

FIRST EMPERORS OF ROME

***Julius Caesar** (49–44 BC): Julius Caesar was not technically an emperor but set the stage for the empire. He conquered Gaul in a decade-long campaign, crossed the Rubicon River in defiance of the Senate, and made himself dictator of Rome. His centralizing reforms and accumulation of power alarmed the senatorial aristocracy, and he was assassinated on the Ides of March in 44 BC. His death triggered another round of civil wars that would ultimately produce the empire.

Caesar Augustus (Octavian) (27 BC – AD 14): Octavian was Caesar's adopted heir. He defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, ended decades of civil war, and became the first Roman emperor when the Senate granted him the title Augustus in 27 BC. He established the empire's administrative systems, pushed Rome's frontiers to the Rhine and Danube, and reigned for over forty years. His era defined what the Roman Empire would be for centuries.

Tiberius Caesar Augustus (Tiberius) (AD 14–37): Augustus's stepson and reluctant heir, Tiberius was a gifted military commander who had proven himself in the Illyrian revolt and on the Rhine frontier. As emperor he was competent but increasingly suspicious and withdrawn. He relied heavily on the Praetorian prefect Sejanus, who accumulated enormous power before Tiberius had him executed. Tiberius spent his final years in seclusion on the island of Capri and was deeply unpopular by the time he died.

Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (Caligula) (AD 37–41): The son of the beloved Germanicus, Caligula was welcomed with enormous enthusiasm when he became emperor. That goodwill evaporated quickly as his behavior became erratic, cruel, and possibly deranged. Ancient sources claim he planned to make his horse a consul, though this may have been mockery of the Senate rather than genuine madness. He was assassinated by officers of the Praetorian Guard after less than four years on the throne.

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (Claudius) (AD 41–54): After Caligula's murder the Praetorians found Claudius hiding behind a curtain in the palace and declared him emperor. He had been dismissed his entire life as a stammering fool, but he turned out to be a surprisingly effective ruler. He oversaw the conquest of Britain, expanded the imperial bureaucracy, and built major public works including the port at Ostia. He was likely poisoned by his fourth wife Agrippina, who wanted to secure the throne for her son Nero.

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (Nero) (AD 54–68): The last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, Nero came to power at seventeen under the guidance of the philosopher Seneca and the Praetorian prefect Burrus. His early reign was considered competent, but he grew increasingly tyrannical, murdered his own mother Agrippina, and was widely blamed for the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64, after which he persecuted Christians as scapegoats. Military revolts in Gaul and Spain ended his reign, and he committed suicide in AD 68, reportedly saying "What an artist dies in me."

Nero's suicide in AD 68 left no heir and no clear succession mechanism. He was the last of the Julio-Claudians, and with his death the bloodline that had legitimized imperial rule for a century

was gone. The result was a power vacuum that revealed an uncomfortable truth about the empire: whoever controlled the legions controlled the throne.

Galba, governor of Spain, marched on Rome first and was recognized as emperor. But he was old, cheap, and alienated the Praetorian Guard by refusing to pay them. Otho, a senator who had expected to be named Galba's heir and was passed over, bribed the Praetorians to murder Galba and seize power. Meanwhile the Rhine legions, feeling overlooked, had already declared their own commander Vitellius emperor. The eastern legions then declared support for Vespasian. In the following battles, **Vespasian** would emerge as the victor of the Year of Four Emperors.

Caesar Vespasianus Augustus (Vespasian) (AD 69–79): A practical and unpretentious general from a middle-class Italian family, Vespasian restored order after the chaos of the Year of the Four Emperors. He stabilized the empire's finances, began construction of the Colosseum, and founded the Flavian dynasty. He had a dry sense of humor and reportedly joked on his deathbed that he thought he was becoming a god, a reference to the Roman custom of deifying dead emperors.

Titus Caesar Vespasianus Augustus (Titus) (AD 79–81): Vespasian's elder son, Titus had already made his reputation by capturing Jerusalem and destroying the Second Temple in AD 70. As emperor he was generous and beloved, though his reign lasted only two years. It was marked by the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, which buried Pompeii and Herculaneum, and by a major fire in Rome. He died of fever and was genuinely mourned.

Caesar Domitianus Augustus (Domitian) (AD 81–96): Titus's younger brother, Domitian was an effective administrator and military organizer who strengthened the empire's frontier defenses, particularly along the Rhine and Danube. However, he was autocratic and increasingly paranoid, conducting purges of senators and demanding to be addressed as lord and god. He was assassinated in a palace conspiracy organized by members of his own court, ending the Flavian dynasty.

Nerva Caesar Augustus (Nerva) (AD 96–98): An elderly and respected senator, Nerva was chosen by the Senate to restore stability after Domitian's assassination. His reign was brief and somewhat precarious, as he lacked military support. His most consequential act was adopting the talented general Trajan as his heir, establishing the precedent of adoptive succession that would produce Rome's most effective rulers over the next century.

Caesar Nerva Traianus Augustus (Trajan) (AD 98–117): A Spaniard by origin and a soldier by temperament, Trajan was arguably Rome's greatest military emperor. He conquered Dacia in two hard-fought wars, adding its gold mines to the imperial treasury, and later campaigned in the east, conquering Mesopotamia and briefly reaching the Persian Gulf. The empire reached its greatest territorial extent under his rule. He was also admired for his fairness and public building projects, and the Senate gave him the title *Optimus*, meaning "the best."

Caesar Traianus Hadrianus Augustus (Hadrian) (AD 117–138): Trajan's successor and fellow Spaniard, Hadrian reversed Trajan's eastern conquests and focused on consolidation and defense. He is best known for Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain, a physical statement that the empire had limits it intended to hold rather than exceed. He traveled the provinces more extensively than any emperor before him, personally inspecting frontiers and armies. He was cultured, intellectual, and sometimes ruthless.

Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius (Antoninus Pius) (AD 138–161): Hadrian's adopted heir, Antoninus Pius presided over what may have been the most peaceful and prosperous period in Roman history. He rarely left Italy, governed through capable administrators, and avoided major wars. His reign of twenty-three years was the longest of any of the Five Good Emperors, and he was so widely respected that the Senate granted him the name Pius for his devotion to duty and family.

Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus (Marcus Aurelius) (AD 161–180): Known to history as the philosopher emperor who wrote of his personal reflections known as the *Meditations* (Stoic philosophy), Marcus Aurelius spent much of his reign not in contemplation but fighting desperate wars along the Danube frontier against Germanic and Sarmatian tribes. This conflict was the Marcomannic Wars.

Caesar Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus Augustus (Commodus) (AD 180–192): The son of Marcus Aurelius, Commodus abandoned his father's Danube wars and returned to Rome, where he became increasingly detached from the responsibilities of rule. He was obsessed with gladiatorial combat, personally fighting in the arena, and renamed Rome and its institutions after himself. His behavior grew so erratic and dangerous that members of his inner circle arranged his assassination.

Commodus' death in 192 AD caused the Year of the Five Emperors.

The following decades are **one big political mess**, and the resulting string of Emperors are lengthy and inconsequential, with some notable exceptions. First is Aurelian, who reunited the fractured empire by defeating Queen Zenobia of the Palmyrene Empire in the East and the Gallic Empire in the West. Second is Diocletian, with his reforms to set up the Tetrarchy. Third is Constantine, who won the Civil Wars of the Tetrarchy, accepted Christianity, and established the split into a Western Roman Empire and Eastern Roman Empire ('Byzantine Empire').