CHAPTER TWO

THE IMPACT OF CRISSES
ON THE POSITION OF THE SENATORIAL ELITE

The crises of the third century altered the position of the senatorial order. This development has been discussed by many scholars, some of whom have even argued that senators had to deal with a crisis within the social system and entirely lost their position as leading elite to the *ordo equester*. More recently, scholars have taken a less extreme position, but they have still been inclined to focus on the changes in the situation of the *ordo senatorius* in the third century, and to ignore, or at least deemphasize, the continuities. However, the fact that certain offices held by senators at the end of the second century AD, remained in their hands after the reforms of Diocletian, shows some continuity. Even though if anything it was the equestrian order that amassed positions of power at the expense of the senatorial order over the course of the third century (see Chapter 3 below), it was also the equestrian order that eventually disappeared in the late Roman Empire. Thus, before further inquiry into changes in the administration and social hierarchies, it seems constructive to observe and map out the continuity which (at least part of) the senatorial order ensured during the chaos and transformations of the third century.

The starting point in seeking continuity is to determine a number of high positions which remained reserved principally for senators both at

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1 E.g. Alföldy (1988), 193: ‘The history of the imperial Roman elite during the crisis of the third century seemed to be leading to a conclusion whereby the senatorial order totally lost its leading position to the equestrian order.’ Cf. id. (1988), 121–122; Stein (1963), 445; Rémondon (1970), 100–101; on the changing role of the senate after AD 180, see also Talbert (1984), 490–491.

2 For more recent views on the *ordo senatorius* in the third century, see, for instance, Potter (2004) *passim*; Lo Cascio (2005), 136. In generic overviews, however, the traditional view still prevails. See, for instance, Sommer (2004), 24: ‘Der Senatorenstand hatte endgültig als wichtigste der drei tragenden Säulen des Prinzipats ausgespielt und wurde immer mehr an den Rand gedrängt.’

3 On this, see Alföldy (1988), 193–194. The equestrian order was not formally abolished, but highly placed *equites* were enrolled into the senatorial order and the lower equestrian positions went to public officials and officers of lower rank.
the end of the second century and after Diocletian’s reforms, which will generate a list of the men who are known to have held these offices in the period under discussion. A subsequent prosopographical examination of these office holders will allow us to distinguish a nucleus within the senatorial elite; this nucleus proved able to maintain or even develop its position within the third century.

2.1. Establishing the Senatorial Elite in the Third Century

As has been noted in the Introduction, the senatorial order (ordo senatorius) was a heterogeneous group which consisted of several strata (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Schematic overview of strata within the senatorial order