

The Julio-Claudians: Rome's First Imperial Dynasty

The Julio-Claudians dominated the Roman Empire in its formative years. After Julius Caesar was assassinated, his nephew and adoptive son, Gaius Octavius, took up his uncle's place. Julius Caesar and Octavius were members of the Julii family, an old clan that dated back to the earliest history of Rome. The Julii had been powerful in the early republic, but faded into relative obscurity until the family was reinvigorated by Julius Caesar. When Octavius took control of the Roman Empire, becoming the first emperor and taking the new name Augustus, the Julii became the ruling family of the empire. The Julii derived their name from Iulus, the son of the mythical hero Aeneas, who was the son of Venus. Thus the Julii claimed a bit of divine blood, a claim that Julius Caesar and Augustus would continue to emphasize.

The Succession of Augustus

Augustus married three times, and had a daughter named Julia by his second wife. His third wife, Livia, was a member of the even more distinguished Claudian family (*gens Claudia*), one of the oldest and most prestigious lines of Roman aristocrats. Augustus and Livia had no children, and without any male heirs, Augustus was forced to look for a successor in his extended family. Livia had two sons through a previous marriage named Drusus and Tiberius. Drusus was married to Augustus's sister Octavia, and they had a son who is called Germanicus (thanks to his military career, in which he achieved major victories against the Germanic tribes). Also, Augustus married his daughter Julia to his close friend and right-hand man, Marcus Agrippa, and they had five children together. Augustus adopted the two eldest, Gaius and Lucius, and made them his heirs.

After Agrippa passed away and Livia's son Drusus died in an accident, Augustus had her other son Tiberius marry his newly widowed daughter. This was an unhappy marriage, and Tiberius left Rome. Then, both Gaius and Lucius, Augustus's heirs, died suddenly and unexpectedly. While their deaths seem to have been the result of illness, some suspect that Livia was behind the demise of both brothers, as she was eager to secure a path for her son Tiberius to replace Augustus. Either way, Tiberius came to power as Augustus's successor.

The Creation of a Dynasty

While the Romans had hailed Augustus as the savior of the republic and accepted his massive power grab as necessary for the stability of the empire and to avoid civil war, not everyone thought he should be succeeded. When he died in 14 AD and Tiberius of the Claudian family took power, it became clear that an emperor would continue to rule the empire. When Tiberius eventually died he was succeeded by Gaius Caesar, known to posterity as Caligula, who was the first emperor to have blood from both the Julians and Claudians. There were several attempts to overthrow the Julio-Claudian Dynasty and to reestablish the republic, but they all failed. While the Julio-Claudians succeeded in maintaining their dynasty, none of the Julio-Claudian emperors

were succeeded by any of their own children. The court culture was marked by intrigue and assassination, as all members of the imperial family competed for power.

Rome under the Julio-Claudians

The period of the Julio-Claudian emperors is typically regarded as one of the high points of Roman culture and power. Augustus's reign saw the height of Latin poetry and with writers such as Vergil, Ovid, Horace, and many others, it saw the culmination of the Golden Latin literary period. Under Tiberius and his successors, Latin literature continued to flourish (though the literature of the period, deemed Silver Latin, was long considered more stilted and formulaic; more recently, however, scholars have come to have a greater appreciation for this later literary period). With an end to the civil wars that had afflicted the republic for over fifty years, the Roman people flourished. There were some military setbacks, such as the defeat of the Roman legions at the Battle of the Teutoberg Forest, but there were also great successes. The conquest of Spain was finally completed, and under Emperor Claudius, Britain was incorporated into the empire.

Still, the Julio-Claudian emperors were not always well loved, and three of the five Julio-Claudian emperors—Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero—were regarded as tyrants. As the first men since the founding of the republic to wield absolute and unchecked power over Rome, the Julio-Claudian emperors often found the temptation to abuse this power irresistible. The senate, and the historians whose work survives to tell us about this period, yearned for a return to the republic, though it was far too late for that. Ultimately, the tyranny of the dynasty became its undoing. Nero tested the limits of his authority to the breaking point, and in 68 AD revolts against him spread and the Praetorian Guard abandoned him. After Nero committed suicide, there was nobody left to replace him. The Julio-Claudian Dynasty burnt itself out, and two of the oldest and most prominent Roman lines were extinct.