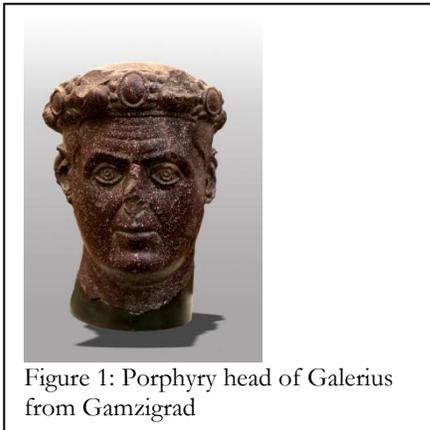


GALERIUS, GAMZIGRAD AND THE POLITICS OF ABDICATION

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Lactantius' pamphlet, the *de mortibus persecutorum*, is a curious survival. In one sense, its subject matter is given lustre by the reputation of the author. Lactantius was a legal scholar and Christian thinker of sufficient prominence, in the early fourth century, to be appointed tutor to Constantine's eldest son. He was also a polemicist of some wit and great savagery. A rhetorician by training, his muse drew richly upon the scabrous vocabulary of villainy that seven centuries of speech-making had concocted and perfected. His portrayal of the emperor Galerius in the *de mortibus* has been influential, if not definitive, for generations of scholars in the same way that Tacitus' poisonous portrait of Tiberius distorted any analysis of that odd, lonely, angry, bitter and unhappy man (eg: Barnes, 1976, 1981; also Odahl, 2004). Lactantius' Galerius is not merely bad, he is superlatively bad: the most evil man who ever lived (...*sed omnibus qui fuerunt malis peior...* 9.1). A vast and corpulent man, he terrified all he encountered by his very demeanour. Despising rank (21.3) and scorning tradition (26.2), Lactantius' Galerius is, above all, fundamentally foreign. Lactantius makes much of his origins as the child of Dacian peasant refugees who settled in the Roman side of the Danube after the Carpi had made Dacia too unpleasant for them (9.4). His Galerius, therefore, is at heart, a barbarian. He is an emperor from beyond the Empire, a monstrous primitive with a savage nature and an alien soul. Lactantius describes him at one point as an enemy of the *Romanum nomen* and asserts that Galerius intended to change the name of the Empire from "Roman" to "Dacian"(27.8) and in general was

an enemy of tradition and culture, preferring indeed the company of his pet bears to that of elegant aristocrats and erudite lawyers (21.5-6; 22.4) .

There is a point, however, in Lactantius' otherwise unremitting hostility to Galerius that he lets slip a curious piece of information. At (20. 3 - 5), speaking of Licinius, and outlining what he seems to have understood Galerius' intentions to be, he writes:

Habebat ipse Licinium veteris contubernii amicum et a prima militia familiarem, cuius consiliis ad omnia regenda utebatur; sed eum Caesarem facere noluit, ne filium nominaret, ut postea in Constantii locum noncuparet Augustum atque fratrem, tunc vero ipse principatum teneret ac pro arbitrio suo debacchatus in orbem terrae vicennalia celebraret, ac substituto Caesare filio suo, qui tunc novennis, et ipse deponeret, ita cum imperii summam tenerent Licinius ac Severus et secundum Caesarum nomen Maximinus et Candidianus, inexpugnabili muro circumsaeptus securam et tranquillam degeret senectutem. Huc consilia eius tendebant.

“He had Licinius with him, a companion and tent-mate of old, his close friend from the beginning of his military service, whose advice he always sought in imperial affairs. He did not wish to make him Caesar since he did not want to call him ‘son’ but wished instead to name him ‘Augustus’ and ‘brother’ in the place of Constantius. Then, in truth having the empire in his power, he might rage throughout the entire world until he celebrated his *vicennalia*. Then he would lay down his power and make his own son (a nine-year old at that time) Caesar in his place; thus, with Licinius and Severus in supreme control of the state, and Maximinus and Candidianus in second place as Caesars, he might enjoy a safe and peaceful old age, surrounded by an unassailable wall. Such was the way his policies tended...”

Given Lactantius' palpable hostility to Galerius, to whom he ascribes the principal blame for the Great Persecution, his depiction of Galerius' intentions seems as odd as his language is uncharacteristically equivocal. That curious sentence “huc consilia eius tendebant” is the only point at which he is ever hesitant in describing Galerius' policies, or the secret counsels of the emperors, or the inner motives of his more sinister characters. At 11. 3 – 7, he describes a

private conversation between Diocletian and Galerius, to which he admits no other person was privy, without disclaimer. At 18, he recounts a long conference between the two, at points, word for word, with apparent confidence. Despite his willingness to present such conversations without hesitation, here he equivocates and admits that what he writes is speculative, although grounded in observation.

