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DARIO NAPPO

On Diocletian's So-Called Abdication

On the 1st of May 305, on a hill three miles from the city of Nicomedia, the Emperor Diocletian performed his last act as an actual ruling *Augustus*. On the very spot where he had been proclaimed Emperor on the 20th of November 284, Diocletian gathered a crowd of officers and soldiers. Here, he delivered an emotional speech, solemnly declaring his intention to relinquish the imperial power he had held continuously for more than 20 years. Diocletian also promoted *Augustus* his former *Caesar*, Galerius, who chose as his new *Caesar* Maximinus Daza.

At exactly the same time, in Milan, the other *Augustus*, Maximian, was attending a parallel ceremony. Maximian retired, proclaiming his *Caesar*, Costantius Chlorus, as a new *Augustus*, and simultaneously opening the doors of the imperial *collegium* to Severus. According to all our sources on this event, it was Diocletian alone who took the decision to retire, and subsequently he forced Maximian to join him on his path. The motives behind Diocletian's exceptional decision to retire have always been the subject of debate, because the very unprecedented nature of the act astonished the historians who recorded it.

Among modern scholars, Gibbon was the first to express an opinion on Diocletian's abdication. According to Gibbon, the emperor chose freely to retire, guided by his own wisdom and greatness:

«It was in the twenty first year of his reign that Diocletian executed his memorable resolution of abdicating the empire; an action more naturally to have been expected from the elder or the younger Antoninus than from a prince who had never practiced the lessons of philosophy either in the attainment or in the use of supreme power. Diocletian acquired the glory of giving to the world the first example of a resignation which has not been very frequently imitated by succeeding monarchs. [...] The reign of Diocletian had flowed with a tide of uninterrupted success; nor was it till after he had vanquished all his enemies, and accomplished all his designs, that he seems to have entertained any serious thoughts of resigning the empire. Neither Charles nor Diocletian were arrived at a very advanced period of life; since the one was only fifty-five, and the other was no more than fifty-nine years of age; but the active life of those princes, their wars and journeys, the cares of royalty, and their application to business, had already impaired their constitution, and brought on the infirmities of a premature old age»¹.

¹ Gibbon 1830, p. 154. Gibbon is aware of the opinion of Lactantius that Diocletian's retirement was due to his poor health, but he stated that it is «sufficiently refuted by an

After Gibbon, Burckhardt too has ascribed the retirement of Diocletian to his moral strength: «may we not conclude that he had always inwardly risen above the Oriental court ceremonies he introduced and that at Nicomedia he had often longed for his Dalmatian throne?»². It is somehow surprising that two of the first historians to write about such an event gave so much credit to the moral integrity of Diocletian. Instead, most of our ancient sources have expressed a very different opinion: Diocletian was somehow forced to retire. It comes as no surprise, in fact, that after Gibbon and Burckhardt most scholars have abandoned the hypothesis that the abdication was the result of Diocletian's free will.

We do not have many contemporary writers describing Diocletian's abdication, so our main witness of the event is inevitably Lactantius, who is rather a problematic source of information. Being a Christian polemist, he aims to reveal in his work *De mortibus persecutorum* how the wrath of God had punished the Roman rulers who had called for persecutions of Christians, so trust in his reporting of various events of Diocletian's life is limited³. Nevertheless, he is the only available writer contemporary to the events of our interest, so any analysis of the last acts of Diocletian as a ruling *Augustus* has necessarily to start from his account.

Lactantius claims that the reason for the abdication is to be found in the events following the celebration of the *Vicennalia* held in Rome in year 303. After the ceremony, Diocletian decided to leave Rome and started his journey back to Nicomedia, but he fell ill during the ensuing voyage. His health worsened day by day, forcing the imperial party to proceed very slowly, so that eventually it took the weakened emperor almost the whole of year 304 to reach his ultimate destination:

Tredecim dies tolerare non potuit, ut Romae potius quam Ravennae procederet consul, sed profectus hieme saeviente, frigore atque imbribus verberatus morbum levem, at perpetuam contraxit vexatusque per omne iter lectica plurimum vehebatur. Sic aestate transacta per circuitum ripae Istricae Nicomediam venit, morbo iam gravi insurgente; quo cum se premi videret, prolatus est tamen, ut circum quem fecerat dedicaret anno post vicennalia repleto. Deinde ita languore <est> oppressus, ut per omnes deos pro vita eius rogaretur, donec Idibus Decembribus luctus repente in palatio, maestitia et

impartial view of the character and conduct of Diocletian». Despite Gibbon's remark, it has been argued that indeed Marcus Aurelius was a political model for Diocletian: see Mazzarino 1973, pp. 327-328.

² Burckhardt 1949, p. 259.

³ For a general discussion about the reliability of Lactantius, see Rougé 1989, pp. 76-89; Mackay 1999, pp. 198-209; Leadbetter 2009, pp. 118-155. The issue will be addressed further in this paper.

*lacrimae iudicum, trepidatio et silentium tota civitate. Iam non modo mortuum, sed etiam sepultum dicebant, cum repente mane postridie pervagari fama quod viveret, domesticorum ac iudicum vultus alacritate mutari. Non defuerunt qui suspicarentur celari mortem eius, donec Caesar veniret, ne quid forte a militibus novaretur. Quae suspicio tantum valuit, ut nemo crederet eum vivere, nisi Kalendis Martiis prodisset, vix agnoscendus, quippe qui anno fere toto aegritudine tabuisset. Et ille Idibus Decembribus morte sopitus animam receperat, nec tamen totam. Demens enim factus est, ita ut certis horis insaniret, certis resipisceret*⁴.

