# Imagining Emperors in the Later Roman Empire

*Edited by*

Diederik W.P. Burgersdijk and Alan J. Ross


BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

# Contents

CHAPTER 2

# *Scelerum inventor et malorum machinator.* Diocletian and the Tetrarchy in Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*

*Jürgen K. Zangenberg*

## Approaching the Topic[1]

> 'Von der Parteien Gunst und Hass verwirrt, schwankt sein Charakterbild in der Geschichte'.[2]

This proverbial phrase from Friedrich Schiller's prologue to his famous poem *Wallenstein* on the eponymous general of the Thirty Years War, Albrecht Wenzel Eusebius von Wallenstein (1583–1634), written in 1800, is a fitting beginning for a chapter on Diocletian in a volume on the literary and visual depictions of Roman emperors.

Images—both visual and literary perception and representation of people or events—always have a function in a concrete process of communication and negotiation. Variety and controversy are part of 'image making'. Images never coincide, they differ, contrast or even contradict each other.[3] Against such a background, this chapter will examine one particular process of 'imaging': that of the Late Roman emperor Diocletian during a crucial period of transformation of the Roman Empire. In my survey I will first briefly sketch the image Diocletian promoted of himself and his colleagues to determine how he wanted to be seen by his own public and by future generations, using both data from material culture and literary sources. Then, I will discuss Lactantius' counter-image which reflects a very different perspective and a new historical situation.

1 I wish to thank Diederik Burgersdijk, Evelien Renders and Ilse Verstegen for organizing the conference 'Images and Emperors in the 4th Century AD' at Nijmegen's Radboud University and for inviting me to present a shorter version of this paper. I am also grateful to my student assistant Jasper Verplanke, Leiden University, for his meticulous editorial work and to the editors of this volume for much valuable advice.

2 'Observed by partisan love and hate, his profile / remains uncertain in the gaze of History' (trans. Flora Kimmich).

3 See Introduction p.6-12 for further discussion.

 | DOI 10.1163/9789004370920_004

## Diocletian's Self-Image

### *From Chaos to Stability—The Sources for Diocletian's Self-Image*

It is more difficult than one might think to reconstruct how Diocletian wanted to be seen by his contemporaries, or what image he intended to leave to future generations after him. Extant literary sources are by far not unproblematic: '(I)f they broadly tell us what happened, they are hardly reliable on the question of why, even less how'.[4] Apart from buildings, coins, and many inscriptions we have, in addition to a number of historical accounts written after Diocletian, six roughly contemporary panegyrical speeches on Diocletian's colleagues Maximian Augustus (*Pan. Lat.* X[2] from 289 and *Pan. Lat.* XI[3] from 291) and Constantius Caesar (*Pan. Lat.* VIII[4] from 297); then on all four Tetrarchs (*Pan. Lat.* IX[5] by Eumenius from 298), on Maximian and Constantine (*Pan. Lat.* VII[6] dating to 307), and three speeches on Constantine as Augustus (*Pan. Lat.* VI[7] from 310; *Pan. Lat.* V[8] from 311/12 and *Pan. Lat.* XII[9] dating to 313). All these texts often contain vital information on Diocletian's self-imaging,[5] but every single one of our sources—be they Christian or 'pagan'—is already part of the broad process of 'imaging Diocletian', and none of them is 'neutral'.[6]

Taking Diocletian's relatively long reign as a whole, many contemporaries indeed seem to have shared the common perception that the Tetrarchy was a turning point after a long period of governmental chaos, economic crisis, and military defeats.[7] In the words of the panegyrist of 291, for example, the Empire had been liberated from tyranny, injustice, and savagery, peace and prosperity had returned to the provinces (*Pan. Lat.* XI[3].5.3 *clementia*; XI[3].15.3 *salutem rei publicae redderetis*). A much more effective division of military, economic, and administrative resources and a clear consensus on succession and responsiblities had indeed granted the Empire respite and the stability that it had been painfully lacking for a long time (for example, *Pan. Lat.* X[2]9; *Pan. Lat.* VIII[4]3.3).[8] Summarizing

4 Rees 2004, 12. He continues: 'On crucial matters of political motivation and ideology, of the practical machinery of government administration, of life as it was lived, they can tell us little.'

5 *Pan. Lat.* = *Panegyrici Latini* according to the bilingual edition by Müller-Rettig 2008 and following the numbering used by Rees 2012. On the Panegyrics as propagandists of a 'united Tetrarchy' see Hekster 2015, 300–311.

6 On Diocletian in general cf. e.g. Stephenson 2011, 87–109; Kolb 1987; Kuhoff 2001; Potter 2013, 29–64; Rosen 2013, 45–66.

7 The *Historia Augusta* even calls Diocletian 'father of a golden age' (Elagabalus 35.4).

8 On military aspects see Rees 2004, 13–23.

these achievements, the famous price edict of 301 was able to announce 'a picture of a world at peace that was not optimistic propaganda but a fair description of reality'.[9]

***Between Meritocracy and Dynastic Ambition: The Tetrachic System***

Diocletian and his three Tetrarchic colleagues did everything to promulgate their image as god-sent creators of an unprecedented degree of stability for the entire Empire. Diocletian was at the very centre of that effort, both ideologically as its uncontested focus and actively as his own main propagandist. The reason for that is simple: there can be no doubt that the Tetrarchic system originally was Diocletian's 'invention', making him one of the great 'moulder(s) of a new imperial matrix', perhaps as great as Augustus'.[10] Regardless of his hate of Diocletian, even Lactantius acknowledges that fact at a crucial point in his narrative: when Maximianus the Elder (i.e., Galerius) approached Diocletian to pressure him into retirement, he assured the aging emperor that he would not alter the present governmental system according to which there were two more powerful men in the state who have ultimate authority, and two less powerful men who support the former in their task (*DMP* 18.5 'Diocletian's arrangement ought to be permanently preserved, whereby there were two senior rulers in the state who held supreme power and two younger rulers to assist them').[11]

In a way, the Tetrarchy intends to combine and reconcile two conflicting principles: meritocracy and the dynastic principle.[12] The purpose was to overcome the disunity that regularly erupted over the question of succession which had caused much of the chaos in previous decades.[13] The way out of that dilemma, according to Diocletian, was to incorporate potential candidates, distinguished by their achievements and authority, into the government as subordinate co-rulers and designated successors already *before* the *casus successionis* occurred, and to bolster their role by creating fictitious family relations.

---

9 Corcoran 2000, 41; Corcoran 2011, 208 quoting *tranquillo orbis statu et in gremio altissimae quietis locato* from Diocletian's price edict I.1 (Lauffer 1971, 90).

10 Corcoran 2000, 40.

11 Trans. Creed. *ipsius dispositionem in perpetuum conservari, ut duo sint in re publica maiores, qui summam rerum teneant, item duo minores qui sunt adiumento.* See the term coined by the not unsympathetic pagan historian Aurelius Victor on what we now call 'Tetrarchy': *quadripartitum imperium* (39.30).

12 Börm 2015, 240–246. He shows that both concepts are rooted in Roman tradition, thugh the combination under Diocletian was new. Lactantius never uses the term Tetrarchy.

13 Thus Kolb 1987, 15–49 and 66f. who underlines his statement with the fact that Diocletian did not have his own sons in 284 which made him attractive for many of his military peers who could hope to be appointed to share the rule with Diocletian.