Whence comes this unusual and uncharacteristic diffidence? One can only begin to respond to this question by looking more closely at the inference that he was drawing. Analogous poison-pen portraits of evil Roman rulers do not climax with the inference that their intention was to retire to a quiet life in the countryside. That was the preserve of great Roman heroes like Cincinnatus, or ailing eccentrics like Hadrian. Wicked emperors, like Lactantius' other villains (Nero, Domitian, Decius, Valerian and Aurelian) are generally regarded as so welded to their curule thrones that it requires either the swords of just men or the spears of foreign armies to remove them.

Lactantius' understanding then, that Galerius apparently intended to retire, was actually quite problematic for him. Moreover, he had already linked the principle of retirement to the name of Galerius in his depiction of the reasoning that led Diocletian to lay down his office. Diocletian's own reason for abdication, according to Lactantius, was that he had been bullied into it by Galerius (18. 1 – 7). While this permits the author a consistent portrayal of Diocletian as vacillating and timorous, it does lead Lactantius into the following piece of indirect speech:

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...(18.5)

“Then he (Galerius), who had hoped that he might seize the whole world, now saw that he might succeed to nothing more than a title, answered that his (Diocletian's) arrangements ought to be retained in perpetuity, so that two senior men might hold the supreme power in

the state, and two juniors assist them. Harmony might easily be retained between two men; amongst four colleagues – no way.”

This extraordinary suggestion, much overlooked by scholars, makes Galerius the inventor both of the principle of imperial abdication and its regular application. While both the tenor of the conversation, and Galerius’ part as constitutional reformer (on the run) are completely inconsistent with Lactantius’ otherwise remorseless depiction of Galerius bear-loving, culture-hating, lawless military bully, aspects of it are not as inherently improbable as first seems. It is one thing to point to the abdications of Diocletian and Maximian, which remain indubitable facts, and blame Galerius for them. It is quite another to suggest, as Lactantius does, that Galerius intended to follow suit and, himself, retire.

It is now generally conceded that Diocletian’s retirement was both willing and prepared (Nixon and Rogers, 1994; Mackay, 1999; Corcoran, 2006; Van Dam, 2007; Leadbetter, 2009). It is also well accepted that Diocletian ensured Maximian’s compliance through the extraction of an oath to that effect when the two were together in Rome for the *vicennalia* in 303 (*Pan Lat* 6.15.6; Nixon, 1981). The critical piece of evidence is not so much the oath, which was sufficiently public knowledge for a panegyrist to need to explain it away, but Diocletian’s own physical preparation for retirement. His grandiose villa at Split, more a castle than a country house, had been under construction as his final dwelling for some years. The integral presence of a mausoleum, at the heart of the complex, makes this intention clear; while the temples, baths, and the great public rooms of the south-eastern belvedere are clear indication that this was also a place for the living (Marasovič, 1982; Wilkes, 1986; McNally, 1989 ; Marasovič and Marasovič, 1994; Niksič, 2004). The dye-works of the north-west also make it clear that this was not a seaside folly. Diocletian did not intend to depend upon the capricious benevolence of his successors. Instead, he built a working villa, which generated its own income (Belmarič, 2004).

The presence of a mausoleum makes it clear that Diocletian’s elaborate palace at Split was more than a country villa for a gentleman emperor, like Tivoli or Capri. Moreover, it is also clear that abdication and retirement to a seaside

palace are intentions which Diocletian formed relatively late. Evidence for this emerges from an analysis of the principal palace complexes constructed during this period and in which Diocletian and his colleagues were frequently resident. It was normative for these complexes both to be attached to a circus and, in some cases, to possess a mausoleum (Frazer, 1966). The best examples of these are in Milan and Thessalonica, as well as the suburban villa of Maxentius in Rome. Milan was a city richly adorned and embellished by Maximian during his residence there. Most importantly, an imperial palace was constructed adjacent to a circus while, outside the walls, a mausoleum was constructed to house Maximian's mortal remains. The octagonal mausoleum was extant until the late sixteenth century, when it was incorporated into a renovation of the neighbouring church of San Vittore al Corpo (Krautheimer, 1984).