«Yet, rather than continue thirteen days longer in Rome, he chose that his first appearance as consul should be at Ravenna. Having, however, begun his journey in winter, amid intense cold and incessant rains, he contracted a slight but lingering disease: it harassed him without intermission, so that he was obliged for the most part to be carried in a litter. Then, at the close of summer, he made a circuit along the banks of the Danube, and so came to Nicomedia. His disease had now become more grievous and oppressing; yet he caused himself to be brought out, in order to dedicate that circus which, at the conclusion of the twentieth year of his reign, he had erected. Immediately he grew so languid and feeble, that prayers for his life were put up to all the gods. Then suddenly, on the ides of December, there was heard in the palace sorrow, and weeping, and lamentation, and the courtiers ran to and fro; there was silence throughout the city, and a report went of the death, and even of the burial, of Diocletian: but early on the morrow it was suddenly rumoured that he still lived. At this the countenance of his domestics and courtiers changed from melancholy to gay. Nevertheless there were who suspected his death to be kept secret until the arrival of Galerius Caesar, lest in the meanwhile the soldiery should attempt some change in the government; and this suspicion grew so universal, that no one would believe the emperor alive, until, on the kalends of March, he appeared in public, but so wan, his illness having lasted almost a year, as hardly to be known again. The fit of stupor, resembling death, happened on the ides of December; and although he in some measure recovered, yet he never attained to perfect health again, for he became disordered in his judgment, being at certain times insane and at others of sound mind»⁵.

The opinion of Lactantius is very simple: Diocletian had become old and weak, therefore the burden of ruling the Roman Empire was too heavy for him. To add a further complication, a severe illness had struck the emperor over the year 304, which made him even more convinced that his time to retire had come. Lactantius' opinion has been received favourably by many modern historians, and in principle it makes sense. Unfortunately, Lactantius decides to further complicate the scenario, finding also a role for Galerius, an even worse

⁴ Lact., *mort. pers.* 17, 3-9.

⁵ For the translation of Lactantius' text here and below, see Schaff 1885.

opposer of the Christian faith than Diocletian himself. Lactantius tells us that Galerius forced the spirit of a weak Diocletian into resignation, having already intimidated Maximian with war if he also did not quietly acquiesce to the plan.

Nec multis post diebus Caesar advenit, non ut patri gratularetur, sed ut eum cogeret imperio cedere. Iam conflixerat nuper <cum> Maximiano sene eumque terruerat iniecto armorum civilium metu. Agressus est ergo Diocletianum primum molliter et amice, iam senem esse dicens, iam minus validum et administrandae rei publicae inhabilem; debere illum requiescere post labores. Simul et exemplum Nervae proferebat, qui imperium Traiano tradidisset. Ille vero aiebat et indecens esse, si post tantam sublimis fastigii claritatem in humilis vitae tenebras decidisset, et minus tutum, quod in tam longo imperio multorum sibi odia quaesisset; Nervam vero uno anno imperantem, cum pondus et curam tantarum rerum vel aetate vel insolentia ferre non quiret, abiecissee gubernaculum rei publicae atque ad privatam vitam redisse, in qua consenuerat. Verum si nomen imperatoris cuperet adipisci, impedimento nihil esse quominus omnes Augusti nuncuparentur. At ille, qui orbem totum iam spe invaserat, quoniam sibi aut nihil praeter nomen aut <non> multum videbat accedere, respondit debere ipsius dispositionem in perpetuum conservari, ut duo sint in re publica maiores, qui summam rerum teneant, item duo minores, qui sint adiumento; inter duos facile posse concordiam servari, inter quattuor pares nullo modo. Si ipse cedere noluisset, se sibi consulturum, ne amplius minor et extremus esset. Iam fluxisse annos quindecim <quibus> in Illyricum id est ad ripam Danuvii relegatus cum gentibus barbaris luctare tur, cum alii intra laxiores et quietiores terras delicate imperarent. His auditis senex languidus, qui iam et Maximiani senis litteras acceperat scribentis quaecumque locutus fuisset, et didicerat augeri ab eo exercitum, lacrimabundus Fiat inquit si hoc placet⁶.

«Within a few days Galerius Caesar arrived, not to congratulate his father-in-law on the re-establishment of his health, but to force him to resign the empire. Already he had urged Maximian Herculius to the like purpose, and by the alarm of civil wars terrified the old man into compliance; and he now assailed Diocletian. At first, in gentle and friendly terms, he said that age and growing infirmities disabled Diocletian for the charge of the commonwealth, and that he had need to give himself some repose after his labours. Galerius, in confirmation of his argument, produced the example of Nerva, who laid the weight of empire on Trajan. But Diocletian made answer, that it was unfit for one who had held a rank, eminent above all others and conspicuous, to sink into the obscurity of a low station; neither indeed was it safe, because in the course of so long a reign he must

⁶ Lact., *mort. pers.* 18, 1-7. Also Petr. Patr., frg. 206 tributes a pivotal role to Galerius in pushing Diocletian to retire, but his narrative is even less realistic, claiming that Diocletian was haunted by nightmares. The emperor would later realise to be under some sort of spell, and therefore he would send for Galerius, depicted as a malevolent ghost, and finally agrees to retire.

