Abstract


The administrative structures of the Roman Empire underwent fundamental changes in the late third and early fourth centuries A.D. Modern scholarship holds both the emperors Diocletian (284-305) and Constantine the Great responsible for a series of reforms that ultimately led to the creation of a system of dioceses and prefectures on top of the already existing organization of the Empire's territory into the provinces. In their turn these provinces were redrawn and divided into many more and smaller provinces. These reforms led to an increasing number of officials – governors, vicarii and praetorian prefects – who became responsible for these three levels of administrative and geographical units. The increasing level of governmental control over these particular units supposedly led to more control for the imperial government over the empire at large.

Whereas we are confronted with the outcome of this process of reforms in the almost doubling of the number of provinces and the implementation of a structure of dioceses and prefectures on top of the provinces, the process itself took many years, even decades before it was fully implemented. Remarkably few ancient sources have documented these far-reaching changes in terms of the geography of the administrative structures of the empire. We are almost completely left in the dark about the decision making process of this large scale administrative operation. For one, we cannot even definitely ascribe the reforms to either Diocletian and/or Constantine, although it seems fairly certain that Diocletian should be credited with the new division of the empire into many more provinces. Moreover, some of the reforms might have been set in motion in the third century already but then finalized under Diocletian or Constantine. Furthermore, as some scholars suggest, the provinces and dioceses might have been part of the reforms early on, whereas the creation of the prefectures might have been a process that took place later in the fourth century.

As a consequence of the notorious lack of sources, modern scholarship has steered away from questions on the decision making process behind the reforms. This contribution hopes to shed some light on the factors that influenced that decision making process. As so little research has been done on this topic so far, this contribution should be regarded a first step to be followed by further research. Consequently, it will pose many questions for which in many instances no answers seem yet available. The following set of questions will be leading in the analysis: Who was or were the mastermind(s) behind this operation that took years before it was fully implemented throughout the empire at large? Who advised the emperors in setting up the various types of units, - the smaller territories of the provinces and the new units of the dioceses -, both geographically and administratively speaking? Why were the particular boundaries of the new provinces and dioceses assigned as the boundaries? Even though individual emperors such as Diocletian or Constantine were involved and in our modern examinations get the credits for the reforms, were they indeed the masterminds at the practical level of the new territorial divisions? There must have been a group of people –
high officials, bureaucrats – who must have been directly involved in the design of the new administrative structures and hierarchy of units. Who were these men? Then, to what extent were the emperors involved in the actual implementation of the reforms? Did they send out orders that listed the new divisions?

At first sight, all these questions might seem to focus strongly on the practical side of the reforms, but at the same time discussion about them should also bring out the underlying and more fundamental issues of how the emperor(s) and the empire at large functioned. As we will see, the new units of the provinces, dioceses and prefectures were anchored within and placed on top of the longstanding and successful structure of the already existing provinces. In other words, the innovation of dioceses and prefectures was founded on the traditions of provincial government.

As a test case for these questions, this contribution will offer a close examination of one region of the empire, the Iberian Peninsula, to see if we can possibly catch a glimpse of the decisions that were made for the new structure and the factors that influenced those decisions. Modern scholarship on the Iberian Peninsula, especially archaeological and epigraphic studies, has blossomed in recent years, opening avenues for asking new questions. Few studies, yet, have focused on the political administrative system combined with the geography of the region.