DISCUSSING CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

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Every empire encounters crises. The Roman Empire was no exception to this rule. In fact, one could argue that crises were instrumental for the creation of the empire and for the various changes in structure it underwent over the ages. Perhaps the two most obvious of such crisis-caused changes were the transition from Republic to Empire and, much later, the period of the so-called ‘third century crisis’, which would eventually change the empire from a ‘principate’ into Diocletian’s ‘dominate’. In the continuous scholarly debate concerning both of these periods, various contributions by Lukas de Blois have been of great importance. For the fall of the Republic, he has mainly though not exclusively emphasised the role of the armies, and especially of the relation between generals, common soldiers and the middle cadre, in the great transformations that took place.¹ In the ongoing discussion of the events of the third century – and indeed in the debate as to whether these events are best described as a ‘crisis’ – he has been even more prolific. From the publication of his *The Policy of the Emperor Gallienus* in 1976 onwards, he has made major contributions to the ways in which the third century has been analysed.² Several of these engage in the

¹ L. de Blois, *The Roman Army and Politics in the First Century Before Christ* (Amsterdam 1987); Idem, ‘Sueton, Aug. 46 und die Manipulation des mittleren Militärkaders als politisches Instrument’, *Historia* 43 (1994), 324–345; Idem, ‘Army and Society in the Late Roman Republic: Professionalism and the Role of the Military Middle Cadre’ in G. Alföldy, B. Dobson und W. Eck (eds.), *Kaiser, Heer und Gesellschaft in der Römischen Kaiserzeit. Gedenkschrift für Eric Birley* (Stuttgart 2000), 1–21; Idem, ‘Army and general in the late roman republic’, in P. Erdkamp (ed.), *A companion to the Roman Army* (Oxford, forthcoming 2007).

² Main contributions: ‘The third century crisis and the Greek elite in the Roman Empire’, *Historia* 33 (1984), 358–77; ‘The crisis of the third century in the Roman Empire: a modern myth?’, in L. de Blois and J. Rich (eds.), *The Transformation of Economic Life under the Roman Empire. Impact of Empire 2* (Amsterdam 2001), 204–217; ‘The onset of crisis in the first half of the third century A.D.’, in K.-P. Johne, Th. Gerhardt und U. Hartmann (eds.), *Deleto paene imperio Romano. Transformationsprozesse des Römischen Reiches im 3. Jahrhundert und ihre Rezeption in der Neuzeit* (Berlin 2006), 25–36; ‘Emperorship in a period of crises. Changes in emperor worship, imperial ideology and perceptions of imperial authority in the third century A.D.’, in L. de Blois, P. Funke and J. Hahn

current argument on the use of the word ‘crisis’ regarding the period from A.D. 193–284. As so often, definition is crucial. It seems likely that some authors would disagree less fiercely with one another, if they would use a similar way of describing the concept. This theme, in fact, has been taken up extensively by Liebeschuetz in his contribution to this volume. Similarly, Lukas de Blois has offered a starting point. In his concluding remarks at the end of the workshop (not included in these proceedings), after many deliberations on exactly this point, he proposed a definition of crisis in which the central notions are that problems are “deeper, more complex and many sided” and that they “could result in changes in lifestyles and social structures, and could threaten the continuity of the Roman system”. This volume incorporates contributions dealing with several of the areas in which many sided problems have often been presumed, and indeed articles which discuss the changes in lifestyles and social structures that result from the various ‘crises’ which the empire had to deal with. We therefore feel that it is a wholly fitting tribute for Lukas de Blois on the occasion of his retirement as chairman of the international network Impact of Empire.

Crisis, as mentioned above, is a many-faceted concept. During the workshop four themes in particular came to the fore. They were, firstly, the way crisis impacted on regions and the organisation of the Roman empire; secondly, crises and the Roman economy; thirdly, modes in which crises influenced the presentation of the emperors and their family; and, fourthly, the impact and reception of crisis on (legal) writing. The articles in this volume are organised accordingly. Besides the themes, the notion of crisis itself was often at issue, as was discussion on how to make Roman crises conceptually visible. On the first point, the article by Liebeschuetz set the scene, and it is therefore placed alongside this introduction at the very beginning of the volume. On the second point, a wonderful example on how to approach historical crises using the internet as a teaching tool is given by Nicols. His contribution is placed as an epilogue to these proceedings. It provides a powerful reminder of the importance of visualisation of concepts, and the use that modern media can play in this process.

(eds.), *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religions, Ritual and Religious Life in the Roman Empire*. Impact of Empire 5 (Leiden and Boston 2006), 268–278.