unavoidably have made many enemies. That the case of Nerva was very different: he, after having reigned a single year, felt himself, either from age or from inexperience in business, unequal to affairs so momentous, and therefore threw aside the helm of government, and returned to that private life in which he had already grown old. But Diocletian added, that if Galerius wished for the title of emperor, there was nothing to hinder its being conferred on him and Constantius, as well as on Maximian Herculus. Galerius, whose imagination already grasped at the whole empire, saw that little but an unsubstantial name would accrue to him from this proposal, and therefore replied that the settlement made by Diocletian himself ought to be inviolable; a settlement which provided that there should be two of higher rank vested with supreme power, and two others of inferior, to assist them. Easily might concord be preserved between two equals, never amongst four; that he, if Diocletian would not resign, must consult his own interests, so as to remain no longer in an inferior rank, and the last of that rank; that for fifteen years past he had been confined, as an exile, to Illyricum and the banks of the Danube, perpetually struggling against barbarous nations, while others, at their ease, governed dominions more extensive than his, and better civilized. Diocletian already knew, by letters from Maximian Herculus, all that Galerius had spoken at their conference, and also that he was augmenting his army; and now, on hearing his discourse, the spiritless old man burst into tears, and said, "Be it as you will".

We finally arrive to the abdication ceremony in Nicomedia:

*Contio militum convocatur. Incipit senex cum lacrimis alloquitur milites: se invalidum esse, requiem post labores petere, imperium validioribus tradere, alios Caesares subrogare*⁷.

«An assembly of the soldiers was summoned, at which the old man addressed the soldiers in tears: he was not a well man (he said), he sought rest after his labours and he now handed over the imperial rule to men in better health than him, and he appointed other Caesars to succeed him».

Lactantius reports that Diocletian himself clearly stated in his speech that the reasons for his retirement were his old age and his declining vigour. The emperor was at the time almost 60 years old, a rather considerable age for the time. The problem arises with the 'second explanation' of Lactantius, i.e. the possible role of Galerius in the process of decision making.

Reading the report of Lactantius is enough to understand that this part of the tale is either exaggerated or completely fictional. Surely, there is little doubt that the main beneficiary of Diocletian's abdication was Galerius: the new

⁷ Lact., *mort. pers.* 19, 3.

Caesares were men of his trust, his nephew Maximinus Daza⁸ and his friend Severus. Furthermore, Galerius himself became *Iovius Augustus*, the most important member of the *collegium*⁹. Yet, Lactantius' account is inconsistent. The writer first claims that Diocletian fell suddenly ill and weak, therefore deciding to retire. If this is true, then the role of Galerius cannot have been as described by Lactantius: indubitably, Galerius could not have forced Diocletian to do what he had already decided to do anyway¹⁰. If we remove from Lactantius' account the part about Galerius driving Diocletian into retirement, the scenario is more coherent. Having reached the age of 60, and having gone through a severe illness, Diocletian decides to withdraw. Even so, we are left with no real explanation of the process that lead him to take such a decision.

We need here to consider the action of Diocletian from the point of view of his contemporaries. The voluntary act of retirement of a ruling emperor was perceived as an unprecedented, inexplicable and most of all, totally out of character¹¹. This drove contemporaries to search for the reason or the reasons that would have compelled Diocletian to make such a choice. This is a first important point. Ancient sources do not accept the idea that Diocletian took his decision freely, instead they look for a cause that had urged him to step back.

Given the age of Diocletian, the idea that it was his poor condition that drove him to retreat was accepted by several ancient writers as the most plausible one. Christian authors suggest openly that along with imperfect health, the emperor suffered from some form of madness, caused by the frustration of the unfruitful struggle against Christianity. Constantine¹², Eusebius¹³ and

⁸ For an account of the difficulties of correctly defining the family relationship between Galerius and Maximinus Daza, see Mackay 1999, pp. 198-209.

⁹ Costantius was the senior *Caesar*, having been introduced into the *collegium* before Galerius. But now, with the retirement of Diocletian and his replacement with Galerius, the latter inherited the title once belonging to Diocletian, along with the status connected to it. See Leadbetter 2009, pp. 135-136; Carlà, *in press*.

¹⁰ The real role of Galerius might have been suggesting the names of the two new *Caesares* to Diocletian. This subject lies outside the limits of this paper, therefore it will not be addressed here. It is worth noting however that there is no consensus in neither the ancient nor the contemporary writers on the matter. Lactantius, as usually, blames Galerius for having chosen men of his entourage and, more importantly, for having convinced Diocletian to keep Constantine out of the succession (Lact., *mort. pers.* 18). Eusebius shares the same point of view as Lactantius (Eus., *vit. Const.*, 1, 18), and most of the later sources are equally distorted by the pervasive Constantinian propaganda. See Thomas 1973, pp. 229-247; Corcoran 2012, pp. 3-15.

¹¹ A good example of such a feeling in Eutr., *brev.* 9, 28: *Diocletianus privatus in villa quae haud procul a Salonis est praeclaro otio senuit inusitata virtute usus, ut solus omnium post conditum Romanum imperium ex tanto fastigio sponte ad privatae vitae statum civilitatemque remearet.*

¹² Constant., *orat. ad sanct. coet.* 25, 1.

Theophanes¹⁴ are very explicit on the matter. This interpretation (again originated by Lactantius' malevolent report on Diocletian's last days as a ruling *Augustus*) is attested only by Christian writers, and it is clearly connected with the bad reputation held by the Emperor in such communities.

We find a slight variation in other sources; instead of Diocletian's poor health, it is his advanced age and tiredness that drove him to retire. Eutropius¹⁵ the *Panegyrici Latini*¹⁶, the Emperor Julian¹⁷ and Cassiodorus¹⁸ all share this interpretation. Finally, Aurelius Victor¹⁹ and Zosimus make no mention of the reasons²⁰. The version that Diocletian just retired freely is also attested²¹.

