



## Preamble to Diocletian's 'Edict on Maximum Prices' (AE 1890, 66)

### Fragment of the edict of Diocletian in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin



[1]

**Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.):** Imperial edict

**Original Location/Place:** Plataeae, Achaia, Greece

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** National Museum Athens, inventory number unknown

**Date:** 301 CE Nov 20th to 301 CE Dec 10th

**Physical Characteristics:**

Fragment of a marble stele with a copy of the preamble to Diocletian's 'Edict of Maximum Prices'. The text must have continued on another stele. Broken in two parts; two smaller fragments with the letters of lines 33-36 (centre) and lines 49-52 (beginning) were lost during transport to the museum.

**Material:** Marble

**Measurements:** Width: 83.5 cm

Height: 135 cm

Depth: 18 cm

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Publications:** AE 1890, 66

EDH: [HD042458](#) [2]

**Commentary:** Between 20<sup>th</sup> November and 10<sup>th</sup> December 310 CE, the emperor Diocletian and the tetrarchs instituted the *Edictum De Pretiis Rerum Venalium*, or the "Edict of Maximal Prices"; more than forty fragments of inscriptions recording this edict have been identified, making it the best surviving epigraphic text from antiquity (for detailed discussion and maps of the other fragments, see Giaccherio, *Edictum Diocleti* II, tables 1 and 2, to which fragments recently discovered in Odessos, Corinth and Crete should also be added). Although much of the scholarship has focussed on the economic implications of the prices for goods listed in the edict, or the extent to which the edict was universally applied across the empire, as well as the reasons for its failure just a few years later, this commentary is concerned with the rhetoric of the preamble of the text (for discussion of the prices listed in the edict, see the points raised by Corcoran, *Empire of the Tetrarchs*, p. 225-229 and suggested bibliography); it reminds its audience of the turbulent years of barbarian invasions that the empire has suffered in recent years, and the peace that has been achieved as a result of Rome's powerful efforts to resist them. The main purpose of the preamble is to identify the current immoral, 'greedy' state of the Roman economy – which had seen coinage seriously debased and rising prices across the empire – and to denounce such greed for holding back Rome's continued progress.

The preamble of the edict begins with the full imperial titles of all four tetrarchs, Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius and Constantius I; although this section is missing from the copy of the edict whose text is given here, it did survive on a copy from Egypt, which has been used to securely date the edict, based on the statement of Diocletian's tribunician power (Corcoran, *Empire of the Tetrarchs*, p. 206, n. 3). *Dicunt* – "they say" – is the traditional edictal opening formula, but what follows after is anything but traditional; as Simon Corcoran has noted, the preamble is "a long and complex piece of writing" which seeks the approval of the reader through "constant repetition,



reduplication and strong emotive language" (Corcoran, *Empire of the Tetrarchs*, p. 207). This is evident from the first sentence of the preamble (chapter 5), which presents the Roman world as being in a state of peace: "The condition of the world has been placed, tranquil, in the lap of the deepest quiet and peace towards good men" (*tranquillo orbis statu et in gremio altissimae / quietis locato*); the "raging depredations of the past" have been suppressed through Rome's defeat of the barbarians (*aestuantes...rapinas gentium barbararum ipsarum nationum clade compressimus*), which was achieved through the support of the gods (*benigno favore numinum*), and now "Roman dignity and majesty" (*Romana dignitas / maiestasque*) desire that peace be founded for eternity (*in aeternum fundatam quietem*). In spite of the great effort that Rome – and the gods – have gone to win peace across the empire, there is still the threat of eternal discord, however; the edict proclaims that the empire is suffering from a great greed (represented by growing inflation), which threatens to grow "without respect for humankind" (*sine respectu generis humani...festinat*); the language used to describe this terrifying spectre is, as Simon Corcoran has rightly pointed out, "precisely that appropriate for a raging barbarian enemy", characterising it as wild, frenzied, inhuman and with a "perverted religion" (see chapters 6 and 7 in particular; Corcoran, *Empire of the Tetrarchs*, p. 208). The opening statement of the edict is characterised then by a tone of moralising rhetoric, that advertised the efforts that the tetrarchs – with the support of the gods – had gone to in order to win such peace, justifying their power by highlighting the moral threat that continued to pervade the human race.

Gonzalo Bravo Castañeda organised the preamble of Diocletian's edict into three sections, recognising this first one as a general statement of affairs (*Coyuntura sociopolítica y estructura social de la producción en la época de Diocleciano*, p. 243-247). This first section lasts until chapter 8, when the imperial motives for reform are offered. Here Diocletian claims that he fears that they have waited too long to try and resolve the situation, out of hope that humanity would recognise its fault in this respect and be motivated to change its own ways (*paene sera prospectio est dum hac spe consilia molimur aut remedia inventa cohibemus ut quod expectandum fuit per iura naturae / in gravissimis deprehensa delictis ipsa se emendaret humanitas*). The emphasis here, particularly in chapters 5-6, is to recall the emperors' deeds and to again highlight the efforts to which they have gone to restore peace, and the foundations of *iustitia*, justice, upon which this new peace was determined (Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, p. 295).

There follows, in chapters 10-14, a discussion of how inflation has grown out of control, and in particular the greed of individuals who have prioritised profit over human sympathy. Chapter 15-end provide the Tetrarchs' solution to the problem; rather than fixing prices absolutely, they have decided to fix a 'ceiling' (*modum statuendum*) for the price of all goods, meaning that prices can be lowered in times of prosperity when cheaper prices will benefit the market:

We have taken the position, not that we must set prices of goods and services for sale - nor indeed would it be thought right, since meanwhile very many provinces rejoice in the blessing of desired low prices as if by some special condition of abundance - but that we must set a limit. When some expensiveness should arise (the gods forbid it!) the greed that could not be restrained, as if it ranged in fields spread over some limitless expanse, will be choked off by the limits of our statute and the boundaries of a moderating law.

