The Twelve Caesars

What’s in it for me? The inside story of the emperors who ruled Rome.

Stretching from the north of England to the Sahara desert, from Portugal to the middle east, the Roman Empire was one of the biggest empires in history. And at the heart of this huge empire sat one man ruling over everything: the emperor. Rome’s emperors could be good, bad, kind, cruel, sensible or unhinged. In these blinks, we’ll look at Rome first’s emperors through the eyes of the Roman historian, Suetonius. we’ll delve into their triumphs and tragedies, their follies and their vices. It’s quite the story. So let’s get going. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how Caesar won total power; why so many emperors met untimely ends; and where we got the idea that Nero fiddled while Rome burned.

Julius Caesar: Ambitious and ruthless

It’s 85 BCE, and a 15-year old boy is grieving the death of his father. The passing of the family patriarch means the teenager is now the head of his household. His name? Julius Caesar. It’s a turbulent time to come of age. Rome is consumed by a civil war between plebeian populists and conservative aristocrats. After a bitter struggle, the aristocrats win. A conservative general called Sulla is installed as dictator. This makes Caesar – the nephew of one of the populists’ most famous leaders, Gaius Marius – a target. He’s stripped of his inheritance and forced into hiding. Sulla eventually pardons him, but he issues his decree with a sense of foreboding. Caesar, he says, has all the markings of a man who will one day bring down the Republic. He isn’t wrong. Caesar doesn’t

hang around to find out whether Sulla will change his mind about the pardon. He leaves Rome to serve in the Republic's army. But by 78 BCE the dictator is dead, and Caesar has returned. The young man is a fiery populist, just like his uncle, and he's a gifted speaker. During these years he makes a name for himself as a scourge of elite corruption and an advocate of the common folk, whose rights he defends in Rome's courts. As those who cross him soon learn, Caesar is a merciless opponent. He shows as much when he's kidnapped by pirates while crossing the Aegean Sea. His captors ransom him, demanding 20 talents of silver. Caesar is offended: that figure is far too low. He insists they raise it to 50 talents – over 3,000 pounds of silver. They do, and the ransom is paid. But this isn't the end of the story. During his captivity, Caesar tells his abductors that he will find and execute every last one of them as soon as he is free. They think he's joking, but he's deadly serious. He raises a fleet and returns to the Aegean. After hunting the pirates down, Caesar makes good on his promise. He has them killed, and their bodies crucified. Caesar's political career is well on track by 69 BCE. That's the year he's elected to oversee Rome's finances. But he's growing impatient. At the same age, Alexander the Great had conquered the world. What has he achieved, by contrast? A few triumphs here and there, perhaps, but nothing epoch-making. That is about to change.

Julius Caesar: Military genius

Caesar's power is growing, and the conservatives and aristocrats are beginning to worry about him. It's easy to see why. Here's an ambitious young man from a family of political radicals, with military experience to boot. Worse, he has the ear of the lower classes. Then there's his love of organizing gladiatorial spectacles – a ruse, many think, to assemble a private army in the Republic's capital. There is even talk of a plan to use those fighters to storm the senate and install Caesar as supreme leader. Fearful senators soon rush through a law limiting the number of gladiators any private citizen may keep in Rome. Caesar has them rattled. But Caesar doesn't need a personal army. He has designs on the Republic's army. In 60 BCE, Caesar stands for election for the position of consul, Rome's highest political office. Conservatives throw everything they have at preventing his victory. Even Cato, a senator famed for his probity, advocates bribing voters to keep Caesar out of office. None of it matters; Caesar wins the election. During his year as consul, Caesar appoints himself governor of several Roman provinces, including

Cisalpine Gaul in northeastern Italy and Illyricum in today's Balkans. That puts him in direct command of four legions, or around 14,000 men. Greatness, he senses, is close at hand. Caesar is a gifted military leader. Men under his command aren't called soldiers, but "comrades." When they suffer losses in battle, Caesar refuses to cut his hair or shave his beard until the fallen have been avenged. This kind of leadership inspires loyalty – and bravery. During one naval battle, one of Caesar's men grasps the stern of a hostile vessel. His hand is severed by a sword. Undeterred, he boards the ship and drives the enemy back with just his shield. Having subdued the Germanic tribes on the Republic's northern frontiers, Caesar returns to Rome with his legions in 49 BCE. Civil war follows, and this timeCaesar is on the winning side. He assumes the position of dictator and wields absolute power. He ends up staying in power for only five years, but he uses this time to change the course of history. His rule hastens the demise of the Republic and speeds up the emergence of the Roman Empire. From now on, Rome will be ruled by those who can claim to be descended from Caesar.

