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Pierfrancesco Porena
A collector of prefectures

The inexorable rise of Sextus Petronius Probus

The 4th century Roman Empire was immense and in order to defend it, Constantine the Great divided it into four large administrative districts, the regional praetorian prefectures. Governing a praetorian prefecture was no easy task. Not only did the holder need to be experienced and bold, he also needed to be unscrupulous as well. Of all the senators to hold the praetorian prefecture, Sextus Petronius Probus was by far the most imposing and charismatic, casting his spell over both emperors and subjects alike.



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In order to overcome the immense size of the late Roman Empire, the Emperor Constantine (306-337) divided it into several regional praetorian prefectures. Comprising Gaul, Italy, Illyricum, Africa and the East, these vast administrative zones were governed for short periods by praetorian prefects who were based outside the imperial palace. In the 4th century the prefecture of Illyricum lay at the heart of the empire's defense. The latter was placed under considerable strain in the period 368-388, when the Goths crossed the Danube and Gaul was usurped. During these twenty difficult years, Valentinian I and his sons Gratian and Valentinian II relied on the effective but questionable administration of the praetorian prefect Sextus Petronius Probus. A man adored by his clients and hated by almost everyone else, the powerful senator not only dominated the political scene, he also succeeded in doing something quite unprecedented – holding the praetorian prefect four times.

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