To what extent did Aurelian successfully stabilise the Roman Empire during his reign with his campaigns, policies and reforms?

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Abstract

During the Crisis of the Third Century that shook the Roman Empire, the commander of the cavalry, Aurelian, would be proclaimed emperor by his troops in AD 270, leading to a five-year reign that would see the empire transformed from a divided realm beset by internal and external struggle into a united superpower once more as Aurelian gave it a new lease on life. In spite of the fact that Aurelian brought such benefits to the empire while spending so little time on the imperial throne, it has only been in the past two decades that historians have begun to devote the necessary attention to this spectacular figure of history, leaving the scholarship on Aurelian incredibly sparse with many gaps still to be filled. Exploration of the ancient historians who covered Aurelian's reign along with analysis of the coinage will form the basis of this investigation, since these are the main surviving sources of information for the period. This study aims to ascertain how Aurelian restored stability to the empire through his campaigns, policies and reforms and to what extent he can be judged to have been successful, providing an opportunity to better understand the reign of an extraordinary emperor.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

When Aurelian was proclaimed emperor by his troops in AD 270 he was not taking control of the mighty empire that had conquered the ancient world, but instead a tumultuous, divided realm riven by warring usurpers, economic disaster and hostile foreign powers capable of challenging the Roman superpower and winning. Despite these challenges, by the end of his mere five-year reign Aurelian left behind a much-improved empire, having brought the breakaway fiefdoms back under the command of Rome and initiated both economic and religious reforms. The purpose of this dissertation is to determine whether Aurelian actually was successful at stabilising the fragmented empire in the long and short term or whether he failed to bring about any lasting change. To achieve this, I will provide an overview of Aurelian's life (Chapter 2) before analysing Aurelian's campaigns against his rivals (Chapter 3), his handling of unrest in Rome and his policies for integrating his newly conquered territories (Chapter 4), the economic reforms he undertook (Chapter 5) and finally examining how Aurelian navigated the religious world amid the clashes between pagans and Christians (Chapter 6). Each chapter will follow the formula of examining how the stability of the empire was threatened, explaining what actions Aurelian took to rectify the situation and judging their success and failures in the long and short term. I have chosen to examine Aurelian as he achieved spectacular feats worthy of fame akin to Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great, yet has been largely relegated to the side-lines of history by scholars, who seem to content to take Aurelian for granted.[1]

The turmoil and chaos that Aurelian grew up and ruled in is known to historians as the Crisis of the Third Century, where a perfect storm of problems struck the empire during the fifty-year period of AD235-285, leading to a period of chaos and uncertainty.[2] A dirty secret of the principate, exposed by Vespasian during AD 69, was that any general with an army could be declared emperor by his men and could take full control of the empire provided he won the resulting civil war.[3] During the years of the Crisis this act became widespread, with over sixty claimants seeking imperial power, crippling Rome as its armies fought each other again and again under their power-hungry leaders.[4] Rome had new foreign enemies now menacing its borders, from the powerful Germanic tribes that ravaged the lands with their raids, to the Sassanian empire that had risen from the ashes of Persia, giving Rome the first ancient superpower it had had to fight since the Carthaginians.[5] Furthermore, for the previous two centuries, emperors had been steadily debasing the coinage to increase their funds, and these acts would bear a bitter fruit as money became increasingly worthless.[6]

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[1] It is telling that first major scholarly publication to examine Aurelian did not come until 1999, when Alaric Watson recognised this academic neglect and produced his seminal work *Aurelian and the third century*. Even after this, the scholarship has remained depressingly small. Watson (1999) xi.

[2] Watson (1999) 2; White (2020) 4; Syvanne (2020) 15; Southern (2001) 1.

[3] Vespasian's troops would declare him emperor in Egypt during the civil wars of AD 69, after refusing to recognise Vitellius, who had claimed power by defeating the forces of Otho. Tacitus, *The Histories* 2.80.

[4] White (2020) 9; Watson (1999) 3.

[5] Syvanne (2020) 15; White (2020) 7; Watson (1999) 7.

[6] Katsari (2003) 46; White (2020) 122.

Each of these difficulties were within Rome's power to overcome individually with ease, but together they conspired to throw the empire into turmoil and it was Aurelian who sought to defeat these challenges and restore order to the empire.

It is fortunate that there are plenty of sources to draw upon for Aurelian's reign, through both archaeological findings such as coin hoards and the many ancient writers who touched upon his reign.[7] There will be more of a focus on the literature than the archaeological as the historical accounts give us more information.[8] It must be acknowledged that this approach comes with certain limitations, as the Aurelian depicted in a literary work is merely the one the writer wishes us to see, potentially twisted and shaped to best suit their agenda without any regard for the truth.[9] As the case of Emperor Claudius in the next chapter will show, even an emperor decades dead was subject to having their image overhauled to suit the needs of a later incumbent of the imperial throne. Matters are further complicated in this period, where the line between an usurper and an emperor was thin and murky: both minted coins in their image and passed laws, with length of rein not being a deciding factor either, as comparison between Zenobia and Quintillus proves.[10] It should be noted that archaeological evidence is no less burdened with its own flaws – coins are no more honest, they merely show the image that the ruling emperor wishes to portray.[11] To overcome the issues surrounding the literature an examination of some of the key writings shall be undertaken to establish guidelines on how this dissertation will be treating the claims the various writers make.

Of all the ancient literature at our disposal that covers Aurelian, the *Historia Augusta* is simultaneously the most detailed and the most problematic. The author intended to cover the lives of all the emperors from Hadrian in AD 117 to the Tetrarchs, who came to power in AD 284, as well as thirty usurpers who rose up while Gallienus was in power.[12] It is clear that Aurelian is a figure of importance to the author as his biography is the second longest in the work, only behind Severus Alexander, despite Aurelian having a far shorter reign than many of the other emperors. The *Historia Augusta* asserts it is the product of six different writers who each authored separate parts of the work, with the life of Aurelian having supposedly been penned by Flavius Vopiscus Syracusanus while the previous emperors were covered by

[7] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.47-62; SHA, *Life of Aurelian*; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13-15; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 25-27; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35; Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 7.30.
[8] The brevity of Aurelian's reign combined with the difficulty in precisely dating archaeological evidence that isn't coinage for this period forces us to rely all the more on the literature. Drinkwater (1987) 215.
[9] Burgersdijk & Ross (2018) 2.
[10] Burgersdijk & Ross (2018) 4; Omissi (2018) 23.
[11] Burgersdijk & Ross (2018) 11.
[12] While the *Historia Augusta* claims all the usurpers were around in the time of Gallienus, examination of those covered in this section reveal that only nine fit these criteria, with the rest either being figures who made their bids for power years after Gallienus was murdered, or in the case of two of the women and six of the youths mentioned, never held any official imperial power at all, nor claimed to. SHA, *Lives of the Two Gallieni*.

Trebellius Pollio.[13] However, this claim has come under serious doubt, as there are many signs that point to the *Historia Augusta* being the work of a single author. One of the most compelling clues is how these six apparently separate historians all appear to share exactly the same views on certain subjects, as throughout the *Historia Augusta* there is a clear bias in favour of the Senate, a particularly striking view given that the organisation had become increasingly irrelevant throughout the third century, as well as repeated sympathy throughout the various lives for the suffering of the provincial citizens caught up in foreign invasions.[14] Furthermore, there is a clear common writing style across the entire work, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by Adams, who has engaged in a comprehensive study of the grammar and terminology of the *Historia Augusta*, in particular highlighting how six separate authors all favour "occido" as the verb of choice to describe killing over the more common "interficio" that was used at the time.[15]

Marriott took the impressive step of analysing the sentence lengths of every line in the works of Ammianus Marcellinus and the *Codex Theodosianus*, showing how an writer has a consistent average sentence length, before doing the same to the *Historia Augusta*, which showed a similarly regular mean length.[16] However, Marriott's work is not as conclusive at it could be, since he only used one other ancient writer to prove his point, and he would have strengthened his arguement had he inspected other ancient authors in the same way. White has also observed that the *Codex Theodosianus* was a poor choice given that it is a legal document written by multiple people.[17] He has further challenged the idea of a single author by taking Marriott's methods and subjecting the section covering Aurelian to further scrutiny, noting how the final third of the work seems disconnected, splitting it off and comparing average sentence lengths, which show a marked difference in the two parts.[18] White argues that this is strong evidence of there being two authors for the life of Aurelian, and I do believe this discovery warrants further investigation, yet it alone is not enough proof to convince me that there isn't a single hand at work across the *Historia Augusta*.

Use of the *Historia Augusta* is further complicated through the deceptions and contradictions woven throughout the text by the author, frustrating efforts to uncover the truth. This has already been seen with regards to Quintillus and the inability of the text to decide on the length of his reign or the manner of his death. Such acts have made dating the *Historia Augusta* a challenge, since we neither truly know the identity of the author, nor when they were writing, since what hints they offer clash with each other. While covering Aurelian, the writer first mentions that Junius Tiberianus was prefect of the city when he began writing, who held the post between AD 303-304, only to later claim that the

[13] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 2.
[14] SHA, *Life of Tacitus* 5; White (1967) 116; Le Bohec (2000) 117; Watson (1999) 210; Millar (1977) 350.
[15] That the writing style of the supposed six authors remains identical has been noted since the idea of a single author was first proposed. Adams has taken this position and rigorously examined it. Adams (1972) 187-193; Syme (1971) 282.
[16] Marriott (1979) 67.
[17] White (2020) 200.
[18] White (2020) 201-202.

consulship of Furius Placidus had just occurred, which took place in AD 343.[19] Even if we were to account for the possibility of slow writing, forty years is simply too much, leaving no doubt that one, or quite possibly both, of these statements are false. At best, it can be concluded that the *Historia Augusta* was written during the fourth century, given its desire to flatter Claudius, since this is when the Constantine family were in power. This is a source of particular frustration, since depending on when it was written, the author may have lived through Aurelian's reign, which would lend some credibility to their claims.

By far the most egregious twisting of the truth performed by the *Historia Augusta* is the use of manufactured documents and letters meant to act as supporting evidence to assertions made, but have actually been completely fabricated by the writer. There is absolutely no doubt amongst historians that these letters and many of the people named in them do not exist.[20] Such letters cover topics that range from simple matters such as Aurelian complaining to a colleague that he will not be admired for defeating the female Zenobia, to Valerian writing about a consulship for Aurelian which simply never occurred.[21] The author also makes use of such documents to characterise historical figures and create dramatic irony, such as when Zenobia receives a letter from Aurelian demanding her surrender, and sends a response berating him for his arrogance and highlighting the strength of her forces.[22] This letter would be a source of humour for the Roman readers, who know full well that it is Zenobia who is the arrogant one about to face defeat, making her comments highly amusing to them. Furthermore, by listing all the forces Zenobia has at her disposal, Aurelian's eventual victory is made all the more impressive by defeating so many foes, and Zenobia herself is made to seem dominant and threatening. This in turn ties into the subtle message that Zenobia is a powerful and worthy foe, since this letter is produced just after the one in which Aurelian is concerned others will fail to recognise his achievements due to Zenobia's gender. This is but one example of the many detailed and complex fabrications surrounding Aurelian in the work, and the fact the author felt the need to such lengths suggests that they themselves were working with limited sources as they were forced to invent the parts of Aurelian's life they had no information for.[23] That they went to such lengths suggests a strong bias that must be accounted for when examining the *Historia Augusta*. Creating these letters make the narrative more dramatic and interesting to read, but cause massive harm to the *Historia Augusta*'*s* trustworthiness as a source, to the point it cannot be relied upon on its own.

After the *Historia Augusta*, the most thorough source available about Aurelian can be found in the writings of the sixth century historian Zosimus, who scholars widely agree to be a more reliable source.[24] Zosimus is particularly useful for analysis of Aurelian's military campaigns, since he provides the most coverage of the events out of all the ancient

[19] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 1; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 15.
[20] White (2020) xx; Watson (1999) 210; White (1967) 124; Scarborough (1973) 377; Drinkwater (1987) 65; Syme (1971) 283.
[21] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 26; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 12.
[22] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 27.
[23] Watson (1999) 210.
[24] Syvanne (2020) 13; Southern (2001) 11; White (2020) xvii; Watson (1999) 212; Drinkwater (1987) 55.

writers.[25] However, Zosimus is far from a perfect source as he is a careless historian who can play fast and loose with the chronology of events and the identities of the Germanic tribes, necessitating caution when drawing upon him as a source to examine certain events.[26] In addition to this, Zosimus' focus on military events comes at the cost of limited coverage of Aurelian social and political reforms, making him far from useful when examining these topics.[27] Zosimus seeks to depict Aurelian as a balm for Roman troubles, as the narrative leading up to Aurelian's accession depicts an empire slowing crumbling under repeated foreign attacks and fragmenting with the rise of the Gallic Empire and Zenobia, before covering in detail how Aurelian defeated these many threats during his reign.[28] Provided some care is taken, Zosimus is a helpful source from which much can be learnt.

One of the greatest challenges when analysing the ancient writers is identifying the influence of the *Kaisergeschichte*, a lost historical source that scholars agree has clearly affected the works of several later historians, including Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Pseudo Aurelius Victor and the *Historia Augusta*.[29] The impact of the *Kaisergeschichte* has been identified in the portrayal of Aurelian as an incredibly cruel and severe figure, with the same terminology and phrases being found in all these works.[30] That this is due to the *Kaisergeschichte* is beyond doubt when Aurelian's actions are examined, and one sees that he showed mercy to his enemies, sometimes to his detriment, sparing many that others would have executed.[31] Consequently, when handling these sources corroboration between them should be carefully scrutinised, as it is possible they have not independently reached the same conclusion but simply both used the *Kaisergeschichte*.

In summary, this dissertation intendeds to treat any claim that the *Historia Augusta* makes that cannot be corroborated by either another ancient writer or archaeological evidence as the unreliable fantasy produced by its anonymous author for the entertainment of the readers. Zosimus will be taken as a more reliable source, but extreme caution will be exercised when dealing with his chronology of events, and similar care will be taken when looking for any biases caused by the *Kaisergeschichte*. The other historians will be treated

[25] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.50-61.
[26] Saunders (1992) 314; Watson (1999) 212; Syvanne (2020) 13.
[27] Zosimus boils down all of Aurelian's economic reforms to telling us in a single sentence that the emperor recalled bad money and issued new coins in its place. Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.61.
[28] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.31-46.
[29] Southern (2001) 10; Burgess (2005) 167; Watson (1999) 211; White (2020) xvi.
[30] Burgess has performed a comprehensive review of the works, identifying multiple examples where the *Kaisergeschichte* has left its mark. SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 39; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.4; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.14; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35; Burgess (2005) 177.
[31] Aurelian spared Zenobia, Tetricus and Antiochus, three leaders who challenged him for the imperial throne, and kept the administrative organisations they had set up. SHA, *The Thirty Tyrants* 30; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.7.

with care, particularly Aurelius Victor, who held a strong anti-military and pro-senatorial view that colours much of his narrative.[32]

[32] Victor despised the military to the point that he felt it was the natural inclination of soldiers to make the wrong decisions and openly claimed that Aurelian's firm leadership occurred in spite of his military background, rather than because of it. Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 34-35.