Octavian: Shrewd tactician

Caesar is very sure of his importance to Rome: If anything happens to me, he says, a new civil war will break out. His prophecy is fulfilled when a group of senators stab him twenty-three times in 44 BCE. Rome is plunged into crisis. Caesar's plebeian supporters look to avenge their champion – slain, in their eyes, by cowardly aristocrats. The assassins see themselves as heroes. They have prevented the dictator Caesar from destroying the Republic and making himself king. But who will rule Rome now – another dictator, or a would-be emperor in Caesar's mold? There are three contenders for power after Caesar's death. Brutus and Cassius – the senators behind Caesar's assassination – represent a return to the Republic of old. Caesar's friend, the general Mark Antony, favors another military dictatorship. Then there is Octavian, Caesar's 18-year-old adopted son. What does he stand for? It's hard to say, but it is clear that he has a plan. Antony leverages popular outrage to drive Brutus and Cassius into exile in Greece. They still pose a threat, though – there's no telling, after all, when they might return to Rome at the head of an army. Octavian and Antony join forces to eliminate this danger. Each man leads an army into Greece, and, in 42 BCE, Brutus and Cassius's troops are defeated at the Battle of Philippi. After having Brutus killed, Octavian sends his head to Rome, where it is thrown at the

feet of Caesar's statue. On the battlefield, he is as unrelenting as his adoptive father. Once, when prisoners awaiting execution ask to be assured of a decent burial, he replies that they may take up the matter with "the carrion birds." The truce between Octavian and Antony falls apart, however, when Antony and Cleopatra, the ruler of Egypt, become lovers. Octavian manages to convince the Senate that this is a prelude to an attack on Rome. How? Well, Cleopatra and Caesar had also been lovers. Their relationship produced a son, Caesarion, whom Cleopatra has declared Caesar's true heir. From Rome, it looks like Antony is using this claim as a wedge issue. In 31 BCE, with the Senate's blessing, Octavian defeats Antony's forces. Both Antony and Cleopatra commit suicide; Caesarion is killed. After all, there can only be one son of Caesar. After years of civil war, Rome is at peace again. Octavian is the linchpin in this settlement. In 17 BCE, after just over a decade of ruling as a dictator, he adopts the name Augustus and becomes the emperor of Rome.

Augustus: A humble and frugal man

Julius Caesar is deified after his assassination, and Augustus styles himself as Imperator Caesar Divi Filius – Commander Caesar, Son of the Divine. The gods seem to smile on Augustus. The gold he brings back from Cleopatra's treasury in Egypt helps cement his peace settlement. With the civil wars over, commerce flourishes. Rome grows more prosperous, and the empire begins to expand once again. This is the beginning of the Pax Romana – the 200-year-long Roman Peace. What is Augustus like? We might expect a tyrant, or at least a man filled with imperial hubris – but Suetonius paints a very different picture of this son of the divine Caesar. Augustus lives on the Palatine Hill, one of Rome's seven hills and traditionally home to the city's great and good. It is a fittingly grand location for an emperor, but his house and lifestyle stand apart from those of his neighbors. His abode is clad in plain brick rather than marble. It lacks the elaborate tiled floors favored by the wealthy, and the furniture is as plain and functional as that of an ordinary citizen. Augustus's habits are equally frugal. He avoids the lavish imperial dress typically donned by emperors and wears the home-woven garments his wife and daughters make for him. He doesn't like banquets either, preferring the food of the common people – coarse bread, fresh hand-

pressed cheese, green figs, and fish from the nearby Mediterranean. As for alcohol, he never drinks more than three cups of wine in a single sitting. Augustus, Suetonius records, is a handsome and graceful man, even in old age, but he cares little for his appearance. Grooming irritates him, in fact – it gets in the way of more important business. To get these irksome tasks out of the way as quickly as possible, he instructs three barbers to cut his hair or shave his beard at the same time. While they work, Augustus reads his correspondence. The emperor's most memorable feature, however, is his serene expression. A Gallic chief once confessed that he planned to throw Augustus off a cliff after being granted an audience with the emperor during a military campaign in the Alps. "I would have carried out my plan," the chief says, "had not the sight of that tranquil face softened my heart."

