

Tiberius

Date of Reign: CE 14–37

Tiberius, the stepson of Augustus, was a highly regarded general with several successful military campaigns to his credit then he became Emperor. He was a large, powerful man of good health, except for his complexion, which was marred by skin problems. A stern, silent individual with a great interest in mythology, Tiberius firmly believed that everything is ruled by fate. Despite his great physical strength, he lacked the oratory skills of leaders such as Augustus.

During the first ten years of his reign, he provided good leadership by continuing the policies of Augustus, whom he had succeeded. He increased the power of the Senate, thereby leaving the public assemblies only the token power of approving the Senate's choices for public office. Generally, Tiberius was disliked by the people because he was frugal and refused to sponsor lavish games.

In the years following CE 23, Tiberius's reign took on an evil dimension. In this year, Tiberius's only son, Drusus, suddenly died. The Emperor became increasingly paranoid. Fearing that people were plotting to kill him, Tiberius held treason trials in which those accused of plotting against him were often found guilty despite a lack of concrete evidence. Sejanus, a close friend and advisor to the Emperor, helped fuel the paranoia to serve his own ends—getting rid of his personal enemies. At least 60 people were executed as a result of treason trials before Tiberius was informed that Drusus had been murdered by Sejanus. Although this was not likely true, Tiberius believed the accusation; by this time, Sejanus had died. In March, CE 37, Tiberius also died, in his 78th year.

Caligula

Dates of Reign: CE 37–41

Gaius (Caligula) was Tiberius's grandnephew and successor. As a young child, he was nicknamed Caligula ("little boots") by the soldiers who served under his father. This nickname referred to the miniature military boots he had been given to wear as a child.

Descriptions of Caligula indicate that he was not an attractive man. He was said to have been tall and extremely pale, with an unshapely body and very thick neck and legs. His eyes were described as hollow, his forehead broad, and the hair on his head thin, although he had a hairy body. He is reputed to have worked hard in front of mirrors to make himself appear even more fearful by making scary faces. He was also said to get extremely excited and angry and was prone to extreme measures such as making it a capital offence for anyone to look down on him lest they see his baldness. Perhaps the most damaging reports about his character regard his sex life. These reports include rumours of sadism and incest. Caligula has been described as an insomniac, schizoid, schizophrenic, and chronic alcoholic.

Although Caligula had very little administrative training, his rule began positively: he pardoned political prisoners, abolished some taxes, and put an end to treason trials. After a serious illness, however, he became mentally unstable, and his reign descended into treachery. He began to use the treasury for lavish building projects and insulted public officials. When the treasury had been drained, Caligula extorted money from wealthy families by reinstating treason trials. Throughout his reign, he made no pretense of ruling with the support of the Senate. Instead, he openly ruled as a despot, earning himself the distrust and hatred of many members of the upper class. After only four years as Emperor, Caligula was assassinated by members of the Praetorian Guard.

Claudius

Dates of Reign: CE 41–54

Despite never holding public office before becoming Emperor, Claudius proved to be an able and energetic administrator. His lack of training was quite likely due to numerous physical disabilities. He has been described as a well-built man with an impressive face and white hair who had a nervous tic and often ate and drank himself into a stupor. He is said to have slept poorly at night, although he was known to doze off while presiding over a lawsuit.

As an administrator, Claudius attempted to emulate Augustus, whom he greatly admired, by blending innovation with tradition. He met with limited success, however, for despite conceiving many good ideas, he found it difficult to implement his thoughts and was easily diverted by suspicion, timidity, and fear.

Among his greatest achievements were the construction of two new aqueducts, the building of three major roads, the expansion and improvement of the harbour at Ostia, and the completion of the conquest of Britain, which had been started by Caesar nearly a century earlier. Claudius personally participated in this military conquest. He is also remembered for extending Roman citizenship to provinces that had been under Roman rule for some time and had adopted Roman customs and values. He was eventually assassinated by his wife, Agrippina, whose son, Nero, became the next Emperor.

Nero

Dates of Reign: CE 54–68

Nero was only 16 years old when he became Emperor. He was described by Suetonius as follows: "...spots and malodorous, his hair light blond, his features regular rather than attractive, his eyes blue and somewhat weak, his neck over-thick, his belly prominent, and his legs very slender."

During the early years of his reign, he was wisely advised by the philosopher Seneca, leading to a few years of sound rule. For example, Nero had governors charged if they abused their powers, did not allow gladiators to fight to the death, and refused to engage in war except for defence. He also took steps to improve public order, to guard against forgery, and to reform the treasury procedures.

In the second year of his reign, Nero became increasingly frustrated by his mother's (Agrippina) attempts to dominate him, and he plotted her murder. Tacitus describes Nero's attempts to murder Agrippina by providing her with a collapsible ship, which she was able to swim away from only to meet her death on land. After her death, Nero's reign began to steadily deteriorate. He later murdered his wife so that he could marry his mistress and eventually neglected the daily needs of the Empire.

