

Trajan (98-117 AD): The Height of Empire

When Edward Gibbon wrote his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he started the book with the reigns of the so-called Five Good Emperors. He believed this was the very height of the Roman Empire, and that it could have only declined from this highpoint. The concept of the Five Good Emperors is a later invention, and being “good” was from the senatorial perspective: an emperor was good if he respected and yielded power to the senate. Still, these “good emperors” presided over the Roman Empire at its high point, when the empire was most stable and powerful.

The first “Good Emperor” was Nerva. He was elected by the senate after the assassination of Emperor Domitian, whom the senate hated, in 96 AD. Nerva was an older man, and he had no children. Thus the question of succession immediately arose. Nerva designated a successor from outside his family, choosing Trajan. When Nerva died after a short and uneventful rule, Trajan succeeded him. Nerva had set an important precedent in picking Trajan: he chose an able and intelligent successor. The Roman Empire had often been harmed by poor emperors whose claim to power was not based on ability but from their family. Nerva avoided this, and his precedent would be followed by the next few emperors: they chose the most able man from outside their family as their successor.

Few men were as able as Trajan. Born in Spain, outside of both Rome and Italy, he was the first non-Italian emperor. Though Trajan’s family was not aristocratic, it was still powerful, and he gained a good reputation as a military leader. He was a smart choice as a successor for Nerva, since Nerva’s senatorial background made him unpopular with the army, whereas the troops loved Trajan. When Nerva died and Trajan became the new emperor in 98 AD, he became the greatest of the warrior-emperors. He initiated the final phase of Roman military conquests. Trajan’s first target was Dacia, the land known as modern-day Romania (it is called Romania because of its conquest by the Romans). The Dacians had inflicted an embarrassing defeat on the Roman army during the reign of Domitian that still needed to be avenged. Perhaps more importantly though, their land was filled with rich silver and gold mines. The economy of the Roman Empire had long been sustained by conquest, and this was one of the last wealthy regions in Europe left for the Romans to conquer.

Trajan’s successful invasion of Dacia is illustrated on Trajan’s column, built in Rome to celebrate his victory. It depicts the Roman army under Trajan crossing the Danube and inflicting several great victories over the Dacians, and finally capturing their capital. Their king, faced with defeat, killed himself. With the Dacians subdued, their enormous wealth flowed into Roman hands. Trajan used this to fund spectacular building programs, such the Baths of Trajan, the largest Roman bathing complex of the time, and Trajan’s Forum, a massive complex that included a shopping center, law court, and two libraries. Trajan did not only use the money to build monuments to his own greatness, but he also used it to create a welfare fund for orphans and poor children. Trajan increased the grain dole in Rome, and funded magnificent games for the Romans. All of this led the satirist Juvenal to make his famous quip about “bread



and circuses.” In addition, Trajan respected and supported the senate, and made an oath never to execute a senator. This gained him the reputation of a “Good Emperor.”

In 111 AD, a dispute over the control of Armenia provoked a war between Rome and the Parthian Dynasty of Persia. The Parthians had long been a thorn in the side of the Roman Empire, since they defeated and killed Julius Caesar’s colleague Marcus Crassus a century and a half earlier. Trajan decisively defeated the Parthians in another successful war. He captured and sacked their capital Ctesiphon (near modern-day Baghdad) and annexed both Armenia and Mesopotamia for the Roman Empire. At this point, Trajan’s victory enlarged the Roman Empire to its maximum extent. It is said that Trajan wanted to keep going east, to emulate Alexander the Great and push on into India. But he was getting older and his health was failing him, and started on a return journey back to Rome. He died on the way.

Trajan did not have children, and so he continued the policy of choosing a wise and able successor from outside his family. He chose Hadrian, a talented administrator. When Trajan died in 117 AD, Hadrian stepped seamlessly into the role of emperor.

While Vespasian and Titus were perhaps the most beloved Roman emperors, Trajan was generally considered its best. He was kind and caring to his people, but also a great conqueror who brought the borders of the Roman Empire to their farthest reaches. Centuries after, new emperors were installed in power with the formal wish from the senate: “may you be luckier than Augustus and better than Trajan.” Few if any future emperors lived up to this lofty standard.

Lesson Summary:

- Nerva and Trajan were “Good Emperors;” they respected the senate and designated wise and capable men from outside their family as their successors.
- Trajan was the greatest of the warrior-emperors, conquering Dacia, Armenia, and Mesopotamia. The Roman Empire reached its greatest extent under Trajan.
- Trajan was also known for a munificent domestic policy, sponsoring great building projects for the benefit of the people and helping the poor.

