

# **The 10 Greatest Emperors of Ancient Rome**

## **\*Marcus Aurelius (April 121 AD – 17 March, 180 AD)**

Considered to be the last of the “Five Good Emperors,” and a stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius ruled the Roman Empire from 161 to 180 AD. During his reign, the empire defeated a revitalized Parthian Empire in the east, and in central Europe, he triumphed over the Marcomanni, Quadi, and Sarmatians in the Marcomannic Wars, just as the threat from the Germanic tribes was becoming a troubling reality. A possible revolt in the east led by Avidius Cassius might have caused serious issues if it had gained momentum, but Aurelius suppressed it immediately.

A remarkable philosopher and writer, Marcus Aurelius’s stoic tome *Meditations*, written in Greek while on campaign between 170 and 180 AD, is still revered as a literary monument to the philosophy of service and duty, describing how to find and preserve equanimity in the midst of conflict by following nature as a source of guidance and inspiration.

Marcus Aurelius acquired the reputation of a philosopher king within his lifetime, and the title would remain after his death as he became known as “the Philosopher.”

## **Trajan (September 53 AD – 8 August, 117 AD)**

Famously declared by the Senate *optimus princeps* or “the best ruler,” he ruled ancient Rome from 98 AD until he took his last breath in 117 AD. Trajan is one of Rome’s most outstanding emperors and under his rule, the empire reached its peak.

He is remembered as a successful soldier-emperor who presided over the greatest military expansion in Roman history, leading the empire to its maximum territorial extent by the time of his death. He was respected by the common people, the Senate, and the military, having made his name through his philanthropic rule that oversaw extensive public building programs and welfare policies.

As an emperor, Trajan’s reputation has endured. He was one of the few rulers whose reputation has survived for 19 centuries. In the 18th century, historian Edward Gibbon’s popularized the notion of the Five Good Emperors, and Trajan was second. Each new emperor after him was honored by the Senate with the wish *felicio Augusto, melior Traiano* which meant “be luckier than Augustus and better than Trajan.”

## **Augustus (September 63 BC – 19 August, 14 AD)**

The founder of the Roman Empire himself, Augustus, who has the longest reign of 41 years from 27 BC to 14 AD. Born under the name Octavian, he was given the name Augustus by the Senate as an honor for his great achievements.

He went on to avenge the death of Caesar together with Mark Antony, before falling out with him. He defeated Mark Antony and the famous Egyptian queen Cleopatra and afterwards, together with the Roman Senate, created a new constitution for the great empire.

The reign of Augustus initiated an era of relative peace that was known as Pax Romana or the Roman Peace. Yes, there were several wars at the Roman frontiers in the name of expansion and a year-long civil war too, but after the succession of Augustus to the throne, the Roman world was free of any large-scale warfare for more than two centuries.

Augustus ruled wisely and built roads, aqueducts, and buildings. Not only was Augustus the first, but he was most certainly one of the best emperors Rome has ever had.

## **Vespasian (November 9 AD – 23 June, 79 AD)**

A famous Roman emperor, Vespasian's reign lasted from 69 to 79 AD. He founded the Flavian dynasty that went on to rule the Roman Empire for 27 years.

His rule began during one of the most troubled times in Roman history as the Romans were just recovering from the antics of infamous emperors like Nero and Caligula, and a civil war that saw four emperors in a single year.

A down-to-earth man himself, and a competent general who had proved his mettle on the battlefield, Vespasian was handed the task of bringing balance to Rome. And during his rule of 10 years, he did just that, earning his name as one of the greatest Roman emperors.

During Vespasian's reign, much money was spent on public works as well as on the restoration and beautification of Rome. He initiated the construction of the Temple of Peace, a number of public baths, and one of the most majestic structures in ancient Rome, the Colosseum. Sadly, by the time the Colosseum was completed, Vespasian was dead. After his death in 79 AD, he was succeeded by his eldest son Titus and thus became the first Roman emperor to be directly succeeded by his own natural son, establishing the Flavian dynasty.

## **Hadrian (January 76 AD – 10 July, 138 AD)**

Emperor from 117 to 138 AD, Hadrian was born Publius Aelius Hadrianus to an ethnically Italian family. Even though his predecessor Trajan never officially designated him as his heir, Trajan's wife declared the appointment just before his death.

Hadrian visited nearly every province under his rule, connecting to the people at a provincial level. A known admirer of Greece, he sought to bring Greek architecture back to its old glory. He rebuilt the Pantheon and constructed the Temple of Venus and Roma. He also built Hadrian's Wall which marked the northern limit of Roman Britain.

Hadrian spent a considerable amount of his reign with the military, wearing military attire and at times dining and sleeping with the soldiers. Maintaining an alert and responsive military was his biggest challenge, so he would raise false alarms at times to test his army's training, drill, and response to a sudden crisis. But despite his reputation as an efficient military administrator, his reign was marked by a general lack of major conflicts, apart from the Second Roman-Jewish war, which he handled rather cunningly.