Caligula: Son of a Roman idol

In 37 CE, Gaius Caesar succeeds Tiberius as emperor. The Romans don't know much about Gaius, or, as he is better known, Caligula – his nickname means "Little Boot" in Latin. But they did know – and love – his father, Germanicus. In his life, Germanicus embodied the ideal of the perfect Roman man. A gifted orator in Latin and Greek, he could quote at will from the literary classics in both languages. He could also wield a sword, and was famous for his courage and skill in hand-to-hand combat. Off the battlefield, he was a model citizen – as graceful as he was kind-hearted. Augustus had considered naming Germanicus his successor, but finally chose Tiberius instead. By the time the latter died in 37 CE, Germanicus was also dead. That left Caligula. "Little Boot" had big shoes to fill. Caligula inherits the Roman people's love for his father. When he accompanies Tiberius's funeral procession, Romans line the streets to catch a glimpse of him. Onlookers call out to him, using terms of endearment like "star," "baby," "pet," and "chick." The Senate unanimously grants Caligula absolute power, making him the third Caesar of the Roman Empire. For the first few months of his reign, he proves a popular and capable ruler. He allows exiles to return to Rome, reuniting families torn apart by politics, and pardons criminals who had been charged under Tiberius. Hated taxes are eliminated, and massive gladiatorial and racing shows are staged for the people's entertainment. But something is amiss. Before his death, Tiberius consulted an astrologer called Thrasyllus about who should succeed him. Thrasyllus told him that Caligula was no more likely to become an emperor than he

was to walk across the Gulf of Naples. This prophecy haunts Caligula. He gathers every merchant ship he can find and anchors them in a line extending three miles from Baiae to Puteoli, two points on opposite sides of the Gulf. The ships are boarded up and soil heaped on top of them, creating an artificial “road” across the water. For two days, Caligula defiantly paces up down this strange creation, oblivious to all else. It’s a sign of things to come.

Caligula: The overthrow of a monster

Suetonius divides Caligula’s reign into two periods – the time in which he rules as an emperor, and the time in which he rules as a “monster.” Ultimately, it is in this second guise that he makes his mark on history. In his own mind, Caligula is a god. The Romans, he thinks, should acknowledge this, so he builds a shrine to his own divinity. At its center stands a life-sized golden image of the emperor. Around it, he places statues of the other gods, their heads removed and replaced with likenesses of his own. Priests, meanwhile, sacrifice flamingos, peacocks, pheasants, and hens in his honor. Hubris isn’t Caligula’s only vice, however – it’s his cruelty that makes him a true monster. He rarely uses his power without also abusing it. Take Gaius Piso and Livia Orestilla. Piso is a senator, so it is fitting that he invited the emperor to his wedding. But during the celebratory feast, Caligula takes exception to something Piso says. He promptly orders his bodyguards to carry Orestilla back to his own home. He releases her after a few days, but banishes her from Rome after learning that she still intends to marry Piso. Lollia Paulina, the wife of a consular army commander called Gaius Memmius, suffers the same fate after the emperor hears that she is the granddaughter of a famous beauty. Caligula grows bored of her, too. Rather than banish Paulina, he forbids her ever to sleep with a man again. Even Caesonia, the woman whom he genuinely appears to love, is badly mistreated. He humiliates her in front of his friends and refuses to marry her until she has given him a child. When she does, Caligula announces the birth and the marriage simultaneously. Over the years, Caligula’s appetite for cruelty grows. At first, it is enough to humiliate members of the Senate, by, for example, making officials run for miles beside his chariot, or threatening to have his horse made consul. Later, he summons men who have offended him to appear before him in his

quarters – having already secretly ordered their murders. When they fail to appear, he remarks offhandedly that they must have committed suicide. Other times, seemingly on a whim, he closes the granaries, letting Rome's people go hungry. Such tyranny is unbearable. In 41 CE, disgruntled soldiers in league with Caligula's enemies in the Senate assassinate the 28-year-old emperor. Quote "Everything that Caligula said and did was marked with equal cruelty, even during his hours of rest and amusement and banquetry."