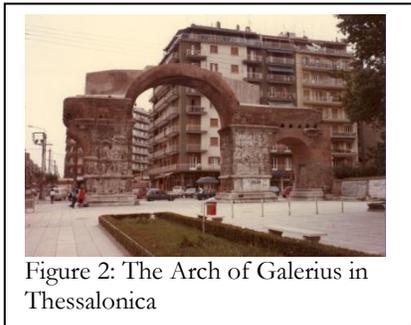


Figure 2: The Arch of Galerius in Thessalonica

In Thessalonica, the palace complex is better preserved, particularly the mausoleum itself, which became the church of St George. Although most of the Galerian palace lies beneath the contemporary streets of Thessaloniki, enough has been identified or reclaimed to give some idea of the vast size and the orientation of this series of structures. The

bulk of the palace lies between the contemporary via Egnatia and the sea. In antiquity, the street that is now the via Egnatia was colonnaded and broken by a remarkable octopyle structure that is now called the Arch of Galerius. The Arch was originally a complicated structure of two tetrapyle arches joined across the

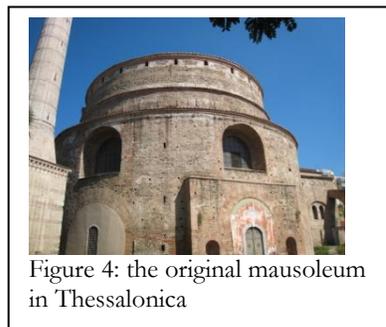


Figure 4: the original mausoleum in Thessalonica

centre and with a domed chamber at the heart. The extant section is decorated with reliefs of Galerius' victories, while there is evidence to suggest that the lost portions celebrated Constantius' victory over Allectus in Britain and the recovery of those provinces

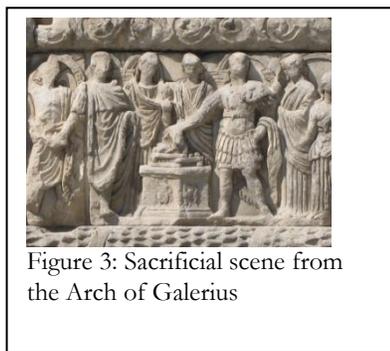


Figure 3: Sacrificial scene from the Arch of Galerius

(Laubscher, 1975; Pond Rothman, 1977; Meyer, 1980).

Just to the north of the arch, and leading off from it, was the rotunda intended as Galerius' mausoleum while, to the south, a further covered way led from the Arch to the public rooms of the palace (Grégoire, 1939).

While comparatively little remains of the palace, some of its public rooms have been excavated and are on display in a remarkable open air museum in the heart of the modern city. The most interesting, and controversial, room is the "Octagon", apparently an audience chamber, into the wall of which, Michael Vickers has suggested, Christian motifs have been smuggled (Vickers, 1972). These are equally likely to have been solar motifs. Just south of the large entrance to the chamber, a small arch was discovered, now on display in the Thessaloniki museum. The so-called "little arch" is decorated with *tondi* in which are inset portraits of Galerius and Valeria, his wife and Diocletian's daughter, as the *tyche* of Thessaloniki. The portraits are held up by men in Phrygian hats who might be identified as Mithras but, more likely, Orpheus.

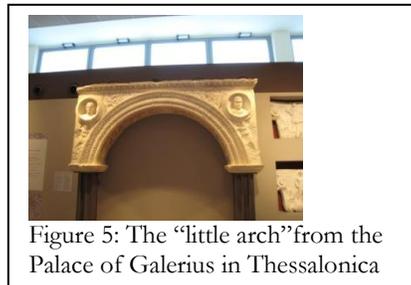


Figure 5: The "little arch" from the Palace of Galerius in Thessalonica

The physical remains of the Thessalonica palace, like those of the Milan palace, indicate that this is a place in which the emperor intended to live and, indeed, die.

Diocletian's decision to abdicate changed that. The Thessalonica mausoleum was never used to house the body of Galerius, or his family. As Aurelius Victor makes clear (*Ep.* 40.16), Galerius, after his lingering and unpleasant death, was entombed at a place he calls "Romulianum", now more securely identified as



Figure 6: Inscribed archivolte from Romuliana

the building complex at Felix Romuliana, a site near the town of Gamzigrad in eastern Serbia (Srejović, 1982; Barnes, 1995; Corcoran, 2006).

