as well as for local tax-collecting. A city's <i>boule</i> could count from 100 to 200 curiales, depending on the city's population. |
| | dioecesis (admin.) Administrative unit consisting of more than one provinces. This measure was introduced by Diocletian in order to make the |



administration more centralized. Diocletian divided the Roman Empire in 12 dioeceses which reached the amount of 14 at the end of the 14th c. These administrative divisions existed throughout the Early Byzantine period.

equestrians, the (equites)

The lowest class of Roman aristocracy, whose economic wealth derived mainly from civil professions (bankers, publicans, merchants), yet without political privileges. The Roman Republican period was marked by their strives against the senators. The equestrians were won over mainly by leaders who desired to promote a monarchic type of government pushing aside the Senate.

praefectus urbi (prefect of the city)

(later referred to as the *eparch* of the city) Administrator and virtual governor of Constantinople in the Early/Middle Byzantine Era. He was responsible for the surveillance and the harmonious life of the Capital. One of his responsibilities was to control the commercial and manufacturing activities of Constantinople. After 1204, however, the office began to diminish, while from the 14th century, his responsibilities were assumed by two officers, the so-called *kephalatikeuontai of the capital*.

procurator

Administrator of a roman Province deriving from the class of equites. He was controlled directly by the Emperor and his legati Augusti pro praetore.

senate, the

The top political body of the Roman state. During the early Republic, it was represented by the council of the consuls, the top archons of the roman state. Later on, its power and responsibilities increased. As a result, it became the main governmental body of Rome. However, during the Imperial period, the responsibilities of the senate were restricted.

senator, the (1. Roman, 2. Byzantine)

1. A Roman body of men that originally advised the king and then the consuls; Heredity was not the only means of joining the senate and "new men" or *novi homines* could become part of it; Augustus revised the senate and left the body with less power and bolstered hereditary claims as a means to enter the senate; it continued to make laws and conferred powers on new emperors.
2. Member of the senate. The senate, a roman institution transferred from Rome to Constantinople by Constantine I during the Byzantine period was an advisory body whose rights and responsibilities were not clearly defined. It was consisted of imperial officers coming from the upper and were ranked according to hierarchical levels: viri illustri (perfectus praetoriae and the magister), viri spectabili (proconsul, vicarius and the comes), viri clarissimi (consul praetoriae) and viri perfectissimi (praeses and duces). Since the 6th c. AD a new title was established for the upper officers (viri gloriosi). The years that followed officials were entitled to officers regardless their position as senators or if they were about to be admitted to this body.

toga, the

Type of roman clothing. Gown without seams. It is wrapped around the body and is reminiscent of the greek himation.

vicarius

The term refers to the substitute of various officials. Since the 3rd century, the vicarius replaced mostly procuratores from the equestrian class. The most important vicarii were those who replaced the Praetorian eparchs in the dioceses set up by Diocletian. In addition, the vicarii could have military (like the command of the garrison in Egypt) or even judicial responsibilities.