

# LIVES OF THE CAESARS

EDITED BY ANTHONY A. BARRETT



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# Lives of the Caesars

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*Edited by Anthony A. Barrett*



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*Die Verwaltung des römischen Reiches in der Hohen Kaiserzeit*, 2 vols (Basel, 1995, 1998), *Das senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre* (with A. Caballos and F. Fernández; Munich, 1996), *Tra epigrafia, prosopografia e archeologia: scritti scelti, rielaborati ed aggiornati* (Rome, 1996), *Köln in römischer Zeit* (Cologne, 2004) and *The Age of Augustus* (2nd edn Oxford, 2007).

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The task of completing this book was made much lighter by the generous help afforded by a number of individuals. In a collaborative venture like this it would perhaps be odious to single out individuals, since each of the contributors has been able to call on the generosity of colleagues, friends, and family members, but the cheerful, patient, and persistently helpful role of the editorial staff at Blackwell should not go unrecorded.

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## Abbreviations

Standard abbreviations are used for ancient texts and modern collections and journals. The following abbreviations for modern authorities are also used throughout the book:

- McCrum and Woodhead 1961 M. McCrum and A. G. Woodhead, *Select Documents of the Principates of the Flavian Emperors, including the Year of Revolution AD 68–96* (Cambridge, 1961)
- Oliver 1989 J. H. Oliver, *Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri* (Philadelphia, 1989)
- Sherk 1988 R. K. Sherk, *The Roman Empire: Augustus to Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1988)
- Smallwood 1966 Smallwood, E. M., *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1966)
- Smallwood 1967 Smallwood, E. M., *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero* (Cambridge, 1967)
- Syme 1958 Syme, R., *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958)

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# Timeline

The following list shows the sequence of Roman emperors from Augustus to the Severan dynasty, and (with omissions) through to Justinian. The subjects of individual essays in this volume are shown in bold type.

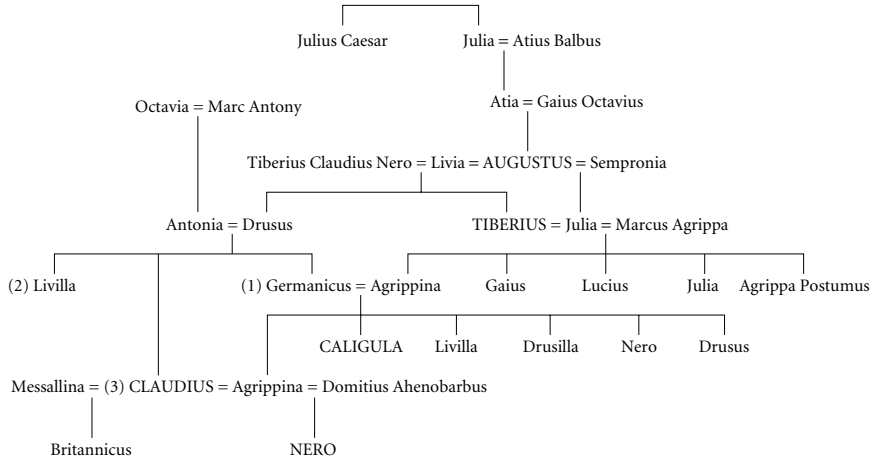
After the death of the last member of the Severan dynasty in 235 the picture becomes very complicated; hence the full list of emperors after that date is not given.

<b>27 BC–AD 19</b>	<b>Augustus</b>
<b>AD 19–37</b>	<b>Tiberius</b>
<b>37–41</b>	<b>Caligula</b>
<b>41–54</b>	<b>Claudius</b>
<b>54–68</b>	<b>Nero</b>
68–9	Galba
69	Otho
69	Vitellius
<b>69–79</b>	<b>Vespasian</b>
79–81	Titus
81–96	Domitian
96–8	Nerva
98–117	Trajan
<b>117–38</b>	<b>Hadrian</b>
138–61	Antoninus Pius
161–80	<b>Marcus Aurelius</b>
161–9	Lucius Verus
177–92	Commodus
193	Pertinax
193	Didius Julianus
<b>193–211</b>	<b>Severus</b>