This complex, in many respects, mirrors the palace of Diocletian at Split. Just as

Diocletian's retirement home was constructed at his birthplace, so too, the Romuliana palace was built where Galerius was born and had his youth. The farm upon which the family had settled after their removal from Dacia was rebuilt as a fortified villa in the late 290s. The first stage of building at the site seems to have been undertaken after Galerius' Persian victory, and the construction was by military architects since it is clear from brick stamps recovered at the site that the actual builders were from the V Macedonica (Christodoulou, 2002). Detachments from this legion had been with Galerius in

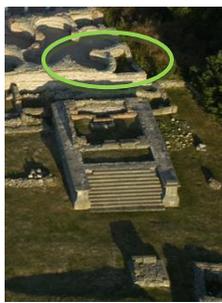


Figure 7: The Temple of Cybele at Gamzigrad. The *fossa sanguinis* can be seen as a long trench (circled) in the rear of the cella

Egypt and they may also have been with him in his activities in the east. The villa complex has now been extensively excavated, and indeed gazetted as a World Heritage site. It discloses a number of temples, most particularly a temple to Cybele. While Diocletian's palace also features one, it is not one quite like this.

This structure includes a brick trench that has been reliably identified as a *fossa sanguinis*

– the space within which a worshipper of Cybele experienced the rite of the taurobolium, in which the worshipper stood below, while above a priest, standing on a sturdy grille, sacrificed a bull. The worshipper beneath would then be bathed in the blood of the bull. It was believed that this was a rite of extraordinary power and was often conducted in connexion with the imperial cult. A series of inscriptions from Rome, for example, suggest that the *tauroboliati* in some sense dedicated their religious experience to the emperor for the safety and security of the state (*ILS* 4131 –7; 4138 – 4142). As well as the Cybele temple, there is also a massive temple to Jupiter, also analogous to Diocletian's own arrangements, and public rooms including a small baths complex and an elegant triclinium decorated with mosaics, the most striking of



Figure 8: Aerial view of the Gamzigrad palace complex.

which features Bacchus riding a tiger. This is a clear cultural reference to the tradition that Dionysus conquered India, and is intended to symbolize Galerius' great victory over Persia.

Soon after he became Augustus, a second phase of building commenced at Romuliana with greater and more elaborate fortifications. Unlike the fortifications at Split, which were largely for show, these were for real. Romuliana was far closer to the frontier, and Galerius far less trusting of his friends for it to be otherwise.

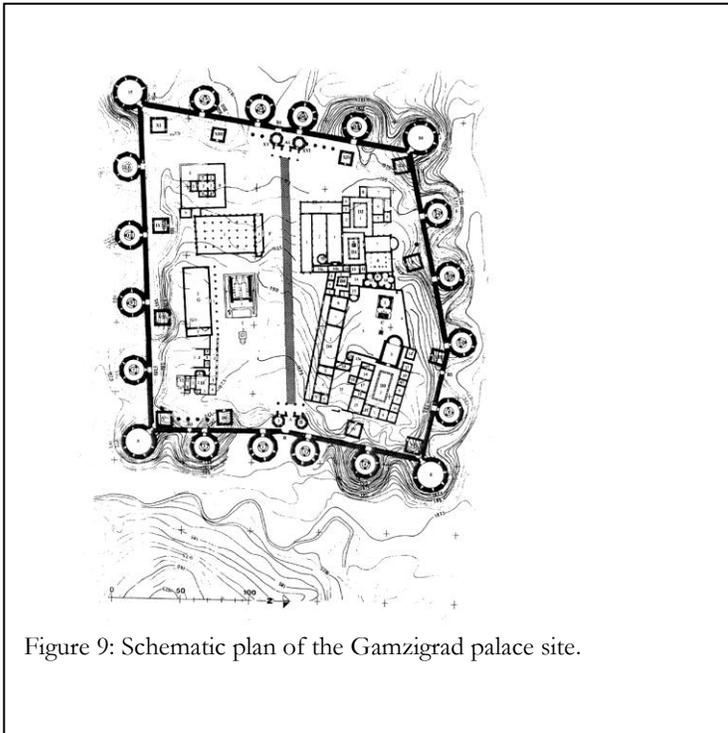


Figure 9: Schematic plan of the Gamzigrad palace site.