Claudius: An unlikely and fearful ruler

Caligula is slain! Word of his assassination soon reaches the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill. When Caligula's 51-year-old uncle, Claudius, hears the news, he guesses that he is next. That makes sense – palace coups often end in the death of both the emperor and his closest male relatives. The sound of footsteps outside the palace suggests his time is up; Claudius hides behind a curtain. A soldier spots his feet. The curtain is pulled back suddenly. Expecting a blow from a sword, Claudius falls to his knees and begs for mercy. The blow never comes. Instead, the soldier hails Rome's new emperor. Up until this point, Claudius's life hasn't been particularly happy. True, he has been given many honors – he is a descendant of Julius Caesar, after all. But he has never enjoyed good health. He suffers from seizures and walks with an odd limp. He stutters when he speaks and drools when he is animated. He has endured merciless mockery throughout his life. Caligula, especially, enjoyed humiliating him. It appears that Claudius only escaped execution during Caligula's reign because the emperor enjoyed bullying him. The mockery stops when Claudius becomes emperor. His health also improves dramatically. But he remains fearful. This, too, makes sense. Claudius never shakes his reputation for being unusually frail, and this emboldens his enemies. During his thirteen years in power, he faces a dozen conspiracies. The plotters are usually close at hand. One intrigue is hatched by his own servants; another by his wife, Messalina; a third by Rome's highest-ranking senators. In each case, his enemies are caught and put to death, but Claudius's mental health declines. He becomes increasingly scatterbrained, asking why people he's had executed aren't at dinner. This isn't a cruel joke of the kind Caligula liked making, but genuine bafflement. His reign isn't without its triumphs, though. It was

Claudius, for e xample, who completed the invasion of Britain begun many years earlier by Julius Caesar. In 54 CE, Claudius's luck finally runs out and he, too, is assassinated. Suetonius lists a few likely culprits, including his fourth wife, Agrippina, who is suspected of slipping poison into his favorite mushroom dish.

Nero: Vain and flawed

When Claudius marries Agrippina, he adopts her son, Nero. That places Nero next in the line of succession – one reason many suspect Agrippina of having poisoned Claudius's food. Nero is 16 when he's proclaimed emperor on the steps of the imperial palace. He looks to be a promising ruler. Modeling himself after Augustus, he emphasizes his generosity and leniency. He lowers the taxes that weigh most heavily on common folk and uses his own money to extend Rome's city walls and build a new canal. When asked to sign execution orders, he sighs, declaring that he wishes he'd never learned to write. Unfortunately, it is all a show. When the young emperor's mind wanders, he doesn't dream of Rome's greatness, but of his own fame. Above all, he wants to be recognized as a great artist. He practices the lyre, a handheld stringed instrument resembling a small harp, and attempts to strengthen his singing voice. To do that, he spends days lying on his back with a heavy lead weight on his chest. He also takes enemas to keep his weight down and avoids eating apples, a fruit thought to damage the vocal cords. His efforts yield little, according to Suetonius, who describes his voice as "feeble and husky." Nero, however, is pleased with his progress. Quoting the Greek proverb that unheard melodies are never sweet, he begins organizing performances for Rome's upper classes. Nero's recitals often last for more than ten hours, and guests are officially forbidden to leave. The only escape is to fall down dead, or at least pretend to, and be carried out on a stretcher – a ruse successfully deployed by more than a few attendees. Music isn't the only art that fascinates Nero – he also dreams of redesigning Rome's architectural fabric. In 65 CE, a devastating fire rips through the city, leveling its historic center. Many Romans believe Nero started the blaze in order to realize his ambition of remodeling the capital in his own image. Did Nero actually set the fire? Suetonius thinks he did, and it's in these passages that we find the origin of the idea that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. According to Suetonius, Nero climbed a tower overlooking the city and then sang an entire dramatic work called The Fall of Troy while watching the blaze.