The decision was taken by Diocletian alone, and there are two reasons why we can safely assume it was taken slightly before the solemn celebrations for the *Vicennalia* of the *Augusti* in Rome, on the 20th of November 303²².

First of all, the existence of an agreement, or even more, a real oath between the two *Augusti* is clearly referred to in our sources. On the very day of the celebration, Diocletian and Maximian would go together to the temple of *Iuppiter* on the Capitoline Hill. Here, in front of the supreme God protector of the imperial *collegium*, Diocletian would announce to Maximian his intention to abdicate, bidding him to do the same²³. Maximian accepted, however unenthusiastically²⁴.

The second, more compelling, point is that for the *Vicennalia*, the asymmetrical chronology of the two *Augusti* was for the first time made even.

¹³ Eus., *hist. eccl.*, 8, 13, 11. See also Zon., 12, 33, who also reports such a version, ascribing it to Eusebius.

¹⁴ Theoph., *chronogr.*, Anno Mundi 5796.

¹⁵ Eutr. 9, 27, 1: *Cum tamen ingravescente aevo parum se idoneum Diocletianus moderando imperio esse sentiret, auctor Herculio fuit ut in vitam privatam concederent et stationem tuendae rei publicae viridioribus iunioribusque mandarent.*

¹⁶ *pan. lat.*, 6 (7), 9, 5.

¹⁷ Jul., *caes.* 315 B.

¹⁸ Cassiod., *chronic.* s. a. 308.

¹⁹ Aur. Vict., *caes.* 39; *epit.* 40.

²⁰ Zosim. 2, 10, 5. It has to be noted anyway that when recalling the attempt made by Maximian to convince Diocletian to retake power, Zosimus claims that the latter refused because he did not want to lose his quiet lifestyle.

²¹ *pan. lat.*, 6 (7) 15, 4-5: *At enim divinum illum virum qui primus imperium et participavit et posuit consilii et facti sui non paenitet nec amisisse se putat quod sponte transcripsit, felix beatusque vere quem vestra tantorum principum colunt obsequia privatum.*

²² *pan. lat.* 6 (7), 8, 8-9, 2; Lact., *mort. pers.* 17, 1; 30, 6; Aur. Vict., *caes.* 39, 48; Eutr. 9, 27, 2; Theoph., Anno Mundi 5796; Zon. 12, 32. See also Kuhoff 2001, pp. 235-236.

²³ *pan. lat.*, 6 (7), 9, 2; 7 (6), 15, 4. See Kolb 1987, pp. 143-150; Kuhoff 2001, pp. 306-307; Rees 2004, p. 79.

²⁴ Eutr. 9, 27, 1: *aegre collega (i.e. Maximianus) obtemperavit.* Similar opinions in Orosius, *hist.* 7, 25, 14; Lact., *mort. pers.* 26, 7. Instead, *pan. lat.*, 6 (7), 9, 2-6 reports that Maximian agreed willingly to follow Diocletian into retirement. The author clearly wants to adulate Maximian, misrepresenting the truth. See Chastagnol 1993, p. 29.

Maximian had in fact started his official rule in December 285, a year later than Diocletian. This meant that the twentieth year of Diocletian's rule was in fact only the nineteenth year of Maximian's. To celebrate the *Vicennalia*, for the first time, the official titulatures of the two *Augusti* were artificially adjusted in order for Maximian to also celebrate 20 years of power. Egyptian papyri attest that after the *Vicennalia* Maximian's chronology was considered on a level with Diocletian's²⁵. There had been no such need for symmetry of the two *Augusti* for the *Quinquennalia* nor for the *Decennalia*, meaning that there was something special in the *Vicennalia* that required a change. I would say the only possible reason for such a resolution was the preparation for the retirement of the two *Augusti*, to be done in a way that would make their power perfectly balanced, in keeping with the propaganda of the time.

If such an argument is acceptable, in my view a further consideration is in order. If, as we have just seen, Diocletian had already agreed in 303 with Maximian to retire, then it makes no sense to connect this retirement with Diocletian's subsequent illness, which would happen in year 304. Such illness might at most have delayed the realisation of the plan to relinquish the active power, but it would in no way have prompted it. We know that during both journeys to and from Rome in 303 and in 304, Diocletian spent a lot of time passing through the *limes* in the Danubian regions. This was certainly done with a purpose: to check that those provinces were left in good order and that no harm would have come from there at the moment of raising the *Caesares* to the new dignity of *Augusti*²⁶.

It is indeed true that Diocletian had been ill. The issue is that the emperor had spent nearly a year in this condition, and he was still recuperating from his sickness when he relinquished the power. Had the lengthy and grave nature of his ailment prompted his decision, then the question should persist as to why he would wait until he was fully recovered before he actually carried it out. It was definitely not the most favorable time, given that he was now in position to resume, rather than resign, the direction of public affairs. If further argument be needed, it must be noted that Diocletian required Maximian to abdicate with him. Age and illness are individual phenomena, and there is no evidence that Maximian suffered from ill-health. If Diocletian's decision had been made on purely personal grounds, then why did he oblige his colleague to follow him into retirement?

The explanation can come from an analysis of the nature of the power of Diocletian and his colleagues. It is common to refer to the *collegium* of emperors

²⁵ Chastagnol 1967, p. 76; Roberto 2016, pp. 176-177.

