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## [Peter Charanis. Observations on the transformation of the roman world - suite]

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### Présentation de la fiche

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impoverished, sought to shift their responsibilities, even to peasants<sup>5</sup>, and no longer served their towns the way they had done before, even to the extent of furnishing them with monuments and other public works.

But worst of all, the wars brought out what is the worst in man, dehumanized him, surfaced the ferocity of his animal nature and led him to commit atrocities which, under ordinary circumstances, he would have never thought to commit. ROSTOVITZEFF, in his great book to which reference has already been made, sought to attribute the calamities of the third century to the coarseness, ignorance of, and lack of appreciation of city-life by, the peasant soldiers who by then had come to constitute by far the predominant, if not the only, element of the imperial armies<sup>6</sup>. He was right in that soldiers, either as agents for the enforcement of the law, particularly the effective collection of the various exactions imposed on the population, or as warriors in the field, abused, terrorized, destroyed. But this was not because they were of peasant origin. It was because they had been roughened, dehumanized by war. "In peace and prosperity", wrote Thucydides<sup>7</sup> a long time ago, "both states and individuals have gentler feelings, because they are not then forced to face conditions of dire necessity; but war, which robs men of the easy supply of their daily wants, is a rough schoolmaster and creates in most people a temper that matches their condition." It is no secret that perfectly good American boys fighting as soldiers in Vietnam committed atrocities which, under ordinary circumstances they would never have thought to commit. But this is how all armies which find themselves in a prolonged war behave. War barbarized the society of the Roman empire in the third century. This is not to say, of course, that war has always this effect. It may be, as was the case with the Athenians who fought hard against the Persians early in the fifth century B. C., a great stimulant for public spiritedness, the development of thought, literature and art<sup>8</sup>.

The composition known as 'Historia Augusta' constitutes a literary problem which has not yet been solved nor is likely ever to be solved. It may be, as is now generally believed, that the biographies of the emperors which it contains were written towards the end of the fourth century and

<sup>5</sup> See for instance, T. C. SKEAT and E. P. WEGENER, A Trial Before the Prefect of Egypt Appius Sabinus, c. 250 A. D., *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 21 (1935), 224-47 (= *Sammelbuch Griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten*, hrsg. von F. PREISIGKE, Straßburg, 1915ff., papyrus no. 7696). According to this document the senate of Arsinoe because of the impoverishment of its members sought to shift its responsibilities to nearby villages. The villagers sued and won. The argument put forth by the lawyer of the senate of Arsinoe that at the beginning of the third century times were prosperous and as a result the members of the senate could carry out their obligations, but now (c. 250 A. D.) this was no longer the case and as a consequence others should share these obligations, was not accepted by the court.

<sup>6</sup> ROSTOVITZEFF, op. cit., 492ff.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides, III. lxxiii. 1.

<sup>8</sup> But it was not long before war began to exhibit among the Athenians its barbarizing potentialities.

include much that is fictitious<sup>9</sup>. But the author or authors, whoever they may have been, could not have invented everything. There is indeed a great deal in the 'Historia' which is legendary, but all is not legend. This is not the place, however, to discuss its reliability as a historical source. Suffice to say that in general when one finds a statement in it which finds some confirmation in another source, then the presumption should be that it tells the truth.

Eutropius, in his very brief account of the reign of Probus (276-282) reports<sup>10</sup> Probus to have said after he had brought to a successful end the various wars, external and internal, in which he had been engaged: "Soon there will be no need for soldiers." Eutropius does not elaborate, but the implications of the statement attributed to Probus are clear: now that the wars were over, wars which had caused so much loss and suffering, the fighting armies should be disbanded and the men who composed them should be turned to the arts of peace. This is indeed how the author of the 'Life' of Probus in the 'Historia' who repeats the brief statement of Eutropius in Eutropius's exact words, explains it<sup>11</sup>. I quote:

"To this he added another remark . . . that soon there would be no need of soldiers (*brevi milites necessarios non futuros*). What had he in his mind when he made this remark? Had he not put down all barbarian nations under his feet and made the whole universe Roman? 'Soon', he said, 'we shall have no need of soldiers'. What else is this than saying: 'Soon there will not be a Roman soldier? Everywhere the commonwealth will reign and will rule all in safety. The entire world will forge no arms and will furnish no rations; the ox will be kept for the plough and the horse be bred for peace; there will be no wars and no captivity; in all places peace will reign; in all places the laws of Rome, and in all places our judges.'"

And towards the end of his work, in evaluating the achievements of Probus, the author adds<sup>12</sup>:

"That most famous remark of Probus itself reveals what he hoped to have brought about, for he said that soon there would be no need for soldiers . . . What great bliss would then have shone forth, if under his rule there had ceased to be soldiers! No rations would now be furnished by any provincials, no pay for the troops taken out of the public largesses,

<sup>9</sup> Most recently: RONALD SYME, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (Oxford, 1968); Id., *Emperors and Biography. Studies in the Historia Augusta* (Oxford, 1971); Id., *The Historia Augusta. A Call to Clarity* (Bonn, 1971). SYME wrote the last work in reply to his critics, A. MOMIGLIANO especially. SYME questions the reliability of the 'Historia Augusta', that part of it especially which relates to the emperors of the second half of the third century, and places the writing of it about 395 A. D.

<sup>10</sup> Flavius Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae*, edited and translated into French by MAURICE RAT (Paris, without date), 160 (= bk 9, ch. XI): *brevi milites necessarios non futuros*.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Scriptores Historiae Augustae' with an English translation by D. MAGIE, 3 (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), 378f. (= Probus, XX. 5-6). I used MAGIE's translation.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 380ff. (= Probus XXII.4-XXIII.1-5).

