

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE TITLE *PERSICUS MAXIMUS*  
BY PROBUS AND THE DATE OF SATURNINUS' REVOLT

By

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ABSTRACT: Our knowledge of the rebellion of Saturninus is limited. The date of this usurpation is much disputed. Various dates are given in our primary sources (Zosimus, Jerome and Syncellus). Also other proposals to determine when the usurper's rebellion took place, based on the evidence of papyri or Saturninus' and Probus' coins, seem mistaken. In my opinion, Probus' assumption of the title *Persicus Maximus* may be used to date the usurpation of Saturninus. This *cognomen ex virtute* does not refer to any external conflict but, as suggested by some scholars, to Probus' suppression of Saturninus' rebellion (before Probus, also Aurelian assumed this title after the suppression of the revolt in the East). If so, the emperor's acceptance of this title in 279 (or possibly somewhat earlier) provides us with the date of the usurpation of Saturninus.

During Probus' reign, several attempts were made to seize the imperial power. Saturninus was one of the usurpers who endeavoured to put on the purple. In fact, little is known about this person. According to Zosimus (*Historia Nova* I 66, 1) and Zonaras (*Epitome* XII 29), he was governor of Syria, whereas Jerome (*Chron.* 224) and Syncellus (*Chron.* 471) claim that he was *magister exercitum* in Syria. According to Zosimus and Zonaras, he came from Africa, whereas according to the *Historia Augusta*, his origin was connected with Gaul<sup>1</sup>. This last source provides the greatest amount of information about his career before the attempted usurpation. It mentions his studies of rhetoric in Africa and Rome (*HA Quad. tyr.* 10, 4), his service in Gaul, Africa and Spain (10, 4), and his military command of the East, to which he was appointed by Aurelian (7, 2)<sup>2</sup>. Since the biography of the four usurpers is full of fantasies and unreliable facts (even for the standards of the

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<sup>1</sup> It is fairly easy to explain why the *Historia Augusta* made Saturninus a Gaul. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries there were several usurpations in Gaul (from Gallic emperors through Magnentius to Eugenius). The author of the *Historia Augusta* believed that Gallic provinces could have been predestined to deliver subsequent rebels (Paschoud 2001: 234).

<sup>2</sup> Many researches believe this information is true, see Paschoud 2001: 235. According to *PLRE* Saturninus was Syria's governor from 275 to 282 (*PLRE* I 808). Barnes 1972: 172 questions this and reminds that according to Zosimus I 63, 2 Tacitus appointed his cousin Maximinus as the governor of Syria.