

VALERIAN (Publius Licinius Valerianus)

A Roman emperor (253-260). He was named emperor by the legions on the death of Trebonianus Gallus and was associated with his son Gallienus as co-emperor. During his reign there were almost continuous conflicts to defend the frontier of the empire, first against the attacks of the [Franks](#) and the Alemanni on the Rhine frontier, and then, with increasing severity, against the attacks by Shapur I on the Roman Euphrates frontier with Persia. At the same time Germanic tribes, such as the Goths and the Borani, dwelling in what is now southern Russia, invaded parts of Asia Minor by sea, bringing anarchy and misery in their wake. Valerian was lured into a personal conference with the Persian king outside Edessa, which he recaptured in 256-258. He ended his days as a captive.

Valerian's relations with the Christians, especially as they affected Egypt, are described by Bishop DIONYSIUS of Alexandria in a letter to Hermammon, a bishop whose see is not known (Eusebius *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.10). Apparently Valerian, in contrast to his predecessors, DECIUS and Gallus, began his reign well-disposed toward the Christians (7.10.3). By 257, however, he had changed. Dionysius attributes this to the machinations of Macrianus, the former imperial financial officer (*rationalis*) in Egypt, who was now "master and ruler of the synagogue of the Egyptian magicians," and perceived the [Christians](#) as rivals possessing a more powerful magic than he could command (Eusebius, 7.10.4), and no doubt casting an envious eye on the wealth of the church.

Probably in August 257 a joint edict was issued in the name of Valerian and Gallienus. Letters were sent to provincial governors ordering that "those who do not venerate the Roman religion should acknowledge the Roman ceremonies." The emphasis was on "Roman" religion and a demonstration of respect toward it. On 30 August 257 Cyprian of Carthage was summoned to the *secretarium* of the proconsul of Carthage, informed of the terms of the edict, and, on his refusal to [observe](#) them

and his further refusal to name his presbyters, put under house arrest at Curubis on the Gulf of Hammamat. The interview of Dionysius with Aemilianus, the vice-prefect, recorded in the letter of Dionysius to Bishop Germanus (Eusebius, 7.ii) was more courteous but came to the same conclusion. [Christians](#) were forbidden to hold assemblies and to enter (Christian) cemeteries. Dionysius was exiled to Cephro (the oasis of Kufrah), and sent on his way the same day.

At Cephro, Dionysius was able to make some conversions among the inhabitants. He was moved, perhaps in January 258 (see *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 3112), to the village of Collution in Mareotis, nearer Alexandria, which was less friendly to Christians.

In August 258, Valerian and Gallienus promulgated a further edict that provided the death penalty for clergy and loss of dignities for influential laymen (Cyprian, *Letters* 80 and 81). Cyprian was executed at Carthage on 13 September 258 (*Acta proconsularia* 4), and both Catholics and Marcionites were executed in Palestine. In Egypt, Dionysius may have been in the process of being led to a trial for his life when he was rescued by individuals he does not say were Christians, and spent the remainder of the persecution “in a lonely parched spot in Libya” (Eusebius, 11.23). Valerian’s persecution continued to claim victims through 259.

Dionysius comments that Aemilianus continued to have [Christians](#) put to death even during the [plague](#) that struck the country (Eusebius, 11.24). A papyrus (*Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 3119) dated to 259 indicates the possibility of an official scrutiny (*exstasis*) of [Christians](#) in the Saitic nome, in the seventh year of Valerian, that is, the systematic continuation of the persecution throughout Egypt. In the West, the persecution was probably the longest and the worst ever suffered, exceeding, at least in the deaths of senior clergy, the Great Persecution.

Valerian’s reign, then, involved a major test of strength between the empire and its protecting gods, and the Christians. The church’s

resilience and ability to weather the storm, not least in Egypt, boded ill for any future major attack on it by the imperial authorities.

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