

CLAH4006

**From Village to Empire: An
Introduction to the History of Rome**

Commodus and the Aftermath

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Part 1: Commodus and the Aftermath

Succession of Commodus

- AD 177 Commodus given the same titles and honours as Marcus Aurelius.
- Inevitability – heredity principal.
- Criticisms of Marcus Aurelius – fallacy of meritocratic system of adoption.
- Alternative candidate – Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus (husband of Lucilla).
- The first emperor 'born to the purple' (i.e. when his father was reigning emperor).



- Reigned from 18th March AD 180 to 31st of December 192.

Stereotypical “Bad” Emperor

“...for our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for Romans of that day.” **Dio Cassius 71.36.4.**



Commodus AV Aureus. 180 AD. L AVREL
COMMODOVS AVG, laureate, draped & cuirassed
bust left / TR P V IMP III COS II P P, Victory seated
left holding patera & palm branch. – **RIC 8b.**

Frontiers and Provinces

Danube

- Commodus makes peace with Germanic tribes and lazyges.
- Terms – deserters/prisoners returned, “Barbarian” soldiers of the army, restrictions on the assembling of tribes; Roman troops removed from territories and subsidies paid.
- Revolt of Qaudi in AD 188.

“...after making a truce with the barbarians he rushed to Rome; for he hated all exertion and craved the comfortable life of the city.” – **Dio Cassius 72.1.2.**

Britain



Commodus Denarius. Rome, AD 184. COMM ANT AVG P BRIT, laureate head right / PM TR P VIII IMP VII COS III P P, Roma standing left, holding Victory & spear. **RSC 460.**

“When the tribes in that island, crossing the wall that separated them from the Roman legions, proceeded to do much mischief and cut down a general together with his troops, Commodus became alarmed but sent Ulpius Marcellus against them... he ruthlessly put down the barbarians of Britain, and later, when, thanks to his peculiar excellence, he was all but on the point of being put to death by Commodus, he was nevertheless pardoned.” – **Dio Cassius 72.8.6.**

Imperial Estates

- Inscription from Soukh el Khmis (North Africa) reporting the complaints of *coloni* (c. AD 181) about lessees of imperial estates.
- Abuses by procurator.

“In view of established tradition and my orders, procurators will see to it that nothing more than three periods of two days’ work per man is unjustly exacted from you in violation of established practice.”

Commodus and Gladiators

“They say that Faustina, the daughter, the daughter of Antoninus Pius and wife of Marcus Aurelius, was once fired with the love of a gladiator... she suffered from a protracted sickness over this and eventually confessed to her husband. Marcus referred this matter to the Chaldaeans. Their counsel was that the gladiator should be killed and that Faustina should bathe herself in his blood, then sleep with her husband in this condition.” – **SHA**
Marcus Aurelius 19.

Commodus as Gladiator

“In public he nowhere drove chariots except sometimes on a moonless night, for, though he was eager to play the charioteer in public, too, he was ashamed to be seen doing so; but in private he was constantly doing it, adopting the Green uniform. As for wild beasts, however, he slew many both in private and in public. Moreover, he used to contend as a gladiator; in doing this at home he managed to kill a man now and then, and in making close passes with others, as if trying to clip off a bit of their hair, he sliced off the noses of some, the ears of others, and sundry features of still others; but in public he refrained from using steel and shedding human blood. Before entering the amphitheatre he would put on a long-sleeved tunic of silk, white interwoven with gold, and thus arrayed he would receive our greetings; but when he was about to go inside, he put on a robe of pure purple with gold spangles, donning also after the Greek fashion a chlamys of the same colour, and a crown made of gems from India and of gold, and he carried a herald's staff like that of Mercury.” – **Dio Cassius 72.17.1-3.**

“And here is another thing that he did to us senators which gave us every reason to look for our death. Having killed an ostrich and cut off his head, he came up to where we were sitting, holding the head in his left hand and in his right hand raising aloft his bloody sword; and though he spoke not a word, yet he wagged his head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us in the same way. And many would indeed have perished by the sword on the spot, for laughing at him (for it was laughter rather than indignation that overcame us), if I had not chewed some laurel leaves, which I got from my garland, myself, and persuaded the others who were sitting near me to do the same...” – **Dio Cassius 72.21.1-2.**

Commodus as Hercules

- Jupiter *Exsuperantissimus*
– move towards quasi-monothestic Jupiter.
- Firm identification by later reign with Hercules.



Commodus Denarius. M COMM ANT P FEL AVG BRIT, laureate head right / IOV EXSVP P M TR P XII IMP VIII, COS V P P in ex, Jupiter seated left, holding a branch and a scepter. RSC 242.