²⁶ An inscription from Numidia (*CIL* VIII, 18698) celebrates the *Vicennalia* of the *Augusti* and wishes them to see their own 30 years of power. This is just a formal wishing, and it cannot be used to prove that the original plan of Diocletian was to aim for 30 years as an *Augustus*. See Carlà, *in press*.

lead by Diocletian as a 'tetrarchy', but this way of defining Diocletian's peculiar form of government is a purely modern creation. It is not attested in any of our ancient sources in connection to Diocletian²⁷. The term was first used in the 19th century and became more popular among historians in the 20th century²⁸. Tetrarchy is therefore a conventional term, but it can be an effective shorthand for a large and continued period between 284 and 337. It can be usefully employed to describe the organization that Diocletian gave to the imperial *collegium*, but we must always keep in mind its arbitrary nature. Furthermore, there is no consensus among modern historians as to how and when the tetrarchic system was conceived by Diocletian.

Some scholars believe that Diocletian decided to build up the tetrarchy from the very moment he became emperor²⁹; others have suggested that he had no will to share his own power, but he was forced to do so, by Maximian³⁰; finally, it has been proposed that Diocletian created the tetrarchic system step by step, constantly adapting it to the changing political circumstances³¹. This interpretation seems the best to describe the nature of the imperial *collegium* under Diocletian. The idea of associating one member to the imperial power was not at all new. It dated back to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus³² and later on several emperors of the 3rd century have also experienced it.³³ Initially Diocletian would have just reprised the system already used by his predecessors, and later he would have progressively adapted it. The creation of the so-called first

²⁷ They prefer definitions referring to the power being divided among four rulers. See for example *hist. aug., vit. Cari* 18, 4: *quattuor principes mundi*; Lact., *mort. pers.* 7, 2: *Diocletianus [...] tres enim participes regni sui fecit in quattuor partes orbe diviso et multiplicatis exercitibus*. See also Leadbetter 1998.

²⁸ Much modern scholarship was written without using the term. It was again Gibbon who firstly identified the Diocletianic government as a «New Empire», but he never used the term tetrarchy. The word did not appear in the literature until used in 1887 by schoolmaster Hermann Schiller in a two-volume handbook on the Roman Empire. He wrote of «die diokletianische Tetrarchie». The term was not picked up swiftly or comprehensively. Mommsen, for instance, never used it. Otto Seeck (1897) adopted it but still many scholars would not use it in the decades to come. The author who finally fixed the use of the term was Seston (1946), after whom tetrarchy has become the standard way to define both the age and the governing system of Diocletian.

²⁹ Burckhardt 1949; Straub 1939, pp. 86-92; Marotta 2010, pp. 170-188.

³⁰ König 1974, pp. 567-576.

³¹ Kornemann 1930; Seston 1946; Barnes 1982; Kolb 1987, pp. 65-67; Kolb 1995; Williams 1997, pp. 61-62; Leadbetter 2009.

³² *hist. aug., vit. Marci* 19, 12 clearly states that Marcus Aurelius was a model for Diocletian: *deusque etiam nunc habetur, ut vobis ipsis, sacratissime imperator Diocletiane, et semper visum est et videtur, qui eum inter numina vestra non ut ceteros sed specialiter veneramini ac saepe dicitis vos vita et clementia tales esse cupere, qualis fuit Marcus*. Similarly *CJ.* 5, 17, 5: *Divus Marcus pater noster religiosissimus imperator*.

³³ Rees 2004, pp. 72-73.

tetrarchy in 293 was aimed at meeting an immediate need: more members of the college to deal with multiple military emergencies³⁴. The same ratio generated the events of the 1st of May 305. The new set up was in response to a different need: stabilising the imperial college for years to come.

It had been likely envisioned since the appointment of the Caesars that each *Augustus* would in due course be succeeded by his *Caesar*, with a new *Caesar* chosen in his place. One difficulty which the Roman imperial organism had never adequately resolved was an orderly succession to power. The dynastic imperative was strong, but the succession rules were ambiguous. In Diocletian's planning, the succession to the senior positions had been fixed in advance, so that at any moment of transition only the question of the new Caesar(s) persisted. A planned abdication would have the advantage of also fixing the moments of transition also in advance and keeping the pairings of *Augusti* and Caesars in step with one other.

This is exactly what Diocletian did, although his move was apparently not fully understood by his contemporaries, who all seem to agree to describe it as a sort of retreat to private life³⁵. It was not exactly so. After May 305, the imperial *collegium* counted six members, not four anymore: there were two *Caesares* (Severus and Maximinus Daza), two ruling *Augusti* (Galerius and Constantius) and two *Seniores Augusti* (Diocletian and Maximian).

The official representation of the title of the *seniores Augusti* seems to show that, at least formally, Diocletian and Maximian did not leave the imperial *collegium*. Although no longer active ruling members, they were still part of the *collegium*. The *seniores Augusti* would relinquish their *imperium*, the military power, but they would keep their *tribunicia potestas* and their legal *auctoritas* (required to give validity to some formal acts), along with a special charisma, which expressly applied to Diocletian, a real *pater* of the imperial *domus*³⁶. Further proof of such interpretation comes from numismatic evidence. Two *folles* struck at Lugdunum between year 305 and 307 have an obverse that reads: *D(omino) N(ostro) Diocletiano Aeter(no) Aug(usto)*³⁷. These coins, struck in a period of turmoil, give two precise message: first of all, Diocletian is still an *Augustus*, and he will always be such, for he is the source of the harmony of the universe. Secondly, Diocletian is still ostensibly the most important member of the imperial *collegium*, since he is the *dominus* of the imperial party, and it is only from him that the power of the others originates.