Crisis and the Empire

Much of the discussion in recent years as to whether or not one can speak about a ‘third century crisis’ has focused on regional differentiation. If in certain areas there was continuity and relative peace – it is argued – one should not speak of a crisis of empire.³ However, as Eck shows in his article, which is based upon the opening lecture of this workshop, crisis in one area of the realm had its inevitable consequences in other regions as well. That aside, he argues that there was at least a perception of crisis by the inhabitants of the empire. In this light people dedicating *pro salute imperii* clearly indicate that at least some felt that “the continuity of the Roman system” as a whole was threatened.⁴ This perception, however, need not have been accurate. Developments in certain regions must have been much more positive than in others. Tracing specific areas of the empire throughout the third century gives insight in how provinces could function and – to an extent – flourish. In such a way, Birley analyses the British Isles. At the very opposite end of the Empire, the province of Africa certainly flourished, as has often been stated already. Yet, perhaps under the influence of regional differentiation, political developments in the outlying regions of the empire began to increasingly impact upon the centre. In fact, the periphery was taking on functions that had previously been the prerogative of the centre. These tensions, especially in light of the acclamation of emperors – the most visible way of influencing society – are looked at by Hilali.

The succession of rulers was always a problem for the empire, which, at least technically, did not have a formalised form of succession. Drinkwater, whose article takes a more holistic view of the empire, stresses how there were inherent flaws in the whole way the empire, and especially the position of the emperor in it, was conceived. The lack of institutionalisation of the modes in which the realm was run is also taken up by Peachin, who stresses the importance of *exempla* to define the ways in which the emperor could function. The sheer

³ As for instance discussed extensively by Ch. Witschel, *Krise – Rezession – Stagnation? Der Westen des römischen Reiches im 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Frankfurt am Main 1999).

⁴ *CIL* 13.7844. See Eck in this volume, pp. 33–34. Cf. also *AE* 1965, no. 30 (= *IDR* 221, Apulum): *I O M D et deae Suriae Magna[e] Caelesti pro salute perpetui imperii Romani et leg. XIII Gem. Flavius Barhadadi s(acerdos) I.D. ad leg. s.s. VLMP*. We owe this reference to Tony Birley.

existence of the empire, one could thus argue, or at least the modes in which the empire was run, were critical, if not begging for continuous crisis. The position of the emperor as an aristocrat, much stressed by Drinkwater, had consequences for the relationship between the emperor and the men who ran the empire with him. There was continuous tension between the aristocrat-emperor who had to surround himself with other aristocrats whose status outweighed their actual capacities, and the emperor-in-crisis-time, who had to find capable men to support him. The reign of Gallienus is often put forward as the period in which this tension led to a 'degradation' of the old senatorial order. In this light, however, the context of the famous edict of Gallienus has not been taken sufficiently into account, as Cosme suggests. Still, there were undeniable changes in the relations between the emperor and the great families of old. Such a situation may be described as a crisis for these old families, but it did create possibilities for new clans to come to the fore. The ways in which a new family could establish itself within the empire in unstable times are explored by Mennen. What is loss for one group of people is almost always potential gain for another group. Changing times, in any case, ask for changing measures. These could be at an administrative level, as shown by Vervaeke, but also took place at a much more pragmatic level. An increase in warfare, and changes in the ways battles had to be fought, led to changes in the construction of physical weapons. A case study on that very point is provided by Martino.

Crisis and the Economy

Crises, as mentioned above, can be perceived as actual, structural or more incidental, empire wide or regional. Yet, in all of these cases, economic fluctuations and the social consequences of these fluctuations are often used as undeniable signs of crisis. Interpreting these signs is not as straightforward as one might think. The (perceived) manpower shortage in the late Roman Republic illustrates the point. Few developments have been given so much attention in recent research, yet opinions still differ widely. Different takes on the problem are given here by Rich and by De Ligt. Though the editors do not expect the discussion to end here, the papers do show how crises can arise at the end of a period of seeming stability. Especially in a society like the Roman Empire, manpower was crucial. Hence, also, the important

role of the Antonine plague in discussions on the end of the Antonine era, Gibbon's much quoted "most happy and prosperous" period of the whole of history. Again, the volume pairs two articles with different takes on the matter. All the same, both Jongman and Bruun stress the importance of looking at the Antonine plague when discussing the 'third century crisis'.

Socio-economic changes may cause crises. On the other hand, new socio-economic structures can also develop as a result of crises. The latter seems to have been the case with the organization, and especially taxation, of the Roman provinces at around the beginning of the Common Era. As Naco del Hoyo shows, the ad hoc measures in the Civil Wars at the end of the Republic generated the taxation framework which would be characteristic for the empire. Sometimes, however, crises only illustrated how well the system had been working all along. Thus, Nappo shows how political changes in the third century may have changed the trade routes between Rome and the east – but also emphasises how old structures were maintained within a new topographical framework. Likewise, Verboven shows how the Roman monetary system proved to be surprisingly resistant to obvious moments of crisis.

