

# Trajan (Nerva Traianus Augustus)

GAIUS STERN

Trajan (Marcus Ulpius Traianus) was the first emperor born outside of Italy. Regarded by subsequent generations as the greatest Roman emperor, he conquered *DACIA* (Romania), Assyria, Mesopotamia, Babylonia (roughly eastern Syria and Iraq), and *ARMENIA*. His nineteen-year reign saw both military expansion and a flourishing of men of letters. Trajan came to the throne via adoption by *NERVA* and left no natural offspring to inherit the throne, but supposedly adopted *HADRIAN* to succeed him. His sudden death led to rumors that Hadrian's adoption was spurious and cast a shadow of illegitimacy over his successor's reign, further clouded by the latter's decision to evacuate the recent, eastern conquests.

Trajan was born in *ITALICA* in Spain on September 18, 53 CE. His father commanded a legion under *VESPASIAN* in the Jewish War (68–70; see *REVOLTS, JEWISH*) and rose to patrician status, holding a consulship, and receiving triumphal ornamenta. His mother may have belonged to the gens Marcia, an old Republican family from which the Divine Julius' grandmother also hailed. He served in the army in Syria and Spain and in early 89 marched against *ANTONIUS SATURNINUS*, the governor of Upper Germany who had rebelled against *DOMITIAN*, but arrived too late to help suppress the rebellion.

After Trajan held the consulship in 91, Domitian sent him back to the frontier to govern Germany, a command that included three legions (see *GERMANIA (SUPERIOR AND INFERIOR)*). Trajan was still in Germany when Domitian was assassinated in 96. In 97, the Praetorian Guard forced Nerva to turn over the conspirators who had plotted against Domitian. Nerva then adopted Trajan on October 27, 97 to bring military authority to his regime and formally invested him with both the *imperium* and the tribunician power. This grant was accompanied

by a special diamond of great beauty, which Trajan later passed to Hadrian, and which Hadrian would use to corroborate his claims of adoption and succession (*SHA Hadr.* 3). Nerva and Trajan became consuls together (for the fourth and second time, respectively) on January 1, 98, but Nerva died on 28 January. Thus within the space of four months Trajan went from a governor of Germany to heir, consul anew, and then emperor.

Trajan started his reign by giving a donative to the army, a benefaction to the people, and paid the usual homage to the Senate. He at once sent a letter to the Senate affirming his strong sense of justice and pledging not to execute any Senator without good cause. He also asked the Senate to deify Nerva, a request they granted. He then toured the northern frontier before returning to Rome. His wife, the empress Plotina, won great admiration for stating, upon entering the palace, "I enter here such a woman as I would wish to be when I leave" (*Cass. Dio* 68.5.5).

In 101, Trajan began campaigning in Dacia against *DECEBALUS*, a king whose earlier conflict with Rome (85–88) had ended in a settlement with Domitian. The events of Trajan's First Dacian War are best known through *TRAJAN'S COLUMN*, a monument built from the spoils of the campaigns in Dacia. After much hard fighting, the Romans captured Decebalus' sister, recovered the legionary eagle lost under *Cornelius Fuscus* in the 80s, and pressed Decebalus to come to terms. In 102, Decebalus surrendered some of his Roman prisoners and deserters (for punishment) and agreed to send the rest. He also agreed to surrender the territory he had conquered and to become an ally of the Roman people. Trajan then returned to Rome and held a triumph. The Senate bestowed upon him the *agnomen* *Dacicus* for his victories (*Cass. Dio* 68.10).

However, two years later, the Romans decided Decebalus had violated the treaty, in particular that he had never sent home the remaining prisoners and had encroached again on Roman territory. In this second war

(105–6) Trajan advanced to Decebalus' capital, SARMIZEGETUSA REGIA, and sacked it. Despairing, Decebalus hid much of his treasure in the River Sargetia and fled, but he was captured at the moment of suicide by a cavalry officer, Claudius Maximus. The scene on Trajan's column depicting Decebalus' death does not match that on the tombstone of Claudius Maximus (Speidel 1970). The victory was memorialized by the TROPAEUM TRAIANI at Adamklissi in nearby Moesia.