³⁴ Corcoran 2008, pp. 228-254.

³⁵ Eutr. 9, 27, 1; Lact., *mort. pers.* 19, 5; Theoph., *chronogr.*, anno mundi 5796.

³⁶ See the recent interpretation of Roberto 2016, pp. 238-239; Carlà, *in press*. Still in year 312 or 313, a law issued by the Emperor Licinius (*CTh.* 13, 10, 2) refers to Diocletian as a *dominus, parens, Senior Augustus: sub domino et parente nostro Diocletiano, seniore Augusto*.

³⁷ Sutherland 1957, pp. 67-70.

It is worth highlighting that the definition of *aeternus Augustus* is not new in the Diocletianic propaganda: it is attested during the ruling years of Diocletian. Finding it again after year 305 serves to reaffirm the fact that the old emperor is still watching over the empire³⁸.

If the proposed interpretation of the available evidence is sound, it derives that the traditional view of the abdication of Diocletian is faulty. The old *Augusti*, and especially Diocletian, were not completely excluded from the governing process. Therefore, Diocletian decided to retire from the front stage of the imperial power, but he never gave up his role of *pater nobilis* and guarantor of the functioning of the imperial chain of power.

I would propose the terms abdication and retirement are unfit and even misleading to describe what Diocletian actually did. Before fully putting forward my own hypothesis, I will quickly examine the available evidence on the actual status of Diocletian after the 1st of May 305. I will not go through the literary sources again. We have already seen that they all express great astonishment at Diocletian's decision to step down, and they all fail to offer a real rational explanation for it.

There are instead a number of inscriptions and official documents that give us a better comprehension of the way the *collegium* was organised after the May 305. There is a group of inscriptions all dated to the first year after the so-called abdication. The first to examine is an inscription found in Tupsuctu (Mauritania), dated between May 305 and July 306, to celebrate the construction of new granaries in the town³⁹:

[dd. nn. Diocletianu]s et Maximianus seniores Aug(usti) et
[dd. nn. Constantius et Maximianus in]victi imperatores et
[Severus et Maximinus nobili]ssimi Caesares,
[quo tempore d. n. Maxim]ianus invictus senior Aug(ustus) feliciter
[comprimens turbas Quinque]ntaneorum ex Tubsuctiana
[regione copiis inva]retur, horrea in Tubsuctiana
[civitate fieri] praeceperunt, anno pro. CCLXV

The inscription is dedicated by Diocletian and Maximian, *seniores Augusti*, while Constantius and Galerius are qualified as *invicti imperatores* and finally Severus and Maximinus are *nobilissimi Caesares*. It is worth noting that in this document the definition of *Augusti* for Diocletian and Maximian prevails over Constantius and Galerius, who are *imperatores*, not *Augusti*. This might be expression of some confusion in the local community as to how to define the

³⁸ See for example AE 2003, 2010: inscription from a temple at Thibaris (Africa), built between 296 and 300 and dedicated to the *Gens Valeria Aeterna*. See also Sutherland 1957.

³⁹ CIL VIII, 20648 (= ILS 645); Di Vita-Evrard 1992, p. 862.

emperors⁴⁰, or it might be a conscious way to distinguish the statuses of each of the four *Augusti* (I will return to this point below).

A similar scheme comes from the dedicatory inscription of the Baths of Diocletian in Rome, likewise opened between May 305 and July 306⁴¹:

*D(omini) N(ostri) Diocletianus et Maximianus invicti
seniores Aug(usti), patres imp(eratorum) et Caes(arum), et
D(omini) N(ostri) Constantius et Maximianus invicti Aug(usti), et
Severus et Maximinus nobilissimi Caesares
thermas felices Diocletianas, quas
Maximianus Aug(ustus) rediens ex Africa sub
praesentia maiestatis disposuit ac
fieri iussit et Diocletiani Aug(usti) fratris sui
nomini consecravit, coemptis aedificiis
pro tanti operis magnitudine omni cultu
perfectas Romanis suis dedicaverunt.*

Again, Diocletian and Maximian are defined *invicti seniores Augusti*, and also *patres imperatorum et Caesarum*⁴², while Galerius and Constantius are *invicti Augusti*. One more inscription with similar features and identical dating comes from Numidia⁴³:

*D(ominis) / n(ostris) Inv(ictis) / Diocletian(o) / et Maxim/[ian(o) seniorib(us)] /
[Aug(ustis)] et Im/p(eratoribus) [d(ominis)] [n(ostris)] C/onstantio / et Maximian/o
Invictis / Aug(ustis) et S/evero et M/[aximin]o / n[o]biliss(imis) [Ca]es(aribus)*

Again, we have the full *collegium* as set up by Diocletian on the day of his retirement, but in this case Diocletian, Maximian, Constantius and Galerius together are all called *domini nostri*, to mark the difference with the two *Caesares*. Nevertheless, again Diocletian and Maximian are defined also *seniores Augusti*, while Galerius and Constantius are *imperatores*. More slight variations come from two inscriptions found in the province of Arabia, where again we find the formula *patres Augustorum* to define the *Augusti seniores*⁴⁴:

*[Imp(eratoribus) Caes(aribus) C(aio)] Aur(elio) Val(erio)
Diocletiano et M(arco) A[ur(elio)]*

⁴⁰ As suggested by Carlà, *in press*.

⁴¹ *CIL* VI, 1190 (= ILS 646). On the text, see now Crimi 2015, pp. 426-446.