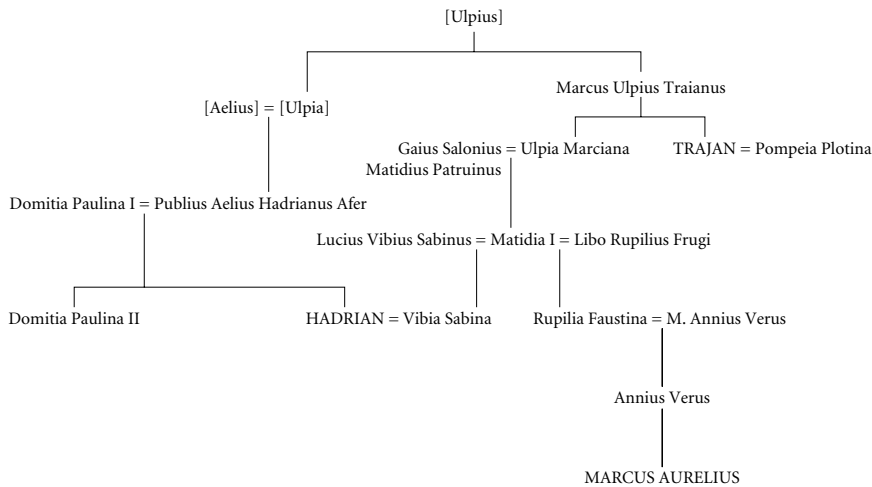
211–17	Caracalla
211	Geta (joint emperor)
217–18	Macrinus
218–22	Elagabalus
222–35	Alexander Severus
[...]	
<b>284–311/12</b>	<b>Diocletian</b>
[...]	
<b>306–37</b>	<b>Constantine</b>
[...]	
<b>527–65</b>	<b>Justinian</b>