Trajan's modesty and affability was much acclaimed in his own lifetime and afterwards, especially when contrasted with rather more despotic and aloof emperors. Contemporary praise is to be found, especially in the *Panegyricus*, a speech delivered by PLINY THE YOUNGER to the Senate in 100. Later, Eutropius (8.4–5) would commend Trajan's modesty and willingness to conduct himself as a private citizen in many situations where other emperors maintained an imperial demeanor. Unlike Domitian and Vespasian, he did not monopolize the consulship. He allowed others to enjoy the honors of that high office, holding only four more consulships during his reign after the term in 98 he started with Nerva, namely in the years 100, 101, 103, and 112.

His correspondence with Pliny the Younger, while the latter was governor of BITHYNIA, in particular about the Christians, is well-known. Pliny asked whether to conduct a general persecution, but Trajan replied not to seek out Christians for punishment, but only to punish those who had been caught committing crimes and refused to sacrifice to the health of the emperor (see PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS). This relatively benevolent attitude probably contributed to Dante's inclusion of Trajan in Paradise in the *Divine comedy*.

Romans also noticed and admired Trajan's *pietas* to his relatives. As a signal of his loyalty to Nerva, he summoned the Praetorian Guards, who had forced Nerva to turn over Domitian's assassins and had them executed (Cass. Dio 68.5.4), even though their actions had directly led to his adoption. In addition to deifying his adoptive father, he also deified

his late, real father M. Ulpius Traianus, making him the first person outside an imperial family to be so honored. He granted the title *Augusta* to his wife, his sister, and his niece, and upon his sister's death had her deified also.

Trajan attempted to pass a series of social and military reforms in the vein of AUGUSTUS and CLAUDIUS. For his wars he raised two new legions (Cass. Dio 55.24.4), but encountering much resistance to the draft, he had to pass a law severely punishing those who mutilated their sons to escape military service, probably following the lead of Augustus in 9 CE (*Digest* 49.16.4.12; see also Suet. *Aug.* 24; Cass. Dio 56. 23). Eutropius (8.2) credits him with improving the imperial post, apparently on the model of the Persian Empire described by Herodotus 8.98, Xen. *Cyrop.* 8.6.18 (but see Suet. *Tib.* 7.3; Val. Max. 5.5.3; Plin. *HN* 7.20.84 that such a system may already have existed). Fathers who neglected their sons were obliged to emancipate them, probably pursuant to the precedents of Claudius (Suet. *Claud.* 25). More famously, he reformed the regulations regarding the wills of soldiers, although they did not win the right to marry while in the service (*Dig.* 29.1.1, 29.1.24).

Trajan's public works were numerous and valuable. He built new harbors at OSTIA, Centumcellae, and Ancona. He sponsored a major public assistance project after a flood of the TIBER and decreed a sixty-foot height limit on future buildings in the city to limit damage should they collapse. His famous column was ninety-eight feet tall. He sponsored baths and an aqueduct in Rome. He built many libraries and roads, the most famous of which, the *via Traiana*, ran to BENEVENTUM to the Arch of Trajan.

The immense wealth extracted from Dacia funded Rome's greatest building project in several decades, Trajan's Forum. A large portion of the Esquiline Hill was dug out to make room for a gigantic forum, three stories tall of shops. Also included in this new forum was Trajan's column, which depicts his Dacian wars in a procession of detailed scenes spiraling up the column: Romans bridging the Danube, fortifying camps, fighting battles, and listening

to Trajan's speeches. The Dacian wars also funded certain social projects that raised the quality of life for the average Roman. Trajan greatly expanded Nerva's program of *alimenta*, welfare programs for poor children and orphans, whereby he essentially provided the poorest members of society with badly needed financial support, education, and respectability (see *ALIMENTA SCHEMES*). In short, he tied Roman society's least fortunate as clients to himself, the most powerful patron in the realm.

Trajan's next undertaking was a war against the Arabians, who had resisted Roman rule for over a century (since Augustus sent Aelius Gallus in a failed invasion in the mid-20s BCE, Cass. Dio 53.29). However, the Arabians voluntarily submitted to avoid suffering the fate of the Dacians, so Trajan converted Arabia into a province (see *ARABIA, ROMAN PROVINCE*).

