

Marcus Aurelius (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus)

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Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus was a Roman emperor who ruled between March 7, 161 and March 17, 180 CE. He succeeded his adoptive father ANTONINUS PIUS and was in turn succeeded by his natural son COMMODUS.

Marcus's benevolent rule and interest in philosophy has garnered him almost universal praise among ancient and modern writers. The influential British scholar Edward Gibbon considered him the last of the so-called "Five Good Emperors," a flattering assessment, which has influenced the work of countless modern scholars (Birley 1987: 8–11). During his nineteen-year reign, there were increasing signs of the turmoil that would grip the empire during the third century crisis. Marcus faced both internal pressures, including the arrival of plague in the empire and a serious usurpation. He was also forced to deal with significant pressures on Rome's borders, including an extended conflict on the DANUBE frontier known as the Marcomannic wars. As emperor, he was married to Annia Galeria Faustina Minor, with whom he had thirteen children.

SOURCES

Although a wide array of primary source material relevant to the reign of Marcus Aurelius has survived, it is of varying quality (Birley 1987: 226–30). The one narrative history of the period, written by CASSIUS DIO, only survives in the form of an abbreviated epitome. The biographies of Lucius Verus, Antoninus Pius, Avidius Cassius, and Marcus Aurelius himself, which are contained in the work known as the *HISTORIA AUGUSTA*, are useful but must be considered with a measure of caution due to the uncertainty surrounding the authorship of the work. There are also references to the reign



Figure 1 Detail of an equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. Musei Capitolini, Rome. © Photo Scala, Florence.

of Marcus Aurelius in a number of third and fourth century works by Herodian, Ammianus Marcellinus, Eutropius, and Aurelius Victor. Offsetting this paucity of narrative history is Marcus's personal correspondence with his tutor Fronto, and the *Meditations*, a philosophical treatise written by the emperor himself. The latter is especially important in understanding the relationship Marcus enjoyed with his predecessor Antoninus Pius. Also preserved is a large corpus of the emperor's legal decisions, a significant body of coins, inscriptions, and papyri, and archaeological artifacts, including the Column of Marcus Aurelius, which is located on the Piazza Colonna in Rome and which portrays Marcus's victories in the Marcomannic wars.

EARLY LIFE

Marcus Aurelius was born M. Annius Verus on April 26, 121 CE in Rome. A member of the Gens Annia, he was raised by his grandfather Marcus Annius Verus following the death of his father in 124. He seems to have been singled out for favor early in his life by the emperor HADRIAN, who nicknamed him Verissimus (truest) and enrolled him into the order of the equites at only six years old (*Hist. Aug. Marc.* 1.10; 2.1; Birley 1987: 31). Cassius Dio twice suggests that the favor shown to Marcus by Hadrian was a result of family ties (Cass. Dio

69.21.2; 72.35.2). In a sign that Hadrian considered him a future heir, Marcus, at the age of only fifteen, was betrothed to Ceionia Fabia, the daughter of Hadrian's adopted son and heir L. Aelius Caesar. This status was solidified when before his death in 138, the aging emperor asked his successor Antoninus Pius to adopt both Marcus and LUCIUS VERUS, the son of the now deceased L. Aelius. Hadrian also requested that Marcus, who after his adoption was known as Marcus (Aelius) Aurelius Verus Caesar, be betrothed to Pius' daughter Annia Galeria Faustina. Marcus held a number of positions that further indicated he would succeed Antoninus Pius. He was quaestor in 139 and became consul in both 140 and 145. His second consulship, which he held at the very young age of twenty-two, was a particular honor.

Following the birth of his first child in 147, Marcus was granted the traditional imperial powers of *tribunicia potestas* and *imperium* (see *TRIBUNUS PLEBIS*; *IMPERIUM*). Faustina was granted the title Augusta. This act was the clearest indication yet that Antoninus expected Marcus to succeed him. From this point until the death of Antoninus in 161, Marcus was the virtual co-emperor of the empire (Birley 1987: 104).

ACCESSION AND JOINT RULE

On March 7, 161, Antoninus Pius died. According to the *Historia Augusta*, his last act as emperor was to place the state in the hands of Marcus, who now added the name Antoninus to his title (*Hist. Aug. Pius* 12.4–8; *Marc.* 7.3). When the Senate met to formally ratify Marcus as emperor, he demanded that his stepbrother Lucius Verus be given equal powers. It is not entirely clear why Marcus took this step, although it is possible that he was attempting to honor the wishes of Hadrian. It is also possible that he recognized the intrinsic benefits to the empire of an imperial partnership (Birley 1987: 116–7).

Despite the demands made by Marcus on behalf of Lucius Verus, it is clear that he was to remain the senior member of the partnership.

