Caracalla (211–217 AD): A Reign of Violence

The emperor known as Caracalla was born as Lucius Septimius Bassianus in Gaul in 188 AD to the future emperor Septimius Severus and his second wife Julia Domna. When his father became emperor, he had his name changed to Marcus Aurelius Septimius Bassianus Antoninus to connect him and his family to the beloved emperor Marcus Aurelius. He later became known as Caracalla for the type of Gallic cloak he frequently wore, and this name has stuck.

Caracalla came to the throne of the Roman Empire when his father, Septimius Severus, died in 211. He was supposed to share power equally with his brother Geta, but this was an immediate problem. Geta and Caracalla had different personalities and frequently fought, their disagreements fueled by mutual jealousy and suspicion. The government could hardly function with the two joint emperors constantly at each other’s throats. Therefore, their mother Julia Domna called a conference between the two in her quarters to resolve their differences. Caracalla showed up with a group of Praetorians and murdered Geta as he clung to his mother for safety. Caracalla then embarked on a campaign to rid society of any memory of his brother. He had the senate issue a damnatio memoriae, according to which all images and inscriptions of Geta were to be struck out. Caracalla executed anyone he suspected of having supported his brother. Thousands were executed, including many prominent citizens such as the Praetorian prefect and respected juror Papian. Caracalla replaced him with Macrinus, a trusted supporter.

With his brother out of the way, Caracalla left Rome and spent the rest of his reign away in the provinces. First he went to the Rhine, where he fought some Germanic tribes to a stalemate, but claimed a glorious victory. Next he travelled east. Caracalla was obsessed with Alexander the Great, and convinced that he was the new Alexander. Thus, he planned a massive campaign to conquer the Parthian Empire. Following his father’s deathbed advice, he also raised the pay of the soldiers even more, to 675 denarii. In order to fund his army, he continued to decrease the silver content in the coins. This allowed him to mint more coins, but resulted in inflation. Caracalla also sought to increase the tax base. Thus, in 212 he issued the Constitutio Antoniniana (also called the Edict of Caracalla), which made all free men in the empire Roman citizens. Roman citizenship had previously been a closely guarded privilege that only Italians and a few others held. By granting it so widely, he allowed for most of the people living in the empire to be taxed as Roman citizens, and also allowed these men to serve in the Roman legions, which one had to be a citizen to serve in.

Caracalla had few priorities beyond the military. However, he did sponsor the construction of the Baths of Caracalla, the largest bath complex in Rome and a monument to Roman architecture. With massive bathing areas, libraries, private rooms, temples, and outdoor tracks, and decorated with marble, gold, mosaics, and colossal statues, it was an amazing structure, and its ruins continue to attract tourists to this day.

In the east, Caracalla continued to play at being Alexander, while reveling in cruelty. He travelled to Alexandria the visit the tomb of Alexander, but learned that the people there had recently mocked him. As the leading citizens of the city greeted his arrival, he had them slaughtered, then vengeancefully ordered a massacre of the city's
population and allowed his soldiers to plunder at will. Caracalla returned to the border with Parthia and instigated a war. However, relations with his previously trusted Praetorian prefect Macrinus became strained. In 217, while travelling with a small group to visit a temple, Caracalla was killed while relieving himself on the roadside. It is uncertain why Caracalla was killed, but Macrinus, who was soon after declared emperor, was probably behind the assassination.

The Roman people were relieved to be rid of a cruel and belligerent tyrant, but Caracalla’s reign had seen two important events. First, the construction of the Baths of Caracalla was a marvelous achievement of Roman architecture. Second, and most important, was the Consitutio Antoniniana, which forever changed the Roman Empire and opened up new opportunities to people who had never had any stake in the empire.

Summary:

- Caracalla succeeded his father Septimius Severus. Caracalla was supposed to share power with his brother Geta, but instead he had Geta murdered and massacred his supporters, then had a damnatio memoriae passed on Geta. Caracalla became known for malice and cruelty.
- Caracalla was obsessed with Alexander the Great, and launched a series of mostly ineffectual campaigns in an attempt to emulate him.
- Caracalla oversaw the construction of the Baths of Caracalla—the largest Roman bath complex ever built, and a Roman architectural marvel.
- The most historically important event of Caracalla’s reign was his Constitutio Antoniniana (also called the Edict of Caracalla), which made all free men in the empire Roman citizens. Although this was probably issued so that they could be taxed, the expansion of citizenship greatly affected Roman society.
- Caracalla was assassinated in 217 while traveling in the east. He was succeeded by his Praetorian prefect, Macrinus.