It took Diocletian some time until he had perfected the new system: after Gaius Valerius Diocles had come to power on 20 November 284 as a usurper like the more than twenty emperors or pretenders before him,[14] Marcus Aurelius Gaius Valerius Diocletianus, as he now called himself, chose Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maximianus first as his aide in 285, then after Maximian had proven himself fit for the job formally appointed him *Augustus* in early 286.[15] Each *Augustus* was now responsible for one half of the Empire which had long become much too big for a single ruler to control. In 293, the co-rule of two emperors was transformed into collegiate rule of two emperors with their two 'appointed princely successors' when the two senior *Augusti* Diocletian and Maximian chose Galerius and Constantius I as *Caesares*, their junior colleagues, and above all designated successors.[16] Until Diocletian's retirement in 305, the system worked remarkably well.

To be sure, shared power arrangements were not unheard of in the Roman Empire. Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, who jointly ruled with Lucius Commodus and Annius Verus, offer a good precedent of an 'arranged succession'. But times changed, and the model of basing legitimacy on imperial descent and defending it by keeping power within one's own family, more and more discredited itself during the second half of the third century. None of the usurpers ultimately proved strong enough to secure control. But despite its rather sobering reality check, the dynastic principle remained an option, and needed to be addressed by Diocletian.[17]

### *Propaganda and Success: Advertizing an Experiment*

Real success was as important as its systematic advertisement by propagandistic and ideological means. To overcome the lack of dynastic legitimation and its potentially centrifugal effect on the Tetrarchy, one of its strongest ideological ties was the image of *concordia*. Many documents continuously affirm the unity and cordial relationship between the two *Augusti* and their *Caesares* (*Pan. Lat.* X[2]3.1–4 *cognata numina*; 9.3 *hac ipsa vestri similitudine magis magisque concordes et, quod omni consanguinitate certius est, virtutibus fratres*; *Pan. Lat.* XI[3]6.3 *quanta vosmet invicem pietate colitis*). This mantra took on several forms. While the panegyrists, for example, repeatedly hailed the Tetrarchs' success as an achievement of their *concordia*, pieces of official

14 Kolb 1987, 10 calls the circumstances of his ascension to the throne 'einigermaßen geheimnisvoll' (see pp. 10–21).

15 On the reasons for Maximian's appointment and its circumstances see Kolb 1987, 22–67.

16 See the discussion in Kolb 1987, 68–87.

17 Kolb 1987, 86.

art reinforced this image: the faces of the Tetrarchs were made to look similar on statues and coins, and statues showed the Tetrarchs embracing each other or clasping their hands.[18]

Of course, the Tetrarchs' common origin in the war-torn Danubian provinces and their military careers had already forged them into an invincible 'band of brothers' (*Pan. Lat.* XI[3]3.9 *provinciae … in quibus omnis vita militia est*). No wonder the army provided an exceptionally important element for shaping the 'Tetrarchic image'. The Tetrarchs frequently had themselves depicted in military dress, arms, and harness. Such attire did not only signal solidarity with the military: the Tetrarchs' short hair, bullish heads, and stubbly beards symbolized austerity and continuous hard work for the wellbeing of the Empire in general—a kind of military ascetism.

But that was not enough. To bolster their collegiality, a fictitious ancestry was designed and strong kinship ties were created through adoption and marriage and propagandistically promoted. Establishing new family bonds was meant to keep individual ambitions under control by securing future roles for all members of the newly created families.[19] Consequently, the panegyrists used family-related concepts and metaphors to describe the Tetrarchs' mutual relationships: they are like brothers or twins sharing an indivisible patrimony (*Pan. Lat.* X[2]9.3 *virtutibus fratres*; *Pan. Lat.* XI[3]6.3 *germani geminive fratres indiviso patrimonio*). But unlike in natural families, the Tetrarchs' ties are not incidental, but are willingly chosen and therefore of a higher, stronger sort because they are based not only on common blood (*Pan. Lat.* X[2]9.3 *consanguinitas*), but on virtue and rational choice and consent (*Pan. Lat.* XI[3]7.5-7 *germanitas* is not *fortuita … sed electa*).[20] Strangely enough imperial women were—unlike later under Constantine—almost invisible: the Tetrarchic 'band of divine brothers' apparently needed neither mothers nor wives.[21]

### *'A Band of Divine Brothers': Religion and the Tetrarchy*

The Tetrarchy certainly did not only depend on family politics and propaganda. Success *was* important, above all on the battlefield. But above all, Tetrarchic rule required a firm intellectual and religious basis.[22] There was

18 See e.g. the Venice Tetrarchs or the reliefs in the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, L'Orange 1984, 6–9, 27, 99–100, pls. 5, 7.

19 Hekster 2015, 277–314.

20 Emphasized also by Kolb 1987, 86f.

21 Hekster 2015, 313–314.

22 On the ideology of unity see Rees 2004, 72–76.

a lot the Tetrarchs could adapt: the crisis of the third century had already led to several attempts to revive and reform traditional religious beliefs and rituals, like under Gallienus and later Aurelian, but the rapid sequence of emperors and usurpers had prevented any long-lasting effect of these reforms.

The Tetrarchs' court propagandists and philosophers not only very skilfully borrowed elements from traditional religion; they also combined them with new philosophical elements and added new accents. The Tetrarchs designed a new theological system based on their divine origin and character (*Pan. Lat.* XI[3]3.2–4; cf. 6.4 their souls are called *vero caelestes et sempiternae*). Diocletian himself claimed to have attained power *divino consensu* (*HA*, Car. 13.1). Later, Fate and the Stars brought the four emperors together (*Pan. Lat.* XI[3]4.1; 19.2-4 *praemia fatorum, bona sidera et amica*). The Tetrarchs consequently participate in divine virtues and qualities from birth (*Pan. Lat.* XI[3]2.4 *vos dis esse genitos*).[23] Their rule corresponds to the order in the universe, since the number 'four' is nothing less than a cosmological principle (*Pan. Lat.* VIII[4]4.2 *isto numinis vestri numero summa omnia nituntur et gaudent*).

The Tetrarchs' emphasis on their sacrality, their image as *comites deorum* permeated all aspects of official court ideology and protocol.[24] A powerful visual expression of that belief can be found in the iconographic programme of the shrine of the imperial cult at Luxor.[25] What worshippers preceived from painted or sculpted images, and what they performed in ritual created a powerful reality that evoked the presence of the divine emperors. The panegyrics are equally explicit: Diocletian's colleague Maximian was hailed as *sacratissime imperator* (*Pan. Lat.* X[2]1.5; XI[3]19.1). Diocletian consequently expected to be addressed as *dominus* and was called a 'present and visible Jupiter, all close-by'.[26] Human reaction to Diocletian's divine appearance was one of awe and gratitude. Of course, each Tetrarch's achievements enhanced his own glory, but ultimately every ruler served the fame and popularity of his colleagues (*Pan. Lat.* XI[3]6.7; see the *adoratio* in *Mediolanum*: *geminato numine*, *ambo*, *pariter*, *iunctim*, *concorditer* in *Pan. Lat.* XI[3]11), so that in the end a delicate imperial symmetry prevailed.[27]

23 Kolb 1987, 90–91.

24 Rees 2004, 54–56 on the background of the names and *Herculius* and *Iovius*.

25 McFadden 2015b.

26 *Conspicuus et praesens Iuppiter cominus*, *Pan. Lat.* XI(3)10.5.

