

Marcus Aurelius: a Good Emperor?

Introduction

Marcus Aurelius is considered to be the last of the 'Five Good Emperors' and symbolised the 'Golden Age' of the Roman Empire. It was in this period that Rome saw its borders grow to its greatest extent and the Pax Romana was at its strongest. The arts and humanities flourished and some of the best Roman monuments and structures were built in this time. Marcus Aurelius contributed to this era by campaigning in the Danube region and by publishing some of the most well-known Stoic Philosophy. Aurelius is often considered to be an ideal candidate for the ideals of a 'Philosopher King' set out by Plato in "The Republic" due to him being well educated and a philosopher. However, recent scholarship has put that title, 'Good Emperor', under criticism as although the empire did prosper, the emperors' behind those reigns have been exaggerated by previous historians and their achievements have been questioned.

Good Emperor?

Despite the title 'Good Emperor', many scholars have debated whether he is worthy of this name, as some state that he is a historically overrated figure. His actual achievements are shadowed to the other five good emperors such as Trajan and Hadrian, who conquered more territory in comparison and saw more development in Rome's economy by the inclusion of those territories. But other scholars argue that his personal nobility and dedication are probably his strongest contribution as emperor. He was an enlightened and educated ruler who did see his empire prosper during his reign. These traits that he possessed, are ones that we want to see in our leaders today. It is no wonder why he is seen as one of the few true Philosopher Kings.

Reign

The Emperor Antonines adopted Marcus Aurelius to be his successor as emperor as Antonines was married to Aurelius' Aunt. Marcus regarded his adopted father as a model emperor and looking for the good of the community. When Marcus was elected, he was seen as a humble and honest man, the best example of this being him declining the senate to vote for him to have greater power in the senate. Throughout his reign, Marcus Aurelius went on a number of military campaigns across the empire mainly in the Danube region as he tried to stop a number of Germanic invasions and he sent a number of troops to Syria to prevent a number of Parthian invasions.

Successor

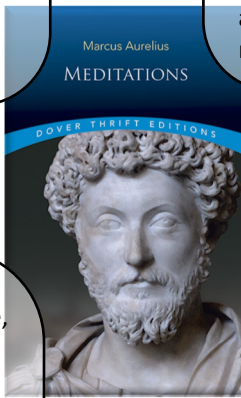
After Marcus Aurelius' death in 180 AD, he was succeeded by his only surviving son, Commodus. Commodus was very different to his father as he was very keen on gladiatorial combat. According to the contemporary sources, he fought many gladiators and animals in the Colosseum and thought he was invincible. However, his hubris got in the way and he was assassinated by strangling while he was bathing. After his death, the next few emperors were elected in military coups led by proletarians. These coups led to the 2nd and 3rd centuries going through a crisis and eventually helped lead to the downfall of the empire due to their being very few instances of stability from the emperor.

Philosophy

While he was on campaign, Marcus Aurelius wrote his stoic philosophy 'Meditations'. Stoicism is the belief that virtues (such as wisdom) are the base for our happiness and that our judgment should be based on behaviour, rather than words. Marcus' work is one of the main reasons why we consider him a philosopher king because. In his book Marcus lays out this philosophy from narrations from a person known as the Meditator. The book is seen as the work that defined Aurelius as a Philosopher King, due to the morals and lifestyle set out by him and that his philosophy perfectly coincides with the ideals of a Philosopher King set out by Plato in his Republic.



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