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I

THE EARLY YEARS
OF HADRIAN

Hadrian’s reign did not begin well. People believed, or could affect to believe, that it was Trajan’s widow Plotina to whom Hadrian owed the throne, rather than the wish of the dead emperor. It was true that he had been Plotina’s favourite, and that many senators could imagine themselves a better successor to Trajan than this protégé of a dowager empress. Alternative names were bandied about, and Hadrian looked still worse when he immediately gave up Trajan’s remarkable conquests. With hindsight, we can see that they were already a lost cause, and that even Trajan would have had to surrender them. But Trajan was dead and his memory revered. Hadrian was alive and not much liked, so he took the blame. Worst of all, though, were the murders. Either someone attempted a coup, or rumours of a coup were taken seriously. Regardless, four senior consulars, men who had held the consulship and now occupied the greatest commands in the empire, were put to death before Hadrian had returned to Rome from the east. He would always disclaim responsibility for the executions, but no one believed him. He seemed a poor contrast with a predecessor who, even when faced with genuine plots, had sent only two senators into exile during his reign and executed none of them.

Hadrian took his time getting back to Rome and his entry into the city was not greeted with enthusiasm. The plebs was restive – the murder of the four consulars was a scandal. Hadrian had to distribute large sums of
money to calm them. He also forgave debts to private lenders and to cities that owed money to the emperor’s own treasury, the *fiscus* (kept separate from the official treasury of the state, which was called the *aerarium publicum*, or sometimes the *aerarium Saturni* because it was housed near the temple of Saturn). He staged a very public burning of the tax registers in Trajan’s Forum, hoping to win some popular goodwill. In the senate, too, he had to curry favour, but this was not easy. He swore on oath that he had not ordered the killing of the four consulars, and also took the now traditional vow not to punish any senator without a vote of the senate itself. But senatorial suspicions were irreversible and Hadrian was never well liked.

He had his adoptive father deified and Trajan’s remains were entombed in the base of the column he had built to commemorate his victories on the Danube. This column, 100 feet high and decorated with a spiral frieze 600 feet long, depicting images from the emperor’s Dacian wars, still stands in the forum that bears his name, and remains one of the iconic monuments of Roman imperialism. Hadrian’s act of piety was in fact quite unusual and at one level sacrilegious. Trajan’s Forum fell inside the traditional sacred boundary of the city of Rome, the so-called *pomerium*, within which burials were prohibited. Even emperors were buried outside the *pomerium*, in the mausoleum of Augustus on the Campus Martius. As with so many things he did, Hadrian’s gesture would offend those who wanted to take offence, however well meaning he might have been.

Hadrian took other measures to secure his throne. He dismissed one of Trajan’s two praetorian prefects, the chief administrators of imperial government and commanders of the praetorian guard, and accepted the resignation of the second prefect, a loyal old ex-centurion who seems not to have wanted to serve under Hadrian. (As the senior non-commissioned officers in the Roman legions, centurions generally gained equestrian rank upon discharge, which allowed them to hold the various offices of the imperial administration that were, like the praetorian prefecture, reserved for equestrians.) In place of Trajan’s prefects, Hadrian appointed another ex-centurion, Marcius Turbo, who had long known Hadrian from the army, and who was at this time busy tidying up the Danube frontier in the provinces of Dacia and Moesia. The second new prefect was Septicius Clarus, an equestrian by birth, whom we know mainly as the dedicatee of Pliny the Younger’s letter collection. Finally, Hadrian appointed a new *ab epistulis*, the equestrian official responsible for drafting imperial letters.
and replies: this was Suetonius Tranquillus, famous for his *Lives of the Caesars*, a series of gossipy biographies of the emperors from Julius Caesar (considered, incorrectly, to be the first emperor) to Domitian that has long been one of the most popular works of Latin literature.

Other appointments reveal the ways in which colonial elites who had prospered under the Flavians now became the dominant forces in government. Hadrian’s urban prefect (a different post from that of praetorian prefect, in charge of the day-to-day running of the city of Rome itself) was the Spanish senator Marcus Annius Verus. His career went back to Vespasian’s day and he would go on to become one of the very last private citizens in Roman history to hold three consulships, a privilege increasingly reserved for emperors and their heirs. The daughter of this Annius Verus, Annia Galeria Faustina, was married to a senator from Nemausus (Nîmes) in the province of Gallia Narbonensis: this senator, whose mouthful of a name was T. Aurelius Fulvius Boionius Arrius Antoninus, would later become the emperor we know as Antoninus Pius (r. 138–61). In the year 121, when old Annius Verus was consul for the second time, another M. Annius Verus, the consul’s grandson, was born; this M. Annius Verus would in time become emperor as Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–80). These interlocking families would dominate the dynastic politics of the second century.