27 Kolb 1987, 115–127.

### *Jovians and Herculians: Hierarchy in Equality*

Despite all the shared honours and the creation of a common divine aura around the Tetrarchs, a subtle hierarchy existed among them.[28] To express both common sacrality *and* hierarchy, the Tetrarchs modified the traditional ruler's affiliation with a particular protector god and adapted this, still rather informal, habit into a more systematic form.[29] While Diocletian seems to have had a particular affinity with Sol at the beginning of his career,[30] he later connected himself and his co-*Augustus* with the prime god of the Empire Jupiter.[31] The *Caesares*, however, claimed Hercules, the universal helper and invincible protector 'who represented heroic energy combined with willing obedience',[32] as their patron.[33]

The religious dimension was indeed crucial for the Tetrarchy's public image and its inherent stability.[34] Throughout his reign, Diocletian demonstrated a decidedly conservative attitude towards traditional values and practices. The result was a much more doctrinal form of Roman religiosity than had ever existed before. In the edict against the Manicheans, for example, Diocletian and Maximian explicitly warned that one must not oppose *vetus religio* and subject it to new creeds. To them, it was a most severe crime to reopen discussions about 'doctrines once and for all settled and defined by our forefathers' (*Coll. leg. Mos. et Rom.* XV 3). Only traditional *religio* will please the gods and safeguard their continuous blessings for the Empire. At the same time, only practicing accepted *religio* will demonstrate one's loyalty to the emperors, since such action complies well with the emperors' own behaviour.[35] Therefore,

28 Hekster 2015, 280–282 on an 'apparent hierarchy among the rulers' in their 'Tetrarchic image'.

29 Kolb 1987, 88–114 describes the complex relationship between Iovii and Herculii and emphasizes their factual (perhaps not ideological) equality and Diocletian's 'persönlichen Ancennitäts- und Autoritätsvorsprung' (p. 109).

30 Aur. Vic. 39.13; Kolb 1987, 15.

31 According to Kolb 1987, 16.19–20 Diocletian adopted Jupiter very early in his reign (continuing a tradition starting with Gallienus), but did not drop Sol altogether, see the Carnuntum-Altar on which both deities are mentioned (AE 1914, 249; CIL V 803). See also ibid. 52–67 on the *dies natalis* of Diocletian and Maximian in 286.

32 Frend 2006, 518. On Iovius and Herculius see Kolb 1987, 88–114; DePalma-Digeser 2012, 27–31; Hekster 2015, 297–300

33 *Pan. Lat.* X(2)1.3; see X(2)13; XI(3)3 or VIII(4)4.1 *illa Iovis et Herculis cognata maiestas in Iovio Herculioque principibus totius mundi caelestiumque rerum similitudines requirebat*.

34 Corcoran 2011, 51–53.

35 See *Coll. leg Mos. et Rom.* VI 4.1: 'The immortal Gods, on their part, will undoubtedly continue to be, as they have always been, favourable and friendly to the Roman Power, only if all who live under our rule shall be observed by us to lead pious and religious lives, and to observe in all things quiet and absolute purity'.

contemporaneous pamphlets constantly celebrated the Tetrarchs' divine qualities (*providentia* in ILS 613, a building inscription from Nicomedia on the restoration of the Antonine Baths),[36] and presented them as shining examples for all citizens to emulate in their way to practice proper *pietas* towards the gods. By their example, the Tetrarchs will ultimately lead all humans to an ever greater appreciation of the divine (*Pan. Lat.* XI[3]6.1-2).

As a saviour of the peace and stability of the Empire, Diocletian saw himself personally responsible for promoting and protecting this news sort of 'orthopraxy'. Consequently, one of the most important tasks of the Tetrarchs consisted in actively fighting against all sorts of immoral behaviour (Law on Marriage in *Coll. Leg. Mos et Rom.* VI 4),[37] stubborn depravity (*pertinacia pravae mentis* in *Coll. leg. Mos. et Rom.* XV 3.3) and *anilis superstitio* and to defend real *religio* towards the gods (Lactantius, *Inst*. 5.2.7).[38]

### *Dangerous Terrain for Non-Conformists*

In such an environment, nonconformity could only have been perceived as attempt to undermine the image of religiously motivated *concordia* and *pietas*: 'the emperors wanted a polity whose common worship would ensure the continued blessings of unity and stability from the gods, Rome's traditional protectors, whose wrath they had but recently appeased'.[39] Whoever challenged the peace regained with the gods was a threat to public safety and had to expect the most severe punishments.

The first to be hit by the full impact of Rome's coercive actions were the Manicheans. Being of Persian origin and by rejecting animal sacrifices, they were suspicious per se. So, on 31 March 302 a letter was issued by the Tetrarchs against the Manichaeans that forms an 'immediate and aggressive precedent for the "Great Persecution"' only a year later.[40] In 303, the next to suffer were the Christians.

The Christians, on the other hand, had not developed a really constructive relationship with the Roman state either. For a long time, Christian intellectuals had kept a mental distance from the state and saw it, mostly on the basis of practical experience but also inspired by apocalyptic motives, as a proponent of

36 Rees 2004, 146.

37 *Coll. leg Mos. et Rom.* VI 4.6: 'The Roman Empire has, under divine favour, attained its present greatness, only because it has safeguarded all its laws with the wise sanctions of religion and concern for morality (*religione sapienti pudorisque observatione*)'.

38 Heck 1987, 187.

39 DePalma-Digeser 2012, 2.

40 Rees 2004, 58–59, see *Coll. leg. Mos. et Rom,* XV 3.

blasphemous paganism and a potential source of violence. The definitive change of the legal situation only came after Galerius had issued the famous Edict of Tolerance in 311 which ended the persecutions by finally adopting Christianity into the fold of accepted Roman religious options. Galerius' momentous decision, confirmed in 313 by Constantine and Licinius in Milan, also gave the Christians the opportunity—and posed the necessity—to revise their own attitude towards the state. Lactantius is an important voice in this process.

## Lucius Caecilius Firmianus

### *An Intellectual between Imperial Honours and Persecution*

Sometime in the 290s Diocletian appointed Lucius Cae(ci)lius Firmianus, also called Lactantius,[41] a student of the famous rhetor Arnobius from Sicca Veneria in Africa, professor of Latin to serve as teacher at his new, thriving court at Nicomedia on the Marmara Sea (Jerome, *vir. ill.* 80). Well educated in language, literature, and philosophy, as well as being cultured, eloquent and equipped with a respectable public position, Lactantius certainly belonged to the intellectual and likely also economic elite of his time.[42]

Sometime before or during his stay at Nicomedia, Lactantius must have converted to Christianity. Why and under what circumstances he took this step, we do not know. Christian communities in general benefited from the forty-year period of peace and stability since 260 when Gallienus had stopped the first wave of persecutions initiated under his predecessors Decius and Valerian.[43] Christians actively used this opportunity and increasingly recruited neophytes from intellectual circles. Lactantius apparently was one of these elite newcomers who built more and more social and intellectual bridges between Christian religion and imperial culture.[44]

In 302/03 at the latest, however, the tide clearly turned against the Christians. The stage was apparently prepared by anti-Christian propagandists like Porphyrius or Sossianus Hierocles (*Inst.* 5.2.3-3.26).[45] Already in 299

41 Born c. 250, died c. 325 perhaps in Trier.

42 On the life of Lactantius and the circumstances under which *DMP* was written, see e.g. Barnes 1996, 11–14; DePalma-Digeser 2000; Walter 2006, 16–21; Städele 1998; id. 2003, 7–11 and 75–78.

43 Rives 1999; Corcoran 2011, 36.

44 see e.g. Eusebius, *HE* 8.13.9.

