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Roman empire in the second century². And what, one may ask, were these features?

A government dominated by a prince, but more civil than military in its orientation; peace; law and order; urbanization within the framework, of course, of the classical tradition; extensive commercial activity; general economic prosperity; the building of roads, aqueducts and bridges; an army more and more imperial in its origins; a tendency towards a common citizenship — these are the things which, according to Aristides, constituted the salient features of the Roman Empire in the second century. In giving expression to these features he tended to be hyperbolic and details of his pronouncements could not have possibly corresponded to the historical truth. In general, however, there can be little doubt about the accuracy of his characterizations. They correspond to what one finds in any manual on Roman history, containing presumably what has been accepted, on the basis of all sources available, to have actually obtained. This makes them a measuring rod to determine to what extent conditions may have changed in the course of the following century.

There is, of course, no comparable document describing the conditions which came to prevail in the society of the Roman Empire in the third century. Some papyri, a few inscriptions, some narrative accounts, not all of equal value — these are all that modern scholarship has had at its disposal to study these conditions. Moreover, this evidence is unevenly distributed so that while it may yield sufficient information for one province, Egypt for instance, it may say nothing about another province. In the light of this, any account given is bound to be partial. Nevertheless, any such account is bound also to contain enough to indicate, at least in broad outline, the main features of the society of the Roman empire in the third century³. What were these features?

Well, a government headed by an emperor, originally an army officer, who relied more and more on the army and was ever threatened to be replaced by force, as was often the case, by another army officer; an almost continuous state of war; a general lack of security as well as public order; a retrogression in urbanization, certainly in so far as the inhabited centers were concerned; depopulation; a serious decline, if not all stoppage, of commerce; depressed general economic conditions; a debased coinage with the attendant uncontrollable inflation; little, if any activity in public works; a tendency towards immobility, certainly in the country-side and among the trades; the progressive impoverishment of the element of the popula-

² For the text, translation and commentary of this speech: J. H. OLIVER, *The Ruling Power. A Study of the Roman Empire in the Second Century after Christ through the Roman Oration of Aelius Aristides* (= Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, Vol. 43, part 4) (Philadelphia, 1953).

³ In general ROSTOVITZ, op. cit., 433ff. and any other comprehensive account, as, for instance: JOSEPH VOGT, *The Decline of Rome*, tr. by JANET SONDHEIMER (New York, 1967), 11–87.

tion of cities which furnished the personnel for their administration and contributed to their well being; repeated famines and plagues; an imperial army drawn from the provinces, with an overwhelming numerical dominance of the peasant element; a Roman citizenship now possessed by all the free inhabitants in the empire; and a legal system more common than ever before in theory and application — these were the features which came to characterize the society of the Roman empire in the course of the third century. It takes no great sophistication nor sharp perception to see the difference between this set of conditions and that which had characterized the second century. Life in the course of the third century had become very difficult and lost in quality. What is the explanation?

The explanation, I think, is simple: the state of war which, beginning with the reign of Marcus Aurelius, continued, with brief pauses now and then, throughout the third century. It became the normal state of things. To be sure, some instances of change, as the extension of citizenship to all the free inhabitants of the empire and the more extensive development of common law, were the inevitable culminations of processes begun long before. But in all the other instances of change the cause was war. The war, or rather wars, were at times defensive in the sense that they were provoked by invaders who devastated, robbed and burned; at times or simultaneously they were civil in the sense that rival armies sought to put their officers on the throne and as a consequence fought with each other. For the state of war had made the army the only visible force, the only effective power in the state and it was natural, given its type of organization, that its various components would vie with each other for the supreme position. But whether defensive or civil the wars on the whole were fought on imperial territory and if there was booty it was booty seized at the expense of the people of the empire, thereby reducing their capital and accumulated wealth. But more than that, the wars by their continuity and devastations seriously interfered with the economic productivity of town and country, reduced commerce and industry to the minimum, did away with security and order, jeopardized life and property. The armies involved in these wars had to be fed, equipped, and sheltered, requirements which could be met only by heavier and heavier exactions from the productive classes at a time when their productivity was seriously affected by the ravages of the wars. The state debased the coinage⁴ or imposed regulations in order to get the most out of its subjects, but these regulations did not always work and at times had the opposite effects than those expected. People fled, some turning into groups of robbers, thereby reducing still more the safety of life and property. Large estates tended to become more and more self-sufficient, in this way affecting adversely the economy of towns. Many among the well-to-do inhabitants of these towns were

⁴ For an exposition of the relationship of war to the debasement of the coinage, see: JEAN PIERRE CALLU, *La politique monétaire des empereurs romains de 238 à 311* (Paris, 1969), 475–483.

