

The Gallic Empire

A.D. 259 - 273



By

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Much has been written on this period, but its history remains obscure. No work of any contemporary historian survives, and the earliest records are found in the *Historia Augusta*. The lives of the Gallic Emperors comprised in that collection were written, as is supposed, by Trebellius Pollio, about A.D. 298-304¹, and the author himself complains that they were even then wrapped in such obscurity "*that little can be said or looked for concerning them by even more learned writers*". Unfortunately, also, he was obsessed by such strong hostility to Gallienus that we cannot avoid discounting somewhat the praises which he gives to the numerous rebels of the time, whom he calls the Thirty Tyrants.

On the departure of Valerian to the Persian War, which terminated in his defeat and capture, Gallienus left in charge of the West, found himself beset by difficulties both internal and external. He seems to have been in Gaul when he was called away to the defense of his Danubian frontier, and left Postumus (who had been appointed by Valerian) in command in the west. His son Saloninus, with his tutor Silvanus, was then resident in Cologne.

Of the character of Postumus and his usurpation of the imperial power Pollio writes as follows: *This man, by his great bravery in war, his steadfastness in peace and his dignified behaviour in all circumstances, made himself so respected that Gallienus entrusted his son Saloninus, then in Gaul to his care, charging him to watch over his life and behaviour and to instruct him in the management of imperial affairs. Subsequently, however, according to the statement of a number of writers (although it is inconsistent with his character) he broke faith and, having murdered Saloninus, assumed the purple. But many others with greater credibility report that the Gauls, who had a violent hatred of Gallienus, and could not endure that a mere boy should rule over them, had themselves proclaimed emperor the man who virtually exercised the imperial functions, and dispatched some soldiers to put the young prince to death. After this Postumus was joyfully recognised as emperor by the whole army and all the Gauls. For seven years he ruled so beneficially that he restored Gaul to its former position, while Gallienus was wasting his time in sensual pleasure, visiting taverns, and growing old in the arms of a foreign woman. At last however, Gallienus made war upon him, in the course of which he was wounded by an arrow.*

All the people of Gaul were greatly attached to Postumus, because he had driven back all the German tribes and restored to the Roman empire its former security. But since he ruled with great severity, the Gauls, with their natural desire for anything that is new, put him to death at the instigation of Lollianus".

Pollio proceeds to quote a letter, said to have been written by Valerian to the Gauls when he conferred the command of the Rhine frontier on Postumus, in which his merits as a soldier and administrator receive the highest praise, and mention is made of his son of the same name, "*a young man who will shew himself the worthy son of his father, upon whom I have conferred the tribunate of the Vocontii*". ²

The letter, like many other documents cited by Pollio, is probably spurious, but the encomiums which it contains no doubt had some foundation.

Pollio devotes a paragraph to the young man as follows:

"Hardly anything need be said of Postumus the younger, except that he received the title of Caesar from his father, and later, in his honour, that of Augustus. He is said to have been killed with his father at the time when Lollianus was chosen in place of Postumus and accepted the supreme power that was offered him by the Gauls. The only thing worth recording about him is that his declamations were characterized by such eloquence that some of them are said to have been inserted among those of Quintilianus".

As we have seen, he calls Laelianus "Lollianus" and of him he writes as follows:

"The insurrection of this Lollianus in Gaul led to the death of Postumus, one of the bravest of men, who, when Gaul was already tottering in consequence of the profligacy of Gallienus, had restored the Roman empire to its former position. Lollianus, indeed was also a man of great bravery, but on account of his insurrection he obtained less authority among the Gauls than the strength at his disposal would otherwise have given him. He was in turn put to death by Victorinus, the son of Vitruvia or Victoria, who was afterwards called mater castrorum and honoured with the title of Augusta, although, to avoid the heavy burden of supreme power for herself she handed over the principate first to Marius and afterwards to Tetricus and his son. But it must be admitted that in some respects Lollianus deserved well of the State; for he restored to their former condition several cities of Gaul and some fortresses, which Postumus, in the course of seven years, had built upon foreign soil, and which, after he was put to death, had been plundered and burnt during a sudden German inroad. Later, Lollianus himself was put to death by his soldiers, because he tasked them too severely.