Chapter 2 – The rise and reign of Aurelian

It would be understandable for any historian examining Aurelian for the first time to believe that there would be a clear picture of this pivotal emperor's reign given that there are a number of ancient writers who have covered him in their works.[33] However, even a cursory examination of the literature reveals a tangled mess of contradictions, omissions and lies that makes trying to uncover what actually occurred during Aurelian's time on the imperial throne a challenge in and of itself. The aim of this chapter is to present a coherent narrative of Aurelian's rise to the imperial throne, as well as a brief overview of his reign, providing a foundation for later chapters to build upon as they examine Aurelian's many campaigns, policies and reformations.

It is widely accepted that Aurelian was born in the Roman province of Dacia Ripensis, which was situated to the north of Macedonia and bordered the Danube River, marking the edge of Roman territory.[34] The *Historia Augusta* offers another possibility, as it claims that some historians believe Aurelian was born in Dacia, yet "according to most writers" he was actually born in Sirmium, a city located in Illyricum.[35] A more convincing case can be made for Dacia, given that Sirmium was the city in which Aurelian was proclaimed emperor by his troops, suggesting that the *Historia Augusta* has either got confused or is more likely trying to tie Aurelian to Sirmium to make his accession there more narratively compelling by making Aurelian begin his time as emperor in the city where his life began.[36] Aurelian was heavily involved in altering Dacia during his reign, abandoning part of the region and redistributing the displaced Roman citizens among the reorganised provinces.[37] While this could raise the possibility that Aurelian is being tied to Dacia by the ancient sources in the same way that the *Historia Augusta* tries to link him to Sirmium for dramatic effect, we would then have no birthplace for Aurelian and given that all the usually discordant ancient sources mention Dacia leads me to believe that this is not the case. Aurelian is agreed to have been born a commoner, who rose to prominence through his service in the Roman Army.[38] The *Historia Augusta* tells us that Aurelian's mother was a priestess of Sol, while Pseudo Aurelius Victor claims that that his father was the tenant farmer of Aurelius, a Roman senator. However, there is no further evidence to support or refute these claims,

[33] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.47-62; SHA, *Life of Aurelian*; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13-15; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 25-27; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35; Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 7.30.
[34] Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.1.
[35] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 4.
[36] Watson (1999) 226; White chooses to favour Sirmium as Aurelian's place of birth, yet offers no reason for why he has made this strange decision, when only the *Historia Augusta* mentions this possibility and all other sources are unanimous in Aurelian being from Dacia; White (2020) 47.
[37] Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.1; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 4.
[38] Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.1; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 4; Watson (1999) 1.

leaving it uncertain whether either or both assertions are true.[39] That such confusion and uncertainty surrounds Aurelian's beginnings highlights the challenges scholars face when attempting to study him in any detail.

Aurelian's time in the military would see him rise through the ranks to become a senior cavalry officer, a position of some importance within the Roman Army by this point in time.[40] This was because the structure of the Roman army had changed from the large forces of the early Empire to a more fluid and reactionary force, designed to quickly react to and suppress any hostile incursion into Roman territory.[41] Given the suitability of the cavalry for this style of warfare, they played a key part in the defensive strategy of the Romans and thus preserving their numbers was vital. Consequently, it was of critical importance that the cavalry units were placed under the command of a capable leader who could ensure the survival of their forces. Aurelian proved to be an incredibly skilled commander, using his cavalry to inflict catastrophic casualties upon the invading Germanic tribes during the reigns of his predecessors, displaying his military prowess.[42]

Aurelian would be propelled to the highest echelons of power for his part in the assassination of Emperor Gallienus in AD 268, although it is difficult to ascertain what role he exactly played in the conspiracy, as most of the sources that mention him refuse to elaborate on what Aurelian actually did.[43] However, we can conclude that Aurelian's role must have been either been rather minor or of great importance, since he was not among those purged in the aftermath of the conspiracy.[44] Taking this further, I believe that Aurelian

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[39] Watson puts little stock in either of the literacy sources for Aurelian's early life, while White uncritically believes the *Historia Augusta* to be accurate. Watson (1999) 1; White (2020) 47.

[40] By the time of 3rd Century it was possible for a career in the army to see a soldier propelled to the highest positions in the military. The days of the foot soldiers being common people and the officers being the future senators using the ranks to advance their political careers were over. Professional soldiers were able to climb the ranks and even become emperors, a pattern that had emerged over the third century since the ascension of Maximinus Thrax in AD 235. Goldsworthy (2011) 202; Lee (2007) 24; Hebblewhite (2017) 11; Roth (2009) 226.

[41] Cavalry units had been significantly increased in size by the time of Aurelian due to their importance, with the legion's *equites* being increased by a factor of six, going from one hundred and twenty to seven hundred and twenty-six, as well as cavalry commanders being placed in command of entire detachments. Le Bohec (2000) 198; Goldsworthy (2011) 202.

[42] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 6; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.43; White (2020) 48.

[43] Zosimus does claim that Aurelian had "formed some new design", but the vagueness of this statement creates ambiguity as to whether Zosimus is referring to the idea of rebelling against Gallienus, or is arguing as Victor does that Aurelian was the one who planned the murder. Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 33; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.40.1; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 25; Syme (1971) 210.

[44] Watson (1999) 42; White goes so far as to argue that Aurelian may not just have been the author of the plot to kill Gallienus, but was in fact the architect of the enire conspiracy, yet fails to provide any reason for why Aurelian would want Gallienus dead in the first place; White (2020) 53.

played a major part in the murder of Gallienus, since Aurelian was swiftly promoted first to commander of the Dalmatian cavalry, then commander of the cavalry for the entire Roman army, and it is unlikely that Aurelian would have received such rewards had he done little to earn them, lending credence to Victor's position that Aurelian came up with the scheme that ended Gallienus. The murder occurred when Gallienus was lured out of his tent without his bodyguards under the false belief that the army of the usurper Aureolus was close at hand, before being struck down.[45] Any chance of uncovering the truth is complicated by the fact that Claudius, Gallienus' successor and key figure in the plot, has been whitewashed by later historians on account of a later emperor, Constantine, claiming descent from Claudius, leading to accounts of the assassination being distorted as attempts are made to distance Claudius from the murder.[46]

Claudius' reign would be brief, as he died of plague in AD 270, leading to his brother Quintillus taking the imperial throne with the support of the Senate, before being replaced by Aurelian, who had the favour of the army and had been proclaimed emperor at Sirmium by the troops in September of that year after they had refused to recognise Quintillus.[47] Ever since the success of Vespasian in AD 69, the fact an army had the power to make an emperor had been exposed as an uncomfortable truth. This particular issue exploded in the 3rd century, with Aurelian being a textbook case of how the army could simply reject a current emperor and propel their own choice to power. There is a startling amount of disagreement amongst the literary sources as to how long Quintillus actually reigned, with Aurelius Victor claiming he only lasted "a few days", Eutropius, Zonaras and the *Historia Augusta* professing that his reign was seventeen days in length, although the *Historia Augusta* later alleges it was twenty days with no indication as to which it believes to be the correct duration, and Zosimus argues for the longest reign of "a few months".[48] Faced with such dispute in the literature, historians have turned to archaeological evidence, and have found the answer in the coinage. The number of coins minted for Quintillus at Rome, in combination with coins founded minted as far afield as Egypt, makes it impossible for his reign to have lasted only a handful of days, leading to all historians to collectively favour Zosimus as the most accurate writer on this matter.[49] Following Quintillus' death, Aurelian had full control of Rome and its territories by the end of the year, inheriting an empire that was divided by rivals seeking power, under threat from foreign invaders and an economy that was in shambles.[50]

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[45] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.40; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 33.2; Anonymous, SHA, *Lives of the Two Gallieni* 14; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 33; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 25.

[46] The *Historia Augusta* is particularly guilty of attempting to flatter Constantine by promoting Claudius, despite repeatedly and unconvincingly claiming that this is not the case. SHA, *Life of Claudius* 3; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35; Syme (1971) 203.

[47] Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 26.

[48] Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 34.5; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.12; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 26; SHA, *Life of Claudius* 12; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 37; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.47.

[49] White (2020) 53; Watson (1999) 222; Dmitriev (2004) 570.

[50] The sources are divided on whether Quintillus committed suicide or was murdered, and there is no way to be certain whom is correct, since both possibilities are highly plausible.

The immediate danger to Aurelian lay in the Germanic tribes that had crossed the Danube to raid and pillage Roman lands, and it was these threats that he spent the first year of his reign in pacifying. Piecing together Aurelian's movements and actions during this period of time is exceedingly difficult, as the literary sources offer disparate and contradictory accounts of what occurred, when they chose to even cover this topic in the first place.[51] The first question to tackle is who was Aurelian actually fighting, since Eutropius simply claims his opponents were "Goths", and those historians who name tribes give conflicting information: Zosimus argues it was in fact the Scythians and Alemanni, while the *Historia Augusta* holds that Italy was being attacked by the Suebi, Sarmatians and Marcomanni.[52] Matters are only further confused by fragments of Dexippus that have been recovered, mentioning two wars between Aurelian and the Iuthungi along with a different war with the Vandals.[53] As Saunders proved in his pivotal article however, it is Dexippus who is correct, since Zosimus and the *Historia Augusta* have been thrown off by developments among the Gothic tribes that occurred after Aurelian's reign.[54] The Alemanni would absorb the Iuthungi at the end of the third century, leading to Zosimus getting confused between the two tribes, and Scythians has been used as a catch-all term in the same way Goths has been by Eutropius. The *Historia Augusta* has mistaken the Vandals for the Sarmatians, who were in reality a neighbouring tribe, while the Suebi were a progenitor from which a number of tribes including the Iuthungi originated from. Historians agree that Aurelian would fight two wars against the Iuthungi, broken up by a clash with the Vandals.[55]

Aurelian's first war with the Iuthungi at the end of AD 270 was an overwhelming success for Rome, catching the tribe as they were crossing the Danube River and forcing the envoys to sue for peace.[56] A sudden incursion by the Vandals in the first months of AD 271 would force Aurelian to hurry east to Pannonia to meet them, ordering the Romans living in the countryside to retreat into the walled towns with grain and cattle, which served to limited spoils for the Vandals to seize and gave Aurelian time to engage and defeat the foe, expelling them from Roman lands.[57] However, the Iuthungi had used this opportunity to break their agreements and strike at a weakened Italy, leaving Aurelian no choice but to return to Italy. The sources agree that Aurelian would fight three battles at Placentia, Fano

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Zonaras, Zosimus and the *Historia Augusta* (while covering the life of Aurelian) argue for suicide, Eutropius, Pseudo Aurelius Victor and the *Historia Augusta* (while covering the life of Claudius) claim he was killed. Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 26; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.47; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 37; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.12; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 34.5; SHA, *Life of Claudius* 12.

[51] Zonaras makes no mention of Aurelian's early reign, choosing instead to leap from Aurelian's accession to his campaign against Palmyra two years later. Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27.

[52] Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.48-49; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 18.

[53] Dexippus, *Fragments* 100F6-7.

[54] Saunders (1992) 319.

[55] Saunders (1992) 326; White (2020) 68-69; Watson (1999) 49-50; Le Bohec (2000) 199.

[56] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 18; Dexippus, *Fragments* 100F6.

[57] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.48; Dexippus, *Fragments* 100F6.

and Pavia against the Iuthungi in Italy in this final war, although they are not in agreement as to the results of all these battles.[58] The point of contention lies in the first battle at Placentia, which Pseudo Aurelius Victor holds was a Roman victory, while Dexippus and the *Historia Augusta* claim it was an embarrassing Roman defeat. All evidence suggests that Victor is seeking to rewrite history to hide the defeat and make Rome look better, since the next battle fought would occur at Fano, which was far to the south of Placentia and far deeper in Roman territory – had Aurelian won at Placentia, the Iuthungi would not have been able to penetrate into Italy as far as they did. That there was major civil strife at Rome at the time, followed by Aurelian building fresh walls after the war can be seen as further proof that Aurelian lost at Placentia as the defeat would have shaken the city's sense of security.[59] Aurelian would ultimately defeat the Iuthungi at the Battle of Fano, before annihilating them utterly as they left Italy at the Battle of Pavia in mid-271, at last securing Italy from invaders.[60]

Aurelian did not end his military campaigns here, but would go on to wage war against Zenobia and the Palmyrene Empire for the next two years, before turning his attention to the north to defeat Tetricus in early AD 274, bringing the Gallic Empire to an end before returning to Rome to celebrate a triumph for his great conquests, which will be given proper examination in the following chapter. Zosimus claims that Aurelian celebrated his triumph between his conquests of his two rivals, but this has been discounted since all other sources claim the triumph occurred after the Gallic Empire was crushed and it would make more sense for Aurelian to celebrate the complete reunification of the empire under his command.[61] Aurelian would also enact a number of religious and economic reforms, and these too will be examined in subsequent chapters.

Accounts of Aurelian's death are broadly similar, but there are clear disagreements among the sources as to the exact details of his end. There is unanimous agreement among the sources that Aurelian perished in AD 275 in the province of Europa in Thrace, but it is here that details start to diverge.[62] The exact location of Aurelian's end is a matter of dispute: Eutropius and the *Historia Augusta* name the town of Caenophrurium, Zoismus and Zonaras hold it was at Heraclea, while Pseudo Aurelia Victor claims he died on the road between Heraclea and Constantinople. Historians tend to favour Caenophrurium, although the fact that the precise location of Caenophrurium has not yet been discovered denies us access to possible archaeological proof to settle the debate.[63] Aurelian was killed by a treacherous servant named Eros, which the *Historia Augusta* has as Mnestheus in what is clearly a

[58] Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.3; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 21; Dexippus, *Fragments* 100F7.
[59] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.49; White (2020) 83; Watson (1999) 54.
[60] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.49; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.3; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 18.
[61] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.61; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 32; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27; Saunders (1992) 316.
[62] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.62; Anonymous, SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 35; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.15; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.8; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27.
[63] White (2020) 143; Watson (1999) 105.

mistaken translation of the man's title, who was threatened by the emperor and in turn used his position in the emperor's court to fabricate letters claiming that Aurelian would kill a number of prominent figures, leading the conspirators to kill Aurelian first.[64] This sudden death rocked the empire, terminating Aurelian's reign and leading to a further decade of turmoil before the Tetrarchs would bring the Crisis of the Third Century to an end.

[64] White argues that Aurelian had discovered corruption amongst the officers, who killed him in a panic, yet there is no mention of corruption in the army in any of the sources. Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.62; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 36; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.15; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.8; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27; Watson (1999) 105; White (2020) 145.