⁴² This implicitly confirms the definition of Galerius and Constantius as *imperatores*.

⁴³ *CIL* VIII, 22286.

⁴⁴ *CIL* III, 14149, 34. Exactly the same scheme in the second inscription from Arabia: *CIL* III, 14150, 6.

Val(erio) Maxi[miano]
 patribus Aug(ustorum) et Im[p(eratori)]
 Caes(ari) Fl(avio) Val(erio) Constant[io]
 P(io) F(elici) I(nvicto) Aug(usto) et Imp(eratori) Caes(ari)
 Galerio Val(erio)
 Maximiano P(io) F(elici) I(nvicto) Aug(usto)

One very interesting inscription comes from Tuscania, in Italy. Here Diocletian is marked out of the college. Indeed, the inscription is dedicated to him by the other members of the imperial *collegium*, therefore the name of Diocletian is in the dative case, while the names of the other rulers are in nominative. This is a rare occurrence. Outside the tetrarchic age, there is evidence of inscriptions dedicated by emperors to other emperors, but normally the latter are already dead. Again, the inscription from Tuscania strengthens the idea of a special status of Diocletian, the only living divinised emperor of the Roman history.

Furthermore, Diocletian is referred to as a *dominus noster* and *senior Augustus*, while Maximian is only a *senior Augustus*. This detail adds something to the picture that we are trying to reconstruct: while both Diocletian and Maximian retained the same title, Diocletian continued as the Augustus with the major *auctoritas* and charisma, as the later events would prove⁴⁵:

Domino Nostro
 Diocletiano
 Seniore Augusto
 [Maxi]mianus senior
 [Aug(ustus)] frater et
 [Const]antius et
 [Maxi]mianus Aug(usti) et
 [Seve]rus et Maximinus
 [Nobilissimi Caesares]...⁴⁶

Other definitions of the *seniores Augusti* coming from inscriptions and worth mentioning are: *Imp(erator) Diocletianus P(ius) F(elix) Aug(ustus) semper (sic!) seni[or ...]* from a *miliarium* in Britain⁴⁷, and *semper Augusti et patres Augustorum et Caesarum* from an inscription in Lydia⁴⁸.

The analysis of the epigraphic evidence shows that the Diocletian and Maximian kept a role in the imperial *collegium*. This might seem to have been

⁴⁵ Even Licinius (*CTh.* 13, 10, 2) in year 312 refers to Diocletian as a *dominus, parens, senior Augustus: sub domino et parente nostro Diocletiano, seniore Augusto*, thus confirming that the origin of the power of all the members of the *collegium* was Diocletian.

⁴⁶ *AE* 1964, 235. See also Sordi 1962, pp. 131-137.

⁴⁷ *CIL* VII, 1190 (= RIB 2311).

⁴⁸ *CIL* III, 14404.

only something formal, but indeed the *seniores Augusti* still retained some power. It has been suggested that on 1st May 305 Diocletian and Maximian relinquished the *imperium*, the military command, but kept the *auctoritas* and a secondary *tribunicia potestas*, that allowed them to act as *arbitri* of the events of the imperial *collegium* after 305⁴⁹. One more hint in this direction would come from coins struck in all mints after the retirement of the two *Augusti*. The reverse legend *Providentia deorum quies Augustorum* and variants thereof are used to describe the state of Diocletian and Maximian as *seniores Augusti* after May 305⁵⁰. They were not retired *Augusti*, but rather quiescent *Augusti*. They were at rest, exactly as Diocletian had claimed on the day of his speech in Nicomedia. The *seniores Augusti* were to give up the active ruling of the empire. The days commanding the armies and fighting the barbarians were over. That burden was indeed to be shifted to younger shoulders. But this did not mean that Diocletian and Maximian were now completely out of the game. More than anyone else, Diocletian was the *arbiter* of the imperial *collegium*, a living incarnation of *Iuppiter*. He might have renounced his *imperium*, but his *auctoritas* and charisma were intact. Proof of this comes from the events after the death of Constantius in 306. His demise triggered a period of turmoil in the *collegium*, that led to the rise of Constantine as a prominent character and to the decision of Maximian to reprise his role as an active *Augustus*. The incidents of the biennium 307-308 shed an interesting light on the nature of the role of the *seniores Augusti*.

Maximian resolved to go to Gaul to forge an alliance with Constantine, who married his daughter Fausta. A key event occurred at that moment: Maximian decided to elevate Constantine to the rank of Augustus in September 307. As attested by the Panegyric VII, Maximian, a *senior Augustus*, still had the *auctoritas* to bestow the *imperium* upon another man and therefore make of him a legitimate member of the imperial *collegium*⁵¹. But the following events clarify even better who was the only man able to have the final word in the controversies between *Augusti* and *Caesares*. Despite his dreams of glory and power, Galerius did not manage to find an agreement with Maximian, Maxentius and Constantine⁵², and therefore he convened a conference at Carnuntum on the Danube in November 308⁵³. It has to be noted that Diocletian had already been

⁴⁹ Marotta 2010, pp. 170-188; Carlà 2012.

⁵⁰ RIC VI, 208 (Trier), 364-365 (Rome), 623-625 (Antioch). See Corcoran 2000, p. 207.

⁵¹ pan. lat., 6 (7), 7, 6: *Ut enim ille qui omnes aquas caelo et terris praebebat Oceanus semper tamen in motibus suis totus est, ita tu potes imperium, Maximiane, donare, non potes non habere*. See Grünewald 1990, pp. 25-45.

