



Maxentius and Diocletian

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Classical Philology*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (July 2010), pp. 318-322

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/658631>

Accessed: 02/04/2012 07:08

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MAXENTIUS AND DIOCLETIAN

The emperor Diocletian abdicated on 1 May 305 and retired to eke out his days in the palace that he had built for himself at Saloniae (modern Split) on the Dalmatian coast. Both the ancient sources and modern historians and scholars disagree on the date at which he died some years later. The ancient sources give three different dates for his death.¹ (1) Writing no later than 315, Lactantius places the death of Diocletian, which he represents as suicide by self-starvation, not only before the death of Maximinus in the summer of 313, but also before Constantine's invasion of Italy in 312 (*De mort. pers.* 42). (2) The *Epitome de Caesaribus*, shortly before 400, presents the death of Diocletian as a consequence of his refusal to attend the marriage of Licinius

1. Contrast Paschoud 1971, 192–93: "Sur la date de la mort de Dioclétien, il y a deux traditions: 316, que suit Zosime . . . , et 313, fondée sur Lactance." This misleading assertion is repeated in exactly the same words in Paschoud 2000, 205. Although the sole manuscript of Zosimus 2.8.1 states that Diocletian died "three years later," the context shows that Zosimus ought to be reckoning from his abdication in 305, not from 314, as Paschoud assumes: C. G. Heyne therefore emended the numeral from τρισὶν to ὀκτώ.

to Constantia, the sister of Constantine, in Milan in February 313 (39.7), while Socrates, writing around 440, also dates it to 313 (*Hist. Eccl.* 1.2.10). (3) The *Descriptio consulum*, until recently known by the title of *Consularia Constantinopolitana*, which Mommsen bestowed on it, states under the consular year 316 (Sabino et Rufino): *his cons(ulibus) diem functus Dioclitianus S(alon)a III n(onas) Dec(embres)* (p. 235 Burgess = *Chron. min.* 1.231). The date of 316 is also stated by Jerome in his continuation of Eusebius' *Chronicle* (230^d Helm) and either assumed or stated in several other late Roman chronicles and Byzantine histories and chronicles, all of which presumably derive their date directly or ultimately from this same source.²

Until 1973, the majority of modern historians of the fourth century adopted the date of 3 December 316 because it was certified by a fourth-century document that seemed to be reliable in chronological matters.³ In 1954, however, Jacques Moreau observed that Lactantius states categorically that Diocletian died before Maximinus, who killed himself in the summer of 313 (*De mort. pers.* 43.1: *unus iam supererat de adversariis dei, cuius nunc exitum ruinamque subnectam*), from which he inferred that the date of 313 implied by *Epitome de Caesaribus* and stated by Socrates must be preferred to that of 3 December 316.⁴ In 1973, I pointed out the relevance of the fact that Patrick Bruun and Christian Habicht had proved that the *Descriptio consulum* must be mistaken in dating the Battle of Cibalae, which opened the first war between Constantine and Licinius, to 8 October 314, since both the coinage of Constantine and all the other relevant ancient evidence establishes that the war began in the autumn of 316 and concluded on 1 March 317, when Constantine officially recognized Licinius' son as Caesar and Licinius officially recognized Constantine's sons Crispus and Constantinus as Caesars.⁵ It is an inescapable corollary of the redating of the first war between Constantine and Licinius from 314/15 to 316/17 that the *Descriptio consulum* can no longer be regarded as authoritative evidence for the date at which Diocletian died. Hence, in accordance with my general thesis that Lactantius was normally accurate on matters of fact, though often grossly misleading on their interpretation and in his presentation, I deduced that Diocletian cannot have lived on even until 313, and I proposed that he died on 3 December 311. This date I derived from combining the *terminus ante quem* of spring 312 implied by Lactantius with the speculative hypothesis that the *Descriptio consulum* or its source had confused the consular date used in Rome and Italy in 311 (Rufino et Volusiano) with that of 316 (Sabino et Rufino).⁶

In 2003 in this journal Byron J. Nakamura produced what he claimed to be "new evidence for an old problem" in order to demonstrate that Diocletian died on 3 December 312 (not 3 December 311, as I had proposed).⁷ What is this "new evidence" that earlier attempts to date the death of Diocletian had left out of account? On close inspection, it turns out not to be new evidence at all, but an invalid *argumentum e silentio* from well-known and familiar evidence. Nakamura deduces his

2. Moreau 1954, 421.

3. Thus, to cite only the most influential, Schwartz 1909, liv, lix (using the date of the death of Diocletian for the dating of successive editions of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*); Seeck 1919, 165; 1921, 145, 501–2; Ensslin 1948, 2493; Stein 1959, 93, 459; Jones, Martindale, and Morris 1971, 254: "Diocletianus 2".