Thus, while Gallienus was ruining the State, in Gaul first Postumus, then Lollianus, Victorinus, and lastly Tetricus (for I say nothing of Marius) stood forth as defenders of the empire of Rome. I believe that they were all sent from heaven to prevent the Germans being afforded the opportunity of making themselves masters of Roman territory, while that monster Gallienus was entangled in the net of unheard of profligacy. For had the Germans advanced in the same manner as the Goths and Persians, in concert with the peoples living on Roman territory, the venerable empire of Rome would have perished. However, the life of Lollianus, like that of Postumus, is obscure in many details. I refer to their private life; for they owed their celebrity to their personal merit, not to the nobility of their origin".

It is noticeable that the author took the view which was certainly held by many of the usurpers, that they were rebelling in the true interest of the state, to restore the power which it was losing in the hands of a weak emperor, rather than to injure it by setting up a hostile dominion.

When Postumus the Elder saw that he was being attacked by Gallienus with considerable forces and that the assistance not only of soldiers but also of another prince was necessary, he summoned Victorinus, an active and experienced soldier, to share the supreme power, and carried on war with him against Gallienus. Supported by large numbers of German auxiliaries, they carried on their resistance for a long

time, but were at last defeated. After Lollianus, as well as Postumus, had been put to death, Victorinus was left sole ruler; but since he laid himself out to ruin the domestic happiness of his soldiers and ex-soldiers, he also was murdered by an actuary whose wife he had dishonoured, and who got up a conspiracy against him at Cologne. His little son of the same name, upon whom his grandmother Victoria had bestowed the title of Caesar, was also killed at Cologne immediately after his father. Since Victorinus was a man of very great bravery and, apart from his passion for women, an excellent emperor, many writers have told us much about him.

Of Marius Pollio writes that "*after the death of Victorinus, Lollianus and Postumus, Marius, who is said to have been a blacksmith, was only emperor for three days*". He commends him for the energy with which he had raised himself from his former humble position, proceeds to give instances of his enormous physical strength, and says that he was killed with a sword of his own manufacture by a soldier who had formerly worked with him at the forge, whom he had treated with contempt.

In his anxiety to make up the full number of "Thirty Tyrants" Pollio devotes a paragraph to Victoria, of whom he says that, "when she saw her son and grandson, and Postumus, Lollianus and Marius put to death by the soldiers who had proclaimed them emperors she encouraged Tetricus to seize the throne". and adds, "bronze, gold and silver coins were minted by her, the dies of which still exist at Treviri."³ But in fact she did not live much longer for most historians say that she was slain while Tetricus occupied the throne, although according to others she died a natural death".

Of the two Tetrici he says, somewhat repeating himself: "After Victorinus and his son had been put to death, his mother Victoria urged Tetricus, a Roman senator and at that time governor of Gaul, to assume the purple, because as most people say, she was related to him. By her influence he was proclaimed Augustus, and his son received the title of Caesar. Tetricus, having been successful in many undertakings and having retained power for a long time, was finally conquered by Aurelian; and, being unable to endure the insolence and unruliness of his troops, voluntarily surrendered to that haughty and severe prince. But Aurelian led in his triumphal procession a senator of the Roman people and a man of consular rank, who had been governor of the whole of Gaul at the same time as Zenobia, the wife of Odenathus, and his *youngest sons, Herennianus and Timolaus. Later however, ashamed of his excessive severity, Aurelian appointed the man whom he had led in triumph corrector of the whole of Italy*⁴, that is, of *Campania, Samnium, Lucania, Bruttii, Apulia, Calabria, Etruria and Umbria Picenum and Flaminia, in fact, all of the districts bound to supply provisions. He not only spared the life of Tetricus, but left him in possession of the highest rank, often calling him colleague sometimes fellow-soldier, and occasionally emperor*".

Tetricus the Younger "*received the title of Caesar from Victoria. After having been led in triumph together with his father, he afterwards, like him, enjoyed all the honours attached to senatorial rank, and*

handed down his patrimony to his posterity intact. My grandfather used to tell me that this Tetricus had been his friend and that no one was treated with greater distinction by Aurelian or the succeeded him. The house of Tetricus still exists on the Caelian mount, between two groves, opposite the temple of Isis built by Metellus. It is very beautiful and therein is to be seen a mosaic painting of Aurelian conferring the praetexta and senatorial dignity upon father and son, and receiving from them the scepter and the civic garland. At the dedication of the house, Aurelian himself is said to have been present at the banquet by the invitation of the two Tetrici."