# Family Trees

## The Julio-Claudians

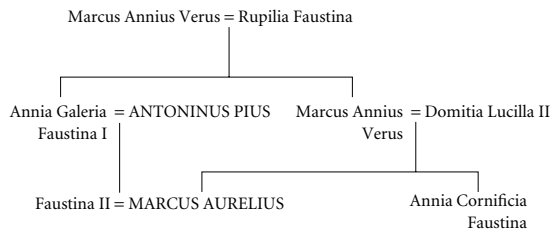


## Trajan and Hadrian





**Marcus Aurelius**

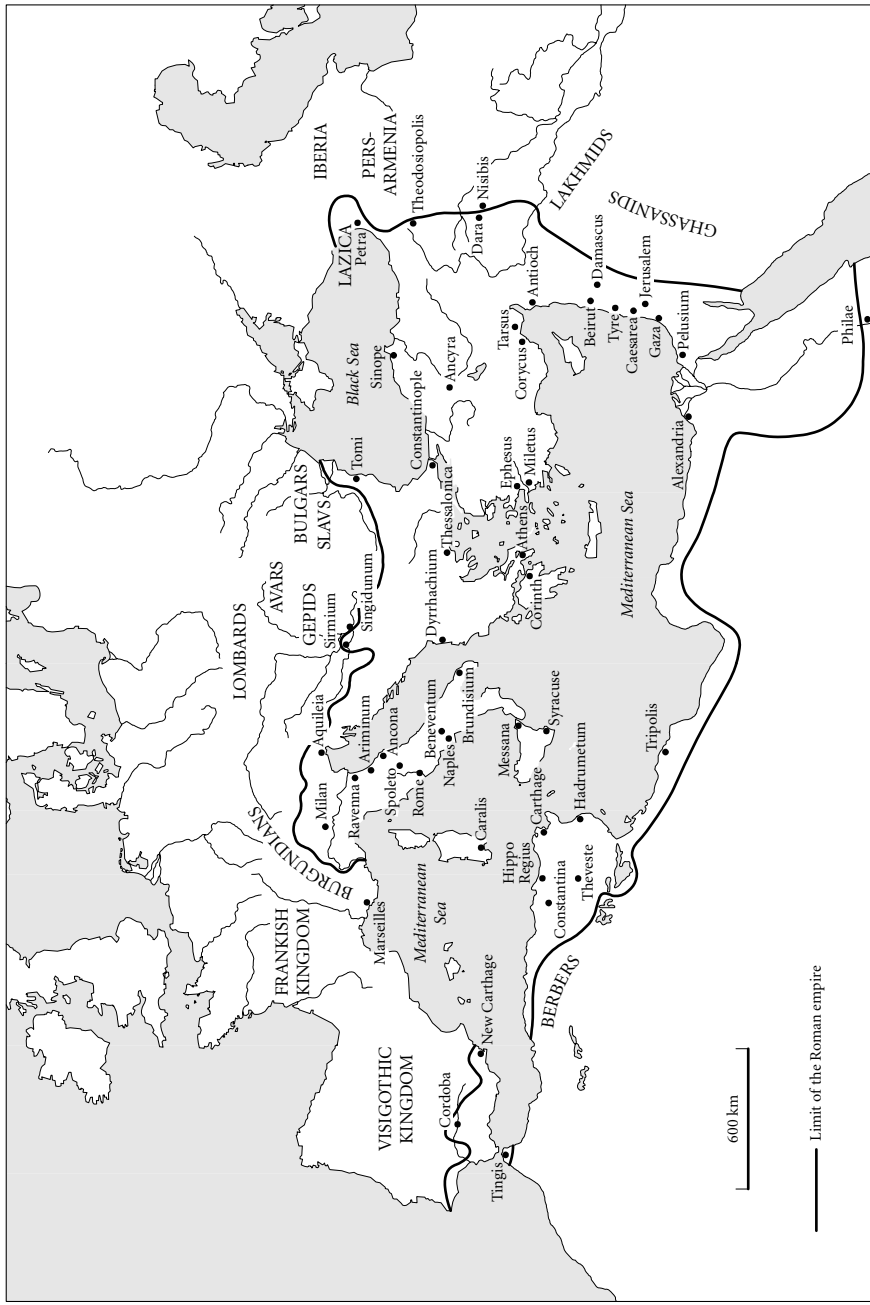


# Maps



The Roman empire in the time of Augustus





The Empire in the Time of Justinian

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# Introduction

*Anthony A. Barrett*

Since at least the time of Edward Gibbon the Roman empire has always seemed to represent the quintessential imperial enterprise. Other great empires may rise and fall, but when they do they somehow follow a preordained course that this archetypal model laid down for them. So it is, that when doomsayers predict that our civilization is teetering on the brink of collapse, they more often than not point out that it is the *Romans*, specifically, who teach us that such a fate is inevitable. While we continue to be intrigued by almost every aspect of this remarkable institution, what holds our attention most firmly is undoubtedly the succession of individuals who stood at its centre, the emperors. The last decade or so has seen a surge of books, both popular and academic, on the lives of these individuals, a trend that has flourished in the teeth of considerable opposition from those classical scholars who harbor a deep suspicion about the biographical approach to history. The late Oxford historian Sir Ronald Syme argued that emphasis on individual emperors distorted historical analysis, and that once the system had been put in place it made little difference who was emperor, especially by the second century AD. Fergus Millar, who was later appointed to the same Oxford chair that Syme held, similarly sees the emperor as defined essentially by the institution and does not attach great significance to the personalities of individual emperors. Both viewpoints have considerable merit, but it is possible to make a very strong case that individuals can, under certain circumstances, influence, if not determine, the course of history in a profound way, and that those circumstances existed in imperial Rome. In fact, it is arguable that there are few topics potentially more rewarding to the student of history than the lives of the Roman emperors. They can surely teach us better than most the relationship between humans and power, and the ends, sometimes good but more often malign, to which arbitrary power can be directed.

The title of this collection of essays on the most significant (or, in one or two cases, the most familiar) emperors is undoubtedly reminiscent of Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, written in the second century AD, and the fact that we have similarly included twelve lives might, to some small degree, be seen as an unconscious homage to Suetonius' great classic. It is also fair to say that we aim for a similar, non-specialist readership. But the parallelism goes no further. If we concede that Suetonius was a seeker after the truth, we would want at the same time to point out that he shared with other authors of his age a more flexible concept of the truth than we now consider acceptable in historical writing. The ancient historian would, for instance, without fear of contemporary censure, make up a speech where none existed in the record or blithely ascribe motives based on nothing more than supposition. The twelve essays of this collection are written by individuals who, as a matter of routine, subject the available evidence to rigorous scrutiny, and who are professionally committed to the ideal of objective historical truth, in so far as it is humanly attainable. The authors have all published extensively on their subjects and each can lay claim to considerable expertise in the period on which they write; indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that most of them are the recognized world authorities on their chosen emperors.

Each chapter is self-contained, although for the first eleven we have tried to provide enough linkage to enable them to be read consecutively as a reasonably coherent narrative. The last emperor, Justinian, reigned much later than the others, and in a way stands alone; but his inclusion is clearly justified as a link between the Roman empire and the Byzantine empire that followed, or, one might argue, into which it metamorphosed. While all the essays adhere to broad guidelines, and there is a degree of consistency in some of their mechanical aspects (such as citations and terminology), there has been no attempt to impose a rigid conformity. Hence there is no uniformity of approach. These chapters will introduce readers to the changing dynamics of the Roman empire, and they will also introduce them to the different ways in which modern scholars approach their subjects. As a result, while each chapter reflects the idiosyncrasy of the emperor being studied, it also reflects the individual methodology (as well, perhaps, as a little of the idiosyncrasy) of the scholar writing on him. Thus, while it is hoped that there will be no jarring contradictions, it is felt to be healthy for the reader to be exposed to differing conclusions. A good case in point is the interpretation of the period marking the end of Caligula's reign and the beginning of Claudius', where it will be seen that the confused testimony of the ancients can legitimately be interpreted in more than one way.