Chapter 3 – Securing the Frontiers

Now that a clear picture of Aurelian's life has been established, this work intends to examine in depth how he restored stability to the empire, starting with his military conquests. Although Aurelian had secured Italy from the threat of foreign invasion during his first year as emperor, he still had much to do to take control of the entire empire, not least of which was dealing with his two rivals that held power over the provinces to the north and east of Italy. The Gallic Empire had formed during the reign of Gallienus when the commander in charge of the Rhine, Postumus was declared emperor by his troops and whose sphere of influence extended to Gaul, Hispania and Britain. In the east, the city of Palmyra had become increasingly powerful under its leader Odenathus, only for Odenathus to be assassinated in AD 267, leaving his widow Zenobia in control of the region, who began to carve out her own eastern empire. Finally, Aurelian would need to resolve the matter of Dacia, where Roman control was becoming increasingly untenable. The aim of this chapter is to examine how the Gallic and Palmyrene Empires as well as the situation in Dacia threatened the stability of the Roman Empire as a whole. It will then analyse what steps Aurelian took to rectify the situation before judging how successful he was in the long and short term.

The strength of the Palmyrene armies, which held no loyalty to Aurelian, ensured that Palmyra would have threatened the stability of the empire regardless of Zenobia's aggressive expansion westwards. The city had risen in power and prominence over the preceding centuries, serving as a trade hub on the edge of Roman territory that saw goods pass through out to India and China and vice versa.[65] It had also served as a bastion against the Parthians during the first and second centuries AD, and with the rise of the Sassanid Empire, the first ancient superpower Rome had faced since Carthage, Palmyra had become a critical part of Roman defences in the region.[66] Following the capture of the Roman emperor Valerian in 260 AD by Shapur I at the Battle of Edessa, Roman control of its Syrian territory had nearly collapsed, save for the efforts of the leader of Palmyra Odaenathus, who took control of the local forces and decisively drove the Sassanians out of Roman lands.[67] This had left Odaenathus as the de facto ruler of the East, a fact Gallienus had begrudgingly acknowledged when he "appointed [Odaenathus] Commander-in-Chief of the entire East", which provided Odaenathus an official and powerful position within the empire.[68]

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[65] Pliny the Elder grumbled that the East took "one hundred million sesterces from our empire per annum, at a conservative estimate". In reality, this claim is likely inflated for dramatic effect but highlights the staggering wealth and by extension power Palmyra earned through trade. Pliny, *Natural Histories* 12.41.

[66] "Palmyra…enjoying a separate lot between two supreme empires…in times of discord, it is always the first concern on both sides." Pliny, *Natural Histories* 5.88.

[67] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.39; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.11; SHA, *The Thirty Tyrants* 15.

[68] Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.23.

The question of where Palmyra found the forces to defeat Shapur I and challenge Aurelian is one that historians have sought to answer.[69] It is believed the Palmyrene strength lay to two parts, the first being soldiers which were normally used to protect the trade caravans that came through Palmyra.[70] Due to the wealth involved in the trade coming through Palmyra, that there existed a large number of mercenaries who served to guard the caravans from bandits, which Strabo had prophetically noted in the first century BC that "camel traders travel…in such numbers of men and camels as to differ in no way from an army".[71] The rest of the Palmyrene forces were made up of Roman garrisons that had been stationed in Palmyra by Trajan and Hadrian in the preceding century, and had been strengthened by Septimius Severus, and when combined with the local mercenaries and auxiliaries produced a powerful army capable of keeping the might of the Sasanian Empire at bay.[72] Given the choice between supporting the widow of Odaenathus, who had so brilliantly defended the region against the Sassanians, or Aurelian, a distant leader whose support from the army came from the western legions he had served besides, it is clear their loyalties were more likely to lie with the local figure. Following Odaenathus' assassination in AD 267, since his son Vaballathus was only eight years old and too young to rule, Zenobia would reign as queen regent in his stead.[73] Of particular importance is the dedication found on a milestone outside Palmyra, which gives Vaballathus the title of "Corrector", which refers to the position of Commander-in-Chief that Gallienus awarded his father.[74] It is highly unlikely that Gallienus intended for the position to be hereditary, yet it is clear that the people of Palmyra either believed it was or chose to believe this was the case in order to keep the title and power that came with it. Consequently, there existed in the east of the Roman Empire a powerful faction with authority just below that of an emperor, with no loyalty to Aurelian and a large army at their command.

Stability was further threatened by the fact that Zenobia chose to form the Palmyrene Empire and begin aggressively expanding her sphere of influence into the west while engaging in a cunning propaganda campaign to undermine Aurelian's authority.[75]

[69] Young (2001) 159; Nakamura (1993) 138.
[70] Gawlikowski (1994) 32; Young (2001) 160.
[71] Strabo, *The Geography* 16.4.
[72] See White, who argues that the Roman legions stationed in Syria had been dispersed by Palmyra to the frontiers, but fails to explain why the legions would have stood by passively as Zenobia began attacking fellow Romans. Edwell (2007) 61–62; White (2020) 102.
[73] The assassination of Odaenathus is shrouded in mystery, evidenced by the sources offering wildly different theories as to who killed him and why, with suggestions ranging from a nephew lashing out over a matter of personal honour, to Zenobia herself seeking to claim personal power. Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.24; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.39; SHA, *The Thirty Tyrants* 15; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13.
[74] CISem. 2, 3971. Taken from Dodgeon & Lieu (1991) 65.
[75] Jones (2016) 223.

Fig 1 – A map of the full extent of the Palmyrene Empire in AD 271. Wikipedia.

At the height of its power, the Palmyrene Empire had conquered nearly all of Roman territory in Asia Minor, and had the ability to destabilise Rome itself. This territory was not solely made up of provinces whose loyalty to Zenobia outweighed its loyalty to Aurelian, but in the case of Egypt, land that had been won by force. Zenobia sent an army under the command of Septimus Zapdas to seize Egypt, which did so after short campaign of a few months against the prefect of Egypt Tenagino Probus.[76] This was a clear act of aggression against fellow Romans, proving that Aurelian had good cause to view Zenobia as a rival and threat to the stability of the empire.[77] The use of the army to take control of Egypt showed the lengths Palmyra was willing to go to build its empire and that there would be no hope of a peaceful resolution to this situation. The importance of Egypt as a province cannot be ignored when its wider role within the empire is taken into account as a source of wealth

[76] Zosimus claims that the Palmyrene army numbered seventy thousand against the Egyptians fifty thousand, which was almost certainly inflated, as Egypt did not have that many troops to call upon. Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.44; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.27; SHA, *Life of Claudius* 11; White (2020) 46; Roth (2009) 228.

[77] Jones notes how the *Historia Augusta* shows that despite Aurelian's efforts to tie Zenobia to Cleopatra and portray himself as the conquering Augustus, Zenobia subverts this and seems instead to be as much a *triumphator* as Aurelian, shattering the rules of power and proving herself to be a worthy rival and equal to Aurelian. Jones (2016) 232-33.

and grain. Egypt saw as much trade come through the province as Palmyra itself did, as ships would pass through to go between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In taking the province, Palmyra gained access to a massive source of income and had effective control of all eastern trade, while simultaneously ensuring the wealth would go to Zenobia rather than Aurelian. Furthermore, Egypt produced large amounts of grain which would then be sent on ships to feed Rome itself, giving Palmyra the option to cut off the shipments and starve the city.[78] This was not without historical precedent, as Vespasian had chosen to do exactly this during the civil wars of AD 69, leaving the task of capturing Rome itself to his subordinates, before sailing into the famished city with the grain ships as its saviour.[79] Palmyra posed a great threat to Italy, making it clear Aurelian would need take military action preserve the empire.

The city of Antioch was part of the Palmyrene Empire, and this gave Zenobia control of one of the largest mints in the region, which she used as an effective tool for propaganda. This can be seen by examination of the coins minted by the city, which show a subversive campaign to slowly undermine Aurelian's authority in the region and promote Vaballathus and Zenobia in his stead.

Fig 2 – RIC V Aurelian, *Antioch*, c. AD 271/272, American Numismatic Society.

This is one of the coins minted at Antioch, early in Aurelian's reign in AD 271, and its denomination is that of a silver antoninianus. The obverse of the coin depicts Aurelian, complete with the radiate crown to mark his status as emperor, in a position of clear superiority over Vaballathus on the reverse, who has been artificially aged into a young man for propaganda purposes, when in reality he would only have been twelve years old. It has been noted that placing Aurelian on the obverse is a sign of subservience by Palmyra, and that later coins placing him on the reverse would be a deliberate snub to highlight the supremacy of Vaballathus.[80] However, examination of the legends on the coin reveals that Aurelian was already being undermined despite this supposed show of featly. Aurelian's legend reads "*imp c averlianvs avg* – Emperor Caesar Aurelian Augustus", a simple acknowledgement of his position and nothing more. In contrast, Vaballathus has "*vcrimdr"*, which is an abbreviation of "*Vir Clarissimus Rex Imperator Dux Romanorum* – A very excellent man, king, general, leader of the Romans", a far longer legend with more titles that makes him seem far more impressive than Aurelian. Furthermore, the titles of

[78] White (2020) 46.
[79] Tacitus, *The Histories* 2.82.
[80] Bland (2011) 142; Jones (2016) 223; Watson (1999) 68.

"*Imperator*" and "*Dux Romanorum*" could only be held by the emperor, and bestowing them upon Vaballathus was an incredibly subversive act.

Fig 3 – RIC V Vaballathus, *Unknown mint*, c. AD 272, American Numismatic Society.

This silver antoninianus was produced a year after the first and does not depict Aurelian on it at all. Instead Vaballathus, once again aged up, is on the obverse now wearing the radiate crown, a clear sign that he is now considered to be an emperor, with the legend leaving no room for doubt as it says: '*imp c vhabalathvs avg* – Emperor Caesar Vaballathus Augustus". Aurelian no longer even features on the Palmyrene coinage, with the reverse instead depicting the goddess Aequitas, often associated with justice, shown here with a cornucopia in one hand and a set of scales in the other. Given that Aurelian was at war with Palmyra by AD 272 his absence from the coins is understandable, as it was clear to all that there could be no sharing of power between Aurelian and Zenobia.[81] Having Vaballathus on the coins with a goddess rather than Aurelian was meant to shown Palmyra's independence.[82] The fact Aurelian was no longer being recognised by the Palmyrene regime highlights the complete split that had occurred, leaving Aurelian no choice but to defeat them in battle and forcefully take control of the dissident empire.

Aurelian sought to resolve the matter of the Palmyrene empire and restore stability by launching a full military campaign in AD 272, marching through Asia Minor towards Syria.[83] Aurelian would engage Zenobia and her armies twice, at Immae and Emesa, winning both battles decisively, before laying siege to Palmyra itself, forcing capitulation and capturing Zenobia.[84] In this Aurelian successfully broke the strength of the Palmyrene Empire, removing its leaders and shattering its hold over both Asia Minor and Syria as a whole.

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[81] Watson (1999) 69.

[82] Jones (2016) 224.

[83] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.50; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 22.

[84] Aurelius Victor and Pseudo Aurelius Victor are the only literary sources that make no mention of Odaenathus, Zenobia or the Palmyrene Empire in any form. This cannot be attributed to either anti-military biases or an unwillingness to acknowledge Aurelian fighting fellow Romans, since Tetricus and the Gallic Empire are covered in their works, as well as Aurelain's Italian campaigns. I hold that sexism and xenophobia has caused this omission and that they didn't like the idea of the Zenobia being in such a position of power. Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.27; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 25; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.50-54; Downey (1950) 67; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Watson (1999) 75-76; White (2020) 97.

However, this campaign was not enough to completely restore stability or completely eradicate the Palmyrene cause, as two rebellions would occur in AD 273 in Palmyra and Egypt lead by the resentments of Zenobia's faction.[85] The rebellion in Egypt was apparently lead by a rich merchant called Firmus, but all our information about the man comes from the *Historia Augusta* and historians are highly sceptical about the claims made.[86] Palmyra rallied behind Zenobia's relative Antiochus, who was declared emperor and clothed in the purple.[87] Both of these rebellions were short-lived, with there being no record of any territory being taken by either rebel or damage done to the empire beyond some civil unrest in Alexandria.[88] Aurelian would conduct a quick campaign against both usurpers and crush them, sacking Palmyra in the process. This would finally end all the unrest in the East and Palmyra would never again be able to amass such power again, even after it was rebuilt under Diocletian.

Good fortune played a critical role in Aurelian's recovery of the eastern territories, since he did not have to contend with the Sassanid Empire. Shapur I, who had been such a threat to the Romans, had passed away in AD 270, just as Aurelian was being declared emperor, ensuring Aurelian did not have to contend with a powerful foe.[89] Furthermore, Shapur I's successor Hormizd only reigned for a single year, and while the next ruler, Bahram I did reign between AD 271 and 274 he had to deal with a serious internal religious struggle brought on by a clash between the Sassanian priesthood and the founder of Manichaeism, the prophet Mani.[90] Bahram II would take the throne in AD 275, the last year of Aurelian's reign, only for a civil war to break out between himself and his brother who ruled the eastern Sassanian territories, which would last for years, to the point the Roman emperor Carus sought to take advantage of the infighting when he invaded in AD 283.[91] The consequences of this meant that the Sassanian Empire was unable to invade Roman territory while Aurelian was warring with Zenobia, nor were they in a position to take advantage of the battered region in the aftermath of Palmyra's sacking. Given that Shapur I's final invasion of Roman territory had seen him conquer all the way to Antioch before Odaenathus drove him back, it is clear that a Sassanian invasion would have been devastating for Aurelian and that he was incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to conduct his campaign against Palmyra without fear of intervention from the rival superpower. Aurelian's ability to restore stability to the empire came about not solely due his campaigns, policies and reforms, but also due to the circumstances of the time he ruled in.

[85] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 31-32; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.61.
[86] White makes the convincing case the author of the *Historia Augusta* has confused the Firmus who lead the rebellion in Alexandria with Caludius Firmus, the governor of Egypt who remained loyal to Aurelian. White (2020) 108; Watson (1999) 82.
[87] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.60; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 31.
[88] Watson (1999) 82.
[89] McNab (2010) 210; Watson (1999) 77.
[90] White (2020) 166.
[91] Southern (2001) 241.