He also says that Tetricus succeeded to the Gallic empire before Claudius assumed the purple in Italy.

We shall see that the statements of Pollio are in many respects contradicted by other authors, and still more by numismatic evidence.

Aurelius Victor wrote during the second half of the 4th century. In *De Caesaribus*, XXXIII, 12 he says:

"First of all Postumus, who happened to be in command of the barbarians in Gaul had proceeded to seize the empire, and after having put to flight a large body of Germans, became engaged in war with Laelianus; after having routed him with equal success, he perished in a revolt of the soldiers, because he had refused, in spite of their importunity, to allow them to plunder the city of Moguntiacum (Mainz), which had assisted Laelianus "

He gives no new details as to Laelian; but of Marius he says that *"after the death of Postumus, a certain Marius, formerly a smith and an obscure soldier seized the supreme power"*.

Both Victor and Eutropius (who wrote a few years later) consider that Victorinus reigned during the life of Gallienus. The author of the Epitome on the other hand makes him a contemporary of Claudius Gothicus. Victor calls him the equal of *Postumus* in war.

The two authors agree that he succeeded Marius, and was in turn succeeded by Tetricus, governor, not of Gaul, but of Aquitania.

Victor says:- *"Victoria, having lost her son Victorinus, won over the legions by a large sum of money and with their approval made Tetricus emperor, a man of noble family and governor of Aquitania; his son also obtained the insignia of Caesar";* and he proceeds to tell us that Aurelian drove the Germans from Gaul, and cut the legions of Tetricus to pieces by the treachery of their leader (i.e. Tetricus) who, *"seeing that Faustinus the governors⁵ had won over his soldiers and frequently made attempts upon him implored the protection of Aurelian, and when he approached leading his troops forward as if to attack him, surrendered during the action. . . As for Tetricus, after a reign of two years, he was led in triumph by Aurelian, who afterwards made him corrector of Lucania and forgave his son for the past and gave him the title of Senator"*.

Eutropius (ix. 9. r) says "Then when affairs were desperate and the Roman empire almost destroyed Postumus in Gaul, a man most lowly born, assumed the purple and ruled for ten years during which by

his bravery and moderation he almost restored the provinces. He was slain in a sedition of his soldiers, because he refused to hand over Moguntiacum, which had rebelled against him when L. Aelianus was planning a revolution, to be plundered.

After him Marius, a workman of the lowest class, grasped the purple and was slain on the second day. Victorinus after him seized the Imperium Galliarum: a most strenuous but lustful man he was, and having seduced another man's wife he was slain at Agrippina (Cologne) by an acturius (her husband) in the second year of his reign. To him succeeded Tetricus, a senator and governor of Aquitania, who was elected by the soldiers in his absence, and assumed the purple at Burdigala (Bordeaux)".

Orosius Paulus, writing some 60 years later, gives much the same account, and Zosimus, his contemporary, says "After this, Postumus, who had been entrusted with the command of the soldiers in Gaul, turned his thoughts towards revolution. Taking with him the soldiers who had revolted at the same time, he advanced to Agrippina, a very large city on the Rhine where he besieged Saloninus, the son of Gallienus, declaring that he would not abandon the siege unless he surrendered. The soldiers were compelled by the stress of the siege to give up Saloninus and Silvanus the commander of the garrison, both of whom were put to death by Postumus, who thus became master of Gaul".

Zonaras, writing about the beginning of the 12 century, gives the following account (xii. 24) "*Postumus then rose against Gallienus for the following reason. Gallienus had left his son of the same name, a clever and handsome youth whom he intended to succeed him, in the city of Agrippina to assist the Gauls who were being pressed by the Scythians. Postumus, who had been left to guard the Rhine, to prevent the barbarians on the other side from invading Roman territory, did not notice that some of them crossed. He accordingly attacked them as they were returning loaded with booty, slew a number of them, seized all the booty, and distributed it at once among the soldiers. Albanus, who had been set over the young Gallienus owing to his youth, demanded that the booty should be given to him and the young prince Postumus then called the soldiers together, attacked Agrippina, and put Albanus and the young Gallienus to death.*

Gallienus the elder accordingly attacked Postumus, whom he put to flight and ordered Aureolus to pursue him. The latter, although he could have overtaken him, abandoned the pursuit, declaring that he could not. Postumus thus escaped, and reorganized his forces; but Gallienus again attacked him, and drove him into a town in Gaul, where he shut him up and besieged him, but being wounded in the back by an arrow he abandoned the siege".