Perhaps what distinguishes the Roman empire above all else is the way it combined, within a single institution, both revolution and conservatism. Romans were not innovators; the principle they most zealously upheld was that of *mos maiorum*, “the tradition of our ancestors.” So when toward the end of the first century BC the Roman republic collapsed under the weight of ambitious warlords and civil conflicts, it was not replaced by a radical new system. Instead, the republican constitution was refined and modified, in such a way that it remained in form a republic although it was in reality a monarchy. This set the pattern for the following centuries. Remarkably, although by the time of Justinian the system had in many ways been transformed, in others it still preserved the essence of Augustus’ great contribution to history at the birth of the empire. It will be useful to provide an outline of that Augustan system, as a background against which the essays might be read.

The main deliberative and legislative body in Rome was the senate, consisting of some 600 former magistrates (in Roman times, the word means simply “officials”) of the rank of quaestor or above. Arguably, it was initially not *strictly* legislative, since in a narrow technical sense the senate could not pass legislation during the Augustan period or, it seems, for a century or so after his death. For a senatorial decree (*consultum*) to have the force of a law (*lex*) it had to be ratified by the popular assemblies, although this ratification tended to be little more than a formality. Through a process that is not fully understood, by the second century AD senatorial decrees had acquired the force of law. Membership of the senate was usually permanent, but subject to the approval of the censor. This official maintained the citizen list and had the power to remove senators either on moral grounds or if their financial assets fell below the necessary property qualification. Membership of the body required, as a result of Augustus’ reforms, a property qualification of 1,000,000 sesterii. It might be noted that Romans normally expressed monetary amounts in sesterii (abbreviated HS), the highest denomination of the common coins, made of brass (an alloy of copper and zinc) and valued at four to one silver denarius. It is impossible to cite precise monetary equivalence, but we do know that in the Julio-Claudian period the legionary soldiers were paid HS900 (225 denarii) each year, before deductions.

The first significant event in the life of a Roman male occurred usually around the age of fourteen, when he underwent the formal ceremony that marked his entry into manhood. At this point he exchanged his purple-edged toga (*toga praetexta*) for a plain white one, the *toga virilis* or “toga of manhood.” If he aspired to a senatorial career (such aspirations were not harbored by young Roman women, since, with the exception of certain priestly

positions, public offices were not open to them), he might hope to enter the quaestorship when he had reached at least his twenty-fifth year. Twenty quaestors were elected annually; they were concerned with a variety of duties, financial and other, and, by virtue of holding the office, granted entry into the senate. The quaestorship might be followed by one of two offices. The position of aedile brought responsibility for certain aspects of municipal administration in Rome. The alternative, that of the tribune of the plebeians, had originally been meant for the protection of the interests of the plebeians, and in Augustus' time the office was still reserved for plebeians; but the old principle by which each Roman belonged to either the lower-class plebeians or the upper-class patricians was by now largely a relic with few practical implications, and the tribune was primarily concerned with minor legislative matters. The quaestor could, however, bypass the tribunate or aedileship, and pass straight to the next office in the hierarchy, the first major one: the praetorship. Under Augustus, twelve praetors were elected annually. They had responsibility for the administration of justice, and could afterwards compete for one of the two consulships, the most prestigious and much sought-after senior offices in the state. Strictly speaking, consular rank could be attained only after the candidate had reached the age of forty-two, but family background could enable an individual to seek the office much sooner, possibly by thirty-two, while members of the imperial family were able to achieve it even earlier. From 5 BC it became common for consuls to resign during the course of the year. Their replacements were called 'suffect' consuls (*suffecti*). There was a certain cachet to being appointed one of the first pair of the year, in part no doubt because the year was officially identified by their names. The consul first appointed was known as *ordinarius*, the Latin term usually still employed in preference to the misleading "ordinary."

The magistrate's sphere of action was known as his *provincia*. By the Augustan period this term tended to be applied to Rome's external possessions. The victory over the Carthaginians in the late third century BC had led to the control of much of Spain, beginning a process by which more and more territories fell to Rome. These acquisitions came about usually through warfare, but they could be voluntary, as in the case of the province of Asia, organized from a kingdom bequeathed to Rome by Attalus III of Pergamum on his death in 133 BC. During the republican period, praetors and consuls governed these provinces after their regular terms of office had expired. They consequently exercised their power, their *imperium*, in the capacity of the offices previously held, as *propraetors* or *proconsuls*. In 27 BC, Augustus handed the territories he controlled over to the senate and people. They for their part granted him an enormous "province" (its precise extent varied over time),



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