Nero: Extravagance and downfall

Things take a turn for the worse after the Great Fire of Rome in 65 CE. Senators move against their vain emperor, but their plot is foiled. Nero's position is now stronger than ever. With the city in ruins, he also has a blank canvas on which to realize his artistic ambitions. There is just one hitch – he's already bled the imperial treasury dry. Nero soon finds a solution to this cash-flow problem and begins confiscating the wealth of merchants, nobles, and family members – including by murdering them. Roman aristocrats, fearing for their lives, begin looking for an alternative to their emperor. Nero believes that fortunes are made to be squandered, and he considers people who take care of their wealth to be misers. "True gentlemen," he once remarks, "always throw their money about." He lives up to his own ideal. He never wears the same clothes more than once and gambles fortunes on a throw of the dice. If someone pleases him, he lavishes that person with gifts. It is in this way that a gladiator called Spiculus and a lyre player called Menecrates come to own the kinds of estates usually reserved for war heroes. The horses that pull his carriage, like the mules that carry his belongings, are shod in silver. If he travels by boat, the banks of rivers and the shores of bays are lined with temporary brothels. How does he find the money to pay for all these extravagances? In a word, robbery. If a nobleman dies and doesn't bequeath him a large enough portion of his estate, Nero seizes the entire family's wealth and fines the lawyers who drew up the will. On market day, he sends agents out to sell illegal fabric dyes to unwitting customers. When an unfortunate wholesaler buys a few ounces of this dye, he is accused of breaking the law and forfeits his business to the emperor. Murder is another method by which Nero gets what he wants. Take his aunt, Domitia, to whom he gives a fatally strong dose of laxative when he finds her confined to bed with constipation. He confiscates her estate before she is even dead. When a rebellion against Nero breaks out in Spain, Rome's fearful upper classes embrace its leader – a general called Galba. In 68 CE, both the Senate and the army accept Galba and proclaim him emperor. Seeing no way out, Nero kills himself.

Galba and Otho: The year of short-lived emperors

At the beginning of his reign, Augustus's wife, Livia, plants a bay tree. It thrives and becomes a symbol of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Augustus's heirs wear laurels fashioned from its leaves and take cuttings from it to start their own trees. These, too, are symbolic. If one of the saplings dies, its planter's death is believed to be close at hand. In 68 CE, it's Livia's own tree that withers at the root – an evil omen for the family. Sure enough, with Nero's suicide, the Julio-Claudian line becomes extinct. Galba, the instigator of the revolt against Nero, now makes his bid for power. Before the rebellion, he'd been a dutiful commander and servant of the Empire. Once, when Caligula inspected his troops in Spain, he earned praise for running 20 miles alongside the emperor's chariot. Later, his friends urged him to seize power after Caligula's death. He refused – an act that earned him Claudius's lifelong gratitude. Galba the general knew whom to please, and what advantages doing so might bring him. Emperor Galba, however, isn't in the business of pleasing people. This creates a problem; his soldiers haven't put him on the throne out of the goodness of their hearts. They've been promised handsome rewards. Galba refuses to honor his pledges, high-handedly declaring that it is his custom to "levy troops, not to buy them." His betrayal isn't taken lightly. Rome's German legions proclaim their own commander emperor – a general called Vitellius – and begin their march on Rome. As Galba scrambles to secure his position, an ambitious senator named Otho makes a move of his own. Angry that he's been snubbed by Galba, who's named a much less experienced senator as his successor, Otho launches a coup. That is an easy enough thing to do. The soldiers in the capital are in no mood to defend an emperor they loathe, let alone die for him. Hearing of the coup, Galba rushes into the streets to restore calm and is killed by a furious mob. He's ruled Rome for just seven months. Otho doesn't last long, either. Proclaimed emperor in January, 69 CE, he stakes everything on a swift victory against Vitellius's forces. But he overplays his hand, abandoning a favorable defensive position and launching a disastrous offensive. A long and bloody civil war now seems likely. Otho, who still shudders when he hears the names Brutus and Cassius, is desperate to prevent it. On April 16, he kills himself with his own dagger. He's been emperor for barely three months.

