



Septimius Severus, 193-211 AD

Septimius Severus was born in 145 AD in Leptis Magna in North Africa, not far from Carthage. His mother was Roman but his father was from a wealthy Punic (Carthaginian) family. Severus' native language was Punic and, though he learned Latin and Greek, he always spoke them with a 'foreign' accent.

When he was about 17, he travelled to Rome hoping to begin a senatorial career. A severe outbreak of plague in 166 AD in Rome forced him to return briefly to Leptis Magna. Once back in Rome, he found the plague had killed off many potential rivals. This helped his career move forward quickly, and he was given positions of authority, first in Spain and later in North Africa.

In the late 180s, Severus, recently widowed, travelled to Syria in search of a new wife, following a horoscope prediction. There he married Julia Domna. The marriage was a very happy one. Well-educated, with an interest in philosophy, Julia exercised considerable political influence in her husband's reign and that of her elder son Caracalla.



Severus' next appointment was to Pannonia on the northern shore of the Black Sea where he had three legions under his control. He had hardly settled in however when, in 192, the unstable Emperor Commodus was murdered by the Praetorian Guard, setting in motion a chain of events which would make Severus Emperor. He was replaced by Pertinax, a successful soldier and former Governor of Britain who however only lasted 3 months before he alienated the Praetorian Guard, who murdered him too and offered the throne to the highest bidder. The winner, Didius Julianus did not get value for his money. The offer of the throne to the highest bidder outraged most Romans and three provincial governors (Severus, Albinus and Niger) all set out with their legions to restore sanity and claim the imperial throne for themselves.

Septimius Severus was first to reach Italy and, as he got near to Rome, the Senate deposed Julianus (who was put to death) and hailed Severus as Emperor. When he entered Rome, Severus executed or exiled the entire Praetorian Guard and replaced them with troops loyal to him. Knowing that he could not fight both the other claimants at the same time, he made an alliance with Clodius Albinus, Governor of Britain. If Albinus would support him, he would make Albinus his heir with the traditional title of Caesar. Severus now felt secure enough to leave Italy and march east against Pescennius Niger, Governor of Syria. Niger was finally cornered and beaten at Issus. Shortly afterwards he was captured and executed.

Severus spend the next year in the east, securing the whole area. He then returned to Rome where he deliberately provoked his former rival Clodius Albinus by promoting his own young son to be the Caesar who would succeed him. With the support of the legions of Britain, Gaul and Spain, Albinus was proclaimed Emperor and advanced to Lugdunum (Lyons) in southern Gaul. Severus raised an army from the legions of the Danube and moved north from Rome to meet him. The two armies met outside Lugdunum in February 197 AD and fought a tumultuous battle lasting over two days and involving over 100,000 men. Eventually Severus' cavalry enabled him to get the upper hand and Albinus fled back into Lugdunum where he was killed.

After defeating Albinus, Severus returned briefly to Rome. Now master of the whole of the Roman Empire, he ruled as a military dictator and keeping a guard of some 50,000 loyal troops camped outside Rome. He was unpopular in the Senate, executing dozens of their number for real or imaginary plots against him. He also increased the total number of legions to 33 and increased the annual pay of a legionary soldier from 300 to 500 *denarii*. After a brief stay in Rome, he set off by sea and land to attack the Parthian Empire. In a two year campaign, he captured some territory but was ultimately unsuccessful.

In 202 and 203 AD Severus turned his attention to his native province of Africa, pushing the Roman frontier south by as much as 400 miles in places and building a new frontier defence (or *limes*) to keep Roman territory safe from attack by desert tribesmen. In addition to his frontier works, Severus built on a lavish scale in his own home city of Leptis Magna, including new docks and a new Forum with a magnificent Basilica (town hall) in the centre.

In 208 AD, Severus and his two sons, Caracalla and Geta, launched a military campaign in Britain. The province had been left open to barbarian attack when Clodius Albinus withdrew the Britain legions in support of his bid for power. Alterations to the military fort at South Shields at the mouth of the River Tyne show that the expedition was planned on an impressive scale. 22 granaries were built to store food for an immense army, probably numbering about 40,000 troops.

The first military task in Britain was to start major building works along Hadrian's Wall which was in a state of disrepair. His rebuilding was on such a large scale that early archaeologists were unsure whether it was Hadrian or Severus who had built it. The next stage was to advance into what is now southern Scotland, first as far as the Antonine Wall between the Clyde and the Forth which was re-occupied and then into Caledonia, beginning what was intended as an attempt to conquer the whole island. By the end of 210, the Caledonians were ready to make peace surrendering the whole of the lowlands to the Romans.

By the winter of 210-211, Severus was seriously ill and withdrew to York to recuperate. However, early in February he died, leaving the Empire to his two sons Antoninus (nicknamed Caracalla - left) and Geta (right picture) who had previously been made joint emperors with their father. Before the end of the year, Caracalla had Geta murdered, along with 20,000 of his supporters and made himself sole ruler.

