Septimius Severus (193–211 AD): Founder of the Severan Dynasty

Septimius Severus founded the Severan Dynasty, the last dynasty to rule Rome before the anarchic Crisis of the Third Century. He guided the Roman Empire to great military victories, but his reign saw an expansion in the role of the army in politics—a dangerous trend.

Rise to Power

Severus was born in the city of Leptis Magna in modern-day Libya, making him the first Roman emperor born in Africa. His rule and his family, however, would be heavily influenced by the Syrian culture of his second wife, Julian Domna, who was from Emesa. Julia bore Severus his two sons: Bessianus (Caracalla) and Geta.

Severus followed the traditional military and political career of a Roman aristocrat, and he was serving as a general in Pannonia when Emperor Commodus was overthrown. When Commodus’s senatorial successor, Pertinax, was assassinated by the Praetorian Guard, Septimius Severus was proclaimed emperor by his troops (April, 193 AD). Severus was not the only one. In Britain, the general Clodius Albinus was proclaimed emperor by his men, as was Pescennius Niger, the commander of the legions in Syria. Severus’s position in Pannonia put him close to Italy, and he quickly marched to Rome with his troops. There, he held a funeral for Pertinax. He had the Praetorian Guards who had participated in the murder of Pertinax executed and disbanded the rest of the unit, replacing them with loyal soldiers picked from his army. By tying himself to Pertinax, Serverus, who had no claim to rule except his military might, gained legitimacy as successor to Pertinax. Severus also tried to connect himself with Marcus Aurelius, renaming his son Bessianus as Marcus Aurelius Septimius Bassianus Antoninus.

Next, Severus sought to defeat his rivals. He allied with Clodius Albinus, making the commander in Britain his Caesar (junior co-emperor and heir apparent). With the western provinces secure, Severus marched his troops east and defeated the forces of Pescennius Niger. He had Niger killed, and sacked the city of Byzantium for supporting Niger (he later rebuilt Byzantium on a larger scale). With Niger out of the way, Severus then turned against his ally Albinus. He declared his sons Caracalla and Geta his true heirs, betraying the agreement he had with Albinus. In response, Albinus crossed with his troops from Britain to Gaul to fight Severus. At Lugdunum, in 197, the armies of Severus and Albinus met in battle. After a bitter two-day fight, Albinus was defeated and committed suicide. Septimius Severus now controlled the entire Roman Empire.

Reign

Severus’s first objective as emperor was to punish the Parthian Empire, which had supported Pescennius Niger. He invaded Mesopotamia and captured the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon. The Parthian capital had been captured by the armies of Rome twice before in the century, but this sack was particularly devastating. The Parthian Empire would soon collapse. In celebration of his victory, he named his eldest son Caracalla as co-Augustus, and named his younger son Geta as Caesar.
Severus made a fellow native of Leptis Magna, Plautianus, his Praetorian prefect. Plautianus accompanied the emperor on a tour of the eastern provinces and soon became his closest adviser. Severus had Plautianus’s daughter married to his son Caracalla. However, Plautianus’s abuse of power became infamous, and his ostentation outdid that of the emperor. Plautianus was considered a threat, and soon Severus had him executed and had his family exiled. Plautianus was replaced by Papinius, and Severus also incorporated Ulpian and Julius Paulus into his court. These three men, the most important Roman lawyers, represent the golden age of Roman jurisprudence. Their rulings would have a major impact on the development of Roman law, and their participation in the government shows the wisdom of Severus and his ability to find capable administrators.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Septimius Severus’s rule, however, was the army. He increased the size of the army by raising several new legions, and he increased the pay of the soldiers from 300 to 500 denarii a year. The higher cost of this expanded military fell on the Roman taxpayers, and Severus also devalued the Roman currency to offset the cost. He decreased the silver content in coins and added less valuable metals like bronze or copper. This meant that he could mint more coins with the same amount of silver, but each of those coins quickly became less valuable, causing inflation. No Roman emperor since Nero had so debased the currency, and this would eventually have serious repercussions, especially as the policy was continued by his successors.

Septimius Severus also granted new rights to the soldiers. He lifted the rule that banned legionnaires from marrying, and treated the army as if it were an extended part of his family. He was unpopular with the Roman Senate, especially for having many prominent members put to death (reneging on an oath he made upon his accession not to put any senator to death). Thanks to his popularity with the troops, however, Severus’s power was secure.

The Sons of Severus

Septimius Severus hoped that his two sons, Bessianus (Caracalla) and Geta, would succeed him and share power, but this soon proved to be an unlikely scenario. The two brothers had very different personalities, sharing only a mutual distrust and jealousy of one another. In hopes of bringing the two together and teaching them the art of ruling and conquering, Severus embarked with his sons to Britain. There they conducted an invasion of Caledonia (modern-day Scotland). The tribes of Caledonia had attacked Roman Britain, and Severus was eager to subjugate them.

The campaign was not a major success. Growing old, Severus was afflicted with disease and immobilized by severe gout. Soon it became apparent that he was dying. Gathering his sons to his side, he gave them some deathbed advice: “Be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn everyone else.” Geta and Caracalla would not rule in harmony, but Severus’s advice about the soldiers would be taken to heart.

Indeed, Septimius Severus’s reign was little different than a military dictatorship—the basis of his reign was the army. Under Severus’s careful guidance, this was positive: he used the army to enforce his will, but his goal was to keep the
empire well organized, united, and efficient. His successors, however, would be less competent, and their military power became dangerous and soon spelled disaster for the Roman Empire.

Summary:

- Septimius Severus was born in Leptis Magna in modern-day Libya and was married to Julia Domna, a woman from a powerful Syrian family.
- Severus came to power after the assassination of Emperor Pertinax, and defeated two rivals, Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus, to claim control over the whole Roman Empire.
- Unpopular with the senate, Severus maintained his power through his close relationship with the military: he increased the salaries of the soldiers, granted them the right to marry, and treated them as part of his extended family.
- In order to fund his salary increases for the troops and foreign wars, Severus severely debased the Roman currency.
- Severus died in 211 in Britain, leaving power to his two quarrelling sons, Geta and Caracalla.