45 Barnes 1976; Barnes 1996, 21–22; Simmons 1995, 22–32; Walter 2006, 18; DePalma-Digeser 2012, esp. 164–191.

Diocletian had ordered Christians to be removed from the army and civil service when a small group of Christians present at a sacrificial ceremony at the court at Nicomedia was found guilty of being the cause 'for the absence of entrails in animals sacrificed to the gods in honour of the successful conclusion of the Persian war' by uttering exorcistic formulae and refusing to participate in the subsequent *epulae* (*DMP* 10f.).[46] No matter if Lactantius' anecdote is historically reliable, it nicely catches the atmosphere and demonstrates mutual 'image-building'. For Diocletian Christians simply disturbed the harmony between the emperor and the gods. Christians had, after all, long been known for their criticism of pagan sacrifices. Diocletian was convinced 'that the official ideology of the Tetrarchy presupposed religious conformity' and consequently targeted the Christians as next in a line of oriental enemies of the Empire after the Manicheans.[47] Lactantius, in turn, might eagerly have picked (or perhaps even made up) this episode to demonstrate that the religious base of the Tetrarchy was nothing else but supersition. How, in the first place, could an animal have lived without entrails?

In any case, open violence broke out on 23 February 303 when Diocletian began issuing a series of edicts to eradicate Christianity from society as a whole (*DMP* 9.11).[48] To punish and correct Christians, they were forced to sacrifice (*DMP* 10.1–4).[49] Especially in the East, churches were burnt, property confiscated and functionaries and later laypersons arrested, tried and killed.

### *De mortibus persecutorum*

We do not know how Lactantius managed to survive the almost ten dark years of persecution up to 311. He certainly lost his highly-respected position at the Nicomedian court, but seems to have still been able to remain active as writer, if the earliest parts of his *Divinae Institutiones* can really be dated to shortly before 311. Lactantius probably wrote *De mortibus persecutorum* (*DMP*) shortly after the bloody ten years had ended, maybe between late 313 and mid-316.[50]

Unfortunately, the text provides little information on where it originated. We know that Lactantius was active as tutor for Crispus, Constantine's son,

46 Frend 2006, 519.

47 Barnes 1996, 18–20.

48 Barnes 1996, 22–27.

49 Rees 2004, 59–66.

50 Barnes 1996, 13–14: 'Lactantius wrote *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* while Constantine and Licinius were still at peace with each other, and he wrote it in Nicomedia as a subject of Licinius not Constantine', arguing for a date between 313 and 315; Potter 2013, 302 argues for the end of 313.

at Trier in 314/15,[51] but is that enough evidence to propose that Trier was the place where Lactantius penned *De mortibus persecutorum*?[52] Wherever Lactantius lived at the time of writing, he seems to have been fully rehabilitated as a Christian intellectual.[53]

The genre of *De mortibus persecutorum* is difficult to define. It is everything between a polemical pamphlet, a reflection on history and a theological treatise about God's justice. In *DMP* Lactantius triumphantly announces that God, the *religionis ac populi sui vindex* (*DMP* 31.1), has started to punish all persecutors with the most violent deaths. Given the topic and circumstances of its origin, it is no wonder that *DMP* is full of exuberant emotions. Lactantius mourns, warns and threatens, he twists facts, exaggerates situations and ignores others. In *DMP* there is no middle ground, no objectivity. Lactantius is polemical, biased and often unfair to the main characters whose violent and cruel deaths are used to assure all Christians that God will eventually take revenge on unjust rulers and vindicate his innocent people. But *DMP* is not just a 'durch und durch tendenziöse, polemische Abrechnung mit den Feinden Gottes und der Menschen'.[54] It is a well-conceived, rhetorically subtle, pedagogical, and extremely effective work, written at a crucial moment of political transition.[55]

Not only were the years of tribulation and death definitively over for the Christians in the West after 311 and in the East after 313 (*extincta impiorum conspiratio*, *DMP* 1.4), the rise of Constantine, who had effectively stopped persecutions in the West after he had taken over power from his father, nourished Lactantius' hope that Rome might now redefine its relation with the Christians (*post atrae tempestatis violentos turbines placidus aer et optata lux refulsit, DMP* 1.3). The new situation not only demanded Rome to reconsider its attitude

51 Christensen 1980, 21–26 pleads for 'autumn of 313 (or the winter of 314) and the summer of 316' in Bithynia; Städele 2003, 75–77 agrees with Christensen on the dating, but prefers a court in the West; all this, however, remains very uncertain.

52 For Trier see, e.g., Rosen 2013, 17.

53 This does not turn *DMP* into a simple pro-Constantinian pamphlet, although it was likely written under the influence of Constantius I, or more likely Constantine, see the discussion in Christensen, 1980. On the relationship between Lactantius and Constantine, especially regarding *DMP* see Walter 2006, 267–288 ('starke Züge proconstantinischer Propaganda', 268 and 278–280).

54 'A thoroughly biased and polemic account of the enemies of God and mankind', Städele 2003, 75.

55 Barnes 1996, 13 calls it a 'pamphlet': 'The work has a violent and aggressive tone, with no attempt to disguise its author's bias, his profound admiration for Constantine, his deep loathing for Constantine's political adversaries. Lactantius' prejudices and strong opinions foster the suspicion that he must have tailored the facts to suit his thesis'.

towards the Christians, the Christians had to rethink theirs, too. With its clear language and position, *DMP* takes a clear stance in this process. Based on Christian values like *pietas* and *aequitas,*[56] on Biblical topics especially from *2Maccabees*, according to which the just will ultimately be vindicated and the unjust punished, and on elements of Roman ethics of punishment and reward, Lactantius gives a decidedly Christian account of the persecutions and the end of the Tetrarchy. He re-evaluates the main protagonists, criticizes their official images as mirages and replaces them by his own counter-images. With these images, Lactantius actively shapes his readers' conception at a time when the old Tetrarchic spirits were finally evaporating and two new, promising figures were emerging: Constantine in the West and Licinius in the East—the latter of whom had apparently not yet turned into a pesecutor of Christians at the time of writing *De morte persecutorum*. Lactantius takes these rulers as *exempla* for his central message, namely that the one God of the Christians is the only final judge who will avenge his faithful and vindicate his might (*DMP* 1.7).

To prove his point, Lactantius resorts to powerful rhetorical devices. He insists that God's punishment is not only imaginary or spiritual, it has drastic effects on the persecutors: it inflicts madness, debility, illness, bodily decay, and cruel, painful deaths. In this respect, God's justice first of all is retribution. Apart from being a pedagogical treatise on God's justice, *DMP* offers a political program *in nuce*, that—to be sure—differs from the sometimes hostile anti-imperial polemics in earlier apologetic writings, but takes up their point that Christians are loyal citizens and deserve to be tolerated and respected.[57]

### *Targeting the* execrabilia animalia*: Lactantius Versus the Tetrarchs*

Among many other persecutors, Diocletian naturally plays a promiment role in *DMP*. For Lactantius, Diocletian was not the first, but certainly among the most despicable and violent persecutors of the Church. Diocletian and his comrades did not see what swift and violent deaths all those *execrabilia animalia* from

56 See the broader discussion on *pietas* and *aequitas* in Lactantius' writings in Walter 2006, 214–231. Walter is able to show that Lactantius' concept of *pietas* differs quite considerably from that of the way it featured in Roman imperial ideology.

57 The discussion of Lactantius' political message is broad and controversial, partly because his statements in his various works are by far not consistent. I agree with Walter 2006, esp. p. 268 who sees *DMP* in some sort of a transitional, middle position (see literature quoted in his n. 18). Although Lactantius might not have proposed a 'constructive political theory' in *DMP* (Garnsey 2002, 174, n. 90), it cannot be denied that his criticism on Diocletian and the Tetrarchs is remarkably detailed and fundamental at the same time. This implies a distinct political position, which Lactantius may not explicitly express, but addresses *in nuce*.