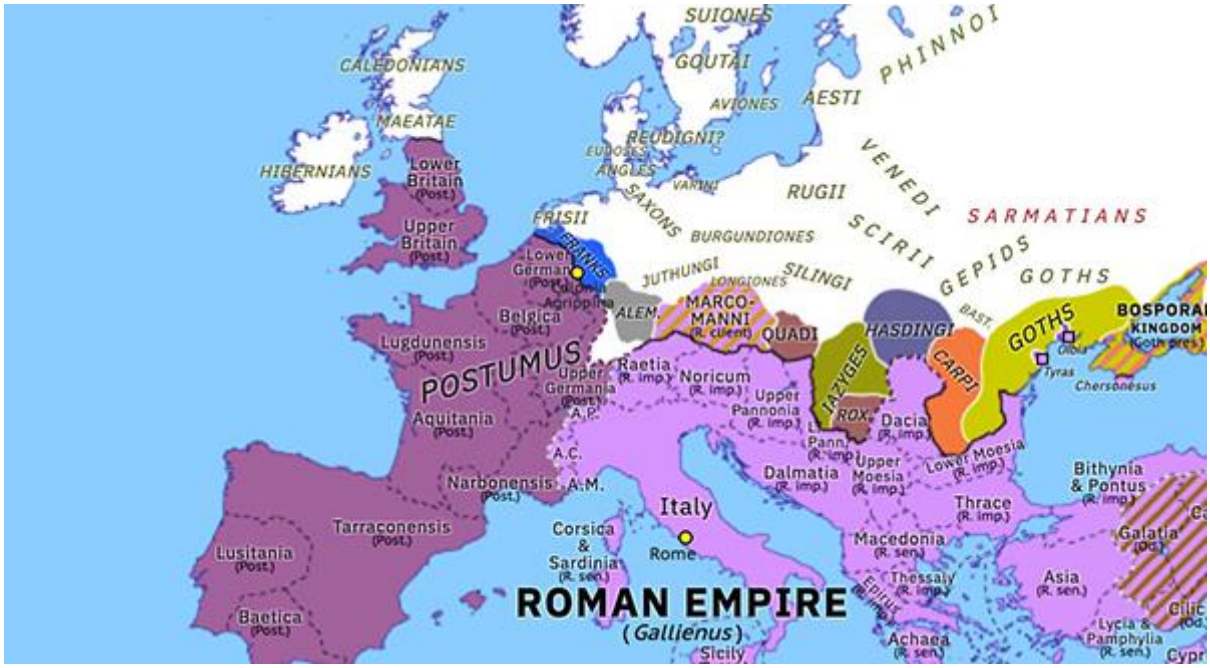

Fig 4 – Map of the Gallic Empire at its height in AD 263. Omniatlas.

Following his victories over Palmyra, Aurelian would turn his attention to conquering the other breakaway empire with a rival emperor: the Gallic Empire and Tetricus. The Gallic Empire consisted of the regions of Gaul, Britain and Hispania and had formed during the reign of Gallienus when the commander of the Rhine, Postumus was declared emperor by his troops in AD 260.[92] There had been a two attempts by Gallienus to recover the lost territory in AD 263 and AD 265 but these invasions had ended in failure, resulting in an uneasy coexistence separated by the natural barrier of the Alps.[93] Although the Gallic Empire was inferior to the Palmyrene Empire in resources and wealth, it nevertheless posed a great danger to Aurelian and threatened the stability of the empire. A particular source of concern lay in the military might of the breakaway empire, which primarily drew its strength from the four legions that had been stationed on the Rhine and declared for Postumus, as well as a further three legions in Britain, compounded by the auxiliaries meant to support them.[94] Given that this force had both seen off Gallienus' attack while continuing to successfully defend the Rhine from Germanic incursions for over a decade, its military prowess is clear to see. This army had the potential to be aided by the might of the *Classis Britannica*, one of the most powerful Roman naval fleets in operation at this time. Such was the power of the fleet that the usurper Carausius was able to maintain an empire in both Britain and parts of Gaul while keeping at bay the Tetrarchs for an entire decade solely

[92] Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.9; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.38; SHA, *The Thirty Tyrants* 3; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.24; Van Dam (1985) 28; Drinkwater (1987) 25.

[93] Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.24; SHA, *Lives of the Two Gallieni* 4; Drinkwater (1987) 30.

[94] White (2020) 111; Le Bohec (2000) 168; Ezov (2007) 51; Goldsworthy (2016) 311.

through the power of the *Classis Britannica*.[95] Furthermore, the threat of invasion was constant, as the Gallic forces had only to cross the Alps to be in Italy and within striking distance of Rome, as Constantine and Magnus Maximus would prove in the summers of AD 312 and AD 387 respectively when they invaded and successfully crossed the Alps.[96] Postumus had never tried to invade, but he was murdered by his own troops in AD 270, leading to a string of successors, with Tetricus being but the latest and it is likely one would have made the attempt had Aurelian not taken action.

Having finally pacified Palmyra, Aurelian was free to strike at Gaul and proceeded to march his veteran legions through the Alps at the beginning of AD 274, before defeating Tetricus and his forces at the Battle of Châlons in March.[97] Unlike Palmyra, a single decisive battle was all that was required to end the campaign, and the breakaway provinces quickly fell in line without any further acts of rebellion. Despite this being a brief campaign, it is one that has become controversial for historians on account of certain claims made in some of the literary sources. Both Eutropius and the *Historia Augusta* claim that Tetricus held no loyalty to his men and wished to defect to Aurelian, passing secret messages to him before the Battle of Châlons and defecting once the fighting started.[98] Eutropius, Aurelius Victor and the *Historia Augusta* use the same message as an example, line 365 of Book 6 of the Aeneid: "Unconquered hero, free me from these ills", which strongly suggests they are drawing from a common source, likely the lost *Kaisergeschichte*. The idea that Tetricus defected is one that has split historical thinking, as it raises the obvious question of why the battle was fought at all, costing the lives of many Roman soldiers that would be needed to defend the frontiers from foreign threats. Thus, it has been convincingly argued that Tetricus never intended defection and was instead captured early in the battle, with his secret messages to Aurelian simply being the fabrication of later propaganda.[99] The fact Aurelian allowed Tetricus' followers to keep their positions after the campaign, leaving the administration of the region largely unchanged is further proof he would not have mauled the Rhine legions

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[95] Carausius would control Britain from AD 286-296, a mere decade after Aurelian's assassination, leaving no doubt that the fleet was just as powerful during his reign. Pitassi (2012) 21; Salway (2002) 73.

[96] See Watson, who argues that the Gallic Empire posed little threat since Aurelian was willing to spend nearly two years campaigning against Palmyra while leaving a garrison force to guard the Alps. However, I would argue this speaks more to the threat Palmyra posed through its control of Egypt and rapid expansion into Asia Minor, leaving Aurelian little choice but to take a risk while he battled Zenobia. Omissi (2018) 268; Watson (1999) 91.

[97] Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.27; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 4; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.61; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35.

[98] Interestingly, there is disagreement between the sources as to why Tetricus wished to defect, with Eutropius and Aurelius Victor claiming it was due to the constant mutinies of the soldiers while the *Historia Augusta* holds it was their shameless behaviour. SHA, *The Thirty Tyrants* 24; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35.

[99] White alone tries to argue that Tetricus did defect and Aurelian needed to break the moral of the rebellious Rhine legions in battle, yet the sight of their leader abandoning them for the enemy would have had the desired effect and left the legions intact for Aurelian to use. White (2020) 111; Watson (1999) 94; Van Dam (1985) 28; Drinkwater (1987) 42.

had there been the option of a bloodless resolution. Ultimately, it can be said that Aurelian effectively restored stability in the short term since he reintegrated a region that had been split off from Rome for over a decade with minimal strife. However, Aurelian cannot be said to have been successful in the long term as he never addressed the issues that made Gaul a hotbed for usurpers, namely the powerful military force on the Rhine and the *Classis Britannica* providing the military might for a would-be emperor to launch their bid for power, while using the natural barrier of the Alps to keep forces from Italy at bay. The future would see many figures such as Carausius, Julian and Magnus Maximus take advantage of this situation, causing severe damage to the empire in numerous civil wars.

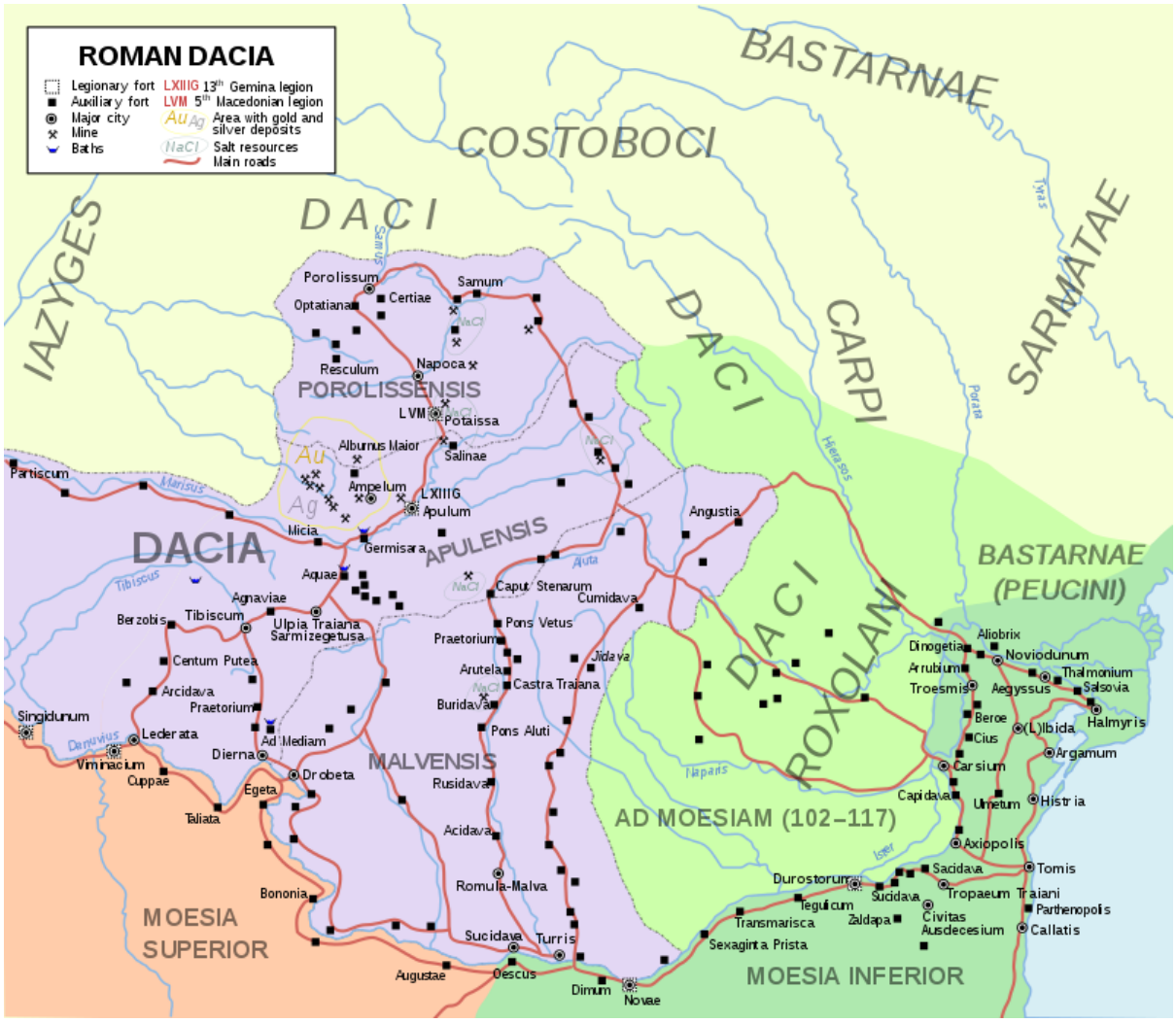

Fig 5 – Map of provinces of Dacia in early 1st century AD following the conquest of the region by Trajan. Wikipedia.

Unlike Palmyra and Gaul, Dacia was not a concern for Aurelian due to being the territory of a rival usurper seeking to carve out their own empire, but was instead a massive drain on Roman military resources that were ultimately failing to protect the region. Dacia's geographic position next to the various Germanic tribes required that soldiers constantly be stationed there to guard against incursion, and unlike the forces stationed in Gaul who had the Rhine, there was no river barrier to help guard the edge of Roman territory, since Trajan had crossed the Danube to conquer the region. Without the terrain to help serve as a blockade, Rome was forced to make up for this by basing even more military forces in the region, with thousands of legionaries, auxiliaries and navel personal being used to guard

what was a comparatively tiny piece of land when set against the rest of the empire.[100] While this had been an issue since Trajan's conquest, it was not until the 3rd century that it began to threaten the stability of the empire. The cause of this was that the Goths and Scythians that had risen in the intervening centuries had taken control of the north of the Black Sea, where Roman military presence was limited.[101] Rome did have the *Classis Pontica* to guard the south of the Black Sea, but the fleet had only numbered at forty ships at its height, being intended and used more to fight pirates than defeat an enemy navy.[102] As a consequence, the barbarians could build fleets on the Black Sea, then sail straight past the defences at Dacia into the Mediterranean to pillage and attack at will, with such incidents occurring in AD 251 and AD 259, where fleets totalling five hundred ships had been assembled and wreaked havoc in the Aegean before they were driven back.[103] The worst incursion occurred in AD 269, where a massive fleet would again break into the Aegean, before going on to lay siege to the city of Thessaloniki, and only the invention of the *Classis Alexandria* would see the threat ended in the following year.[104] The forces of Dacia were unable to prevent these attacks, nor were they able to guard their own land border, as proved by the fact that in the first year of his rule Aurelian was forced to deal with a Iuthungi force that had penetrated Dacia and were crossing the Danube when he caught them.[105] The military situation in Dacia was untenable, forcing Aurelian to act before the entire region collapsed.

Aurelian responded to this threat by completely reorganising the region in AD 271, starting by abandoning all territory north of the Danube and moving all military forces back to the river.[106] This not only allowed the Romans to use the Danube as a natural barrier, but also meant the *Classis Moesica* stationed on the river could be used to actively defend the empire, compared to the limited river guarding duties it had had before. Furthermore, the fleet itself was divided into four parts, each assigned to a local commander in one of the provinces that bordered the river.[107] This made the fleet more flexible and able to quickly respond to local threats as they arose, while simultaneously ensuring that a single commander did not have too much military power in their hands, dissuading would-be usurpers from making a bid for power. This was helped by Aurelian creating the new province of Dacia Ripensis out of the territories of Thrace as well as Upper and Lower

[100] Le Bohec (2000) 169; Goldsworthy (2016) 311.
[101] Le Bohec (2000) 171.
[102] Pitassi (2012) 48.
[103] Pitassi (2012) 156-157; Watson (1999) 39.
[104] Both Zosimus and the *Historia Augusta* claim the barbarians numbered at three hundred and twenty thousand, with the *Historia Augusta* asserting that the fleet was two thousand ships strong, while Zosimus goes for an even higher six thousand. These numbers are clearly inflated for dramatic effect, designed to make the invaders more threatening and the Romans more impressive for defeating them. While it is reasonable to conclude this attack was larger given it had the strength to besiege a city, I hold that the fleet was only marginally bigger than the previous two. SHA, *Life of Claudius* 8; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.26; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.42; White (2020) 43; Watson (1999) 40.
[105] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 18.
[106] Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.15; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 39.
[107] Pitassi (2012) 50.

Moesia, which served to further divide power in the region. Aurelian also moved a significant portion of citizens of the region south of the Danube, a process that was used to restore the depleted population that had been bled dry by the constant fighting, allowing for economic prosperity and fresh recruits for the legions.[108] Plenty of Roman people remained in the abandoned territory, leading to a Daco-Roman region that continued to exist at least two centuries after Aurelian had been assassinated, providing an opportunity for trade and a friendly buffer.[109] While Aurelian did give up territory and reduce the empire's holdings, it is widely agreed that this was a small loss overall and Aurelian's actions ultimately aided the Romans in the long run, as it enabled them to properly protect their territory from invaders.

