

The Roman “BAD” Emperors

Tiberius

No Roman law gave Augustus the right to pass his powers to anyone, but his adopted son, Tiberius, received the transfer of power. The Romans believed that for a continued peace and prosperity someone should rule as Augustus had ruled. When Augustus died in 14 CE, just before he was seventy-seven, Tiberius at the age of fifty-six took the title of emperor, and he also became consul of Rome.

Tiberius was bright, and he had a long history of service to Rome, including ably leading troops in Rome’s frontier skirmishes. As emperor he was a capable administrator and had a genuine concern for the empire’s well-being. He let the Senate know that it was he who ruled, but he left some duties to the Senate, saving himself from being overburdened with work.

Tiberius did well in appointing competent people to administrative positions, although preferences were given to candidates from “better” families. He kept Rome along a path of economic stability, and the military remained disciplined. But the glory that had belonged to Augustus – now considered a god – was not his. Tiberius disliked crowds and did not appear at the gladiator contests as did Augustus. Tiberius eventually retired to his island home of Capri where he was surrounded by troops of young boys known as the 'spintriae'. His bedrooms were said to be decorated with erotic images and statues to arouse and inspire his sexual partners. It was on this island that he was eventually smothered. Rather than a loving father figure, Tiberius was seen as unfriendly and was seen as a disappointment.

1. What were some of Tiberius’ achievements? Why was he considered a disappointment?

Caligula

When Caligula was twenty-six, Tiberius was around seventy-nine and slowly dying. It was rumored that Tiberius was finally smothered by Caligula or one of his aides. As expected, the Senate recognized Caligula as Tiberius’ successor and Caligula was welcomed as their new emperor. Caligula wanted to be popular, and demonstrated his affection for his subjects by providing the Circus Maximus. Unlike Tiberius, he attended the circus, gladiator shows and chariot races. And, to the amusement and delight of his subjects, he participated in the races himself.

Caligula wanted to rule well. He returned to the courts the power to make independent decisions in sentencing people, and he increased the number of jurors in order to speed proceedings. He began publishing a budget, and he began more building. But along with good intentions, Caligula suffered from vanity. He believed he should be worshipped as a god.

Being a man of little emotional discipline or control, he allowed himself to hate and to express his hate with sadistic revenge. He followed his sexual impulses with little restraint. Caligula had many homosexual and heterosexual affairs, this included using his authority to obtain sexual pleasures from other men’s wives. And, it is rumored, he had sexual intercourse with his three sisters. It is said that Caligula went mad two years into his reign. He began illustrating his excessive cruelty firstly by disemboweling his sister in order to get to the child he impregnated her with resulting in her death. He would sell the wives of high ranking Senate members to the highest bidder during sexual orgies. He named his horse as a priest, and gave it a house to reside in, complete with jewel necklaces; and he later talked of making his horse a member of the Senate and a consul of Rome. He had a habit of roaming the halls of his palace at night ordering the sun to rise. He opened a brothel in his palace and staffed it with the wives of Rome’s elite.

It was not Caligula’s sexual activities that resulted in his demise, it was the fear that he put into people around him who had considerable power of their own. Caligula made enemies, and he used the power to have his enemies executed. A conspiracy against him arose among those who felt their lives endangered, including officers in the royal guard. And in the year 41 CE, at the age of twenty-nine and in power only three years and ten months, he was assassinated.

1. What were some of Caligula’s achievements? Why was he assassinated?

Claudius

Caligula's uncle, Claudius, took the throne after the death of Caligula. The monarchy was to remain the dominant form of government in the Roman Empire. In appearance, Claudius stuttered, stammered and suffered a disability that made him clumsy. He had been an embarrassment to the imperial family and had spent much of his life secluded, writing books on history. Not taken seriously as a possible heir, he had survived while others around him died.

He had many difficulties in dealing with senatorial elite. This made his job more difficult. But he was an excellent manager of provinces and foreign affairs. But Claudius believed in the Roman Empire, and he described the glory and popularity enough to lead an invasion into Britain. During his reign, what the Romans called Britannia became part of the Roman Empire. And Claudius expanded the empire's frontiers in Gaul. He annexed lands in North Africa, Asia Minor and Eastern Europe. He made Judea a Roman province. But he avoided major wars with the Germans.

His downfall begins with his very poor choice of wives, most notably Agrippina the Younger. Claudius adopted Agrippina's son Nero, and shared consulship with him. Claudius granted Nero the proconsular imperium outside Rome, at expense of own son, Britannicus. He was said to have been murdered by his wife, Agrippina the Younger when Nero was 16 to allow her son to rule.

1. What were Claudius' achievements?

Nero

Like Caligula, Nero wanted public adoration, and the obvious way to acquire it was as a benevolent ruler. He delivered a speech to the Senate that inspired widespread praise, and claims were made that a new golden age had begun.

Nero disliked having to sign death sentences against criminals and he banned capital punishment. For a while he banned contests that involved bloodshed, and in their place he organized poetry competitions. Nero loved the arts and desired to patronize the great legacy of Greek civilization. He competed in the major Greek festivals and his performances lasted so long, that members of the captive audience gave birth, fell ill and even feigned death to escape the drudgery of his poems.

In the year 64 CE, while Nero was thirty-fives miles away, a great fire broke out in Rome. Fanned by winds, the fire raged for nine days. Nero instituted relief for those made homeless by the fire. He launched a program to rebuild Rome. Streets were to be widened; buildings put up, and made sure there was more fire equipment available in case of another emergency.

A rumor began to circulate around Rome that Nero had started the fire to make space for his great new mansion. To protect his name Nero did an investigation, and the fire was blamed on Jewish fanatics and Christians. He punished Christians by sending them to their death in the arena. He too, was deemed insane. And it is said that Nero murdered his mother and wife.

Because of his instability and his inability to rule, Nero was considered an enemy of the state by the Senate. In AD 68 a military coup drove Nero into hiding. Facing execution at the hands of the Roman Senate, he reportedly committed suicide with the help of his scribe.

1. What were Nero's achievements? Why was he considered a bad emperor?