Nero to Decius and Aurelian had suffered from the hand of God (*DMP* 2.5–6.2), but committed even more outrageous crimes (*audacius etiam contra deum confidentiusque, DMP* 6.3). Introduced in such a way, it is clear that the Tetrarchs, whose savagery Lactantius has very likely witnessed himself, are the main targets of *De morte persecutorum*. Diocletian is the first to be attacked in *De morte persecutorum*, since he made three other rulers join his tyranny and he has divided the Empire into four parts and split up the army (*DMP* 7.2). Lactantius' criticism of Diocletian as a blasphemous persecutor of the Christians is therefore closely related to his political criticism agianst the Tetrarchy. No wonder, therefore, that Lactantius disagrees with the panegyrists about almost every aspect of the Tetrarchs' rule. If the panegyrists had presented the Tetrarchy as a divine reflection of the cosmological order, Lactantius castigates it as nothing less than the result of Diocletian's avarice and timidity (*avaritia et timiditas*, *DMP* 7.29) that made him *scelerum inventor et malorum machinator* (*DMP* 7.1). In short: with the Tetrarchy, Diocletian had set out to destroy the glorious Empire (*rem publicam talibus consiliis et talibus sociis everteret, DMP* 9.11).

Let us have a closer look. Already in the beginning of Lactantius' long list of Diocletian's crimes, the emperor is charged with daring to challenge God (*DMP* 7.1). But theology does not set the tone for *DMP*. Surprisingly, the religious component of the Tetrarchy, itself an important element of its ideology, does not play a prominent role here. It is likely that Lactantius had already referred to the religious aspect of the Tetrarchy in his refutation of polytheism in *Inst.* 1.[58] Although never directly addressing the Tetrarchs by name, he seems especially interested in criticizing traditions on Jupiter and Hercules. In *Inst.* 1.9.1-11, for example, Lactantius attacks Jupiter's lust, self-indulgence, greed, and contempt—the direct opposites of virtue, restraint, and self-control (*Inst.* 1.9.4). Moreover, many myths and traditions depict Jupiter as an adulterer and as being guilty of parricide, undermining the belief that he is really *Optumus et Maximus* (*Inst.* 1.10.10-11.49). Similarly, Daia's *barbarae libidines* and *cupiditas corrumpendi* destroy any *pudicitia*, *fides* and *castitas* (*DMP* 38.1–41.3) and directly violate moral renewal of, for example, marriage laws (cf. *DMP* 38.4: as *omnibus nuptiis praegustator* Daia demanded *ius primae noctis*). Furthermore, Jupiter is arrogant, because he wants to have his cults everywhere (*Inst.* 1.22.21-28). Finally, Jupiter's good reputation with simple people is misused by rulers like shrewd Minos who retreated to Jupiter's cave on Crete, spent a long time there and proclaimed his laws as gift from the god, 'so that he could enforce

58 Digeser 2012, 32–40; Diocletian's decision to persecute the Christians 'had brought Rome to the brink of ruin. (...) (T)he Tetrarchy had set in motion the events that would end the world' (ibid., 45 quoting *Inst.* 7.17.1-19.6).

the people's obedience not merely by command but by religious sanction also' (*Inst.* 1.22.3-4). Hercules does not fare any better in *Inst*. The myths demonstrate that he is not a helper nor a protector, but a violent thief who took the last oxen from a poor farmer because he was hungry. Consequently, he is a liar, and in his cult good words are condemned as profanation (*Inst.* 1.21.31-37).

Instead, *DMP* targets the political and administrative decisions that provided the basis for Diocletian's political experiment of reforming the Empire. A few aspects are worth mentioning:

a) According to Lactantius, the extensive sacralization of the Tetrarchs' rule, above all Diocletian's detailed court protocol,[59] was inspired by Persian customs and dress and therefore is 'un-Roman' and nothing but a testament to Diocletian's boundless desire for wealth. Interestingly enough, Constantius I is not mentioned in this context, although he certainly shared the quasi-divine aura with his colleagues in the official image of the Tetrarchy.
b) Lactantius further denounces the reorganization of the traditional provinces into dioceses and smaller units as 'dividing the world in four' (*in quattuor partes orbe diviso, DMP* 7.2).[60]
c) Lactantius also attacks the new structure of the Empire as an unnecessary enlargement of administration and bureaucracy (*DMP* 7.4).[61] The Tetrarchs' *comitatus* (core of court, civil administration, and high ranking military) indeed quadrupled, because the emperor travelled and needed to have his aides around.[62] In fact, to have the *comitatus* at each emperor's immediate disposal meant quick execution of imperial decisions and easier communication. For Lactantius, however, this system only had negative results.
d) Consequently, the enlargement of the army and its pivotal role in the defence and stabilization of the Empire are criticized as a mere scheme to enhance each ruler's military power in the struggle for his own interests (*DMP* 7.2 and 5).[63] What that meant in practice for Lactantius becomes clear when he describes the aging Diocletian and his rival Galerius negotiating about establishing the 'second Tetrarchy' (*DMP* 19). In the course of the ensuing haggle Galerius' allegedly

59 On the court protocol see Rees 2004, 46–56
60 Corcoran 2011, 46–47.
61 See the *Laterculus Veronensis* in Rees 2004, 171–173.
62 Corcoran 2011, 45–46.
63 Corcoran 2011, 46–47.

corrupt character took the lead and had the hated Maxentius, *homo perniciosae ac malae mentis, adeo superbus et contumax* (*DMP* 18.9), Severus, *saltatorem temulentum ebriosum* (*DMP* 18.12), and Daia, *adulescentem semibarbarum* (*DMP* 18.13; 19.6 a former shepherd who now became *militum pastor*), appointed as successors, because they all were loyal and able commanders in the field. So much for meritocracy! As a sort of promise for a better future and clear anti-model against these figures, however, Constantine, *sanctissimus adulescens*, was already present on the stage. He alone combined military excellence with a flawless character so that even the soldiers and the common people desired him as ruler (*DMP* 18.10). But to the surprise of the whole army and due to Galerius' bad influence, Constantine was not appointed member of the new Tetrarchy in the solemn celebration Diocletian set up for announced his successors, nor was Maxentius, due to his insubordination towards Galerius (*DMP* 19.4), foreshadowing the future conflict between good Constantine and bad Maxentius that would later cover much space in *DMP* 43.4–44.9.

e) Furthermore, Diocletian's tax reform is criticized as a tax increase that works to the disadvantage of small farmers who are now forced to leave their land and let the uncivilized forests take over arable soil (*DMP* 7.3-4). With his additional taxation, Galerius, the *dementissimus tyrannus*, brought huge suffering upon all mankind (*DMP* 31.2–6 *vexatio generis humani*). Maximinus Daia followed his masters Diocles and Galerius and had all crops and beasts carried away from farms and fields, only to squander other peoples' possessions for his army and the barbarians (*DMP* 37.3-6). The Tetrarchs obviously did not bring back Saturn's Golden Age under Jupiter and Hercules as the panegyrists claimed (*Pan. Lat.* IX[5]18.5). For Lactantius Tetrarchy means misery, decline, de-cultivation, and re-barbarization (cf. *Inst.* 7.24.7-8).