Overall Aurelian can be said to have been largely successful in stabilising the frontiers of the empire in the both the long and short term. The immediate threats of the Gallic and Palmyrene Empires were utterly crushed, reunifying the empire under a single ruler for the first time in over a decade. Dacia was reorganised and the forces redistributed, allowing for a far more effective defence of the region and allowing it to prosper again. While Aurelian was unable to completely resolve the issues in Gaul to prevent further usurpations, it would be unfair to place too much blame on him for an issue that no other emperor was able to solve either. However, Aurelian was incredibly fortunate that the Sassanian Empire was not in a position to take advantage of the weakened Roman defences in the east, as they could have easily swept aside the garrisons stationed there and seized large swathes of territory. Despite this, Aurelian's success cannot be downplayed and his momentous achievements in stabilising the frontiers should be recognised as such.

[108] Watson (1999) 156; White (2020) 87.
[109] White (2020) 88; Watson (1999) 156.

Chapter 4 – Pacifying Rome and the conquered territories

Aurelian's efforts in stabilising the Roman Empire were not limited to dealing with foreign threats and rival empires as he also had to deal with internal strife, particularly at Rome. During Aurelian's first year as emperor, the capital city would face civil disturbances that escalated into anarchy as the people rioted. In addition, an uprising by the workers at the mint would occur that forced Aurelian to use the legions to restore order and secure his centre of power. Reconstructing the event and identifying its causes has proven to be challenging for historians, on account of the fact that the literacy sources paint an unclear and confusing picture of what occurred. Furthermore, in the aftermath of his campaigns against his rivals Tetricus and Zenobia he had captured both, requiring him to decide their fates, as well as deal with the Gallic territories, which had developed their own administrative structure in the decade they had been split off from the rest of the empire. This chapter will seek to examine the unrest at Rome, identifying its causes and the steps Aurelian took to prevent additional chaos in the city while he was away on campaign. In addition, Aurelian's treatment of Zenobia, Tetricus and the former Gallic and Palmyrene territories will be analysed and how effective it was in stabilising the empire.

There are a number of possible factors that may have contributed to instigating the riots at Rome, and the threat of barbarian invaders was in all likelihood the greatest. During Aurelian's second war against the Iuthungi in March of AD 271, his forces were defeated at the Battle of Placentia, allowing the Iuthungi to penetrate deep into Italy, until they were finally checked at the Battle of Fano in the following month just over one hundred miles from the capital itself.[110] Given that the turmoil in Rome began around this time, it has naturally led a number of historians to conclude that it was these events that caused the riots, as the people were afraid that the city might be besieged and sacked by the Iuthungi, a view supported by the *Historia Augusta* claiming this to be the case.[111] Another theory that has tentatively been suggested as another potential source for unrest is the idea that Zenobia, who had taken control of Egypt at this time, had taken the opportunity to end the supply of grain ships to Rome, causing a food shortage that agitated the population.[112] However, given that the coins being minted in the Palmyrene territory were still acknowledging Aurelian as the sole emperor at this point in time, it is unlikely that this had occurred, since starving Rome was a highly provocative action that would have completely contradicted the relationship of subservience Zenobia was attempting to portray. While it is possible Zenobia may have advertised herself as friendly with Aurelian in her territory while undermining him in reality, cutting the grain supply would have been a highly provocative

[110] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 18.

[111] The *Historia Augusta* is the only ancient source to explicitly assert there was a link between the Iuthungi invasion and the troubles in Rome, although Zosimus does implicitly support this idea, pointing out that Aurelian had good reason to be concerned for Rome when the Iuthungi invaded. Despite the fact that the main source is the notoriously unreliable *Historia Augusta*, the circumstances do indicate that it is correct, leading historians and myself to conclude that the *Historia Augusta* is accurate. SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 18; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.49; Watson (1999) 143; White (2020) 70; Dmitriev (2004) 575; Dey (2011) 111.

[112] White (2020) 71; Watson (1999) 53.

act that could push Aurelian to war. Historians are split over whether this unrest was a brief and isolated incident, unconnected to the utter tumult the city would be plunged into when the mint works rebelled, or whether the disorder at Rome was all one conjoined event and there is a case to be made for both arguments.[113] One could conclude that the leader of the uprising, Felicissimus, chose this moment to rebel as Aurelian was perceived to be weak following his defeat at Placentia. Furthermore, the suggestion that the mint rebellion occurred while the people of Rome were rioting over the threat of the Iuthungi is supported by the fact the *Historia Augusta* declares this to be the case, and a certain reading of the other sources that mention the mint rebellion, but not the unrest caused by the Iuthungi, suggesting that it was all linked and the other sources are only focussing on the more important matter of the mint rebellion.[114] However, the *Historia Augusta* is a highly flawed source, and the argument could be made that the sources do not mention the unrest because what disturbances did occur were utterly overshadowed by the later revolt of the mint workers. The deciding factor for me is that if Felicissimus did turn against Aurelian at that point, he would have done so in the knowledge he would have to face both the hostile Iuthungi that could menace Rome, as well as Aurelian himself and the forces he still commanded, and so I hold that Felicissmus chose to take up arms when he had only one foe to face rather than two.

While the threat of the Iuthungi would have caused trouble at Rome, this would pale in comparison to the massive disturbance that was to follow in the months of June and July: the revolt of the mint workers and the resulting execution of a number of senators.[115] While many of the sources mention these incidents, they do not agree on whether they are connected either to each other or the riots in Rome. Eutropius asserts that the senators were executed for playing an unknown role in the rebellion of the mint, the one source to explicitly tie these events together.[116] Zosimus is far vaguer, only telling us that the senators were killed for their part in a conspiracy against Aurelian, but gives no details, leaving it unclear whether he is referring to the mint or some other matter, but it is reasonable to conclude he is referring to the revolt.[117] Finally, the *Historia Augusta* holds that the senators should not have been executed as the charges against them were trivial, and were we to believe it, we can infer that they cannot have turned against Aurelian as treason was not a trivial matter.[118] Taking into account the pro-senatorial bias of the work, as well as its

[113] Watson and Dey argue that the two events were largely separate, but suggest that the turmoil from the Iuthungi panic contributed to a general atmosphere of tension and dissatisfaction in the following months that fed into the mint rebellion. White posits that it was all one event. Watson (1999) 53; Dey (2011) 112; White (2020) 70.
[114] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 21; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.14; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.4
[115] For the execution of the senators see: Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.49; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 21; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.14. Coverage of the mint rebellion can be found in: Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.14; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.4; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 38.
[116] Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.14.
[117] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.49.
[118] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 21.

infamous unreliability, it can be concluded that the *Historia Augusta* is downplaying the crimes of the senators, and that they were connected to the revolt of the mint. Historians disagree as to whether the senators caused the mint rebellion, or the uprising at the mint led to the senators supporting them.[119] Of these two views I find it more likely that the senators were following Felicissimus and his workers, given that while the senators could offer Felicissimus money and political support for his cause, they had nothing that could make him believe they would somehow triumph over Aurelian and his legions.

Aurelian responded to the uprising by returning to Rome in July and unleashing his army to crush the mint workers and end the unrest in the city, cumulating in a battle near the mint on the Caelian Hill.[120] The only sources that cover this event in any depth are the *Historia Augusta* and Aurelius Victor, and it should be noted that they agree on many of the details, suggesting they are drawing from a common source, in all likelihood the *Kaisergeschichte*. However, historians agree that neither source can be trusted as they are clearly inflating the casualties of the battle for dramatic effect, claiming that Aurelian lost seven thousand soldiers in his conflict with Felicissimus.[121] While it should be remembered that city fighting can be brutal and lead to increased losses, one should also consider that an entire legion comprised five thousand troops. There is no possibility that the mint workers were able to inflict so many casualties on Aurelian's veteran soldiers, particularly given their complete lack of any form of military training. Not a single source makes any mention of the garrison at Rome playing any role in the events that unfolded, but we can conclude it did not side with the mint workers as this would have been mentioned in the sources and Aurelian would have taken punitive action against the garrison after he had quelled the rebellion. It has even been suggested that there was no battle at all, and simply a riot led by the mint workers, but I do not believe this to be the case as there would have been no reason to execute Felicissimus and the senators in the aftermath of the turmoil.[122] That Aurelian executed those behind the uprising is noteworthy given his merciful treatment of his other enemies. I hold that Aurelian knew he was about to begin his campaign against Zenobia and thus would be away from Rome for a significant period of time while he fought in the east.[123] Having the ringleaders killed sent a strong message to the other senators and officials as to what would happen to them should they seek to stage their own coups in Aurelian's absence. Aurelian's intention was to scare Rome back into line, and the success of

[119] Dey and White argue for the senators being the provocateurs of all that occurred, while Watson believes matters began when the mint workers rose in revolt. Dey (2011) 112; White (2020) 72; Watson (1999) 52-53.

[120] Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 38.

[121] Palmer has clearly misread the sources and believes that the figure of seven thousand refers to the number of rebelling mint workers, yet his argument about exaggerated figures stands regardless. Curran is the only historian to take the claim of seven thousand casualties at face value and I believe he is mistaken in this view. Palmer (1980) 219; Dey (2011) 112; Watson (1999) 53; White (2020) 72; Curran (2002) 34.

[122] Palmer (1980) 220.

[123] Aurelian would capture Palmyra in August of AD 272, yet the two rebellions that sprang up in the aftermath of the war against Zenobia were not crushed until AD 273, keeping Aurelian away from Rome for roughly two entire years. Saunders (1992) 325; Watson (1999) 83; White (2020) 101; Jones (2016) 222.

this measure can be seen both in the complete lack of troubles in the city for the rest of his reign, but also in the fact that the pro-senatorial literary sources writing in the later centuries regard the event with horror, proving that Aurelian's actions left quite the impression.[124]

The execution of the conspirators was not Aurelian's only act to stabilise Rome, as he also sought to bolster the city's defences, primarily through the construction of new defensive walls for the city.[125]

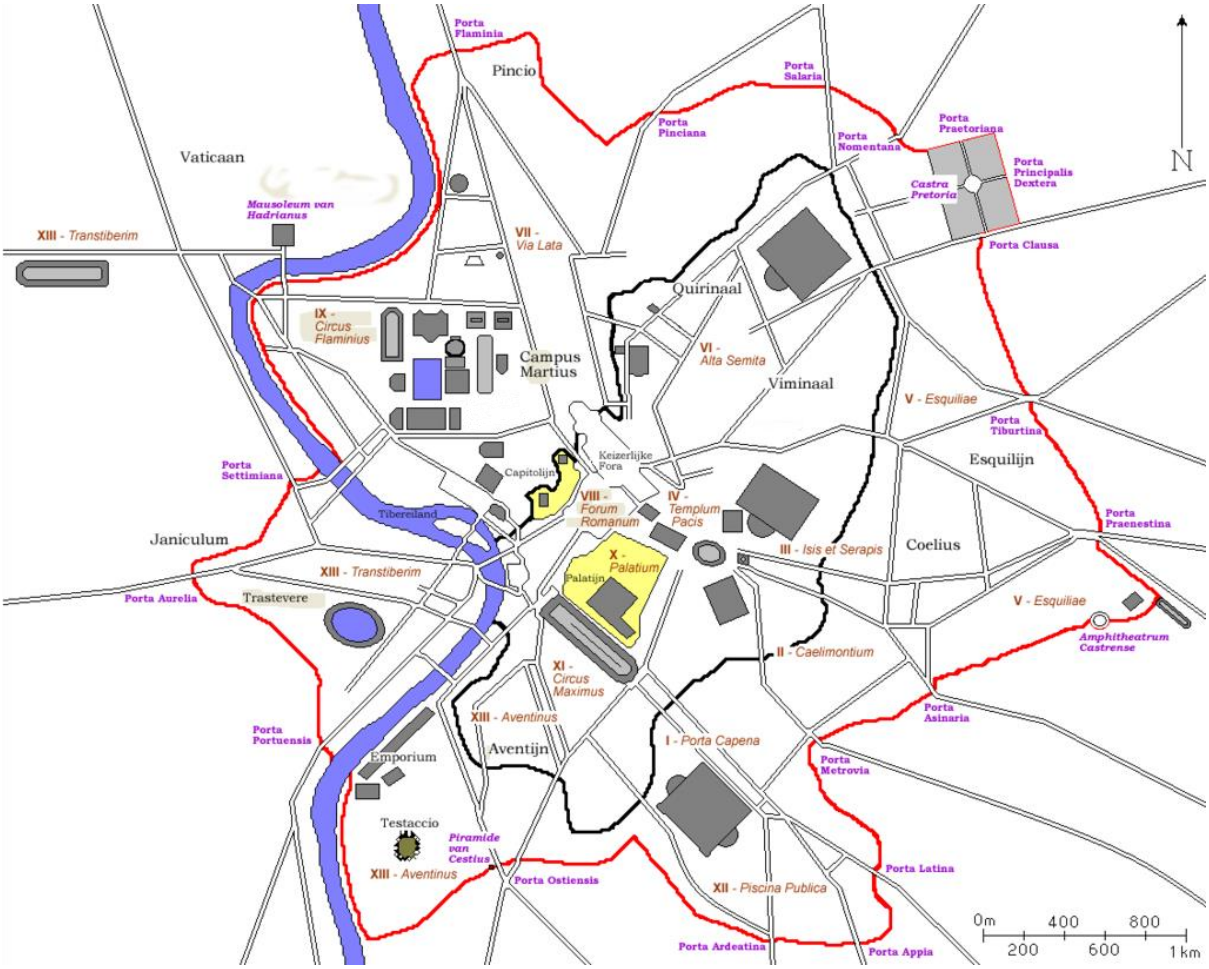

Fig 6 – Map of Rome with the pre-imperial walls in black, and Aurelian's walls marked in red. Wikipedia.

[124] Eutropius considers Aurelian to have acted with "the utmost severity", Pseudo Aurelius Victor holds that Aurelian incredibly cruel with his punitive measures, while the *Historia Augusta* thinks the executions were unnecessary. All of these sources are known to show a strong bias for the senate and be serve as an indicator as to how the senators perceived Aurelian's actions. In addition, this incident almost certainly played a role in leading to Aurelian being depicted as a harsh and uncompromising figure by historians. Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.14; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.4; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 21.

[125] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 21; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.15; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.6; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.49.

The walls were a massive undertaking that protected a substantial part of the city, coming to nineteen kilometres in length while being over three and a half metres high and eight metres tall.[126] These walls would serve to pacify the people and prevent future unrest should barbarians break into Italy again, and helped stabilise the city in a number of ways. The first was the physical defence offered by the wall and the psychological value it had, both on the citizens and potential enemies. These were not the first walls built to defend Rome, but such defences had not been erected since the days of the republic, and what defences did exist were so limited that they served no practical purpose in defending the city. This issue was known to the residents of Rome, and had been a major factor in contributing to their panic when the Iuthungi marched through Italy, as they knew the only protection for the city lay with Aurelain and his army.[127] Aurelian's walls not only gave the city a defence to withstand an assault, it held a symbolic value that would have reassured the citizens and made them feel secure in the face of danger.[128] Furthermore, it has also been observed that the act of building the walls would have served to keep the citizens of Rome busy and give them jobs, which took them off the street where they could cause trouble.[129] Given the size of the walls and the fact that Zosimus tells us the project was not actually finished until the reign of Probus, who ruled from AD 276-282, it is clear that this was a massive undertaking that would have required thousands of workers to complete.[130] The suggestion has been made the walls themselves could be used to quell future riots in the city, but this argument is not convincing when the walls surrounded just under fourteen square kilometres, too large a space to be practical in containing a rioting populace.[131] Aurelian successfully stabilised Rome by both keeping its people occupied with the construction project, and providing protection against future attacks.