Instead of governing, Nero began to devote his time to music and poetry, often forcing people to attend concerts in which he performed. In CE 64, a major fire ravaged Rome, destroying the homes of many of the poor. Rumours immediately began to circulate that Nero had set the fire both for his own entertainment and to seize the land as a location for his new palace. To deflect such accusations, Nero blamed the fire on Christians and carried out the first persecutions of Christians, killing hundreds, including the apostles Peter and Paul.

The palace that Nero built on the land he annexed after the fire was called the "Golden House." This enormous palace was larger than anything built by a European monarch before or since in the heart of a capital city. The Golden House was a series of graceful pavilions and kiosks set among a beautiful landscape that included a large artificial lake stocked with many varieties of fish and animals. The complex included baths flowing with sulphurous and salt waters, the world's largest hydraulic organ, and a banqueting hall that included a domed ceiling, that revolved "like the heavens" about the diners. Nero is reported to have exclaimed upon completion of the Golden House, "Good. Now I can at last begin to live like a human being!"

When a plot to murder Nero was unearthed in CE 65, it was crushed ruthlessly. Many of Rome's leading citizens were killed or forced to commit suicide. As Nero's reign deteriorated, rebellions began to break out throughout the Empire in protest. Becoming frustrated, Nero eventually committed suicide in CE 68, exclaiming as he died, "Oh, what a great artist the world is losing in me."

Trajan

Dates of Reign: CE 98–117

The Spanish-born Trajan was the first Roman emperor not of Italian birth. His numerous successful military campaigns made him very popular with the army. Trajan has been described as a tall, well-built man, "most conspicuous for his justice, for his bravery, and for the simplicity of his habits...." Dio Cassius goes on to praise Trajan: "He did not envy or slay anyone, but honoured and exalted all good men without exception, and hence he neither feared nor hated any of them. He refrained from taking other people's money, and from unjust murders. He expended vast sums on wars and vast sums on works of peace; and while making very many urgently needed repairs to roads and harbours and public buildings, he drained no one's blood in any of these undertakings...."

Trajan saw as his major life work the expansion of the Roman Empire. He hoped to exceed the conquests of Julius Caesar, a man whom he held in high regard. During his reign, the boundaries of the Roman Empire reached their greatest extent, spanning from the Atlantic Ocean to the Caspian Sea and from England to Egypt. These conquests, however, were not without their problems for his successors. To safeguard his regime and himself, Trajan set up Rome's first secret service.

Between his wars of conquest, Trajan was able to show himself a capable and efficient administrator. He paid particular attention to the material needs of the people, ensuring that the grain supply was secure and that financial subsidies were available for poor children. Trajan also expanded an ever-increasing amount of time and resources on public buildings. For example, the aqueduct Aqua Trajana substantially increased the daily supply of water for Rome's inhabitants.

Hadrian

Dates of Reign: CE 117–138

The stable reign of Trajan was followed by the equally effective administration of Hadrian. Hadrian, however, differed significantly from his predecessor in his view of foreign conquests. Immediately following his ascension to power, he reversed Trajan's policy of conquest, electing instead to fortify and consolidate Rome's hold on its territories. For example, he had the 120 kilometre wall across England (Hadrian's Wall) built to protect Roman settlements in Britain from Picts and other warlike tribes in Scotland. Hadrian was the first Roman Emperor to see the Empire as a living organism, not only at its centre but also in all its provinces. Rather than viewing the provinces as conquered territories, he saw them as part of a commonwealth in which each region had a unique identity.

Hadrian spent much of his reign travelling through the Roman provinces, making sure the army was in a state of readiness and attempting to redress the problems he encountered. By the end of his life, he had earned the title of the greatest of all the imperial travellers. At home, Hadrian had the laws modernized and the Pantheon rebuilt. The rebuilt Pantheon was one of the greatest architectural achievements of the Roman world. Hadrian also built for himself a lavish villa near the city of Tivoli, a villa that would rival Louis XIV's Versailles in size and grandeur.

Diocletian

Dates of Reign: CE 285–305

Diocletian was born into a poor family in the Roman province of Illyria. The fact that he was able to rise to become Emperor reflects the changes that had occurred in Roman governments since the time of Augustus. Through careful leadership and the imposition of harsh controls, Diocletian was able to delay the collapse of the Roman Empire. During his 20 years as Emperor, he governed as an autocrat, without either advice or consent from the Senate.

In CE 293, Diocletian decided the Roman Empire was too extensive to be ruled by one person. He divided it into two parts: he retained control of the Eastern provinces, and assigned the rule of the Western provinces to Maximian. He also declared that he and Maximian would rule for 20 years and then step down, allowing their assistants (Constantius and Galerius, respectively) to take over.

Diocletian reformed the administration of the Empire by dividing each of the existing prefectures into 12 dioceses and appointing a ruler in each. He also moved the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire to Nicodemia, while Milan became the capital of the Western Roman Empire. Hence, under the reign of Diocletian, Rome ceased to be the central city of the Empire.

The black mark on the reign of Diocletian comes from his attempts to impose one religion on all the people of the Roman Empire in hopes of promoting unity. When Christians, choosing to remain loyal to their religion, refused to worship the gods of the state as Diocletian insisted, thousands were put to death.

In CE 305, true to his word, Diocletian stepped down as Emperor, having served his 20 years.