f) The famous edict on the regulation of prices and wages, part of Diocletian's broad economic reforms that also included stabilizing the currency,[64] does not fare any better in Lactantius. According to *mort.*, the edict only resulted in inflation and the disruption of markets. Instead of stability, it created a system of corruption, intimidation and exertion against all affluent and powerful citizens. Under this law, imperial bureaucracy degenerated from an institution to protect the rights of innocent citizens to an instrument of suppression which

64 Corcoran 2011, 48–50.

only served Diocletian's personal benefit (*DMP* 7.4-5). Civic freedom turned into slavery and injustice, so that many innocent citizens died before the law was finally abolished (cf. *DMP* 7.12; 8.4).[65]

g) Even the Tetrarchs' investments in building projects, a traditional instrument of governmental benefaction and support, were targeted by Lactantius. The emperors, he says, drained the provinces of builders, artisans and resources only for their own glory (*DMP* 7.8–9). Lactantius criticizes the Tetrarchs for promoting many second- and third-rate cities to capitals (Milan, Ravenna, Aquileia, Trier, Serdica, Sirmium, Nicomedia, Thessalonica). The fact that Diocletian made Rome compete with, for example Nicomedia, was a clear sign of his madness (*DMP* 7.10: *ita semper dementabat Nicomediam studens urbi Romae coaequare*).[66]

The very obvious reasons and advantages for this system are, of course, not mentioned by Lactantius. Indeed, few of the Tetrarchs honoured Rome with their presence at all, many were said to have not liked the city.[67] Lactantius illustrates his verdict with a series of neat anecdotes: when Diocletian, for example, visited Rome on 20 Nov 303 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of his reign (*vicennalia*), he entered into conflict with the *libertas* of the inhabitants and angrily left the city for Ravenna (*DMP* 17.1). Galerius does not seem to have been familiar with Rome either: having never seen the capital *in natura*, he mistook it for one of the small provincial towns he knew, so he neglected Rome's strong walls and lost the siege against Maxentius (*DMP* 27.2). And even Constantius I never visited Rome (something Lactantius passes over in benevolent silence), but after Maxentius' demise in 312 his son Constantinus would occupy the city and quickly take over his predecessors' monuments such as Maxentius' famous *basilica*.

### Lactantius on Good and Bad Emperors: Sketching Diocletian

Diocletian cannot be understood as a simple individual, his achievements depended on the system he created, and therefore to a large extent on his

65 See the translation of the *Edict of Maximal Prices* from 301 in Rees 2004, 139–146.

66 This statement seems to imply a more positive assessment of Rome than in earlier texts, see Walter 2006, 276–277 and Nicholson, 1999.

67 On the waning role of Rome see Corcoran 2011, 43–45: 'Rome was still powerfully symbolic, but for an emperor it was more a luxury than a necessity' (p. 44).

colleagues. Lactantius makes this very clear in *DMP* by relating Diocletian to other rulers. Far from being objective, Lactantius offers interesting insights into characters and events in his usual polemical style.

### *Diocletian and Maximian Herculius*

Despite the fact that Lactantius begins his invective against the Tetrarchs with Diocletian in *DMP* 7.1, he is very clear to state that this emperor was not the major force behind their anti-Christian violence: Diocletian's *fratres* Maximian Herculius and Galerius were even worse (*DMP* 8.1–9.10). While Diocletian targeted the Christians out of fear and superstition (*DMP* 10.1 *pro timore scrutator rerum futurarum*), his colleague Maximian—*homo non adeo clemens* (*DMP* 15.6)—was driven by fury and hate. Though Diocletian's avarice was greater than that of his colleague, his timidity was even more so. Unfortunately, Maximian did not use his greater courage for doing greater good than Diocletian (*DMP* 8.2). To the contrary, Maximian's rule was dominated by *libido* and *cupiditas mala* (*DMP* 8.6): such charges against insatiable and violent sexual behaviour belong to the standard repertoire of political polemic.

Despite all differences, both Diocletian and Maximian are depicted as sinister, sly, full of evil and insanity. Diocletian and Maximian agreed that all enemies of the gods and opponents of publicly accepted religions need to be exterminated (*DMP* 11.7 *inimicos deorum et hostes religionum publicarum tollendos esse*) and issued the infamous *edictum* of 303 (*DMP* 13.1). They even put fire to their own palace, only to blame the Christians for such a crime (*DMP* 14.3–7; see also Constantine, *Or. sanct.* 25.2; Eusebius, *HE* 8.6.6). By destroying what they pretended to protect, their palace became a symbol of the Tetrarchic rule: they achieved stability and security only by deceiving, forging, and lying.

### *Diocletian and Galerius*

The worst of all evil emperors, however, was Galerius (*DMP* 9.1). Lactantius describes him as a sheer monster: being of foreign stock, Galerius had a natural, innate 'barbarity' (*DMP* 9.2 *inerat huic bestiae naturalis barbaries*, a rare word), which is only matched by his horrible physical appearance (*DMP* 9.3 *caro ingens et in horrendam magnitudinem diffusa et inflata*).

With his strong personality, he dominated Diocletian: Galerius' military success against the Persians not only made him arrogant, he even frightened Diocletian (*DMP* 9:7). But not only that: incited by his superstitious mother (*DMP* 11.1–2), Galerius is charged with being the real driving force behind the anti-Christian persecutions (*DMP* 15; above all later 21.7–22.3; 31.1 *nefandae persecutionis auctor*). Weary and hesitant during the persecution (*DMP* 11.3; 12.4), Diocletian is depicted as weak slave of his emotions (*DMP* 10.4) and

easy to influence (*DMP* 11.5,8; 14.1–7). While Diocletian first wanted to limit coercive actions against Christians to members of the army and his court, Galerius—burning from viciousness himself (*inflammatus scelere*)—incited the weak-minded old man Diocletian, made him attack the church empire-wide and behave like a barbarous tyrant (*DMP* 10.6; 18.7 characterized as *senex languidus* during discussion on retiring as *Augustus*).

Galerius' tyranny had shocking consequences: in his cruelty he ruthlessly transgressed the traditional, fundamentally important distinction between *humiliores* and *honestiores* and subjected every inhabitant of the Empire regardless of rank to the most disgraceful and brutal methods of interrogation and punishment (*DMP* 21.7). By crossing this line, Rome had lost its soul, culture, and identity (*DMP* 22.4; cf. Tacitus, *Agr.* 2.2f.), and by treating humans like animals, the emperors themselves had lost their human face, so that Lactantius could name them *tres acerbissimae bestiae saevientes* (*DMP* 16.1). It is indeed interesting to note how often Lactantius uses the terms *animal* or *bestia* for the Tetrarchs (*bestia* on Galerius, *DMP* 32.4; *monstrum* on Daia, *DMP* 38.3; *animal nefarium* on Daia, *DMP* 39.3; see *DMP* 2.5–9 for Nero and 4.1-3 for Decius).[68] Diocletian, the *scelerum inventor et malorum machinator* (*DMP* 7.1), it seems, has found many followers.

### *Constantius I*

But not every Tetrarch was liable to the same crimes in Lactantius' eyes. When one sees how nonchalantely Lactantius kept Constantius I out of the fire, the *political* character of *DMP* becomes especially apparent (*Constantium praetereo*; *DMP* 8.7). Of course, by passing over Constantius I in his catalogue of criminal characters, Lactantius wanted to save his son Constantine from even the slightest suspicion that he had anything to do with the Tetrarchs' evils. In the description of the devastating consequences of the edict of 303, Lactantius explicitly noted that the Gallic provinces were not affected (1*praeter Gallias*, *DMP* 16.1).

