

The Third Century Probus

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club



Introduction

This story is *not* about Probus Clubs – the clubs (mostly for men only) for retired or semi-retired people from all walks of life, which operate worldwide. It's about a Roman emperor called *Marcus Aurelius Probus*. He ruled from 276 to 282. His family origins are unclear. According to various accounts, his father (*Maximus* or *Dalmatius*) was either a market-gardener, a minor state official, or a soldier¹.

Emperor Marcus Aurelius Probus

The future emperor Probus was born between 230 and 235 (the exact date of birth is uncertain, but according to the *Alexandrian Chronicle*, he was born in 232) in Sirmium (modern-day Sremska Mitrovica), Pannonia Inferior.

Marcus Probus became a highly accomplished military man, much like the emperor Aurelius. When Florian was betrayed by his own men, his rival *Marcus Probus* became emperor.

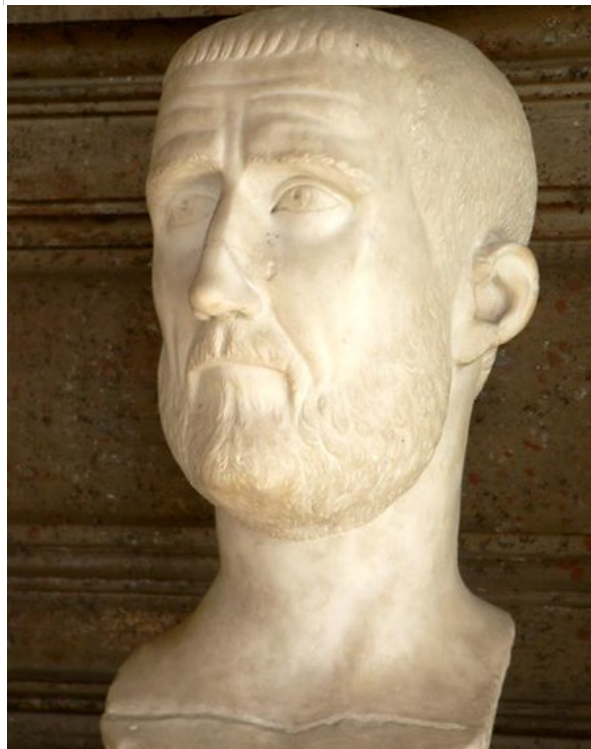
Probus became an active and successful general as well as a conscientious administrator, and in his reign of six years, he secured prosperity for the inner provinces while withstanding repeated invasions of barbarian tribes on almost every sector of the frontier. After repelling the foreign enemies of the empire, *Probus* was forced to handle several internal revolts but demonstrated leniency and moderation to the vanquished wherever possible.

During his reign, the Rhine and Danube frontier was strengthened after successful wars against several Germanic tribes such as the Goths, Alamanni, Longiones, Franks, Burgundians, and Vandals. The Agri Decumates and much of the Limes Germanicus in Germania Superior were officially abandoned during his reign, with the Romans withdrawing to the Rhine and Danube rivers.²

In his reign, the facade of the constitutional authority of the Roman Senate was fastidiously maintained, and the conqueror, who had carried his army to victory over the Rhine, professed himself dependent on the sanction of the Senate. Upon defeating the Germans, *Probus* re-erected the ancient fortifications of 'wall-builder' emperor Hadrian between the Rhine and Danube rivers, protecting the Agri Decumates³ and exacted from the vanquished a tribute of manpower to resettle depopulated provinces within the empire and provide for adequate defence of the frontiers.

Marcus Probus spent most of his reign trying to consolidate the empire, generally by strengthening the borders increasingly attacked by Goths, Vandals, Germanic tribes, etc.

Picture Credit: "Portrait of Probus 276-282 CE Marble" by mharrsch is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



¹ Britannica.com say that Probus father was a Balkan military officer.

² Source: https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Marcus_Aurelius_Probus

³ The Agri Decumates or Decumates Agri ("Decumatian Fields") were regions of the Roman Empire's provinces of Germania Superior and Raetia; covering the Black Forest, Swabian Jura, and Franconian Jura areas between the Rhine, Main, and Danube rivers; in present southwestern Germany, including present-day Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Freiburg im Breisgau, and Weissenburg in Bayern.

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After celebrating a triumph for his German victories, *Marcus Probus* set out again for the east. In his absence, *Carus*, the Praetorian Prefect⁴, raised support and made a bid for power. *Probus* sent troops back to crush the movement, but these troops defected to the usurper.

After repelling the foreign enemies of the empire, *Marcus Probus* faced several internal revolts but demonstrated leniency and moderation to the vanquished wherever possible.

Upon defeating the Germans, *Marcus Probus* re-erected the ancient fortifications of the emperor Hadrian between the Rhine and Danube rivers, protecting the Agri Decumates, and exacted from the vanquished a tribute of workforce to resettle depopulated provinces within the empire and provide for adequate defence of the frontiers.