Annius Verus and Arrius Antoninus, like Hadrian, were different from the older generation to which a man like Trajan had belonged. Although they were of colonial stock, and continued to have relatives and clients in their familial homelands, they were themselves children of Italy, brought up in Rome and rare visitors to the ancestral provinces. For that reason, they were also closely interconnected with the Italian elites: another of Hadrian’s appointees was Haterius Nepos, an equestrian of municipal stock from Umbria who had governed Armenia in the short period between 114 and 117 when it was a Roman province; he was now rapidly promoted through a series of posts to become prefect of Egypt, a hand-picked post reserved for equestrians and always given to the emperor’s most reliable men. Hadrian’s legionary commanders were a mixture of hold-overs from the Trajanic period and new faces: the new emperor’s shaky hold on power made it essential to balance respect for continuity with the need for trustworthy supporters of his own.

Sometimes this quest for security led to innovations. A recently discovered inscription demonstrates that in the wake of the Jewish wars,
Hadrian created an extraordinary command, placing the Roman legions of Judaea and Arabia under the command of a single legionary commander. The gesture was meant to overawe the Jewish homeland and prevent its following the diaspora into rebellion, though it failed, as we shall soon see. The emperor himself spent the first three years of his reign in the city of Rome, despite his preference for the east and indeed for travel in general: a second-century emperor was expected to comport himself as a senator among senators, even if he was unpopular and wanted nothing so much as to be elsewhere. Hadrian endured the necessity of this ‘face time’ with the senate for as long as he could bear it, but thereafter, he moved out into the wider empire and stayed away from Rome whenever possible.

In 121, he went to Gaul and Germany, leaving Turbo and Annius Verus to look after the people and the senate. Trajan’s widow, Plotina, stayed on, too, living in retirement. Matidia, Trajan’s niece and Hadrian’s mother-in-law, had died in 119 and was, like her mother Marciana before her, made a diva. Sabina, her daughter the empress, now became Augusta and travelled with the emperor: she and Hadrian disliked each other intensely but he feared that a woman of her authority would become the focus of plots if she were left to her own devices in Rome. Even travelling and under strict supervision, Sabina raised suspicions in her husband: late in 122, the praetorian prefect Septicius Clarus, the ab epistulis Suetonius and many others were dismissed abruptly from their offices after mysteriously unspecified interaction with the empress. Perhaps there had been a plot, or some indiscretion on Sabina’s part (Hadrian reserved his affections for young men), but we actually have no idea what really happened. Sabina remained in the imperial party but Clarus was not replaced. That meant that Marcius Turbo, in office since Hadrian had first gone to Rome, would serve as sole praetorian prefect until the very last years of the reign.

Hadrian spent a decade and more in travel, touring the provinces of a vast empire. In 121 or 122 he visited the provinces of the Upper Danube, Raetia and Noricum, now parts of Switzerland, southern Germany and Austria, and in Noricum he inspected the imperial mines, as coins struck to commemorate his visit make clear. He honoured both provinces, raising several Norican communities to the status of municipia – a technical status with special rights under Roman law – bestowing a new theatre on the governor’s residence at Virunum (near modern Klagenfurt), and in Raetia raising Augusta Vindelicum (Augsburg) to municipal status as well. From there he aimed for Britain, probably sailing down the Rhine.
as far as Colonia Agrippensis, modern Cologne, the capital of Germania Inferior (‘Lower Germany’, so called because it was further downriver than Germania Superior). It seems likely that the underdeveloped areas of Germania Inferior, which included parts of modern Flanders, were deliberately improved by Hadrian and that the civitas Tungrorum, modern Tongres, was raised to the rank of municipium at this time. The governor of Germania Inferior, Platorius Nepos, went with Hadrian to Britain in 122, eventually becoming his legate there, in a province that would long remain one of the empire’s great military commands.

Britain had been struck by either rebellion or frontier trouble the year after Trajan’s death, and had required the presence of a senior general. In 122, Platorius Nepos brought with him an entire legion, the VI Victrix, from Castra Vetera in Germania Inferior (now Xanten, at the confluence of the Rhine and the Lippe), and thousands of additional legionaries from Spain came to Britain along with the imperial party. Britain would long remain one of the most difficult and least remunerative provinces in the empire, while the main result of the imperial visit of 122 was the plan for Hadrian’s Wall, perhaps the most famous Roman monument outside Rome itself. The emperor spent much of the year in the island province, returning to the continent by the winter of 122–3.