Despite this, the walls themselves were of limited use as defensive structures, and clearly intended to serve more as a deterrent than protection. Historians have noted the numerous failings in the structure, in particular the limitations of the artillery built on top of the walls, which suffered from limited range when it came to targeting enemies directly in front of the walls and the fact that Rome only had enough trained ballistae operators to properly defend a single stretch of wall, rather than the entire city.[132] In addition, the wall had twenty nine

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[126] White (2020) 87; Watson (1999) 147; Curran (2002) 26.

[127] Rome did have both the Praetorian and Urban cohorts stationed in the city to protect it, as well as the *Vigiles*, which had become a militarised force at the start of the third century AD, giving the city a garrison of around twenty thousand soldiers. However, this force would have struggled to protect the citizens from a raiding army when trying to protect a city the size of Rome, and any battle would have quickly devolved into brutal street fighting. Le Bohec (2000) 21-22.

[128] Palmer makes the unconvincing argument that Aurelian had the walls built to better collect customs coming into the city, which Dey and I believe can only have been a secondary concern at most. Palmer (1980) 219; Dey (2011) 114; Dmitriev (2004) 575.

[129] Construction of the walls began in September of AD 271, as Aurelian was setting of for Palmyra, and it is clear that the construction would occupy the citizens of Rome and keep them from taking advantage of his absence. Dey (2011) 113.

[130] Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.49.

[131] Dey (2011) 115.

[132] Watson (1999) 151; White (2020) 85.

entrances, which made it impossible to defend all of them without stretching the defending army too thinly to mount an adequate defence.[133] Therefore, it is clear that the purpose of the walls was simply to delay a raiding barbarian army and limit the damage it could cause until Roman reinforcements could arrive to win the day. Further proof that Aurelian's walls were unable to defend against a dedicated siege army can be seen in the actions of Maxentius, who reigned only four decades after Aurelian, and undertook an extensive reform of Rome's defences to enable them to withstand a dedicated siege, when he feared the city would be attacked by his rival Constantine.[134] Thus, while Aurelian's actions were successful in the short-term for restoring stability by pacifying the people as well as creating walls capable of withstanding barbarian raiders, he would also create problems for his successors that would require great effort for them to rectify.

As a result of Aurelian's campaigns against Palmyra and Gaul, he had managed to capture both of the leaders, Zenobia and Tetricus, who had sought to challenge him for imperial power. Furthermore, there was also the issue of the administration of the former Gallic territories, which had spent over a decade acting independently and had thus developed its own separate imperial hierarchy.[135] Mishandling either situation ran the risk of creating strife and instability in the conquered regions, and while Aurelian could use his army to quell any unrest, it would take time and cause further harm to the empire as a whole. It is widely agreed that Zenobia would be paraded in Rome as part of Aurelian's triumph in AD 274, before spending the rest of her life living comfortably in Rome.[136] By acting in a merciful manner, Aurelian prevented Zenobia from becoming a martyr, but it should be noted that this did not stop Palmyra from rebelling for a second time.[137] Zenobia suffered no reprisal for this due to the fact it was clear that killing her would solve nothing, as Antiochus had been declared emperor and become the new leader. Aurelian also spared Antiochus and the Palmyrene elite after he defeated him and sacked Palmyra, but it is clear that the lack of unrest in the region that followed cannot be attributed to Aurelian's clemency, as this strategy had already failed, and it more likely that Palmyra was in no state to revolt again following two defeats and a brutal sacking. In the case of Palmyra, Aurelian's benevolent approach had failed to bring stability. However, the policy of mercy can be seen

[133] Watson (1999) 148.

[134] Among the improvements made to the walls, Maxentius had the height doubled, closed off a number of entrances to limit access to the city and began digging a defensive ditch in front of the circuit. White (2020) 86; Dey (2011) 43; Watson (1999) 151.

[135] Omissi (2018) 15.

[136] There is a slight spilt among the ancient sources regarding the fate of Zenobia, with Zosimus claiming she died due to either illness or starvation when Aurelian was returning to Rome after the first campaign against Palmyra. Both the *Historia Augusta* and Eutropius argue for Zenobia surviving and residing in Rome, while Zonaras recounts both versions, making no judgment in favour of either. Historians have unanimously concluded that Zosimus is incorrect on this matter. As for Zenobia's children, the *Historia Augusta* is uncertain, yet the claim that Zenobia left descendants would suggest they survived. Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.59; SHA, *The Thirty Tyrants* 30; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27; Watson (1999) 83; Jones (2016) 233; White (2020) 102; SHA, *The Thirty Tyrants* 27.

[137] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 31-32; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.61.

to have been incredibly effective in dealing with both Gaul and Tetricus himself. Not only did Aurelian spare Tetricus, he would go on to appoint him as the Regulator of Lucania in Italy, giving his former rival an official position within Aurelian's regime.[138] He also allowed Tetricus' son to sit in the Senate, showing compassion to his former foe's family too.[139] That Tetricus loyally served Aurelian for the rest of his reign proved Aurelian's choice to have been correct, and his kindness would have helped pacify the Gallic territories to see their former emperor so well treated. Finally, the administration of the provinces that comprised the former Gallic Empire were left utterly untouched, with the existing postings being fully recognised by Aurelian.[140] This act was unquestionably of benefit to the empire, as it allowed the region to continue to run smoothly without the upheaval of a complete leadership overhaul and hastened its reintegration into the empire.[141] The success of this policy can be seen in the complete lack of rebellion or strife in the region, unlike the troubles Palmyra would cause after Zenobia's defeat.[142]

Overall, I believe that Aurelian's handling of Rome and the conquered territories can be judged to have been broadly successful. The pacification of Rome was incredibly effective, allowing Aurelian to campaign against Zenobia without fear of further unrest in the capital and securing his hold on the city for the rest of his reign. However, his design for the walls created a defence for the city that was not as strong as it could have been, and while rampant speculation is dangerous, it does raise the question of what could have been had Aurelian taken the opportunity to properly see to the protection of Rome. His policy of mercy can be judged to have utterly failed with Palmyra, given the two rebellions that

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[138] The historical sources are nearly unanimous on this matter, with only the *Historia Augusta* arguing that Tetricus was put in charge of all of Italy, a view it itself contradicts later in the narrative, leading historians to rightly dismiss it. Pseudo Aurelius Victor does claim that the appointment was meant as a cruel joke by Aurelian to humiliate Tetricus, but no other source holds this to be true, and given this was an act of incredible trust, it was unlikely to have been done in malice. SHA, *The Thirty Tyrants* 24; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 39; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.7; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Watson (1999) 95; Drinkwater (1987) 66.

[139] Elton argues that this act only served to highlight the irrelevance of the Senate in imperial politics. There is merit to this claim, as the Senate had lost power over the 3rd century, as their disastrous election of Quintus proved. While it could be argued that Aurelian's successor was chosen by the Senate, this only occurred at the behest of the army after it couldn't decide for itself. Elton (2018) 26; Omissi (2018) 14.

[140] Van Dam notes that the Gallic emperors were local generals taking the mantle of emperor out of a need to secure the borders against hostile invaders. Through this lens, Aurelian likely felt comfortable leaving the provincial administrations as he was providing adequate defence for the region and wanted to avoid the inevitable unrest meddling with local systems. Van Dam (1985) 29; Drinkwater (1987) 42.

[141] Watson (1999) 96.

[142] The only evidence that does not support this is a single offhand remark from Zonaras, who mentions the Gaul becoming "restless" and requiring Aurelian to lead a military intervention. However, there is absolutely no other literary or archaeological evidence to suggest anything other than a peaceful reunification, so this claim can be dismissed. Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27.

followed and the brutal suppression that was required to bring the region under control, yet his success with the former Gallic empire shows that the policy was not in itself flawed, but that Aurelian simply should have been more careful in his application of it.

Chapter 5 – Aurelian's Economic Policies and Reforms

The Crisis of the Third Century was not a catastrophe for Rome solely due to the spate of usurpers and new foreign powers to threaten the borders of the empire, but also because of the devastating economic crash that occurred in the midst of the strife. Long abuse of the Roman monetary system by past emperors finally bore bitter fruit as entire denominations of coins were rendered worthless and attempts to stabilise the situation proved temporary at best. By the time of Aurelian's reign, the economy was in shambles, leaving him the daunting task of trying to fix a problem centuries in the making. This chapter will examine the issues that caused the economic turmoil to occur, including the loss of purity in the coins, the flaws in the mint system as well as the collapse of Rome's internal trade network. It will then analyse the policies and reforms Aurelian created to combat the calamity, showing that despite his best efforts, Aurelian's success was rather limited and that further efforts were required by future emperors.

A major cause for the economic situation of the 270s was the constant warfare that had occurred throughout the Crisis of the Third Century. The first problem was that all the military campaigns fought by the Romans against both foreign invaders and rival claimants to imperial power had to be funded, which meant paying for everything from the soldiers' salaries to transporting, feeding and housing them. This had forced more and more government expenditure on the military budget, while other areas suffered accordingly, leading to a decrease in revenue.[143] Another issue lay in the fact that many of these campaigns were occurring on Roman soil, causing great harm to both the countryside as soldiers scavenged for food and the cities as they were besieged and sacked, all of which hurt the empire in the long run. More recently, the fracturing of the empire prior to Aurelian's reign had cause a complete collapse of the internal trade network, denying Rome the fruits of its provinces.[144]

The first economic problem that Aurelian needed to overcome was the matter of the mints, as it was clear that the system was in dire need of reform to continue to function. The issue was that the empire needed to ensure the soldiers could be paid, but with the current mints existing far from the frontiers, and the threat of barbarian invasions that would sever supply lines being constant, there needed to be sources of money near the armies to guarantee a steady flow of cash to the troops.[145] If the troops were not paid, there was a significant risk that they would mutiny, creating both another threat to contend with as well as weakening the overall security of the empire. Further problems lay in the fact that it was getting harder and harder to pay the army due to the poor coinage, which had led to the *annona* system in which local communities gave food and clothing directly to the army as a form of tax.[146] In addition to this predicament, at the start of his reign Aurelian only had control of four mints in the empire: Rome, Milan, Siscia and Cyzicus, which would drop to three after the Rome mint was closed following the rebellion of Felicissimus.[147] The fact Aurelian only controlled a

[143] Watson (1999) 125; Grant (1999) 44; Elton (2018) 15.
[144] Paolilli (2008) 283; Southern (2001) 267.
[145] Katsari (2003) 48; Watson (1999) 132.
[146] Roth (2009) 226; Elton (2018) 15.
[147] Watson (1999) 133; Curran (2002) 26.

fraction of the mints both limited his ability to enact meaningful reform on the coinage across the empire, since the other mints would not follow any policies he introduced, but also limited his ability to fund his armies and projects, as he was reliant on a restricted source of wealth.

Aurelian attempted to resolve the debased coinage at two clear points of time, while his efforts regarding the mints spanned most of his reign. In AD 271, Aurelian moved the centre of his minting efforts from Rome to Milan, while also setting up two new mints in the Balkans.[148] This served to weaken the power of Rome, reducing the risk of another rebellion while Aurelian was on campaign against Zenobia and Tetricus, in conjunction with his harsh treatment of the senators and project to build fresh walls for the city. The building of the two mints in the Balkans, which coincided with his reorganisation of the Dacian provinces, provided stable sources of income to the troops stationed in the region, which helped secure a critical frontier of the empire. During Aurelian's campaigns against Palmyra in AD 272 and 273, he was able to secure control of the mints at Antioch and Alexandria, acquiring complete oversight of coin production in the eastern territories as well as two more mints to obtain funds from.[149] Furthermore, in AD 273 Aurelian had the mint at Rome reopened while also constructing a new mint in Tripolis, which both gave the African provinces a mint and brought the total number of mints under Aurelian's control up to nine.[150] Finally, in AD 274 Aurelian would conquer the Gallic empire, capturing the mint at Trier as well as the Cologne mint that had been built during the reign of Postmus, giving Aurelian complete control of all the minting facilities in the empire.[151] Once he had control of the Trier mint, Aurelian had it moved west to Lyon, which allowed it to supply the troops on the Rhine without being too close to the frontier, which had made it easy for usurping generals to take control of the mint to fund their rebellions.[152]

Aurelian can be judged to have been entirely successful in taking control of the minting of the empire and providing stable income to the armies on the frontiers, through his conquests of the rival empires and construction of new mints in key locations. It has been noted that one of the main benefits of this was that Aurelian was able to standardise the entire minting process, with new coins being produced simultaneously across the empire, all to a similar level of purity and weight, which would serve to aid Aurelian's efforts to restore the debased coinage, as the scheduling could be coordinated and allow the new coins to be released into the market at the same time.[153] An additional benefit to Aurelian's campaign was the restoration of Rome's internal trade network, which had largely broken down

[148] Syvanne (2020) 113; Watson (1999) 128.
[149] Aurelian would capture Antioch in AD 272, following his victory over Zenobia at the Battle of Immae. Alexandria would not come under Aurelian's control until the following year, when the rebellion of Firmus was finally crushed. SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 25; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.51; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 12.27; Watson (1999) 134; White (2020) 125.
[150] White (2020) 119; Syvanne (2020) 113.
[151] Besly (1984) 229; White (2020) 119; Watson (1999) 134.
[152] Watson (1999) 135; Drinkwater (1987) 147.
[153] Watson (1999) 136.

between the barbarian invasions and the division of the empire between rival leaders.[154] However, while this achievement was impressive, it did not solve the issues of inflation or the debased coinage, instead providing the opportunity to resolve the matter, which Aurelian would endeavour to capitalise on.

One of the primary coins for the Romans had been the silver denarius, serving as a linchpin of the economy since its introduction during the Second Punic War, nearly five hundred years before the time of Aurelian. Throughout the time of the Republic and early Empire, the coin had maintained a high purity of 98%, meaning that most of the coin was made up of silver as it was meant to be.[155] However, from the reign of Nero onwards, the denarius would gradually be debased, as less and less silver went into each coin, gradually degrading its worth, until by the reign of Septimus Severus at the end of the second century AD the purity had dropped to 50%, before plummeting to a nigh-unusable 2.4% by the time Aurelian was proclaimed emperor by his troops.[156] The cause of this catastrophic drop has been attributed in part to the actions of Caracalla in AD 215, who both lowered the purity of the denarius and introduced the antoninianus, a coin intended to act as a double denarius to stabilise the economy, but was crippled from the beginning with a 60% purity which had collapsed to a woeful 1.5% by AD 270.[157] Despite this, the antoninianus did serve as the principal silver coin of the empire for much of the third century, ensuring any effort to fix the coinage by Aurelian would be forced to grapple with a coin that had been sabotaged from its introduction. Rome's economic woes did not end with the abysmal state of the antoninianus, as the bronze coinage had suffered a near total collapse during the reign of Gallienus, to such an extent that only four mints in the empire were actually producing bronze coins at all by the time Aurelian came to power.[158] Between these two disasters the entire foundation of the Roman economy was in danger of collapsing entirely.