“[Commodus] had the head of the Colossus removed and replaced with a new one in his own features. He also gave the Colossus a club and had a bronze lion placed at its feet to suggest the figure of Hercules...”
– **Dio Cassius 73.22.3.**

Commodus' Character and Governance

Megalomania

“He actually ordered that Rome itself should be called Commodiana, the legions Commodian and the day on which these measures were voted Commodiana. Upon himself he bestowed, in addition to a great many other names, that of Hercules... Finally all the months were named after him... vast numbers of statues were erected representing him in the garb of Hercules...and it was voted that his reign be called ‘The Golden Age’...” – **Dio Cassius 72.15.**

Weak Character

- Aelius Saoterus of Nicomedia.
- Sextus Tigidius Perennis (praetorian prefect).
- Marcus Aurelius Cleander (*pugione*).

“And the imperial freedmen, with Cleander at their head, after getting rid of this man [Perennis], refrained from no form of mischief, selling all privileges, and indulging in wantonness and debauchery.” – **Dio Cassius 72.10.2.**

“This man [Commodus] was not naturally wicked, but, on the contrary, as guileless as any man that ever lived. His great simplicity, however, together with his cowardice, made him the slave of his companions, and it was through them that he at first, out of ignorance, missed the better life and then was led on into lustful and cruel habits, which soon became second nature.” – **Dio Cassius 72.1.1.**

“So this Cleander, too, who had been raised to so exalted a station, fell suddenly and perished in dishonour. It was not the soldiers, however, that killed him, as in the case of Perennis, but the populace. A famine occurred, sufficiently grievous in itself; but its severity was vastly increased by Papirius Dionysius, the grain commissioner, in order that Cleander, whose thefts would seem chiefly responsible for it, might incur the hatred of the Romans and be destroyed by them. And so it came to pass. There was a horse-race on...a crowd of children ran into the Circus... The children shouted in concert many bitter words, which the people took up and then began to bawl out every conceivable insult; and finally the throng leaped down and set out to find Commodus (who was then in the Quintilian suburb), invoking many blessings on him and many curses upon Cleander. The latter sent some soldiers against them, who wounded and killed a few; but, instead of being deterred by this, the crowd, encouraged by its own numbers and by the strength of the Praetorians, pressed on with all the greater determination. They were already drawing near to Commodus, whom no one had kept informed of what was going on... Commodus was so terrified (he was ever the greatest coward) that he at once ordered Cleander to be slain, and likewise his son, who was being reared in the emperor's charge.” – **Dio Cassius 73.13.**

Outbreak of Plague - AD 189

“About this time, plague struck all Italy. The suffering was especially severe in Rome, since the city, which received people from all over the world, was overcrowded. The city suffered great loss of both men and animals... for some said that the sweet odour, entering first, filled up the sensory passages and kept out the poison in the air; or, if any poison should enter, it would be neutralized by the stronger odours. The plague, however, continued to rage unchecked for a long time, and many men died, as well as domestic animals of all kinds. – **Herodian 1.12.**

- Dio Cassius (**72.14.3**) mentions 2,000 fatalities a day during this epidemic.

Securing Military Support

- Pay increased to 375 *denarii* per annum for the legionaries (300 *denarii* since the time of Domitian).



Commodus Denarius. P M TR P XI IMP VII COS
V P P, Commodus on platform haranguing
three soldiers, FID EXERC in ex. – **RIC 130.**

Plots and Assassination

Plots

- Plot of Marcus Ummidius Quadratus (Marcus' Aurelius great nephew) and Lucilla (AD 183):

“The task of slaying him was assigned to Claudius Pompeianus [Quintianus], a kinsman. But he, as soon as he had an opportunity to fulfil his mission, strode up to Commodus with a drawn sword, and, bursting out with these words, "This dagger the senate sends thee," betrayed the plot like a fool, and failed to accomplish the design...” – **SHA *Commodus* 4.**

- Plot of Maternus (AD 185?) – plot of Perennis.

Death of Commodus

“ For Laetus and Eclectus, displeased at the things he was doing, and also inspired by fear, in view of the threats he made against them because they tried to prevent him from acting in this way, formed a plot against him... [they] attacked him, after making Marcia their confidant... caused Marcia to administer poison to him in some beef... Then they sent Narcissus, an athlete, against him, and caused this man to strangle him while he was taking a bath. Such was the end of Commodus, after he had ruled twelve years, nine months, and fourteen days. He had lived thirty-one years and four months; and with him the line of the genuine Aurelii ceased to rule.” – **Dio Cassius 72.22.**

Aftermath

Pertinax

- Laetus and Eclectus convince him to obtain the purple.
- Unpopular with Praetorians – seen as too stern.
- Compelled by praetorians to ratify concessions made by Commodus.
- Shortage of cash – sells imperial property.
- Kept those in place who had been appointed by Commodus.



