Decius and Valerian were incompetent and embarrassing. Decius was the first emperor to die in battle against external enemies. That was in an encounter with Gothic raiders who were withdrawing to their own territory with plunder seized from the city of Philippopolis (modern Plovdiv in Bulgaria). The city had been betrayed to them after they had inflicted a notable defeat on Decius. Decius’ second defeat (and death) took place near Abrittus (modern Razgrad in Bulgaria) at the end of May 251. Valerian was the only emperor to die in captivity. That was sometime after Sapor of Persia took him captive outside Mesopotamian Edessa in the early summer of 260.¹

Given the similarities in the two men’s fates, and the considerable contemporary hostility to both on the part of their subjects, the difference in the longer term historiographical traditions about them are remarkable. What will be significant in both cases is not what really happened (that was most likely only ever known by a few people), but the images that the bare outline of their careers and fates generated. The ways that their reputations changed between the middle of the third century and the end of the fifth century offer a case study in the way that imperial history was written and remembered in the post-Diocletianic period. The pictures of the two men that were current by A.D. 400 bear only a tangential relationship with the contemporary record.

In his important book on the reflection of imperial ideology in local contexts Olivier Hekster has drawn attention to the influence of local choices in defining the way that an emperor was presented in provincial contexts. Similarly, analysis of imperial depictions in oracular contexts reflects quite particular local readings of imperial images.² With both Decius and Valerian, largely as a result of their religious policies, we are able to gain a direct impression of the way their subjects saw them. These records are enhanced by what we can recover of Dexippus’ contemporary history (more helpful for Decius than Valerian) and some comments

¹ For the date of Abrittus see _AE_ 2003 n. 1415; press reports in 2016 place the actual battle at Dryanovets, north of Razgrad. For the date of Valerian’s capture see Koenig 1981, 20–31 showing that the dates obtained from papyri are not reliable (Valerian continues into August), but that the ordination of Dionysius as bishop of Rome on 22 July may be connected to the arrival of news of Valerian’s capture.
in the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*. In the post Diocletianic period, there is some reflection on the two emperors in Lactantius and, perhaps even more significantly, the writings of Constantine himself. In the later fourth century we are offered new versions of both men in the tradition of the Latin epitomators and the more extensive history of Eunapius, as preserved by Zosimus’ *New History*, composed in the sixth century. The changes in the tradition will largely be due to the influence of centralized discourses which shaped public memory.

**Religious Policies**

Decius and Valerian were religious innovators. Decius did what no emperor had done before, ordering all his subjects to sacrifice to the gods of Rome by a fixed date and to obtain a certificate proving that they had obeyed the imperial order. The purpose of this edict appears to have been to rally divine support for a regime whose roots were stuck in the muck of revolutions evidently connected with the celebration of Rome’s thousandth anniversary in a.d. 248. Valerian was somewhat less creative, but the edict through which he sought to eradicate a particular cult (Christianity) involved a higher level of wide-ranging imperial proactivity than earlier edicts banning or declaring illegal cults or undesirable practitioners. Astrologers, for instance, were periodically banned for Rome, as were ‘magicians’. Claudius had banned Druidism, but that ban had been localized to specific provinces; Christians had been executed as public nuisances under Nero, but the connection between Christians and the great fire in 64 seems to be a later embellishment. In 112 Trajan made it clear, that while Christianity remained illegal, his governors were not to go looking for Christians; his rescript was occasioned by an inquiry from a governor whose own arrests of Christians had been sparked by local protest. The supine

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3 See Kienast 2011 for the dates and sources; Potter 1990, 49 on the millennium celebration. See also ILS 8922: I|mp(eratori) Caes[ar]i // C(ai)o Messio Q(uinto) Traian[o] // Decio P(io) |F(elicis) Invicto Au[gusto] / pont(ifici) m(aximo) pot(estate) co(n)s(uli) I[P?] / designato p(atricii) p(atridae) proco(n)s(uli) / reparatori disciplinae / militaris fundatoris / sacrae urbis firmatoris / [S]P(?|E(?)[---]|S(?|F(?)[---]) / [-----] which may be reporting acclamations at the time of his accession. A further fragment of this text, was presented by Dr. N. Sharankov at the conference, ‘Empire in Crisis: Gothic Invasions and Roman Historiography’ held in under the auspices of Universität Wein in Vienna in May 2017 makes it clear, to my mind, that the text dates to the immediate aftermath of Decius’ accession.

4 De Ste Croix 1963 and Barnes 1968 remain valuable surveys for the second-third centuries, for the first century see the important revisionist study in Shaw 2015. For slightly differing interpretations on the context of the Edict on Sacrifices see Potter 2014, 237–40; Rives 1999.