

# The Inflation of Rank and Privilege in the Later Roman Empire, its Causes and Consequences

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The need for differentiation within the Roman aristocracy can be shown to have inspired much of the legislation on rank after the reign of Constantine the Great. Constantine conferred senatorial rank on a broad range of men and opened to senators a number of posts that had previously been restricted to the equestrian order. Scholars have traditionally posited a need to appease the pagan aristocracy of Rome to explain the reintegration of the Senate in the imperial administration under Constantine. On the contrary, Constantine restored senatorial prestige to provincial office (not *vice versa*): the policy of placing senators in traditionally equestrian offices and raising equestrians to senatorial offices led to the predominance of noblemen as governors, vicars, and Praetorian Prefects under the emperors of the later fourth century.

A survey of surviving constitutions on the subject of rank reveals how contention within the new, post-Constantinian aristocracy led to the intervention of the emperors. Several constitutions address specific disputes within the Senate of Rome, Constantinople, and the provinces. The surviving evidence moreover shows that, in questions of precedence, the emperors could rely on the Senate of Rome and Constantinople, and on the aristocracy generally, to police its members. The emperors enforced the rules of precedence not only to guarantee the status of their protégés but also to satisfy the demands of the aristocracy for an order that awarded all their rightful place among their peers.

It was not special favor for imperial officials but regard for senatorial sensibilities that brought about the promotion of imperial administrators to what would become the fixed rank categories of the later 4<sup>th</sup> century. It was the senatorial administrative career onto which the equestrian was grafted, generally in a subordinate position, but once senators began to serve as *praesides*, vicars, and Praetorian Prefects, these offices too had to be given a place in the senatorial order of precedence.

The paper concludes with an examination of the so-called law of precedence issued by Valentinian. This constitution appears to be an attempt to establish a general protocol for imperial officials integrated among their senatorial colleagues. Not all rules in this constitution are new, but it is plausible that frequent disputes, and the resultant inquiries, caused by the unsystematic melding of the equestrian and senatorial orders, led Valentinian to address the subject generally. With the law of Valentinian we have, in a sense, come full circle. Constantine reintegrated the Senate in the imperial administration not by reviving abolished senatorial provinces but by adapting the equestrian administrative structure. Precedence within the imperial administration thereupon assumed a dynamic of its own. Formerly equestrian positions had to be reconciled to senatorial dignity, and the Senate itself had to accommodate the prominence of imperial officials, men who joined its ranks or indeed derived from them.

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