Also forbidden is the movement of goods for sale elsewhere, using the cost of transport as a reason for raised prices, for buyers and sellers to collude together, or for any individual to withhold goods from sale at all (chapter 17), thereby avoiding any possible loopholes that might have been identified (Corcoran, *Empire of the Tetrarchs*, p. 213). In the final section, from chapter 18-20, the emperors encourage their subjects to respect the edict as a body of law, due to it having been established "for the public good", emphasising the "universal" nature of its provision (*cum eiusmodi statuto non civitatibus singulis ac populis adque provinciis sed universo orbi provisum esse videatur*). There then follows a meticulously ordered list (not provided in this commentary) of the individual maximum prices of all goods.

Pat Southern has noted that there is an "exasperated" tone to the synopsis presented in the preamble, particularly with respect to the greed it is claimed that individual producers of goods have shown (*Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine*, p. 161). It is of course possible that the avarice identified by Diocletian here has been exaggerated – Simon Corcoran has suggested so even to the level of caricature – but it is clear that the greed and impropriety of communities around the empire are designed here to serve as the perfect counterpoint to the qualities of the emperors, who are determined to restore justice. The crime of *avaritia* ("greed") is mentioned eight times in the preamble, which should be contrasted with the *ratio* ("reason"), *humanitas* ("humanity") and general generosity of the imperial representatives (*Empire of the Tetrarchs*, p. 209). They are described in the text as the "parents" of the human race (*parentes generis humani*), who have been burdened with the task of restoring moral order to their "children", the subjects of Rome; they are urged to come together in the interests of common humanity (*noster*



*communis humanitas*) and in order to prevent future incursions of morality and temperate behaviour. Both these concepts, of the parental aspect of the emperors, and of a "common humanity" are striking examples of the ideological basis of the Price Edict.

The arguments for why Diocletian laid out such an edict are many and varied, with some suggesting that it was in response not to an empire-wide problem, but to a situation close to the imperial court at Antioch, where Diocletian was then based, which had possibly arisen between the soldiers stationed there and the local merchants. The problems faced by Rome in paying the military are well documented, with many soldiers being forced to accept deferred pay or being forced to requisition food and clothing from provincial subjects when necessary (Southern, *Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine*, p. 159). If this had been the case in the east, it is possible that the traders of Antioch had responded by increasing their prices in order to punish the soldiers and their fixed rate of pay, to which the edict may then have been a response (Corcoran, *Empire of the Tetrarchs*, p. 211; see p. 215-219 for detailed analysis of the origin of the edict. Also Giaccherio, *Edictum Diocletiani*). If the edict was a response to a more localised situation, it would explain why the forty fragments of inscriptions currently identified have been located for the most part in just four provinces of the empire, all of which are in the east; although the edict ends with the instruction that its implementation is to be "for the whole world" (*universo orbi provisum esse videatur*), it is striking that the inscriptions have been excavated from Egypt (moved to Aix-en-Provence in the late 1800s), Phrygia-Caria, Crete-Cyrene and Achaëa; there is no record yet of the text in Syria, where it originated, but three further fragments are known from Samos, Odessos and Pettorano in Italy (Crawford and Reynolds, "The Publication of the Prices Edict," p. 160-163). The fragment known from Italy has generated the most debate, as the only evidence for the edict in the Latin West. However, with the exception of the fragment from Achaëa, all the others are in Latin, and this one in Italy is in Greek, suggesting that it too had been transported from Greece at a later date (Corcoran, *Empire of the Tetrarchs*, p. 230). It may be that the edict was conceived of and written as a "universal" law, but was only actually promulgated and enacted in the eastern provinces, where its immediate need was more pressing. All of this is presented within the ideological framework of *memoria*, or the memory of Rome's greatness and success; gathering the themes of peace, justice, *humanitas* and the notion of Roman *maiestas*, the preamble of Diocletian's Price Edict claims that the reforms are made for the very sake of this *memoria*, returning heavenly justice to the Roman world.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Diocletianus](#) [3]
- [Maximianus](#) [4]
- [Constantius](#) [5]
- [Valerius Maximianus](#) [6]
- [fortuna](#) [7]
- [res publica](#) [8]
- [immortalis](#) [9]
- [deus](#) [10]
- [bellum](#) [11]
- [felicitas](#) [12]
- [orbis](#) [13]
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- [honestas](#) [15]
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- [numen](#) [18]
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- [licentia](#) [24]
- [immanitas](#) [25]
- [cupido](#) [26]
- [religio](#) [27]
- [miserrimus](#) [28]



- [gens humana](#) [29]
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- [abundantia](#) [38]
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- [divinus](#) [40]
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Thematic keywords:

- [Diocletian](#) [42]
- [tetrarchy](#) [43]
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- [Pax Romana](#) [63]
- [humankind](#) [64]
- [humaneness](#) [65]
- [oikoumenè](#) [66]

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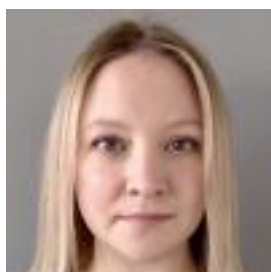
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