Vitellius and Vespasian: Rivals for the right to rule Rome

Otho's suicide doesn't prevent the civil war he had feared. Vitellius cuts a familiar figure. His thirst for luxury is unquenchable. The treasury soon runs dry, and so he begins levying heavy taxes on the common people and plunders the rich. Critics of such misrule don't last long. The fortunate are exiled, the unlucky tortured and killed. By the summer of 69 CE, the soldiers of Rome's eastern legions are ready to revolt. Who, though, will rule them if they succeed in overthrowing Vitellius? They go through lists of provincial officials. The names of men deemed unfit to hold the position of emperor are crossed out. Eventually, they find someone they like: Vespasian. Vespasian doesn't belong to the senatorial class from which Roman rulers are traditionally drawn, but he has an illustrious career behind him. It was Vespasian, for example, who spearheaded Claudius's invasion of Britain in the 40s. In 66 CE, he was charged with suppressing a Jewish rebellion in Judea. Although a final victory eluded him, everyone agrees that he did an admirable job. The only blot on his name is a moment of indiscretion during Nero's reign that almost cost Vespasian his life: he'd been forced to go into hiding after falling asleep during one of the young emperor's notorious musical performances. Vespasian takes some convincing. In the end, a curious event makes him determined to challenge for the crown. An ox shakes off its yoke and bursts into his house, scattering servants and overturning furniture. Upon seeing Vespasian, however, it falls to the ground and lowers its neck in submission. That, surely, is a good omen. The revolt begins. Despite commanding the empire's best fighters, Vitellius's position crumbles under sustained pressure. Legion after legion, province after province switch allegiance to Vespasian. Fearing for his life, Vitellius attempts to abdicate – but no senator, magistrate, or consul can be found to take his place. When news reaches him that Vespasian's forces are at Rome's gates, he hides himself in the doorkeeper's quarters of the imperial palace. He is found by an advance guard; the soldiers torture him, then throw him down a flight of stairs. His body is dragged through the streets of Rome and finally hurled into the river Tiber. Vespasian is proclaimed emperor on December 22, 69 CE. He becomes the fourth man to hold that title in a single year.

Vespasian: Capable emperor

Suetonius tells us that Vespasian is at first rather "bewildered" in his new role. What kind of emperor is he going to be? After Nero's extravagances and a year of civil war, Rome is a disordered and chaotic

place. Vespasian finds an answer to his question: he will restore imperial discipline. That means punishing anything perceived as laxness or softness. When a man reeking of perfume comes to thank him for a commission, Vespasian turns away in disgust and cancels his own order. “I should not have minded so much,” he says, “if it had been garlic.” On another occasion, he receives a military brigade’s application for a special shoe allowance. He turns it down and states that he expects them to march barefoot in future. Vespasian doesn’t like flatterers. When members of his court claim he was descended from a soldier who’d fought with the divine hero Hercules, he roars with laughter. He knows his own modest origins and has no reason to hide them. This humility is also at the root of his easygoing tolerance of rudeness. Once, while traveling outside Rome, he meets Demetrius the Cynic, a philosopher famed for his sharp tongue. Demetrius refuses to rise to greet him and instead barks out a rude remark. Vespasian merely comments, “Good dog!” Yet Vespasian has his vices. The imperial treasury is still low, and he has big plans. It is during these years, for example, that work is begun on the amphitheatre known to us as the Colosseum. Vespasian’s trick for raising cash? He promotes corrupt officials to high office, turns a blind eye as they misuse their positions to collect bribes, and then charges them with extortion. Their ill-gotten gains, meanwhile, end up in his own purse. It is known as the sponge trick – the emperor puts his officials in to soak and then squeezes them dry. Another method is simply to impose taxes on previously untaxed things – things like public toilets. We owe the famous phrase pecunia non olet – that is, “money doesn’t smell” – to Vespasian’s urinal tax. When his son, Titus, complained that he’d gone too far in taxing public toilets, Vespasian handed him a coin taken from the first day’s proceeds and asked him if it smelled bad. “No, father,” Titus replied. “That’s odd,” Vespasian answered in turn, “it comes straight from the urinal!” Despite his vices, however, Vespasian is a popular ruler. He dies a natural death after ten years in power on June 24, 79 CE. Before his death, Vespasian sees a pair of perfectly balanced scales in a dream. Claudius and Nero sit in one pan; he and his two sons, Titus and Domitian, sit in the other. It is a prophetic vision. His family line – the Flavian Dynasty – will rule Rome for the same number of years as Claudius and Nero had.