## **Constantine the Great (February 272 AD – May 337 AD)**

Constantine's full name was Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus Augustus. This famous emperor, who went on to become the first Christian Roman emperor in history, was a ruler of major historical importance.

He reunited a divided empire under a single emperor and scored important wins against some fierce enemies like the Franks, the Alemanni, the Goths, and the Sarmatians. He also reoccupied some of the long-lost Roman provinces. He created his own capital and named it after himself – Constantinople – which went on to become the capital of the Byzantine Empire for centuries. For that reason, he was also known as the founder of Byzantium.

He understood the need for Christian support, as Christianity was on the rise and he eventually became an important historical Christian figure being the first emperor to adopt the faith. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built on his orders at the purported site of Jesus's tomb in Jerusalem, became the holiest place in Christendom. His conversion went on to have a significant impact on the religious preferences of the subsequent Byzantine Empire.

## **Claudius (August 10 BC – 13 October, 54 AD)**

One of the first Roman emperors to have been born outside Italy, his reign lasted from 41 to 54 AD. He was the son of Drusus and Antonia Minor, and because he was afflicted by a limp and slight deafness, he was rather unfairly ostracized by his family and excluded from public office until his consulship. But as it happens, this particularly infirmity directly or indirectly saved him from the same fate as Tiberius and Caligula, for potential enemies never saw him as a serious threat.

His rule was seen to be vulnerable in the eyes of the nobility and the Senate for they thoroughly opposed his ascension to the throne, but he got his biggest support from the military. Claudius was a positive mishmash of conflicting characteristics: absent-minded, hesitant, muddled, determined, cruel, intuitive, wise, and he was dominated by his wife and his personal staff of freedmen. But despite all these and his evident lack of experience, Claudius proved to be an able and efficient administrator.

He was also an ambitious builder. He constructed many new roads, aqueducts, and canals across the empire. During his reign the empire began the conquest of Britain. Having a personal interest in law, he presided at public trials, and issued up to 20 edicts a day.

## **Justinian (482 AD – 14 November, 565 AD)**

Though the Western Roman Empire had already fallen to the barbarians by 476 AD, the Eastern Roman Empire saw one last reign under Justinian I, who ruled the east (also called the Byzantine Empire) from 526 to 565 AD.

During his reign, Justinian sought to revive the empire's greatness and reconquer the lost western half. His great generals Belisarius and Narses reconquered many parts of the empire, including the city of Rome itself. Because of his restorative activities, Justinian has sometimes been called "the last Roman" in modern history.

Justinian was well known for creating a unified code of law, the Justinian Code, that was based on a collection of already used Roman laws. This code has subsequently been taken as the basis of all systems of law in the Western world.

Justinian also oversaw the construction of great buildings in his capital of Constantinople, the most remarkable of them being the Church of Hagia Sophia, which later became the center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity for many centuries. But then came a devastating outbreak of bubonic plague in the early 540s which eventually marked the irreversible period of Roman decline.

## **Antoninus Pius (19 September, 86 AD – 7 March, 161 AD)**

The adopted son and successor of Emperor Hadrian, Antoninus Pius ruled the Roman Empire from 138 to 161 AD. His first act as emperor was to grant honors to his adoptive father Hadrian. And as a part of the deal, Antoninus adopted the future emperor, Marcus Aurelius.

He was one of the most peaceful rulers in the history of the Roman Empire. There are no records of any significant military action during his reign.

He built temples, theaters, and mausoleums, promoted the [Roman arts](#) and science, and bestowed honors and financial rewards upon the teachers of rhetoric and philosophy. Antoninus was virtually unique among [Roman emperors](#) because he dealt with these crises without leaving Italy once. This style of government was highly praised by his contemporaries and later generations.

## **Tiberius (16 November, 42 BC – 16 March, 37 AD)**

Augustus in 39 BC, making him Augustus's stepson. He was later adopted by Augustus as his heir, and that was when he took the name Tiberius Julius Caesar, a name subsequent emperors would also take.

Tiberius was one of Rome's greatest generals, conquering Pannonia, Dalmatia, Raetia, and temporarily, parts of Germania, laying the foundations for the northern frontier. But he was

remembered as a dark, reclusive, and somber ruler who never really wanted to be emperor, having the responsibility thrust upon him.

Despite his overwhelmingly negative image left by Roman historians, Tiberius left the imperial treasury with nearly three billion sesterces upon his death. Rather than embarking on expensive conquests, he decided to build additional bases and use diplomacy over conflict.

All these innovative steps paid off as Rome became a stronger, more consolidated empire. Were he to have died prior to 23 AD, a period marred by the Purge, he might have been hailed as an exemplary ruler.