[154] Paolilli (2008) 283; Southern (2001) 267.
[155] Watson (1999) 126; White (2020) 8; Katsari (2003) 31.
[156] Katsari (2003) 46; White (2020) 122; Giardina (2007) 759; Roth (2009) 226.
[157] White (2020) 8; Southern (2001) 266; Watson (1999) 126; Scarborough (1973) 341.
[158] Southern (2001) 122; Katsari (2003) 43; White (2020) 125; Watson (1999) 127.

Fig 7 – RIC 41 Aurelian and Virtus, *Rome*, AD270, Wildwinds.

This antoninianus that was minted in Rome in AD 270 serves as a perfect example of both how far the purity had degraded and the effect it had on the coins themselves, as well as a demonstration of the propaganda Aurelian used at the beginning of his career. Despite being a silver coin, it is clear that what little silver that did once exist has long since been rubbed way, leaving behind the copper that the coin was actually made of. The obverse of the coin depicts the bust of Aurelian wearing a cuirass, complete with a radiate crown atop his head to serve as a visual symbol of his position as emperor, while the reverse portrays the Roman god Virtus, resting on his shield while his left-hand grips a spear. The legend around Aurelian reads "*imp c l dom avrelianvs avg* – Emperor and Consul Lucius Domitius Aurelian Augustus". While this is a simple statement, it was an essential one for Aurelian to make early in his career, given the brief reign of Quintillus who had been chosen by the Senate to succeed Claudius, and nearly clashed with Aurelian before his sudden death.[159] Given that a number of mints had created coins for Quintillus for several months made it all the more vital for Aurelian to send a clear message that he was the sole ruler of the empire.[160] The reverse of the coin only says "*virtvs avg(vsti)* – Virtus of the Augustus", deliberately short so as to accentuate the important proclamation on the other side. Virtus was the god of bravery and military strength, making it natural for Aurelian to tie himself to given his life as a career soldier. This also served to remind the Roman people of Aurelian's military prowess and the support of the army that had propelled him to power, acting as a simultaneous reassurance of Aurelian's ability to defeat the barbarian threats that were menacing Italy at this time and a warning to those who would seek to usurp him.

[159] Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 34.5; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.12; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 26; SHA, *Life of Claudius* 12; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 37; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.47.

[160] Dmitriev (2004) 570.

Aurelian's attempts to restore the debased coinage can be divided in to two groups: his edict in AD 271 and his reforms in AD 274. Aurelian would first attempt to combat the degraded coinage in AD 271 by having the purity of the antoninianus returned to the level of purity it was before the reign of Claudius in AD 268, which served to curb the worst of issue.[161] However, it should be noted that this was not intended to solve the economic crisis, but instead to act as a temporary measure to stabilise the situation while Aurelian was away on campaign against Zenobia and Tetricus, and in this regard the policy can be judged to have succeeded, since it both prevented total economic collapse and served as a foundation for Aurelian to build upon when he initiated his true economic reforms in AD 274.

Having conquered the Gallic and Palmyrene Empires, Aurelian was finally in a position to focus on Rome's economic woes again by AD 274, whereupon he issued a new set of edicts designed to make real headway into repairing the crippled coinage. This was done by simultaneously recalling the useless and unusable coins, of which the antoninianus pictured above would be an excellent example, taking them out of circulation while simultaneously increasing the silver content of any antoninianus minted from then on to 5%.[162] The effect of this reform meant that the only coins being used by the Romans would have value again, allowing the monetary system to continue to function. Removing the useless coins served to prevent the system from being clogged up with worthless currency and stopped the newly minted coins from being undermined. In addition to this, Aurelian sought to reinvigorate the bronze coinage by having the mints produce three types of bronze coins, hoping that the improved quality of coins could make it affordable to produce bronze coins again, with one of the coins being a new sestertius.[163]

[161] Syvanne (2020) 113; Watson (1999) 128; Southern (2001) 122.

[162] Drinkwater has noted that the Gallic mints had already begun to increase the silver content of the antoninianus during the reign of Tetricus, showing that Aurelian was not the only emperor attempting to tackle this issue. Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.61; Watson (1999) 129; Southern (2001) 122; White (2020) 123; Syvanne (2020) 169; Giardina (2007) 759; Drinkwater (1987) 157.

[163] Southern (2001) 123; Scarborough (1973) 342; Watson (1999) 130.

Fig 8 – RIC 64 Aurelian, *Rome*, AD 274-275, Wildwinds.

This antoninianus was minted in Rome after Aurelian's economic reforms were enacted, dating it to either AD 274 or 275 and once again depicts Aurelian, complete with radiate crown and cuirass, with a god on the reverse. Even a cursory examination of the coin reveals it to be in far better condition than its counterpart from AD 270, actually being a silver coin and having avoided the degradation, leaving the figures it depicts clear to see. The legend on the obverse says "*imp avrelianvs avg* – Emperor Aurelian Augustus", a simple statement of Aurelian's position of which there is little to say that hasn't already been said, with the reverse containing the features of interest. The legend reads "*oriens avg* – Rising Augustus" and depicts the god Sol wearing the radiate crown and standing triumphant over a defeated enemy while holding a laurel branch and bow in his arms. This coin is clearly intended to celebrate Aurelian's military victories over his foes, with the defeated enemy representing either one of the foes that Aurelian had defeated or all of them at once. The legend highlights Aurelian's achievements and political aspirations while simultaneously serving as a self-deprecating pun. "Oriens" can be taken to mean 'Rising', 'Oriental' or 'Eastern' and it is clear that all three interpretations were intended to be valid. The rising is both a reference to Aurelian's elevation to complete control of the Empire, as well as a potential hint for his aborted campaign against the Sassanid Empire. The 'Oriental' and 'Eastern' translations refer to his conquest of Palmyra and toppling of Vaballathus, making Aurelian the new emperor of the East, while simultaneously riffing on his worship of Sol as he has adopted an eastern tradition and become a semi-oriental emperor as a result. The choice of Sol as the god placed upon the coins rather than Virtus as before or another traditional Roman deity is due to the religious stance of Aurelian in the last years of his reign, which will be given proper examination in the next chapter. The bottom of the coin contains the mark XXI, a fact that puzzled scholars as to its meaning for a time, with suggestions ranging from the new coins being worth twenty times that of the originals, which would have been an act of incredible inflation on Aurelian's part if true, to the coins being worth twenty asses, which would have made the silver in the coins worth more than the coins themselves.[164] However, it has finally been recognised that the purpose of the mark is to serve as a pledge

[164] Watson does an excellent job outlining the history of the scholarship surrounding these coin marks and the many hypothesis that were created. Watson (1999) 129-130.

of the coins worth, promising that the coin contains the 5% purity that it is supposed to, which was introduced to help restore trust in the coinage by guaranteeing the coin's worth.[165]

Despite these efforts, it is clear that Aurelian did not succeed in his efforts to fix the coinage, with his attempt to reinvigorate the bronze coins in particular being a total failure. The mints failed to produce enough bronze coins to be useful to the Romans again in daily life, with the production of the bronze coins stopping altogether just a few months after Aurelian's death, and not being successfully resumed until the fourth century, in spite of the efforts of Diocletian, whose reign began a decade after Aurelian was murdered.[166] Rome was also suffering from a steady inflation in a number of areas by Aurelian's reign, with prices steadily creeping upwards in fits and starts over the preceding century.[167] Contrary to the views of earlier scholarship, the inflation was not tied to the debasement of the coinage, meaning that Aurelian's strategies to restore the coinage did not resolve the matter.[168] This was because inflation was being driven by a multitude of factors, such as the constant minting of fresh coins, particularly in bronze, in order to pay the military which was then not removed from circulation through taxes.[169] In fact, things only got worse as Aurelian's reforms caused a significant spike in prices expressed in bronze leading to hyperinflation.[170] Examination of the coin hoards show that the debased currency continued to be favoured, and the mint in Lyon never stopped producing the debased coins at all.[171] Ironically, the fact that Aurelian was generating coins of value meant that they were too important to use in everyday life, and thus the old coins were preferred. It is clear that while Aurelian did succeed in restoring the trust in the currency, the continued use of the debased coins across the empire meant that he failed to provide the empire with the working currency he intended.

Overall, I believe that Aurelian did not stabilise the Roman economy in spite of his best efforts. While he did create the best conditions to bring about the necessary changes by taking control of the entire empire and the mints, as well as standardising the system to allow for a coordinated replacement of the coinage, he ultimately was unable to follow through and successfully remove the debased coinage, while simultaneously causing a serious spike in inflation, further hurting the empire's economy. The fact that Diocletian was forced to undertake his own economic reforms two decades later further highlights Aurelian's failure.[172] However, I hold that Aurelian cannot be judged too harshly for this

[165] Scarborough (1973) 342; Watson (1999) 130; Southern (2001) 123.
[166] Syvanne (2020) 170; Watson (1999) 141; Southern (2001) 123.
[167] The one market where prices didn't rise in line with the others was wheat, and it has been speculated that this is the result of state intervention, since wheat was a staple of the Roman diet. Kelly (2021) 12-3.
[168] Watson and Scarborough link the debasement of the coins to inflation, yet modern studies have shown this not to be the case. Scarborough (1973) 340; Watson (1999) 126; Ando (2012) 215; Kelly (2021) 7; Elton (2018) 16.
[169] Elton (2018) 16; Ando (2012) 216.
[170] Elton (2018) 26; Kelly (2021) 2; Watson (1999) 126; Ando (2012) 216.
[171] Scarborough (1973) 341.
[172] Southern (2001) 160.

deficiency, since he was trying to undo a catastrophe that was centuries in the making that other emperors were unable to fix either – Diocletian's efforts scarcely met with any greater success.

Chapter 6 – Aurelian and Religion

Like much of the Roman Empire during the Crisis of the Third Century, religious worship among the people was an area that had seen strife and turmoil. Christianity had a history of friction within the Roman world dating back to the earliest days of the belief, with matters tipping into conflict as the persecutions began with the most recent having occurred during the reign of Valerian in the 250s.[173] By the time of Aurelian there had been a thawing of relations, although matters were far from settled with the potential for further strife a constant possibility.[174] Aurelian himself had a noteworthy relationship with the divine, choosing to follow traditional Roman gods before making a sudden shift after the summer of AD 273 to promote the solar god Sol as his personal deity. It is somewhat difficult to judge what exactly Aurelian's intentions and aims were in the religious sphere, as his new solar cult was only formally established in AD 274, a year before his assassination which completely threw off whatever plans Aurelian had put in place, leading to much disagreement among scholars. Ultimately, Aurelian was able to introduce Sol into the mainstream Roman religious sphere, while completely restructuring the priestly colleges of Rome without causing any major unrest or civil strife, a truly impressive achievement. However, owing to the brevity of Aurelian's reign, we cannot be sure that this state of affairs would have continued, and that the Roman people would have been as receptive to whatever else he intended to do.

During the first half of Aurelian's reign, from AD 270 to mid AD 273, he clearly favoured the time-honoured Roman pantheon, with a particular focus on the deities preferred by the military such as Virtus and Hercules, unsurprising given both Aurelian's military background and the fact that it was the support of the army that propelled Aurelian to the imperial throne.[175] In addition, Aurelian took Jupiter Optimus Maximus as his divine patron between AD 271 and 273, an obvious choice considering Jupiter was the supreme ruler of the gods, and the Optimus Maximus – Greatest and Best form having been worshipped by the troops for centuries, choosing to display this relationship primarily through coins.[176]

Fig 9 – RIC 129, Aurelian and Jupiter, Milan, AD 272-273, Wildwinds.

[173] Millar (1977) 568; Curran (2002) 39; Ando (2012) 139.
[174] Ultimately there would be almost four decades of peace before Christian persecution began again under the Tetrarchy at the beginning of the 4th Century. Millar (1977) 573.
[175] Watson (1999) 184.
[176] McNab (2010) 211; Watson (1999) 186; White (2020) 135.

This antoninianus, minted in Milan between AD 272 and 273, shows both Aurelian's unique bond with Jupiter and the nature of this relationship between emperor and god. The obverse of the coin depicts Aurelian, complete with radiate crown and wearing a cuirass to remind all of his military background, with the legend "*imp avrelianvs avg* – Emperor Aurelian Augustus". The reverse of the coin portrays two male figures, with the one on the right being identified as Aurelian due to the radiate crown he is wearing, while the other must be Jupiter given the coins legend. The legend itself reads "*iovi conser* – Jupiter the Protector", claiming Aurelian to be under the divine protection of his patron god.[177] However, this relationship is shown to go both ways, as Jupiter is giving a globe representing the world to Aurelian, displaying that while Jupiter guarded Aurelian, the emperor protected the world. This coin was minted to be given to the troops for their pay, making them the intended audience for the propaganda displayed here, and the image of the soldier-emperor defending the realm at Jupiter's behest would have been well received. While Jupiter was a relatively common god for emperors to depict on their coins, particularly with the title of "Protector" during this unstable period, in the case of Aurelian it carried particular weight, as the emperor had proven himself a worthy protector of the Roman state through his successful defence of Italy in the first year of his reign. Aurelian's reunification of the empire through his later military victories in Palmyra and Gaul only gave the title greater meaning.

Following his conquest of Palmyra, in the summer of AD 273, Aurelian underwent a spontaneous and significant shift in his dealings with the gods, pivoting to the eastern solar deity Sol, who Aurelian would remain connected to for the rest of his reign.[178] Sol was not a new god to the Romans as solar worship had been steadily increasing since the beginning of the third century AD, nor was Aurelian the first emperor to have interacted with Sol. As much as a century earlier, Septimus Severus and his successors had honoured the sun, and both Gallienus and Claudius had ties to the solar cult, making Aurelian's introduction of Sol the culmination of religious progression.[179] There had been a doomed attempt by Elagabalus in AD 220 to make the solar god Sol Elagabal the primary god of the Roman pantheon by placing Sol as a dominant figure above the other gods and creating a new priestly college to honour him, which naturally caused outrage amongst the traditional Romans, and these religious reforms would be one of the main motivating factors for his assassination two years later.[180] Roman religion was incredibly varied and complex, with worship of the gods coming in many forms according to local customs and traditions, yet Elagabalus had made the mistake of supplanting the existing deities with Sol Elagabal, rather than simply adding his god as another part of the pantheon.[181] We can identify Aurelian's transition to Sol through examination of the coinage, with mints across the empire producing coins with Aurelian and his new patron from mid-AD 273 onwards. The *Historia Augusta* does claim that Aurelian actually began worshipping Sol in AD 272, recounting a story in which Aurelian's forces received divine aid during the Battle of Emesa against

[177] White (2020) 135.
[178] Scarborough (1973) 342; McNab (2010) 211; White (2020) 137; Watson (1999) 189.
[179] Grant (1999) 49-50.
[180] Shotter (1979) 52; White (2020) 136; Mattingly (1942) 175; Evola (1957) 304; Watson (1999) 194; Southern (2001) 124; Curran (2002) 11.
[181] Ando (2012) 124.