After defeating the Germanic invaders in Gaul, *Marcus Probus* crossed the Rhine to campaign successfully against the Barbarians in their homeland, forcing them to pay homage. In the aftermath of the campaign, *Marcus Probus* repaired the ancient fortifications erected by the emperor *Hadrian* in the vulnerable space between the Rhine and Danube, in the territory of Swabia. More significantly, *Marcus Probus*, by forcing from the conquered tribes a tribute of manpower, established the precedent of settling barbarians within the empire as auxiliaries on a large scale. The provinces suffered depopulation by war, disease and chaotic administration, heavy taxation, and extensive army recruitment, during the crisis of the 3rd century, and the barbarian colonies, at least in the short term, helped to restore frontier defence and the practice of agriculture.

The army discipline that Aurelian had repaired was extended under Marcus Probus, who was more reserved in cruelty. One of his principles was never to allow the soldiers to be idle and to employ them in times of peace to do useful work, such as planting vineyards in Gaul, Pannonia and other districts, to restart the economy in these devastated lands.

In 280–281, *Marcus Probus* put down three usurpers, *Julius Saturninus*, *Proculus* and *Bonosus*. The extent of and reasons for these revolts is not clear.

We know that *Proculus* and *Bonosus* were the commanders of Gaul and Germany and had risen in revolt, declaring themselves joint emperors in AD 280.

Gaius Julius Saturninus was a senior officer under *Marcus Probus* in Syria. According to *Historiae Augusta*⁵, *Saturninus* led a short-lived revolt, which began with his proclamation as Augustus by the troops under his command in Alexandria, Egypt. At first, we are told that *Saturninus* declined the honour, but later in about 280 AD, he appears to have proclaimed himself Augustus in Syria after a change of heart.

Marcus Probus was keen to start his eastern campaign, which the revolts in the west had delayed. Towards the end of 281 AD, he returned to Rome and celebrated his achievements. In the spring of AD 282, he headed for Sirmium (his birth city) on the Danube, from where he hoped to prepare a campaign against Persians. But morale in the army had reached a low point. When not campaigning against barbarians or rebels, *Marcus Probus* had asked them to work - draining land, erecting buildings and defences, building bridges, and even planting vineyards. Whether they regarded the work as too arduous or undignified, we don't know.

It was no less disharmonious in Britain, where its governor declared himself emperor. A Mauretanian⁶ commander named *Marcus Piavonius Victorinus* was sent to crush that attempt and appeared to do so swiftly.

⁴ The praetorian prefect was a high office in the Roman Empire. Originating as the commander of the Praetorian Guard, the office gradually acquired extensive legal and administrative functions, with its holders becoming the Emperor's chief aides.

⁵ *Historia Augusta* is a late Roman collection of biographies, written in Latin, of the Roman emperors, their junior colleagues, designated heirs and usurpers from 117 to 284.

⁶ Mauretania was a region of ancient North Africa corresponding to present-day northern Morocco and western and central Algeria north of the Atlas Mountains.

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Assassination

Victorinus was emperor in the Gallic provinces from 268 to 270 (or 269 to 271), following the brief reign of Marius. It is said he was murdered by a jealous husband whose wife he tried to seduce.

Soldiers of the Roman army⁷, the military of ancient Rome, murdered Probus at Sirmium in autumn 282, probably in August or September. The *Historia Augusta* says that Probus was buried in a mausoleum in Sirmium. There may have been a *damnatio memoriae*⁸ on Probus, and the Romans removed his name from some inscriptions. Later, however, possibly in the time of the emperor Diocletian⁹, the Romans deified Probus (making him into a god). He got a new name in Latin: *Divus Probus*.¹⁰

Despite his widespread popularity, *Marcus Probus* was killed in a mutiny of the soldiers while in the middle of preparations for the Persian war, which was then carried out under his successor *Carus*.

Different accounts of *Marcus Probus*' death exist.

According to *Joannes Zonaras*, the commander of the Praetorian Guard, *Marcus Aurelius Carus* had been proclaimed emperor by his troops. *Marcus Probus* sent some troops against the new usurper, but when those troops changed sides and supported *Carus*, *Marcus Probus*' remaining soldiers assassinated him at Sirmium in September/October 282 AD.

However, according to other sources, *Probus* was killed by disgruntled soldiers, who rebelled against his orders to be employed for civic purposes, such as draining marshes.

Probus' Successor

Carus (who was Roman emperor 282–283) was probably from either Gaul or Illyricum and had served as prefect of the guard to the emperor *Probus* (276–282), whom he succeeded. Like his predecessors, *Carus* adopted the name *Marcus Aurelius* (from his predecessor *Probus*), as a part of his imperial title. After a brief Danube campaign, he led his troops against the Sāsānians, penetrating beyond the Tigris, where he died suddenly and mysteriously, allegedly struck by lightning in 283. His sons *Numerian* and *Carinus* succeeded him.¹¹

⁷ The Roman Army's infantry, for much of its history, was the Roman legion. Rome also had a navy. The army's size in the late Roman Empire was about 128,000 – 179,200 men. It was very well organised.

⁸ *Damnatio memoriae* is a modern Latin phrase meaning "condemnation of memory", indicating that a person is to be excluded from official accounts. There are and have been many routes to *damnatio memoriae*, including the destruction of depictions, the removal of names from inscriptions and documents, and even large-scale rewritings of history.

⁹ Diocletian was Roman emperor from 284 to 305.

¹⁰ Source: [https://kids.kiddle.co/Probus_\(emperor\)](https://kids.kiddle.co/Probus_(emperor))

¹¹ Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carus>