At this time, *Parthia* and Rome stood as the two superpowers in west Eurasia, not unlike the Cold War of the modern era with intermittent thaws and freezes. Trajan claimed to take offense that the Parthians had selected the new king of *Armenia* without Roman approval and demanded the right to replace him, knowing neither *Parthia* nor *Armenia* would agree to this. Attempts to win Trajan's confidence were to no avail. In 114, Trajan invaded *Armenia* and deposed the king, who was later murdered in Roman custody, although Trajan insisted this was unauthorized. He then turned on *Mesopotamia*, which he conquered in 115, capturing both *Nisibis* and *Batnae*. Trajan next divided his forces against *Adenystrae* in the north and *Seleukeia* and the Parthian capital *Ktesiphon* in the south, taking all three. Later sources suggest that the northern region was made into the short-lived province of *Assyria* (Eutrop. 8.3, Fest. 14). Rebellions in his rear, however, forced him to abandon any plans of pushing further east.

Trajan attempted to resolve the problem of future Parthian uprisings by placing *Parthamaspates* upon the throne as the new Parthian king. However, rebellions of other peoples did not abate, and he found himself

forced to contend with a series of rebellions in the newly conquered territory, including *Nisibis* and *Edessa*. An even more troublesome rebellion in his rear was that of the Jews in *Egypt*, *Cyrene*, and *Cyprus*. He sent *Lusius Quietus* to suppress them and himself tackled *Arabia* (Cass. Dio 68.30–1). However, Trajan encountered a major setback when he lay siege to *Hatra*, which he failed to take. He finally abandoned the siege and withdrew, tarnishing his reputation for invincibility in war. In the short term he had to acknowledge tacitly that some of his conquests were already lost and would require a future campaign to reconquer. His health began to suffer, so he marched west, planning to return to Italy.

But Trajan never saw Rome again. In or near *Antioch* he suffered what may have been a stroke; he believed he had been poisoned. He made it as far as *Selinus* in *Cilicia*, but died on August 11, 117. Immediately a report was put forth that Trajan had adopted *Hadrian*; shortly after, news spread of Trajan's death and *Hadrian* was proclaimed emperor in his place. It is likely that Trajan neither adopted *Hadrian* nor chose a successor, not expecting to die so soon. Instead, Trajan, like *Nerva*, would have chosen a firm soldier to follow him, but one also invested in the arts of peace, or possibly a statesman acceptable to the army. Indeed, according to one report (SHA *Hadr.* 4), Trajan intended to leave the empire to *Neratius Priscus* (cos. 97). Accordingly, *Hadrian's* succession was probably a palace coup, engineered by *Plotina*, who favored him. *Cassius Dio* 69.1 states that Trajan's death was concealed for several days to orchestrate *Hadrian's* deathbed adoption. *Hadrian's* purge of Trajan's generals certainly supports this contention. *Hadrian* also relinquished Trajan's new eastern conquests, keeping only *Dacia*, which the Romans held on and off for over a century.

*Hadrian* swiftly wrote to the Senate from *Asia Minor*, requesting deification for Trajan (see *RULER CULT, ROMAN*). *Hadrian* declined to annex the triumph allotted to Trajan for his Parthian victory, but instead held it

posthumously with an effigy of Trajan in the triumphator's chariot (SHA *Hadr.* 6). Trajan's remains were buried not with Nerva in the Mausoleum of Augustus, but in the base of Trajan's column (Cass. Dio 69.2.5; Eutrop. 8.5.2).

Like other prominent Roman commanders before him, Trajan wished to be "the Roman Alexander." Cassius Dio 68.28–9 makes the comparison in reporting Trajan's chagrin that his age stopped him from conquering India. In a letter to the Senate that Dio quotes, Trajan claimed he had advanced further than Alexander (probably referring to Dacia). Reports circulated that, in imitation of Alexander, Trajan had intended to die without naming a successor (SHA *Hadr.* 4). Trajan is already associated with Alexander in DIO CHRYSOSTOM'S *Orations on kingship*, the first of which may date as early as 100.

His legacy as Rome's greatest emperor long endured. Later emperors were hailed upon accession with the acclamation: "May you be as fortunate as Augustus and as great as Trajan!" Dante in his *Divine comedy* includes Ripheus the Trojan and Trajan in *Paradise* as (posthumously converted) pagans in heaven, the former for his righteousness and the latter for his greatness.

SEE ALSO: Parthians, rulers; Rome, city of; 5. Flavian and Trajanic; Trajan's canal.

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