

Notes on Quiz #10: The Third Century Crisis

1. All of the following were factors in producing the Third Century Crisis EXCEPT:

- a. The failure of the Severan dynasty to produce another man of Severus's stature and capabilities
- b. Increasing insufficiency of the frontier defenses
- c. Declining trade and agriculture, worsened by a midcentury plague
- d. Persistent production of coinage containing too high a percentage of gold and silver

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. Caracalla, the son of Septimus Severus, was known for

- a. extending Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire
- b. ruling in harmony with his brother Geta
- c. marrying the princess of Parthia, bringing new stability to the eastern frontier
- d. neglecting the business of state in favor of his priestly devotions

Arguably Caracalla's most impactful legacy was the extension of the citizenship across the empire, part of the Severan policy of raising the provinces to the level of Italy, as well as producing revenue through taxes.

3. Key religious movements in this period include all of the following EXCEPT:

- a. A growing divide between Western and Eastern Christianity
- b. Sol Invictus, the cult of a sun-god embraced by Aurelian as a protector of the empire
- c. Valerianism, a Syrian movement devoted to wise men and ancestors
- d. Manichaeism, a religion rooted in Zoroastrian dualism and Graeco-Christian philosophy

Manichaeism, Mithraism, the cult of Sol Invictus, and an increasingly divided Christianity were all characteristics of the shifting third-century religious landscape.

4. 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 Cleopatra 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

Palmyra was a key city of the Roman east, retaken and destroyed by Aurelian as a part of his successful Syrian campaigns against Zenobia and her allies.

5. The codex was

- a. leaves of parchment bound on the side, cheaper and more portable than a scroll
- b. a type of pheasant bred for hunting, producing more food per bird
- c. a new type of internal column used in Severan architecture, sturdier than the ionic and doric
- d. a means devised in the third century of more accurately measuring product-cost inflation

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.

Optional Extra Credit

EC. 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.