Zenobia.[182] However, the lack of numismatic evidence to support this assertion, combined with the *Historia Augusta* being a notoriously unreliable source as well as the fact that this tale reads as a pagan version of Constantine and the Milvian Bridge gives us ample cause to dismiss this as a fabrication.[183]

Fig 10 – RIC 62, Aurelian and Sol, Rome, AD 274-275, Wildwinds.

Examination of this silver antoninianus that was minted at Rome can be used to understand how Aurelian portrayed Sol as a Romanised figure, which would have made the god far more socially acceptable than the purely eastern deity that Elagabalus had tried to introduce.[184] The XXI mark guaranteeing the coins purity of 5% allows us to date this coin to having been minted after Aurelian's coinage reforms, meaning it cannot have been minted in AD 273. The obverse depicts Aurelian with his familiar apparel of radiate crown and cuirass, with the usual legend of "*imp avrelianvs avg* – Emperor Aurelian Augustus". The reverse shows Sol, wearing the radiate crown and holding the globe in his left hand as he stands triumphant over two bound captives, while the legend reads "*oriens avg* – Rising Augustus", which appears on many of the Sol coins minted during Aurelian's reign. Comparison of this Sol to Sol Elagabal reveals that many of the eastern motifs, such as the consorts and physical image of the sun, have been dropped in favour of showing Sol as a conquering deity, defeating the enemies of Rome and protecting the frontiers in a portrayal similar to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Aurelian specifically chose to make his Sol have traits commonly associated with Jupiter not only to make the Eastern god more Romanised and socially acceptable, but also because it called to mind the idea of Jupiter Protector, allowing Aurelian to create a link between his former and current deities of choice, and in turn enabled Sol to continue the theme of Aurelian as a guardian of the empire. Therefore, while Aurelian did reintroduce the eastern god as a mainstream figure, he was able to do so in a fashion that was socially acceptable and without threatening the stability of the empire.

After conquering Tetricus and returning to Rome to celebrate his triumph in AD 274, Aurelian would oversee the formal establishment of the cult to Sol, constructing a temple in Rome filled with the riches taken from the Palmyra campaign, and creating a college of

[182] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 25.
[183] White actually takes the claims of the *Historia Augusta* at face value on this matter, but Watson has conclusively proved the *Historia Augusta* is simply causing mischief. White (2020) 136; Watson (1999) 194.
[184] Evola (1957) 304.

priests to oversee the rites and needs of the new cult.[185] Scholars remain divided on how the new cult interacted with existing Roman traditions, and whether or not Aurelian had elevated Sol to serve as a tool to unify the empire.[186] There is a long standing school of thought that argues that Aurelian placed his solar cult as the dominant religion over the traditional gods, having created a deity that was liable to offend the least amount of people, and thus could unite the Empire under a single religious figure.[187] However, this has been challenged by those who hold that the cult to Sol merely stood alongside the other gods, having joined the pantheon rather than dominated it.[188] I believe that these historians are correct in their interpretation because there is strong evidence to support it. The fact that Aurelian set up the college using Roman nomenclature, with priests of Sol holding the title of *pontifices*, combined with the fact that an individual could be part of both priesthoods suggests the cults stood side-by-side. Further support for this view can be found in Aurelian bestowing the title of *pontifices maiores* upon the older priests of the traditional gods, giving them greater status in addition to the fact that Aurelian reminded *pontifex maximus* at the head of both priesthoods. Finally, when one considers that Elagabalus' murder was rooted in placing Sol over the traditional pantheon, it would have been unwise for Aurelian to do the very thing that saw his predecessor killed.

Aurelian's establishment of a new college of priests affected more than just the religious sphere at Rome, as politics and religion had long been intertwined. A priestly appointment was a significant sign of imperial patronage and there was a long tradition of emperors making nominations for a major priesthood position.[189] Such was the prestige behind an appointment that it was favoured over a magisterial post, primarily because a priesthood was held for life and limited in number.[190] The opening of a new college simultaneously represented an opportunity for more among the elite to join the hallowed ranks, while Aurelian could use the power of a potential nomination as a potent political tool.

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[185] Aurelian's temple was a grandiose monument that has not survived, although it is believed that the remains have been identified. If correct, then the temple was placed next to the famous Ara Pacis, a powerful symbol designed to draw a link between Aurelian and Augustus as bringers of peace and an end to civil war. Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.61; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 25; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.15; Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 35; White (2020) 140; Watson (1999) 192; Dmitriev (2004) 577; Curran (2002) 16.

[186] Watson (1999) 197-198; Mattingly (1942) 175; White (2020) 135-136; McNab (2010) 211; Evola (1957) 304; Shotter (1979) 53; Southern (2001) 124.

[187] Scholars have been arguing for this view since the twentieth century, with certain modern historians continuing to support it. Most agree that Aurelian intended to place Sol above the other cults, but Southern goes so far as to claim Aurelian had become monotheistic, a position that cannot be held when one considers that coins and inscriptions to traditional deities such as Jupiter continued to be made throughout the entirety of Aurelian reign, proving that Aurelian had in no way abandoned the old pantheon. Mattingly (1942) 175; Evola (1957) 304; Shotter (1979) 53; Southern (2001) 280; White (2020) 135-136.

[188] Watson (1999) 197-198; McNab (2010) 211.

[189] Millar (1977) 357.

[190] Millar (1977) 355.

Measuring Aurelian's success at restoring stability through his religious polices depends entirely on what one thinks he was trying to achieve in the first place. If Aurelian did intend to have Sol act as a unifying god for the empire, then he can only be judged to have failed completely, as his immediate successors returned to the traditional gods, before Constantine elevated Christianity to an official state religion, formally recognising the power it had been steadily amassing in the preceding centuries.[191] However, I do not believe that Aurelian was trying to do any of that, and instead managed to seamlessly introduce and integrate a new cult into Rome without threatening the stability of the empire in any way, a stellar achievement considering how extreme the Roman response could be to an unwanted religion. That the cult persisted for at least another century beyond his death and solar iconography even made its way into Christian symbolic representation further highlights Aurelian's success.[192]

Examination of Aurelian's relationship with Christianity is challenging as the pagan sources say nothing on these matters and the only historians to discuss the topic are the Christian writers themselves, requiring us to grapple with incredibly biased sources.[193] Despite this, it is still possible to evaluate the state of affairs, with the evidence suggesting Aurelian had a strong rapport with the Christian church, as he was trusted enough to be called upon by the Christians to aid in the excommunication of the heretical bishop Paul of Samosata.[194] Historians have noted that this was the first time an emperor had ever intervened in matters of the church of this nature, setting a precedent that future emperors would follow, particularly Constantine.[195] However, Aurelian is also accused of turning on the Christians in the later years of his reign, and was in fact preparing to initiate widespread persecution against them, with only his sudden death halting such plans.[196] This has led scholars to conclude that Aurelian was preparing to persecute the Christians either over their refusal to follow Sol or due to a religious conservatism that Christianity offended.[197] Yet the fact that there is no evidence for any persecution having actually occurred, in addition to the total silence of the pagan sources leads me to conclude that Aurelian never planned to attack the Christians at all. It is clear that such measures would have caused incredible unrest across

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[191] White (2020) 140; Mattingly (1942) 175; Southern (2001) 124.

[192] Evola (1957) 305; Watson (1999) 202.

[193] White contests the idea that the Christian writer could be considered unreliable, holding that "the Christian writers are exceptionally reliable" and that they were "writing honestly". I strongly disagree with this notion, as no writer is free from bias, and it is clear that the Christian historians had strong pro-Constantine views, being willing to demonise other emperors to make him look better by comparison. White (2020) xiv; Southern (2001) 9; Hurley (2012) 88; Burgersdijk & Ross (2018) 7.

[194] Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 25; Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 7.30.

[195] Watson (1999) 199; Hurley (2012) 81; White (2020) 140; Millar (1977) 572.

[196] Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 7.30; Zonaras, *The History of Zonaras* 27.

[197] Syvanne even posits that military discipline may have played a part, arguing that Christian soldiers wouldn't have responded to images of Sol, a theory that falls apart when one considers that the army had used plenty of traditional gods in their symbols for centuries, and if this was going to cause problems with the Christian troops, it would have already happened. Syvanne (2020) 187; White (2020) 141; Watson (1999) 200.

the empire that Aurelian had worked so hard to stabilise, and the leap from helping the church resolve internal matters to full on persecution is a long one. Furthermore, in light of the effort Aurelian went to when he carefully integrated the cult of Sol into Rome shows that he was clearly taking great pains not to cause religious unrest. It has been argued that there is a clear bias in favour of Constantine in the Christian writers' works, and portraying Constantine as the first emperor to side with Christianity required inventing a reason for Aurelian to be their enemy.[198] Ultimately, I do not believe that there was anything more than minimal strife between Aurelian and the church during his reign and relations between them were actually cordial.

Overall, I contend that the success of Aurelian's religious polices should be judged in this case by whether his actions caused instability or preserved the peace, rather than whether it succeeded in unifying the empire as he died only a year after introducing his new cult and it was never intended by Aurelian to unite the empire in the first place. The fact he seamlessly introduced his solar cult into Roman life without causing unrest while simultaneously maintaining positive ties with Christianity, shows that he can only be regarded as having completely succeeded.

[198] Southern (2001) 9; Hurley (2012) 88; Burgersdijk & Ross (2018) 14.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

Having analysed the entire reign of Aurelian, it is clear that he was largely successful in stabilising the empire, drawing upon his expertise gained through his career in the military to conduct a spectacular series of campaigns to conquer the domestic and foreign enemies of Rome. In the space of only five years Aurelian would wage war twice against the Iuthungi, and once against the Vandals, crush a rebellion at Rome as well as conducting two successful campaigns against rival empires with powerful military forces at their disposal, and the only defeat to mar an otherwise perfect record of victory was at Placentia, which Aurelian swiftly recovered from to deliver two devastating defeats to the Iuthungi only weeks later.[199] The momentous achievement this was cannot be understated, as Aurelian was able to not only reunify an empire split in three under his uncontested rule, but also drive the Germanic raiders back to the borders of the realm. Nor did Aurelian's defence of the frontiers stop with reacting to ongoing threats, as his reorganisation of Dacia transformed the crippled defences of the Danube into a bulwark that would serve the empire well in the decades to come, while creating a Daco-Roman buffer zone beyond the river to maintain a degree of influence in the region.[200] While there was an element of luck to this, as Aurelian did not have to contend with the Sassanid Empire which was going through its own internal strife, his accomplishments cannot be downplayed.[201]

Aurelian also displayed a keen skill in civilian affairs when he seamlessly reintegrated the former Gallic empire into the existing Roman administrative structure and gave his former rival Tetricus a position of authority in Italy, transforming the region that had frustrated Gallienus for nearly a decade and its leader into loyal subjects.[202] Aurelian's careful introduction of the god Sol into the Roman religious sphere further proves his awareness of cultural sensitivities, as he re-presented the very cult had that got Elagabalus murdered half a century earlier without provoking any noticeable degree of unrest.[203] However, it must be acknowledged that Aurelian was not as successful with his social and economic policies as he was with his military campaigns. While he did incorporate the Gallic Empire without unrest, Palmyra would promptly rebel again in addition to an uprising of Palmyrene loyalists in Alexandria, necessitating further military intervention.[204] Furthermore, Aurelian's attempt to reform the monetary system and halt the inflation crippling the Roman economy was a catastrophic failure to such a degree that the mint at Lyon never even bothered to produce the improved coinage, recognising the effort as doomed from the beginning, while the minting of bronze coins stopped entirely, despite Aurelian's best efforts to prevent it.[205]

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[199] Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.3; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 21; Dexippus, *Fragments* 100F7.
[200] Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.15; SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 39; Pitassi (2012) 50; White (2020) 88; Watson (1999) 156.
[201] Southern (2001) 241.
[202] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 39; Pseudo Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 35.7; Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 9.13; Watson (1999) 95-96.
[203] Shotter (1979) 52; White (2020) 136; Mattingly (1942) 175; Evola (1957) 304; Watson (1999) 194; Southern (2001) 124.
[204] SHA, *Life of Aurelian* 31-32; Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 1.61.
[205] Scarborough (1973) 341; Syvanne (2020) 170; Watson (1999) 141; Southern (2001) 123.

Nevertheless, I contend that these missteps do not reflect too poorly on Aurelian, as Palmyra and Alexandria were only two cities out of the entire eastern region that Zenobia had formerly controlled and the revolts were short-lived. The failure of his economic reforms can partly be blamed by the sheer scope of the problem Aurelian faced as well as the fact that said reforms only came into effect in AD 274, and his murder the following year meant Aurelian was never given the opportunity to readjust his policies.

Overall, I believe that Aurelian was eminently successful in bringing stability to the chaos Roman empire had fallen into, and he almost singlehandedly ended the Crisis of the Third Century. His assassination prematurely ended the reign of an emperor who had given the empire a fresh lease on life. The assassination was much to the shock and dismay of his troops, whose loyalty to him had been unwavering from start to finish – they had certainly made the right choice in proclaiming Aurelian emperor that fateful day in Dacia.

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Images:

Fig 1 – A map of the full extent of the Palmyrene Empire in AD 271. Taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Palmyrene_Empire.png
Fig 2 – Aurelian and Vabalathus, Antioch, Silver Antoninianus, AD 271/272, RIC V Aurelian 381, American Numismatic Society, http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.5.aur.381. Accessed 25th May 2022
Fig 3 – Vabalathus and Juno, Location unknown, Silver Antoninianus, AD 272, RIC V Vabalathus 1, 1944.100.30790, American Numismatic Society, http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.30790. Accessed 25th May 2022
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Fig 5 – Map of provinces of Dacia in early 1st century AD following the conquest of the region by Trajan. Taken from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0f/Roman_province_of_Dacia_%28106_-_271_AD%29.svg
Fig 6 – Map of Rome with the pre-imperial walls in black, and Aurelian's walls marked in red. Taken from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Maps_of_Aurelian_Walls_%28Rome%29#/media/File:Plan_Rome-_Aureliaanse_Muur.png
Fig 7 – Aurelian and Virtus, Rome, Silver Antoninianus, AD 270 Oct-Dec, RIC 41, Sears 11627, Cohen 274, Wildwinds, https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/aurelian/RIC_0041.jpg Accessed 25th May 2022

Fig 8 – Aurelian and Sol, Rome, Silver Antoninianus, AD 274-275, RIC 64, Sears 11569, Cohen 159, Wildwinds, https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/aurelian/RIC_0064_Z_star.jpg Accessed 25th May 2022

Fig 9 – Aurelian and Jupiter, Milan, Silver Antoninianus, AD 272-273, RIC 129, Sears 11542, Cohen 105, Wildwinds, https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/aurelian/RIC_0129.jpg Accessed 25th May 2022

Fig 10 – Aurelian and Sol, Rome, Silver Antoninianus, AD 274-275, RIC 62, Sears 11572, Cohen 154, Wildwinds, https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/aurelian/RIC_0062_XXI.jpg Accessed 25th May 2022