- Publius Helvius Pertinax – reigns from 1st January AD 193 to 28th March.

“The soldiers and court-retainers regarded him with hatred, but the people felt great indignation at his death, since it had seemed that all the ancient customs might be restored through his efforts. His head, fixed on a pole, was carried through the city to the camp by the soldiers who killed him. His remains, including his head, which was recovered, were laid in the tomb of his wife's grandfather. And Julianus, his successor, buried his body with all honour, after he had found it in the Palace.” – **SHA *Pertinax* 14.6-10.**

Didius Julianus

- Rival candidate Sulpicianus, already in Praetorian Camp.
- Purchased “Imperial Power” – gave 30,000 sesterces to each.

“...immediately thereafter, on the recommendation of the praetorians themselves, Julianus appointed Flavius Genialis and Tullius Crispinus prefects of the guard.” – **SHA *Didius Julianus* 3.1.**

- Detested by people who felt reforms of abuse under Pertinax were being undone.



- Reigned from 28th of March AD 193 to 1st of June.

The populace, however, at the Rostra and in front of the senate-house, assailed him with violent abuse, hoping that he might resign the sovereignty which the soldiers had given him; and they even launched a shower of stones. As he came down to the senate-house with the soldiers and senate, they heaped curses upon him, and when he performed the sacrifices, wished that he might not obtain favourable omens; they even hurled stones at him, though Julianus, with uplifted hand, continually sought to calm them.” – **SHA *Didius Julianus* 4.2-4.**

Civil War

“...being chiefly afraid of the Syrian army, he despatched a centurion of the first rank with orders to murder Niger. Consequently Pescennius Niger in Syria and Septimius Severus in Illyricum, together with the armies which they commanded, revolted from Julianus.” - **SHA *Didius Julianus* 5.1-2.**



Death of Didius Julianus

“Finally, it was proposed that the imperial power be taken away from Julianus by order of the senate. This was done, and Severus was forthwith acclaimed emperor, while it was given out that Julianus had taken poison. Nevertheless, the senate despatched a delegation and through their efforts Julianus was slain in the Palace by a common soldier, while beseeching the protection of Caesar, that is to say, Severus... His body was, by order of Severus, delivered for burial to his wife, Manlia Scantilla, and to his daughter, and it was laid in the tomb of his great-grandfather by the fifth mile-stone on the Labican Way.” - **SHA *Didius Julianus* 8.**

Part 1: Christians under Rome

Persecutions

- First definite persecution under Nero.
- Eusebius refers to some persecution under Domitian.
- Earlier persecution sporadic.
- Development of Christian “Apologetic” literature from second century AD.
- Anti-Christian rhetoric – e.g. Celsus.

Pliny the Younger *Letters* 10.96-97

- [Pliny to the Emperor Trajan] – “It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt... I have never participated in the trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent...”
- [Trajan to Pliny] – “... it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty they are to be punished... by worshiping our gods... shall obtain pardon through repentance.”

Pagan Accusations Against Christians

“[Caecilius Natalis] They gather together ignorant persons from the lowest dregs, and credulous women... and organize a rabble of unholy conspirators, leagued together in nocturnal associations by ritual fasts and barbarous foods... They despise the temples as if they were tombs... they call themselves promiscuously brothers and sisters [i.e. incestuous]... The new initiate is induced to strike what seem to be harmless blows on the surface of spelt, and this infant is killed by his random and unsuspecting blows... [they drink the blood]... the limbs they eagerly distribute... - **Marcus Minucius Felix *Octavius* 3.3-12.6.** [c. AD 160-270].

Persecutions under Marcus Aurelius (AD 177)

“...all that was heaped upon them by the mob, howls and lashes and dragging about, and rape and stoning and imprisonment, all things that often happen at the hands of an infuriated populace against its supposed enemies... they were dragged into the market place by the tribune and by the chief authorities of that city [Lugdunum]... Then they were brought before the governor... fearing tortures which they saw the saints suffering... falsely accused us of cannibalistic feasts and incestuous intercourse... Caesar wrote that they should be tortured to death, but if any should recant they should be let go...” - **Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.** [c. first-half of the fourth century AD].

Useful Reading

- Potter, D. (2009) *Rome in the Ancient World* (London: Thames & Hudson). Pages 238-242.