⁵² AE 2002, 1293 shows that in 307 the Roman world was on the edge of a civil war: Galerius only recognised himself and Maximinus as legitimate rulers, therefore defying openly Maxentius and Constantine.

⁵³ Lact., *mort. pers.*, 29; Zosim., 2, 10, 4-5; see also Leadbetter 2009, pp. 200-205.

appointed consul for 308, a detail alone that should be enough to reject any idea of an *Augustus* now retired to private life. Diocletian attended the meeting in Carnuntum and so did Maximian. Here, the latter famously asked Diocletian to resume their previous status of ruling *Augusti*, which Diocletian declined⁵⁴. Instead, he compelled Maximian to relinquish the *imperium* one more time, and the other rulers to find an agreement⁵⁵. In doing so, he allowed his creation, the collegial empire, to last longer, albeit not much longer.

It is now time to summarise what has been said so far, and to draw the conclusions of this paper. Briefly, we could underline some points:

1. The so-called retirement of Diocletian was decided by himself some time before the celebration of the *Vicennalia* in 303. Probably on this occasion, Diocletian shared his plan with Maximian, who half-heartedly agreed to comply.
2. It follows that the illness of Diocletian had no part in the process of decision making. The idea of stepping down had been originated before the ailment that struck him in 304. Realistically, the emperor's poor health delayed the abdication, rather than prompted it.
3. The most logical reason for Diocletian's stepping down was to inaugurate a new stage of the imperial *collegium*. In keeping with the arbitrary nature of definitions such as diarchy and tetrarchy, we might conventionally use the term hexarchy to define the new model that Diocletian decided to implement: a *collegium* of six members, two *Caesares*, two *Augusti*, and two *seniores Augusti*⁵⁶.
4. This was done in all likelihood to smooth the imperial succession. Diocletian had always been the most influential member of the ruling *collegium*, he was therefore the only one able to exert moral suasion on the others. Diocletian kept for himself (and, to some extent, for Maximian as well) the role of guarantor of the peace and harmony in the Roman world. The inscription *Providentia deorum quies Augustorum* does not simply refer to the fact that the two *Augusti* are resting, but also to the *quies* they provided to the Empire.
5. Diocletian and Maximian remained effective members of the imperial *collegium* for years. The greatest proof of this are the events during the years 307-308, when both actively intervened to put an end to the quarrels among the other *Augusti* and *Caesares*.

If what has been argued so far is convincing, then we have to go back to the first scholars cited in this paper, Gibbon and Burckhardt. We have seen how they

⁵⁴ Aur. Vict., *caes.*, 39, 6. See Arnaldi 1975, pp. 217-238; Leadbetter 2009, pp. 200-205.

⁵⁵ On the aucturity of Diocletian inside the *collegium*, see Chantraine 1982, pp. 477-487; Kolb 1987, p. 143.

⁵⁶ Needless to say, alike diarchy and tetrarchy, such definition is never to be found in ancient sources and it is proposed here only to mark the difference of this phase of the imperial *collegium* from the previous ones.

have both postulated that Diocletian had freely taken the decision to retire, due to his moral integrity and his feeling of having accomplished all he could to restore the Empire. Albeit somehow rhetorical, this view was probably closer to what really happened in the years between 303 and 305 in the Roman Empire. Diocletian brought into a new stage the form of government that he had devised, so hoping to secure a long life for his creation.

From this point of view, his attempts were largely frustrated, although we can acknowledge that the form of collegial government devised by him would prove largely influential over the following emperors, until year 395.⁵⁷ In the 90 years from Diocletian's emotional speech in Nicomedia until the death of Theodosius that finally lead to the ultimate division of the Roman Empire into two separate entities, only two emperors chose to rule without a colleague: Julian and Jovian, who together cover less than three years of this epoch⁵⁸. Also in this respect, the age of Diocletian played a role in establishing the foundations of the later Roman Empire, a role often exaggerated by modern scholarship, perhaps owing to the rhetoric view of the panegyrists⁵⁹. Diocletian devised in various stages a system of government that he saw fit to respond to specific needs and problems, partly imitating his predecessors, partly adding his own insights.

In his plans, the retirement was not the final act of a declining old *Augustus*, it was a new energetic and risky manoeuvre to keep the Empire as peaceful and stable as possible for the years ahead. Although the final goal of Diocletian was probably not achieved, it took the young and bold Constantine almost 20 years to dispose of all his colleagues and finally be able to enjoy the status of undisputed *Augustus* of the whole Roman Empire.

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⁵⁷ For a different view on the legacy of Diocletian's experiment of government, see Rees 2004, pp. 79-80.

⁵⁸ Leadbetter 2004, p. 258.

⁵⁹ Bowman 2005, pp. 68-89.

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ABSTRACT: L'abdicazione di Diocleziano (1° Maggio 305) a Nicomedia è ricordata in maniera pressoché unanime nelle fonti come un fatto inaudito e senza precedenti. Per la prima volta nella storia un uomo arrivato alla dignità imperiale sceglieva di rinunziarvi. Tradizionalmente, si è attribuita la causa di questa decisione a una grave malattia che avrebbe portato Diocleziano a un passo dalla morte, inducendolo ad abbandonare il suo ruolo di imperatore. In questo lavoro si esamina la documentazione disponibile sugli anni a cavallo della faticosa data del 305, per verificare se la vera motivazione non sia altrove. Diocleziano nel 305 non abbandonò completamente il potere, ma diede il via a un nuovo stadio della sua forma di governo, caratterizzato da un collegio imperiale di sei membri, non più di quattro.