Professor Alföldi ⁶ has shewn that we may identify the son of Gallienus who bore his name with Saloninus. Albanus is written in error for Silvanus. For scythians we should no doubt read Germans.

Polemius, Silvius ⁷ writing in A.D. 449, compiled a list of Roman emperors and tyranni-persons who exercised imperial power without senatorial sanction, --and coupled the latter with the emperors against whom he said that they rebelled.

He makes Postumus, Laelian and Marius contemporary with Gallienus, and, disregarding the short reigns of Claudius and Quintillus, speaks of Victorinus and the Tetrici as contemporaries of Aurelian.

The historians, therefore, are by no means in agreement with one another, but it will be possible with the assistance of the evidence of the coins discussed below, to arrive at conclusions that are at any rate approximately correct.

The historians say nothing as to the extent of the Gallic empire, but, when we turn to the inscriptions, we find the names of Postumus, Victorinus and Tetricus recorded in Britain ⁸ shewing that that province was under their rule; and it may be noted that certain more or less barbarous coins of Victorinus and the Tetrici which are not in Gallic style have been suspected of British origin.

Two inscriptions ⁹ both found near Tarraco, attest the rule of Postumus in Spain, but the names of his successors have not been discovered in that province. On the other hand several inscriptions of Claudius Gothicus have been found there. The natural inference is that he recovered the province, but the explanation may be that he was so great a hero that he was honoured by inscriptions in Spain, as he was on coins in Gaul, where he never actually reigned. It is improbable that such an achievement as the recovery of Spain would have passed unnoticed by the historians, particularly as Constantine the Great, who claimed descent from Claudius, desired to ascribe all possible honour to him. Indeed it is difficult to believe that, in his short and crowded reign, Claudius could have found time for such a feat. For what it is worth we have his own alleged statement in a letter. *"The war with Postumus concerns me that with the barbarians the State: it should therefore have the preference"* - These ancient letters are no doubt generally apocryphal, but they probably contain what their alleged authors might have written. At any rate we know that Claudius never returned from the Gothic war.

The inscriptions of Aurelian in Spain are few, and the only dated one is of A.D. 274, i.e. after the recovery of Gaul. An inscription of the third century found near Grenoble records one IVL PLACIDIANVS VC PRAEF PRAETORI ¹⁰, and has been assumed to indicate that the Romans held the eastern portion of Gallia Narbonensis during part of the Gallic independence; Placidianus being supposed to have been an officer stationed there to prepare for an attack on Tetricus contemplated by Rome. This may possibly be correct, for we do not know where the frontier line of the two powers ran.

Postumus, has left us the ruins of a stately palace at Treves, which must have occupied some years in building. Its existence seems inconsistent with the suggestion of some authors that he was hard pressed by Gallienus until late in his reign.

- 1) It is possible that this true date may be sixty years or more later.
- 2) The Vocontii were a people of Gallia Narbonensis, but this appointment may have been merely to the command of a cohort raised from the tribe.
- 3) No such coins are now known.
- 4) i.e. officer in charge of food supplies.
- 5) Faustinus appears to have been the governor of Treveri (Treves, Trier) under Tetricus.
- 6) *Num. Chron.*, 1930, p.259.
- 7) The work of this author was edited and published by Mommsen (*Mon.Germ. hist. Auct. Antiq., Chronic. minor.*, I, 1892, p.520)
- 8) *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Vol. II, 820, 823, 1150, 1160, and 1161.
- 9) *Op. cit.*, Vol II. 4919 and 4943.
- 10)

Note: This article was extracted first from *Roman Imperial Coins*, Volume V, Part II, pp310-317. It later appeared as the historic background text to a re-print of J. De Witte's *Atlas of the Ancient Coins struck by the Emperors of the Gallic Empire; Postumus - Victorinus - Laelianus - Marius - Tetricus I and Tetricus II [A.D. 259 - 273]* (Paris 1864); by Ares Publishers, Chicago, Ill. ©1976