Only he held the title of *Pontifex Maximus* and his advanced standing in public life gave him greater *auctoritas* than his younger co-ruler. Almost immediately, the reign of the new emperors was characterized by increasing pressures on the borders of the empire. In 161, the Parthian king Vologases III invaded ARMENIA, expelling the Roman appointed king, and in his place installing his own nominee Pacorus. Vologases then invaded the province of Syria, in the process defeating a Roman force led by the governor L. Attidius Cornelianus (see PARTHIA; PARTHIANS, RULERS).

The deteriorating situation in the east now demanded an imperial presence. Although neither emperor had military experience, it was determined that Lucius Verus would lead an expedition to the east, as according to Cassius Dio, his youth and temperament made him better suited to military activity than Marcus (Cass. Dio 71.1.3). Between 162–6, Verus, through the actions of experienced generals such as AVIDIUS CASSIUS, achieved significant military successes. The Parthian puppet king Pacorus was expelled from Armenia in 163 and the Parthian capital of KTESIPHON was captured in 165. As a result of these successes, a joint triumph was held in 166 and both emperors took the triumphal titles *Armeniacus*, *Parthicus Maximus*, and *Medicus*. During this period, Verus married Lucilla, the daughter of Marcus. With the return of the Roman army from the east in 166, came the plague, which in the following year devastated the city of Rome itself. The exact type of disease that afflicted the empire remains unknown, although various strains have been suggested by modern authorities, including smallpox, exanthematous typhus, and bubonic plague (Birley 2000: 168; see PLAGUE). The plague delayed a planned expedition to deal with growing barbarian threats along the empire's Danubian border (see DANUBE). In late 168, the emperors finally left Rome for the northern frontier. This was the first time that Marcus had left Italy. However, early in 169, after a reorganization of the Danubian frontier, Lucius Verus suffered a seizure as the

emperors wintered in northern Italy. His subsequent death left Marcus in sole control of the empire.

DOMESTIC POLICY

While undertaking no radical endeavors in this sphere, Marcus was not completely idle. He was considered an effective jurist, and legal rescripts from the period demonstrate that he enacted legislation dealing with issues as diverse as the manumission of slaves; the appointment of guardians for minors and orphans; and public morality. Legislation giving preference to a woman's children as opposed to her male relatives with regards to inheritance and a law requiring that all freeborn children be named and registered within thirty days of birth are both considered groundbreaking by scholars (Birley 1987: 133ff, 205, 227). As far as administrative matters were concerned, Marcus was fairly conservative. He ensured a harmonious relationship with the Senate by extending the body's judicial responsibilities and conducted in private the trials of Senators facing a capital charge. He also enhanced the administrative role of the Senate by appointing Senatorial *curatores* for regional communities across the empire. Marcus moved to replenish senatorial ranks that had been depleted through years of continuous warfare. By taking a meritorious approach and promoting the likes of PERTINAX and Macrinus Avitus, the emperor ensured militarily gifted leaders were available for ongoing campaigning (Birley 1987: 179 ff. *see* SENATE, ROMAN REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE).

Finally, Marcus paid close attention to the administration of Italy itself with the introduction of four officials known as *iuridici*. Unlike those employed by Hadrian, who were of consular rank, the *iuridici* of Marcus Aurelius were of Praetorian rank (Birley 2000: 226–7).

THE MARCOMMANIC WARS

The Marcommanic wars were the defining event of Marcus's sole rule of the empire and

effectively occupied him until his death in 180. The conflict was fought between Rome and a confederacy of barbarian tribes, and derives its name from the largest of these tribes; the Marcomanni. Other tribes involved included the Quadi, Langobardi, Obii, and the Jazyges. Geographically the conflict centered on the middle and upper reaches of the DANUBE, which meant Italy itself was at great risk of invasion (Birley 1987: 249).

The seeds of the conflict lay in the slow building of migratory pressures during the reign of Antoninus Pius, which then exploded upon his death. Disturbances beyond the Danubian frontier are recorded as early as 162, but the volatile situation in the east, which required a transfer of troops from the Danube to participate in the expedition headed by Lucius Verus, left Rome unable to act. In 165, Marcus prepared for the inevitable campaign in the north by raising two new legions (II and III Italica). In early 167, PANNONIA and DACIA were invaded by a number of barbarian tribes, which were eventually defeated by local Roman forces (Birley 1987: 252). Further action against the northern tribes was limited by the outbreak of plague and the death of Lucius Verus. Thus, it was not until mid-169, that Marcus was again able to turn his attentions to the Danubian crisis. Faced with a severe financial shortfall due to the ravages of the plague, Marcus took drastic efforts to fund his upcoming campaigns, including an auction of his personal property (*Hist. Aug. Marc.* 17.4–5). A corresponding manpower shortage forced the emperor to accept slaves as military volunteers and form new auxiliary units made up of gladiators (*Hist. Aug. Marc.* 21.6–8).