Titus: Like father, like son

On June 24, 79 CE, Vespasian’s elder son, the 39-year-old Titus,

succeeds him. Titus had been a talented youth. He wielded a sword with skill, played the harp, and spoke fluent, eloquent Greek. He was also fiercely loyal. Growing up, he was particularly close to Claudius's son, Britannicus. When Nero poisoned this potential rival, Titus grabbed Britannicus's tainted cup and drank its remaining contents in sympathy with his slain friend. He came close to dying himself. Later, he made a name for himself by serving as his father's right-hand man in Judea. When Vespasian became emperor, Titus took charge of operations. It was under his leadership that Roman forces breached the walls of Jerusalem – the last holdout of the anti-Roman Jewish rebels. It was a decisive defeat. In 70 CE, the city was sacked, its holy sites razed, and its inhabitants driven into exile. Titus's victory made him a hero of the empire, and he was even presented with an honorary crown in Egypt. Rumours spread that he had designs on the imperial throne, but he rushed to Rome to declare his loyalty to his father, Vespasian. Back in the capital, he was a ruthless defender of his father's regime and personally oversaw the execution of treasonous officials and generals. Many Romans interpret this ruthlessness as a sign that they have another Nero on their hands, but Titus is a mild-mannered and generous ruler after succeeding his father in 79 CE. He respects his subjects' property rights, grants an audience to anyone who seeks it, and dissolves the hated secret police established by Caligula. When fires and an earthquake combine to wreak havoc across the Italian peninsula, he strips decorations from his own mansions and distributes them to public buildings. At dinner one evening, he sighs – he hasn't done anyone a favor in the past 24 hours. "My friends," he exclaims, "I've wasted a day!" Titus's reign lasts just two years, but he leaves an indelible mark on his native city. It is under him that the building that becomes a global symbol of Rome – the Colosseum – is completed.

Domitian: A cruel end to the Flavian Dynasty

Shortly before collapsing and dying, Titus utters his last words. It is unfair, he says, that he is dying so soon, since he has done nothing he regretted. He then pauses to think about his statement. Then he remembers; there is one thing he definitely regrets. The error in this otherwise blameless life is to have allowed his brother and heir, Domitian, to continue plotting against him. He has been too weak to

execute, or even exile, him. Rome will now pay the price for his inaction. Titus had been a brilliant child. Domitian, by contrast, was merely representative of his class – the privileged senatorial elite in which his father's rise to power had placed him. He was well-educated and capable, but he rarely shone. As a young man, he tried to step out of his brother's shadow by masterminding a military campaign into German territory. It was judged foolhardy, and he was severely reprimanded. From that day on, Vespasian and Titus shared a carriage during public ceremonies, while Domitian rode behind on horseback. The death of Titus seems to have taken him by surprise. After years of plotting against his brother, he doesn't know what to do with the power that has fallen into his lap. For months, he spends his days alone doing nothing but catching and skewering flies on sharp needles. A sudden interest in social improvement rouses him. He restores buildings gutted by fires, raises the army's pay, and sets aside extra land for growing grain. But these reforms don't hold his attention for long. Domitian now turns his cruel streak on other humans. He executes people on a whim. One victim is a sickly boy who resembles an actor he dislikes; another is a historian who makes an inconsequential remark that annoys him. He personally tortures prisoners who possess information he thinks valuable, and cuts off the hands of others who don't. Often, Domitian invites victims into his quarters and talks movingly about mercy or compassion. Once they have been lulled into a sense of security, he has his henchmen kill them in front of him. Unfortunately for Rome, Domitian enjoys much better health than his brother Titus. It is only after 14 years of misrule that he, like so many emperors before him, meets a violent end. In 96 CE, his own friends and servants stab him to death. Domitian's body is carried away by public undertakers who show his earthly remains no greater respect than if he'd been a common pauper. It's the end of the Flavian Dynasty, and our tale.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Julius Caesar didn't rule long before being assassinated, but he changed the course of history. After him, Rome was ruled by emperors – divine monarchs with absolute power. The Empire's fate was now largely determined by the character of the men who held that office. First came the Julio-Claudians: there was clever Augustus, forgettable Tiberius, dangerous Caligula, doddery Claudius, and vainglorious Nero. After Nero's death came the year of

four emperors: Galba, Otho and Vitellius came and went very quickly. But Vespasian stuck around. He proved a very capable emperor. He was followed by his sons – the Flavians. Titus was as steady and sensible as his father. But Domitian was unhinged. His misrule and death, in 96 CE, brought the dynasty to an end. Got feedback? We’d love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with The Twelve Caesars as the subject line and share your thoughts!