For Lactantius, the consequence was clear: Constantius I would have deserved to rule the world alone, because he was different from all others (*dignus qui solus orbem teneret*, *DMP* 8.7). In reality, however, Constantius I must have known and approved of many, if not all empire-wide decisions taken by his colleagues-in-government. Constantius' role at least remains dubious: on the one hand, Lactantius claims that Diocletian did not wait for Constantius' opinion before he started the persecution, implying that the latter was not involved, but at the same time Lactantius wished to avoid the impression that Constantius was unloyal and

68 Städele 2003, 46.

undermined the Tetrarchy's overall consensus and unity (*DMP*, 15.6). In any case, Lactantius emphasizes that no Christian was killed in Constantius' Gaul, and that he only halfheartedly destroyed their buildings (*DMP* 15.7; 16.1). But due to Constantius' illness, it was Constantine who ultimately put an end to the persecutions and restored 'holy religion' in his realm immediately after his father had died (*religio restituta*, *DMP* 24.8–9). By distinguishing Constantius I from his other colleagues, Lactantius intentionally blurred the fact that that there was much more continuity between the 'good' and the 'bad' Tetrarchs.

### Diocletian's End and a New Beginning

As a witness of the two edicts of tolerance in 311 and 313 and the return of the dynastic principle through Constantius I and his son Constantine in the West and Licinius' 'monarchy' in the East since 313/14, Lactantius saw the actual end of the Tetrarchy when he wrote *De morte persecutorum*. Jupiter and Hercules now competed with Christ in an increasingly unequal contest, the powers of the past needed to be revisited and redefined to open up the way into a very different future. For Lactantius, it was now time to settle the score with the past and its powers.

In Lactantius' eyes, Diocletian was an enemy of the Roman name (*hostem se Romani nominis erat professus*, *DMP* 27.8). He and his colleagues were weak and feeble beings who could not keep their physical appetites and emotional desires under control. Therefore, they utterly failed to fulfill their political duties to care for the Empire's well-being and instead committed all sorts of cruelties against innocent people—not only Christians. The Tetrarchs turned out to be nothing but tyrants.[69] For this, but above all for the hubris against God himself, they were justly punished and died a cruel death.

But Diocletian is not simply a second Nero who needed to be described in apocalyptic terms. In the end and regardless of all the revenge Lactantius wished to take on Diocletian, the aging emperor almost appears as a tragic figure. In a way, Diocletian fell victim to his own system that produced and promoted villains to take the imperial throne—one more cruel than the other. Ousted from an active role in the Tetrarchy by his epigones, the old emperor continued to live in his palace and more and more saw himself losing control. His repeated interventions to reconcile conflicting players and to save 'his' Tetrarchy from the jealousy and greed of its successors ultimately remained fruitless. Diocletian was even unable to save his daughter Valeria from the

69 Städele 2003, 44–54.

fury of her husband Daia, demonstrating the absurdity of politically arranged marriages and the ideological pomp around them (*DMP* 41.1–3).[70] Nothing remained of Diocletian's former glory and authority, the stability he intended to create with his 'rule of four' ended in chaos and violence for the entire Empire and in personal disaster for himself. A system that brought figures like Galerius and Maximinus Daia to power and with them depravity, cruelty and barbarism over the entire Empire, could not prevail. When Diocletian realized at the end of his life that Constantine ordered statues and images of Maximian and himself to be removed (sometime between 310/311),[71] he—having been the most happy emperor for twenty years (*felicissimus imperator*)—died full of hate against life, disillusioned and humiliated by both God and humans and consumed by hunger and fear (*ad humilem vitam deiectus a deo et proculcatus iniuriis atque in odium vitae deductus postremo fame atque angore confectus*; *DMP* 42.1–3). With such a bleak resumé of Diocletian's character and achievements, not only God was vindicated, but also Lactantius had established himself as the messenger of the new Constantinian age.

Diocletian's image in *De mortibus persecutorum*, therefore, is inseparably connected to the one that Lactantius wanted to promulgate about Constantine and himself.

## Conclusion and Outlook: Lactantius' Image of Diocletian from a Constantinian Perspective

Historically, the picture is quite obvious. After the turmoil created by the endless line of emperors and usurpers before 284, Diocletian's rigorous, iron-fisted energy, as well as his political prudence and strategic vision no doubt granted Rome the necessary stability to build the foundations for the next two to three generations. Diocletian's image of his own rule was no doubt positive. He emphasized his role as divinely guided servant of the state, not as dictator, and he, wherever he could, gave room to his peers to demonstrate their loyalty to the unity of the Empire.

But in the end, experience showed that the tetrarchy was an experiment that did not deliver that for which it was designed. Despite all rhetorical and material bombast, the Tetrarchic system was inherently fragile; in fact, it

70 Valeria would eventually fall victim to Licinius' purges after the defeat of Maximinus Daia (*DMP* 50.2–51.2).

71 On what this *damnatio memoriae* might have meant for the famous shrine of the imperial cult at Luxor, see McFadden 2015a, 29–31.

worked only once.[72] Its stability ultimately depended on Diocletian's power and authority. As soon as he stepped down in 305, the entire system began to disintegrate. The old dynastic system resurfaced when Constantius I had dropped the Tetrarchic claim of descendancy from Hercules and instead proclaimed himself son of Claudius II Gothicus (which was equally fictitious). With Constantine's proclamation only eighteen months after the abdication of Diocletian, the Tetrarchic model of succession was obsolete.[73] Constantius I, therefore, was not innocent of the terarchy's failure, though his behaviour did not differ much from Maximian's policy after Diocletian's resignation. Constantine (perhaps already his father) realized that the unity of the Empire needed a symbolic center and—with Rome being unable to produce that symbol any longer—the ruler himself had to become that focus. For that matter, Constantine perhaps was more 'Roman' ('Augustan') than Diocletian.

Though Constantine's dynastically based rule brought the Tetrarchy to an end, there is more continuity between Diocletian and Constantine than Lactantius would admit or reveal in *DMP*. Constantine realized that the Empire's internal diversity could not be reverted and consequently left Diocletian's provincial system intact. Despite all the resistance from the traditional Roman elites, he even created a second capital that was soon to supersede the first, and by that continuing a path that Diocletian had pursued with the promotion of Nicomedia—which not only in geographical terms was remarkably close to later Constantinopole. For a large part, the army still provided Constantine's power base, now increasingly supplemented by a new, but no less educated elite of Christian officials and intellectuals who first augmented and later increasingly replaced the traditional political elites. The basis for this profound transformation was that Constantine readily and actively built upon Galerius' decision to revoke Diocletian's concept of unity through uniformity with the edict of Nicomedia from 30 April 311 (cf. *DMP* 24.9; Eusebius, *HE*. 9.1.1-6; 9.2.1).

The consequences Constantine put into practice went much further than perhaps envisioned by Galerius. Under Constantine, Christianity not only formally enjoyed the same legal status as all other religions, but members of his family also acted as generous patrons for Christian matters and interests. Religion continued to form the ideological focus of politics, in a way similar to the Tetrarchy but now centered on one single, divinely sent ruler and his family. In choosing the

72 McKay 1999, 198, 'This new system of appointive succession worked only this one time, collapsing under the hereditary claims of imperial offspring who had been passed over as successors'.

73 Börm 2015; on 'dynastic rebellion' against Tetrarchic 'non-dynastic succession' see Hekster 2015, 287–296.

still somewhat obscure and rather ill-prepared group of Christians to provide this basis, Constantine took a risk that would transform the Empire for good.

