

Roman Emperors – the first 200 years

THE JULIO-CLAUDIAN EMPERORS

JULIUS CAESAR (Dictator 49 – 44 BC) A successful general who conquered Gaul and twice raided Britain before his recall to Rome. He then defeated his rival Pompey and was elected "Dictator for Life" by the Senate, but Senators (jealous or fearing his proposed reforms) assassinated him after only 5 years.

MARK ANTHONY (Dictator 43 – 33 BC) Defeated Caesar's assassins in a civil war and made sure the Senate did not return to Republican government but was himself defeated in a second civil war by Caesar's nephew Octavian to whom the Senate gave the title –

AUGUSTUS (Emperor 27 BC – 14 AD) The first and the longest-reigning Emperor, a wise ruler who began an impressive series of reforms (including a reform of the coinage) and public works so that by the time he died, the Romans fully accepted the Imperial system. He was careful not to rule as a military dictator but persuaded the Senate to place all the republican offices into his own hands and so became a legal despot. All following emperors took the title of *Augustus* (abbreviated to AVG on their coins).

TIBERIUS (14 – 37 AD) was Augustus' happily-married step-son who he forced into divorcing his wife and into marrying Augustus' only surviving child, Julia. Augustus's unhappy heir had got the job simply by outlasting all his potential rivals and proved himself an able ruler. A *denarius* of Tiberius is the *Tribute Penny* mentioned in the New Testament.

CALIGULA (37 – 41 AD) nephew and appointer heir of Tiberius, Caligula (his nickname = little boots – he hated it!) was the first of the "Mad Emperors". His reign became synonymous with perversion, cruelty and excess. When he was assassinated the palace guard (fearing a return to a republic – with no emperor to guard!) replaced him by his uncle –

CLAUDIUS (41 – 54 AD) Initially believed to be little more than a bumbling fool, he proved to be a farsighted and wise ruler – far better than anyone could have predicted. Amongst other things, he began the conquest of Britain in 43 AD. He was eventually poisoned by his wife.

NERO (54 – 68 AD) became Emperor when his mother poisoned Claudius. History has not been kind to Nero who did not 'fiddle while Rome burned' but he did lavishly overspend and did murder his way through his reign. He eventually committed suicide to escape arrest & execution.

CIVIL WAR

So far, Rome had been ruled by the relatives of Caesar and Augustus but following the suicide of Nero, there was a power-vacuum and a short struggle for supremacy resulting in the three very brief reigns of –

GALBA (68-69 AD) strict disciplinarian and rigid economist who alienated the army.

OTHO (69 AD) replaced Galba (as the army's choice) but was defeated in battle by

VITELLIUS (69 AD) (a notorious glutton) who was murdered following defeat by . . .

THE FLAVIAN DYNASTY

VESPASIAN (69-79 AD) was an experienced general who had led a legion in the conquest of Britain and, at the time of Nero's death, was campaigning successfully in Palestine. As he returned towards Rome he was proclaimed Emperor by his army. A wise and just ruler, who initiated the conquest of northern Britain, he tried to heal the wounds of the Civil War, raised taxes to restore the economy and spent money on public buildings (including the Coliseum).

TITUS (79-81 AD) Vespasian's elder son reigned through some major disasters (including the destruction of Pompeii), but was well liked, especially for the lavish 'games' which he staged. He died suddenly of malaria after a short reign.

DOMITIAN (81 – 96 AD) The younger son of Vespasian, Domitian did not share the popular approval that his father and brother had enjoyed, though he was popular in the army as he gave them a 33% pay rise. Disliked by the Senate whose powers he restricted, he was eventually poisoned in a palace revolution.

THE ADOPTIVE EMPERORS

NERVA (96 – 98 AD) An elderly Senator, he was elected by the Senate because of his age and poor health. To confound those who immediately started plotting against him, he 'adopted' their most likely candidate Trajan (the Governor of Upper Germany) as his son and heir. Trajan then executed all of the plotters. The adoption strategy started a trend which was to secure domestic peace for the next century. On their coins, most of these adopted emperors included the name of their predecessor at least early in their reign e.g 'Nerva Trajan', 'Trajan Hadrian', etc. to stress continuity.

TRAJAN (98 – 117) proved to be one of the most successful of all emperors, spending money on fine buildings and public works. In military matters his greatest triumph was his conquest of Dacia which he celebrated by the building of Trajan's Column in Rome. He then went on to invade Mesopotamia but had to return to deal with trouble or rebellions in his other provinces including Britain. On his way back, he suffered a stroke and died.

HADRIAN (117 – 138 AD) married Trajan's niece Sabina and was adopted as Trajan's heir. Hadrian spent his reign travelling and defining frontiers to 'fix' the extent of the Empire. These frontiers included walls in North Africa, Germany and Britain. Hadrian also built on a lavish scale. The *pax romana* which refers to domestic and foreign peace dates from Hadrian's reign. Unfortunately his own adopted heir Aelius died of tuberculosis while Hadrian was still alive. Hadrian then appointed Antoninus Pius as heir with instructions to 'coach' his two new adopted heirs – 16 year old Marcus Aurelius and the 7 year old Lucius Verus (son of his original heir).

ANTONINUS PIUS (138 – 161 AD) effectively ruled the Empire for the last six months of Hadrian's reign while Hadrian was ill and reclusive. Although 52 when he became Emperor, he lived for another 23 years, maintaining the *Pax Romana* by careful diplomacy. His one military adventure was the advance into Southern Scotland and the building of the Antonine Wall. His beloved wife Faustina died only four years into his reign and is commemorated in an extensive series of coins.

MARCUS AURELIUS (161 – 180 AD) was adopted by Hadrian aged 16 and appointed Caesar by Antoninus Pius in 139 AD. When he succeeded as Augustus he was a wise and just ruler (and a stoic philosopher of note) but he had to deal with many rebellions on the frontiers especially in the east. He was married to Antoninus' daughter Faustina.

LUCIUS VERUS (161 – 169) was adopted in turn by Hadrian and Antoninus Pius and made co-emperor by Marcus Aurelius (whose daughter Lucilla he married) but, although a good general, he showed more interest in governing and his death at the age of 39 was a relief.

COMMODUS (177 – 192) the son of Marcus Aurelius was made co-emperor in 177 but proved a failure when he inherited the Empire. He retired from public life, left the government to a succession of unsuitable favourites, eventually became insane and was murdered after a series of plots against him.

CHAOS

PERTINAX (Jan-March 193) Prefect of Rome when Commodus was murdered he reluctantly accepted the throne but his reforms threatened the Senate and he was murdered after only 86 days.

DIDIUS JULIANUS (March – June 193) the Praetorian Guards offered the throne to the highest bidder. The people of Rome appealed to the army and three provincial governors immediately began to advance on the capital. Julianus was deposed and murdered after only 66 days.

PESCENNIUS NIGER (193-4) Governor of Syria he was defeated by Severus and executed

CLODIUS ALBINUS (195-7) Governor of Britain (he left it undefended) also defeated by Severus

SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS (193 – 211 AD) Governor of Upper Pannonia, he defeated both his rivals in battle and began a new dynasty.

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