

HEIGHT OF THE EMPIRE—ERA SUMMARY

14 TO 235 A.D.

REIGN OF TIBERIUS TO LAST SEVERAN EMPEROR

Julio-Claudian Dynasty: 14-68 A.D.—For fifty years following the death of [Augustus Caesar](#), descendants of [Livia](#) and Augustus held the imperial throne. Tragically, the royal family was prone to murder, insanity, debauchery, and every other imaginable vice, so that for nearly half a century, the Praetorian guard held most of the real power. The Praetorian guard, employed as the emperor’s bodyguard, was responsible for the murder of [Caligula](#), who followed [Tiberius](#) on the throne, and for elevating [Claudius](#), who was thought to be easily controlled. On the death of Claudius, who was murdered by his wife [Agrippina the Younger](#), the Praetorians arranged for the elevation of her son [Nero](#) to the throne, again opting for a malleable youth over an experienced and competent ruler.

Nero’s rule was one of the most notorious in Roman history. He was an immature and indulgent young man, who replaced competent ministers with scoundrels, murdered his mother, brother, and wife, and intentionally set fire to the city of Rome in order to clear space for a grand imperial palace. Shortly afterward he discovered a conspiracy against him and executed dozens of Rome’s most prominent citizens, he lost the support of the all-powerful Praetorian guard and was forced to commit suicide.

Year of Four Emperors: 69 A.D.—Nero was the last member of the fratricidal Julio-Claudian dynasty, and he left no heir, so the Praetorians declared for [Galba](#), who was well-respected but old and infirm. Galba was in turn, [overthrown](#) by [Otho](#), while the German legions declared for their commander [Vitellius](#), whom his subordinates favored because of his weak will and easy discipline. Vitellius defeated Otho at the *Battle of Bedriacum*, and became the third emperor to in less than a year, but there were more changes to come. Disgusted by the weak leadership of Vitellius, the eastern legions declared for [Vespasian](#), a competent and well-respected general who was then [besieging Jerusalem](#). In the civil battles that followed, several capitol buildings in Rome were destroyed by fire, but by the time Vespasian marched on Rome, Vitellius was dead and the issue was settled.

Flavian Dynasty: 70-96 A.D.—Vespasian, the founder of the Flavian dynasty, was the first Roman emperor of genuinely humble parentage, who attained the throne purely by merit. He had risen through the ranks slowly and with great credit. By the time he assumed the throne, he had a thirty year career of competent management behind him and during his reign he reformed imperial finances, brought the Praetorian guard under sway, replaced corrupt senators, and restored discipline. In general, he ruled justly and was not prone to extravagant vice. Under Vespasian, the rebuilding of Rome proceeded apace, and the Roman Coliseum was dedicated in 79 A.D., the last year of his reign.

Vespasian shared power with his eldest son [Titus](#), who had successfully prosecuted the [Roman Jewish Wars](#) after his father was called to Rome. Titus had proven a great general, and was popular with both the army and the population, so there was much lamenting when he died

only a few years after his father. The throne was then passed to [Domitian](#), a younger and less talented brother of Titus. [Tacitus](#), probably the most important historian from this era, was critical of Domitian, likely because he was related to his rival [Agricola](#). It is certain that some of the earliest persecutions of Christians occurred under the reign of Domitian, and that he became murderous and paranoid after a failed assassination attempt.

Five Good Emperors: 96-180 A.D.—Whatever his faults, Domitian should be credited for establishing a tradition, adhered to for nearly 100 prosperous years, of selecting a competent leader to replace himself rather than passing the empire to biological kin. Domitian's chosen successor was [Nerva](#), the first of the "Five Good Emperors", who reigned in Rome from 96 to 180 A.D. This period was undoubtedly the golden age of the Roman Empire. The five good emperors were Nerva, [Trajan](#), [Hadrian](#), [Antoninus Pius](#), and [Marcus Aurelius](#). During their peaceful and prosperous reigns, the maximum extent of the empire was reached, the borders were secured and defended, imperial finances were well managed, and infrastructure, including walls, aqueducts, public buildings, and roads, were maintained. Several of the emperors, and Hadrian in particular, were patrons of the arts and literature. The second century A.D. was the "Silver Age" of Latin literature, which produced such literary greats as Lucan, [Pliny \(the Elder\)](#), [Juvenal](#), [Martial](#), and Quintilian, and the historians, [Tacitus](#), [Pliny the Younger](#), and Suetonius.

The two emperors most notable for their virtuous lives and excellent administrative skills were Trajan and Marcus Aurelius. Both were gracious in bearing but courageous in battle and uncomplaining in adversity. Marcus Aurelius was also noted as a stoic philosopher, and his life, which was full of tragedy, difficulties and disappointments gave a true test to his mettle. He is sometimes known as the "model pagan", and some of his meditations on philosophy are still extant. His only fault was faith in his biological son [Commodus](#), whom he selected as his heir. Commodus proved to be a disastrous choice, who brought an abrupt end to nearly a century of peace, prosperity, and competent government.

Severan Dynasty: 193-239 A.D.—The beginning of the "fall" of Rome is often associated with Commodus, the corrupt son of Marcus Aurelius. His reign was as murderous and extravagant as that of Nero or Caligula and coming after nearly a century of good leadership severely rocked the confidence of the empire. He was eventually dispatched by one of his courtiers, but since no successor was named, the government of Rome fell into confusion. Eventually Septimus Severus, a politically skilled senator with connections in Africa and Syria, rose to the throne. He spent much of his early reign putting down rebellions throughout the empire, and his sons, who were badly influence by the decadence of the imperial court, were nearly grown when he returned permanently to Rome. When Severan died, his eldest son Caracalla assumed the throne and murdered his brother Geta. Caracalla ruled for six years before being murdered himself, and was followed by two Severan cousins, Elagabalus, and Alexander Severus. When Alexander was murdered by the leader of the Emperors private guard, the Empire was plunged into fifty years of anarchy.