Crisis and the Emperor

In discussing crises in the Empire, the role of the emperor has already been emphasised. As mentioned above, emperorship developed over time. As such, it could be greatly influenced by moments of crisis. To an extent, it was through reactions to such moments that the emperorship was formulated. One of the crucial aspects of later emperorship, for example, was the ever increasing 'sacralisation' of the ruler. How this process took shape within the various crises in the first three centuries of the Roman Empire is set out by Benoist, who in a way elaborates on the importance of *exempla* which Peachin stressed. In a different way, Manders highlights the importance of placing the changing representation of the emperors within a proper chronological framework, and sketches ways in which to draw conclusions from such developments. Times of crises require strong rulers. Often, however, the absence of such rulers exacerbated crises. This might also explain the importance of dynastic motives in the representation of Roman emperors, as discussed by Horster. Depicting the imperial family implied potential

continuity. Emperors used visual codes that were developed earlier; by the third century, however, the differences between the purported perception and actual political developments must have been enormous. Where Horster looks at the way the emperors made their claims on coinage, De Jong analyses the way emperors portrayed themselves in Egyptian papyri. Imperial titulature employed in these documents, as she shows through a case study of the epithet ἀήττητος (invincible), shows how representation is shaped in context, by deliberate choices of individuals. Though looking at the different media at imperial disposal is an interesting way of analysing changes in emperorship, it is not the only way. Arena, for example, chooses to look at the way in which the acclamation of emperors is ritualised over time. Like the sacralisation-process sketched by Benoist, she recognizes the importance of moments of crisis for the development of the ceremonies surrounding the emperor. These ceremonies, she argues, were greatly influenced by repeated succession-crises, once again underscoring Drinkwater's point on the inherent problems within the very structure of the Principate. Because of this structure, it is difficult to distinguish between legitimate succession and usurpation.⁵ Thus, especially in the third century, rulers with various claims to legitimacy had to compete for the acceptance of the different groups that constituted the empire. Especially in the third century, with sections of the Empire trying to form separate unities, this competition became acute. Grandvallet's article on the ideological claims put forward by Gallienus and Postumus, demonstrates this clearly. The article also, once again, draws attention to the important role played by Gallienus in the development of third-century events, and hence to the ongoing relevance of De Blois' *The Policy of the Emperor Gallienus*.

Crisis in (legal) writing

In the previous section, various sources through which the Roman Empire can be approached have already been mentioned. Coins, inscriptions and papyri are obviously crucial for periods which are sometimes lacking adequate literary sources. One type of source, written though not strictly speaking literary, is often ignored in discussions; the legal

⁵ See on this point especially the publications by E. Flaig, in particular *Der Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpation im römischen Reich* (Frankfurt 1992).

texts which form the vast majority of surviving Latin records from the Roman Empire. In fact, laws often deal with crises, and crises certainly have their influence on the writing of law. The importance of legal structures for the Roman Empire is clear to all, and any volume dealing with the relationship between crises and the development of the Roman Empire ought to include papers on legal developments. These developments also incorporate the changing position of the individuals writing law; the famous jurists like Ulpian and Papian reached their zenith under the Severans, but then disappeared of our horizon. This disappearance has been linked to the military crises of the second half of the third century. With an increasing need of military men, the position of the legal specialists eroded.⁶ Yet, Stolte, in his contribution, shows that the departure of legal writers from the political scene need not be so strongly linked to the end of classical legal writing as it often maintained. The position of individuals may have changed in crisis, but legal structures were not so easily worn away. Still, changes in society had clear impact on the law. Thus, Zwolve shows that the famous *Constitutio Antoniniana* created potential problems for which legal solutions had to be found. Many would have had advantage from being under Roman law, but at the same time, the new structure seemed to limit some of the inheritance privileges that the Roman military had obtained. In times of military unrest, nobody wants to alienate the soldiers, and the potential crisis was solved. The consequences of this solution, as Zwolve shows, had long lasting effects.

Legal writing, which also can be used to analyse changes in society (Polichetti), is not the only form of writing, nor jurists the only ‘intellectuals’ surrounding the ruler. Julia Domna’s patronage of the likes of Philostratus is only one of the better known examples of the importance of ‘philosophers in politics’. At the end of the third century, the previously dominant and public position of philosophy, firmly placed in rhetoric, had however disappeared, to be replaced by a more contemplative and private philosophy. As Hahn argues, this ‘crisis’ of the earlier philosophical notion cannot be explained by any ‘crisis’ of the third century; rather, it is the result of a much longer process developing during the first and second centuries, in which philosophy increases and

⁶ See for instance L. de Blois, ‘Roman jurists and the crisis of the third century A.D. in the Roman Empire’, in L. de Blois (ed.), *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies in the Roman Empire*. Impact of Empire 1 (Amsterdam 2001), 136–153.

then decreases in centrality. Similar ‘cyclical’ developments can also be traced within other spheres of literary production. It would, however, be a mistake to try to parallel these developments to direct events in history. Societal crisis need not be directly mirrored in contemporary literary constructs. Indeed, as Eich shows, societal changes often have unexpected consequences on the form and contents of literary texts, which may take some time to evolve.

In various ways, then, the contributions to this volume explore the impact of crises on the Roman Empire. Much, of course, remains to be discussed. One of the great strengths of Lukas de Blois has always been that he appreciates open discussion. Unlike Ambrose Bierce, who defined discussion as “a method of confirming others in their errors”,⁷ for Lukas de Blois the opinions of others are central to the development of his own thought. This volume, we hope, will stimulate him to many more musings, on crises of empire, and much besides.

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⁷ A. Bierce, *The Devils’ Dictionary* (London 1911), s.v. ‘Discussion’.