In 170, Marcus unleashed his long awaited offensive across the Danube. Although our source material for this period is fragmentary, it seems that the Roman offensive ended in defeat, with the Quadi and Marcomanni outflanking Marcus's forces from the east and devastating Northern Italy, where they sacked Opitergium and besieged AQUILEIA (Ammianus 29.6.1). Further east, the Costoboci invaded Greece and destroyed ELEUSIS. Thanks to the

efforts of leading generals, such as Pompeianus and the future emperor P. Helvius Pertinax, the barbarians were pushed out of the empire by the end of 171, at which time Marcus was able to negotiate a peace settlement with barbarian envoys at his base of operations in CARNUNTUM. In 172, Marcus launched a fresh assault against the Marcomanni. Despite the death of Prefect Marcus Vindex during the campaign, Roman forces gained a significant victory and Marcus Aurelius took the title *Germanicus*. Over the next two years, he turned his attention eastwards and gained significant successes against the Quadi and Naristae. In 175, the revolt of Avidius Cassius forced him to sign an armistice. He returned to the region in 178, ostensibly to annex large tracts of land to the empire. The *Historia Augusta* claims that Aurelius wished to create two new provinces called “Marcomannia” and “Sarmatia” (*Hist. Aug. Marc.* 24.5). While this seems an uncharacteristically aggressive move on the part of Marcus, it could indicate that he believed it was the only way to stabilize this frontier.

THE REVOLT OF AVIDIUS CASSIUS AND THE FINAL YEARS OF MARCUS AURELIUS

The reasons behind the revolt of Avidius Cassius, the Governor of Syria and one of Marcus Aurelius’ most successful generals, remain obscure, although it is possible that it was the result of opposition to the ongoing northern wars and Marcus’s plans of expansion (Birley 2000: 178–9). The *Historia Augusta* and Cassius Dio both claim that the empress Faustina instigated the plot, because she believed that her husband was close to death and that the empire would be seized from her young son Commodus, who was not ready to rule (*Hist. Aug. Marc.* 24.6; *Hist. Aug. Cassius* 7.1; Cass. Dio 72.22.3). Upon hearing of the plot, Marcus was concerned enough to summon Commodus from Rome in order to commend him to the army. Dio claims that Marcus was surprised by the actions of Cassius and includes an address

he supposedly made to the army bewailing an act of treachery from someone he considered his dearest friend (Cass. Dio 72.24–7). As it transpired, Marcus was never forced to act. Despite gaining significant support in a number of eastern provinces, including Egypt, Cassius was assassinated three months and six days after he had declared himself emperor in the early months of 175. Marcus was relatively lenient in dealing with the after effects of the revolt. Although passing a law banning Roman officials from governing their province of origin, he wrote to the Senate declaring he did not want a wholesale slaughter of Cassius’ supporters (Cass. Dio 72.30–1).

In 175, Marcus toured the east in an effort to re-establish his authority. During this trip, his wife Faustina died. Marcus had her deified and renamed the town of Halala, where she had died, as *Faustinopolis*. Returning to Rome via Athens, Marcus held a triumph to celebrate his northern victories. While in Rome, in 177, he also raised his son Commodus to the position of co-emperor, investing him with all imperial titles, except for that of *Pontifex Maximus*. This clearly shows he planned to be succeeded by his son.

In 178, Marcus returned to the Danubian frontier, where he fell ill; he died at Sirmium on March 17, 180. The succession arrangements that he left in place are extremely significant. Where previously Antonine emperors had adopted their successors on the basis of ability, Marcus left the empire to his natural son Commodus. Dio believed it was this decision that marked the change from Rome’s golden age to one of iron and rust (Cass. Dio 72.36.4).

THE “PHILOSOPHER EMPEROR”

Much of the modern fascination surrounding Marcus Aurelius stems from his atypical (for a Roman emperor) interest in philosophy. Our sources state that Marcus was interested in philosophy as early as the age of twelve and that this interest intensified through contact with a succession of philosophers and tutors, including Diognetus, Q. Iunius Rusticus, and

Apollonius of Chalcedon (*Hist. Aug. Marc.* 2–3). However, it was not until the last years of his life, most probably during the Danubian campaigns of the 170s, that Marcus wrote the private document modern scholars refer to as the *Meditations*, but which surviving manuscripts simply refer to as τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν (to himself) (Brunt 1974: 1). It is unclear how the document survived, but it seems to have been widely available as early as the fourth century (Birley 1987: 212). The *Meditations* is divided into twelve books. The first sets out the many teachers and philosophers who influenced his philosophical views. The other eleven books are a collection of thoughts regarding issues such as moral choice, the transience of life, and the natural order of the universe. The work is strongly influenced by the emperor's interest in Stoic philosophy, although it should be noted that Marcus himself never explicitly calls himself a stoic. Indeed, the *Meditations* itself is intellectually eclectic, with Marcus using both his own experiences and the ideas of philosophers as diverse as Plato and Heraclitus (Rutherford 1989; Birley 1987: 221 ff).

SEE ALSO: Commodus; Frontiers, Roman; Philosophy, Roman; Stoicism.

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