Lactantius certainly welcomed the return to monarchy, and it is not too far-fetched to speculate about his active and productive role in that process. In the midst of all polemics against Diocletian and his colleagues, *De morte persecutorum* also allows a glimpse into how Lactantius invisioned the Roman Empire to be governed. One should certainly not expect a detailed, positive discourse on good governance, but some elements deserve attention:

a) Lactantius' negative attitude to the Tetrarchy's division of the Empire into multiple provinces (note how often multiplicity is expressed in *DMP* 7.2!) opens the door to understanding that there should only be *one* empire with *one* single capital: Rome. Singularity instead of fragmentation is the only way how Rome would regain her strength and rule the entire *orbis* / *orbis terrarum* (see *DMP* 3.5 as horizon for the expansion of Christianity, cf. *Pan. Lat.* VIII[4]20; XI[3]13.5).
b) Instead of a division of power in the Tetrarchy, there should only be one single ruler and his dynasty. Lactantius thinks like a good Roman here, more than that, he turns one of the Tetrarchy's most crucial concept against it: unity.
c) And as a Christian, Lactantius would add, the unity of the Empire can only be guaranteed by worshipping the one and only true God (already in *Inst.* 1.3.19 and 20–21).[74] Despite all tendencies towards monotheism that the Tetrarchs pursued, it was the wrong gods after all, and the Tetrarchs lacked rigour to concentrate only on one God. The Jovian and Herculian ideology of the Tetrarchs had proved to be a perversion of power. Instead, true monarchy and true monotheism belong together.

Lactantius' 'global' perception of the Empire and the church, although traditional to the bone, is open to be supplemented by Constantinus' dynastic, neo-monarchic aspirations. Only a little later, Christian intellectuals like Eusebius would fully embrace this concept and elevate it theologically to an almost semi-divine status: *one* God, *one* Christ, *one* Church—and *one* emperor ruling *one* empire, united beyond all diversity. Against such a powerful concept, the Tetrarchy with all its eventualities and its subtle and fragile balance had no future. It remained an episode.

74 This conviction has been advocated by Christian apologetics since the 2nd century, see Young 2000; Walter 2006, 265.

## Bibliography

Apart from the Loeb Classical Library, I use the Latin and Greek texts in

Girardet, K.M. (tr.) 2013. *Konstantin: Rede an die Versammlung der Heiligen*. Freiburg.

Städele, A. (tr.) 2003. *Laktanz, De mortibus persecutorum. Die Todesarten der Verfolger*. Turnhout.

Müller-Rettig, B. 2008. *Panegyrici Latini, Lobreden auf römische Kaiser, Band 1: Von Diokletian bis Konstantin*. Darmstadt.

## Secondary Literature

Aubreville, P. 2009. 'Zur Motivation der tetrarchischen Chistenverfolgung', *ZAC* 13: 415–429.

Barnes, T.D. 1976. 'Sosianus Hierocles and the Antecedents of the "Great Persecution,"' *HSCP* 80: 239–252.

Barnes, T.D. 1996. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge/London.

Börm, H. 2015. 'Born to be Emperor. The Principle of Succession and the Roman Monarchy', in J. Wienand (ed.), *Contested Monarchy. Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD*: 239–264. Oxford. 239–264.

Christensen, A.S. 1980. *Lactantius the Historian. An Analysis of* De mortibus persecutorum. Kopenhagen.

Corcoran, S. 2000. *The Empire of the Tetrarchs. Imperial Pronouncements and Government AD*. Oxford.

Corcoran, S. 2011. 'Before Constantine', in N. Lenski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (revised edition). Cambridge. 35–58.

Demandt, A., A. Goltz and H. Schlange-Schöningen (eds.) 2004. *Diokletian und die Tetrarchie. Aspekte einer Zeitenwende*. Berlin/New York.

DePalma-Digeser, E. 2000. *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome*. Ithaca/London.

DePalma-Digeser, E. 2012. *A Threat to Public Piety. Christians, Platonists and the Great Persecution*. Ithaca/London.

Frend, W.H.C. 2006. 'Persecutions. Genesis and Legacy'. In Margaret M. Mitchell and M. Young, (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*. Cambridge. 501–523.

Garnsey, P. 2002. 'Lactantius and Augustine', in A.K. Bowman, H.M. Cotton, M. Goodman, and S. Price (eds.), *Representations of Empire: Rome and the Mediterranen World*.Oxford/New York. 153–179.

Heck, E. 1987. MH ΘΕΟΜΑΧΕΙΝ *oder: Die Bestrafung des Gottesverächters. Untersuchungen zu Bekämpfung und Aneignung römischer religio bei Tertullian, Cyprian und Lactanz*. Frankfurt/Bern/New York.

Hekster, O. 2015. *Emperors and Ancestors. Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition*. Oxford.

L'Orange, H.P. 1984. *Das spätantike Herrscherbild von Diokletian bis zu den Konstantin-Söhnen, 284–361 n. Chr. Das Römische Herrscherbild.* III. Abteilung; Bd. 4. Berlin.

McFadden, S. 2015a. 'Dating the Luxor Camp and the Politics of Building in the Tetrarchic Era', in M. Jones and S. McFadden (eds.), *The Roman Frescoes and Imperial Cult Chamber in Luxor Temple*. New Haven/London. 25–37.

McFadden, S. 2015b. 'Picturing Power in Late Roman Egypt. The Imperial Cult, Imperial Portrait, and a Visual Panegyric for Diocletian', in M. Jones and S. McFadden (eds.), *The Roman Frescoes and Imperial Cult Chamber in Luxor Temple*. New Haven/London. 135–153.

McKay, C.S. 1999. 'Lactantius and the Succession to Diocletian', *Classical Philology* 94: 198–209.

Kolb, F. 1987. *Diocletian und die erste Tetrarchie. Improvisation oder Experiment in der Organisation monarchischer Herrschaft?* Berlin/New York.

Kuhoff, W. 2001. *Diokletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie. Das römische Reich zwischen Krisenbewältigung und Neuaufbau* (*284–313 n.Chr.*). Frankfurt.

Lauffer, S. 1971. *Diokletians Preisedikt*. Berlin.

Mackey, C.S. 1999. 'Lactantius and the Succession to Diocletian', *CPh* 94: 198–209.

Nicholson, O. 1999. '*Civitas quae adhuc sustenat omnia*. Lactantius and the City of Rome', in W.E. Klingshirn amd M. Vessey (eds.), *The Limits of Ancient Christianity. Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture*. Ann Arbor. 7–25.

Potter, D. 2013. *Constantine the Emperor*. Oxford.

Rees, R. 2004. *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy*. Edinburgh.

Rees, R. 2012. *Latin Panegyric*. Oxford.

Rives, J.B. 1999. 'The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire', *JRS* 89: 135–154.

Rosen, K. 2013. *Konstantin der Große. Kaiser zwischen Machtpolitik und Religion*. Stuttgart.

Simmons, M.B. 1995. *Arnobius of Sicca: Religious Conflict and Competition in the Age of Diocletian*. Oxford.

Städele, A. 1998. 'Laktanz' *De mortibus persecutorum* als Dokument einer Zeitenwende', in P. Neukam (ed.), *Von der Rezeption zur Motivation*, München. 185–208.

Stephenson, P. 2011. *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor*. London.

Walter, J. 2006. *Pagane Texte und Wertvorstellungen bei Lactanz*. Göttingen.

Young, F. 2000. 'Christianity', in C. Rowe, M. Schofield, S. Harrison, and M. Lane (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*. Cambridge. 635–660.