4. Moreau 1954, 420–23.

5. Bruun 1953, 17–29; 1961, 10–22; 1966, esp. 65–67; Habicht 1958, 360–78.

6. Barnes 1973, 29–46, esp. 32–35; repeated in Barnes 1982, 32, 71–73, 81–82.

7. Nakamura 2003, 283–89.

new date from the fact that Diocletian is not among the recently deceased *divi* commemorated on the coinage of Maxentius issued to honor Constantius (d. 306), Romulus (d. 309), Maximian (d. 310), and Galerius (d. 311). To quote his central argument in his own words:

Curiously, the tetrarchy's founder, Diocletian, is absent from Maxentius' coins. The standard interpretation of these issues is that Maxentius, who was regarded as a usurper, claimed legitimization through these consecrated rulers in opposition to Constantine. If Diocletian had died in 311, would not Maxentius have included the emperor in his AETERNA MEMORIA coinage along with Galerius who died in the same year?⁸

The flaw in this argument needs to be exposed before its conclusion gains currency among scholars who make the lazy assumption that the latest article on any subject can be presumed to have superseded its predecessors. Once stated the flaw is obvious. The four recent *divi* are not, as Nakamura mistakenly alleges, all "consecrated rulers." A correct appreciation of the nature of the list completely invalidates the inference that Nakamura draws from the absence of Diocletian from this series of coins.

Maxentius' son Valerius Romulus was in no sense a "ruler": he was only *nobilissimus puer*, then *nobilissimus vir* and *bis consul* (*ILS* 672: Terranova in Sardinia), and after his death *n(obilissimae) m(emoriae) v(ir) cos. or[d. III]* (*CIL* VI 1124 = *ILS* 673).⁹ As the son of a ruler (even one who was not recognized as such outside the territory that he controlled), the young Romulus was destined to be given imperial power later, when he was old enough, but he was in no way a sharer in his father's power. That is made clear by two exactly similar cases later in the fourth century. Valentinianus Galates, the short-lived son of the emperor Valens, who was born on 18 January 366 and died while still an infant, is attested as *nobilissimus puer* when he held an ordinary consulate in 369.¹⁰ And Honorius, the younger son of the emperor Theodosius, born on 9 September 384, is attested as *nobilissimus puer* while consul in 386 (*CIL* XIV 231; *AE* 1906.86), and he was later honored as τὸν ἐπιφανέστατον by Fl. Eutolmius Tatianus, who became praetorian prefect of the East in 388¹¹ (*Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity* 25 = *IGC* 281;¹² *ILS* 8809 = *OGI* 723 = *Sammelbuch* 5.8919: Antinoopolis) before his father proclaimed him Caesar in Rome on 13 June 389 (*Claudian VI Cons. Hon.* 65–68, 73–76; cf. *Descriptio Consulium* 389; *Fasti Vindobonenses priores* 512; Marcellin. 389.1; *P. Goleniščev*;¹³ Theophanes a. 5881 [70.31–33 de Boor]).¹⁴

8. Nakamura 2003, 288, citing King 1959, 73, and Sutherland 1966, 346–47, 396–97. But Sutherland (it may be noted) explicitly voiced the interpretation advanced here, though he defined Maxentius' relationship with Constantius inaccurately: "Maxentius is plainly attempting to suggest the strength of the *family ties* which bind him, in public sentiment, with former Augusti who were his father, his father-in-law and his uncle by marriage" (397, my emphasis).

9. Jones, Martindale, and Morris 1971, 772: "Romulus 6."

10. Bagnall et al. 1987, 272–73; cf. Jones, Martindale, and Morris 1971, 381: "Galates."

11. Jones, Martindale, and Morris 1971, 876–78: "Tatianus 5."

12. Grégoire (1922 [*JGC*], 94) supplemented Κάισαρα at the start of line 5 before the erasure of Tatianus' name. That was quite wrong, since there is a leaf engraved after τὸν ἐπιφανέστατον at the end of line 4: see Roueché 1989, 47–48 with plate VII (inscriptions recorded up to 1994 online at <http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/iaph2007>).