The new stage of the palace features a secondary residence built over the mid-third century *villa rustica* which was the core of the place. There are granaries for the garrison and barracks for the troops. If Split was intended to be a working villa, this was much more like an armed camp for the protection of a more remote and less secure ruler. Diocletian built a

home; Galerius built a fortress. Nevertheless, this distant rural fortress indicates Galerius' own intention to abdicate. This is borne out by Lactantius' narrative which makes the same suggestion. Accordingly, it was here, rather than at Thessalonica, that his actual mausoleum was built. Unlike Diocletian's mausoleum, as well as that of Maximian, and his own original intention, this mausoleum was not an integral part of the structure, but located some distance away on a ridge overlooking the site.

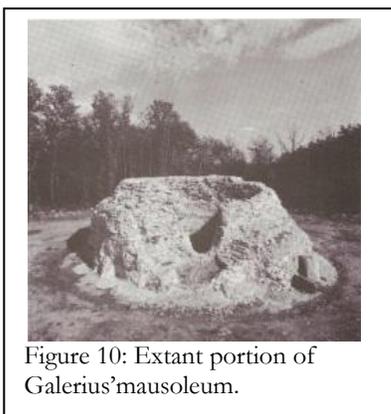


Figure 10: Extant portion of Galerius' mausoleum.

This was a part of a complex of five structures: two mausolea, two consecration memorials and a tetrapylon which marked the ceremonial funerary precinct for the site. It has been suggested that

one of the mausolea was for Galerius' mother, Romula, the other for Galerius (Srejovič and Vasič, 1994A). That is plausible, particularly since the existence of the consecration memorial associated with it suggests that the tomb's occupant predeceased Galerius as his widow did not. Galerius, for his part, was cremated at the site and his ashes were placed within his mausoleum.

Galerius' evident intention to retire was frustrated by his premature death. Perhaps by late 310, he was already suffering from the illness that killed him. Again we are dependent upon the narrative of Lactantius which takes some lascivious pleasure in describing his affliction in brutal detail. This account is, however, modeled on the account of the death of Antiochus Epiphanes in II Maccabees and therefore must be taken as a religious narrative rather than a medical one (Gelzer, 1937 [1963]; Africa, 1982). What is plain is that Galerius' death was protracted and painful. It was during the course of it that he issued an edict decreeing toleration to the Empire's Christians. This was, no doubt, a part of the consequences of his illness, since a man with his religious sensibilities could hardly fail to associate his catalogue of woes with the persecution of the Christians. He certainly believed that their god existed and, in the course of his decree, asked them to do something no other emperor had – to pray for him and the empire. Such a request might have been unprecedented, but it was also in vain. Galerius died soon after he issued the edict.

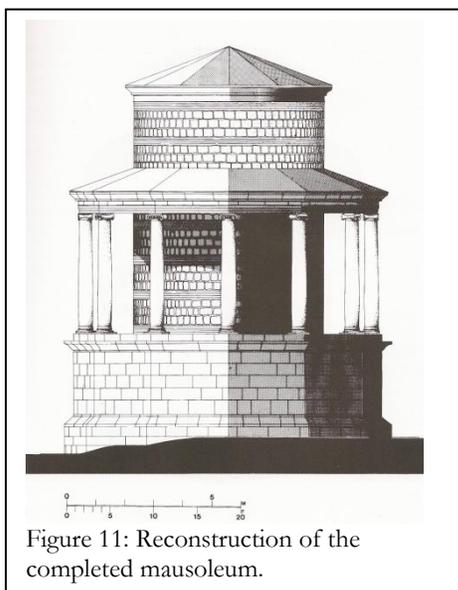


Figure 11: Reconstruction of the completed mausoleum.

Galerius' premature death meant that he was never able to put into effect his intention to retire. Nevertheless, contemporaries clearly expected him to, as is made clear by the grudging evidence of Lactantius. He was not the innovator here. Abdication was not his idea: it had been Diocletian's intention from at least the late 290s. He was, however, following in the footsteps of his adopted father. In so doing, he sought to develop what Diocletian had commenced and, by repeating it, establish a pattern and model of

renunciation for future rulers to imitate. None did. His successors found power far too delicious to surrender to another. Galerius' clear and undeniable intention to retire in turn gives the lie to Lactantius' venomous portrayal of a great barbarian brute who bullied his way into power, and had no regard for culture, law or custom. The actual evidence is of a deeply pious man, a gifted soldier, and a loyal lieutenant, whose desire to serve the will of Diocletian led him both to the height of power, and also to the determination to renounce it.

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