13. Bauer and Strzygowski 1906, 74.

14. The entry in Jones, Martindale, and Morris (1971, 442: "Honorius") inexplicably ignores the well-attested fact that Honorius was Caesar for more than three years before being promoted to Augustus on 23 January 393.

What then do the four recently consecrated *divi* commemorated on the coinage of Maxentius have in common, if it is not their tenure of imperial power? The legends on the coins themselves proclaim it: Maxentius minted them for the eternal memory of (in the dative case) DIVO MAXIMIANO PATRI, DIVO CONSTANTIO COGNATO / ADFINI, DIVO MAXIMIANO SOCERO, and DIVO ROMULO N V FILIO (*RIC* 6 [1967], 382: Roma 243–47; 404: Ostia 24–34). That could hardly be more explicit. Maximian was the father of Maxentius, Galerius his father-in-law, and Romulus his son. Maxentius' precise relationship to Constantius was more complicated. As his coinage proclaims, Constantius was related to him both by blood (*cognatus*) and by marriage (*adfinis*).¹⁵ On the one hand, Maxentius and Constantius were brothers, since Maxentius' father, Maximian, had adopted Constantius as his son when the latter was appointed his Caesar in 293: from 293 onward, therefore, Constantius was the brother of the children of Maximian. On the other hand, Constantius was also Maxentius' uncle by marriage. For his second wife was Theodora, who was either the daughter of Maximian by his first wife, whose name is unknown, as the better evidence seems to indicate (*Origo Constantini Imperatoris* 1; Philostorgius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.16^a, possibly confirmed by *Pan. Lat.* 10[2].11.4), or his stepdaughter.¹⁶ Constantius was therefore an *adfinis* of Maxentius: specifically, he was Maxentius' brother-in-law because he had married either his sister or his stepsister. (It may be noted in passing that, though Maxentius did not advertise the fact, his relationship to Constantius made him both a *cognatus* and an *adfinis* of Constantius' son Constantine, who had in addition married his sister Fausta.)¹⁷

Was Maxentius also related to Diocletian in any way? Could the ruler of Rome have minted coins for DIVO DIOCLETIANO PROSOCERO in 312? The answer to this question depends on whether Maxentius' wife, Valeria Maximilla, was the daughter of Galerius by his second wife, Galeria Valeria, the daughter of Diocletian, or the daughter of an earlier marriage of Galerius to a woman whose name is unknown. If Galerius married Valeria in 293 when he became Caesar, as is stated by several fourth-century writers (Victor *Caes.* 39.25; Eutr. *Brev.* 9.22.1; Jer. *Chron.* 225^s Helm), then Maximilla, who produced a son for Maxentius no later than 307, can hardly be the daughter of Valeria, who on this interpretation of the evidence married Galerius on or after 1 March 293. Moreover, Lactantius reports that Valeria adopted Candidianus, who was the son of Galerius by a mistress or concubine, *ob sterilitatem* (Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 50.2): prima facie this should mean that Valeria was incapable of childbearing and hence produced no issue by her husband Galerius.¹⁸ It has been argued, however, that Lactantius could be construed to mean that Valeria produced one daughter and no sons for Galerius (as the "barren" Catherine of Aragon did for Henry VIII of England), and hence that Galerius may have married her before he was appointed Caesar in 293, that a daughter of their marriage could have been born before 293, and that this daughter could be the future wife of Maxentius.¹⁹ Diocletian's absence from Maxentius' commemorative coinage surely tips the balance of probabilities heavily in favor of the obvious interpretation of Lactantius. For, if

15. Mackay 1999, 203.

16. For the full sources, modern opinions and discussion, see Barnes 1982, 33.

17. Barnes 1982, 35–37, 39–42.

18. So Jones, Martindale, and Morris 1971, 937: "Galeria Valeria"; 1184 (stemma).

19. Barnes 1982, 38, 264.

Valeria Maximilla was not the granddaughter of Diocletian, then Maxentius was not related to Diocletian in any degree—and the alleged “new evidence” is irrelevant to determining the date of his death.

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