Once in Gaul, Hadrian made for Spain, his familial homeland, which now enjoyed the glories of a full imperial visit. Hadrian journeyed there via the south coast of Gallia Narbonensis, erecting a memorial to Trajan’s widow and his own adoptive mother Plotina in her home city of Nemausus. In Apta (Apt) he put up a monument to Borysthenes, his beloved hunting horse, who had died there and whose tomb was adorned with some not very good verse composed by the emperor himself. From Narbonensis, Hadrian took the coast road to Tarraco (Tarragona), the capital of the huge province of Hispania Citerior, where he overwintered well into 123. In spring of that year, he held a major conventus, or assembly of provincial Roman citizens, in the forum and temple complex constructed in Tarraco by the Flavians. After that, he visited the northern part of the province, including the legionary fort of the Legio VII Gemina (León) and the north-western administrative centres like Asturica Augusta (Astorga). We do not know whether he visited the other two Spanish provinces, Baetica and Lusitania, but he deliberately refused to visit his patria, his ancestral home, at Italica. He did, however, lavish funds on the town: Italica constructed virtually a whole new public centre during the course
of his reign. Also while in Spain, Hadrian introduced a levy on provincial citizens to provide recruits for the legions. He wanted to supplement the army of the Parthian frontier, for in 124 he intended to move eastwards.

We have no real notion of the route by which Hadrian travelled to the east, but we know for certain that he personally negotiated peace with Parthia, conceding token support to one side in a dynastic dispute there and forestalling any actual fighting between the two empires. Instead, he spent the rest of 124 touring the eastern provinces. We know that he travelled through mountainous Cappadocia up to the great Black Sea port of Trapezus (Trabzon) and that a major renovation of its harbour was undertaken on his orders. He also toured the more easterly, Pontic sections of the dual province of Bithynia et Pontus before moving into Bithynia proper and staying at Nicomedia (modern Izmit). It is possible, though impossible to verify, that Hadrian here met the country boy Antinous, a Greek from outside the Bithynian town of Claudiopolis, who would become his great love and the subject of romantic fancy down to modern times.

From Bithynia, the imperial party crossed over to the European side of the Propontis, probably visiting Perinthus, the capital of the province of Thrace, before returning to the province of Asia. Cyzicus was Hadrian’s first and perhaps most important stop, for he honoured it extravagantly, restarting work on a great temple begun by king Attalus of Pergamum hundreds of years earlier, and granting the city the status of neokoros, which is to say one of the provincial centres of imperial cult. To be neokoros, and have a temple to the deified emperors and the ruling imperial house, was a coveted status in the province of Asia and peninsular Asia Minor more generally. The old cities of Pergamum, Ephesus, Smyrna and Sardis already enjoyed it, as Roman imperial rule fuelled a renaissance of local Greek urbanism, sentiment and pride. Only the provincial capital, Pergamum, and Smyrna, home of the sophist and philosopher Polemon who was Hadrian’s travelling companion, were more greatly honoured than Cyzicus, for Hadrian designated both cities as twice neokoros, a towering privilege. No wonder that he began to gain a reputation as a Hellenophile, something regarded as not altogether seemly by the more censorious Latin senators at Rome. That said, Hadrian’s visit to Asia encouraged many high-born Greeks who were already Roman citizens and possessed an equestrian fortune to pursue senatorial careers.

Hadrian lingered at Ephesus for some time in August 124, before
making for mainland Greece by way of the island of Rhodes. He had been in Athens before as a young man, but that had been a decade earlier, when he first showed signs of his unabashed love for all things Greek. Now he came as ruler of the Roman world and his primary aim was to be initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, the great religious rites of ancient Attica which were celebrated in late summer or early autumn and had long fascinated Roman admirers of Greek culture. Hadrian also renewed old acquaintances, like the young Herodes Atticus. Herodes was the son of one of Athens’ wealthiest men, Claudius Atticus, who had looked after Hadrian during his time there a decade before, and Herodes himself would go on to be the great patron of mid-second-century Attica. Now, Hadrian adlected him into the Roman senate as quaestor inter amicos. Adlection (adlectio, ‘reading into the rolls’) was a way emperors could honour their favourites by making them senators of a particular official rank without their having to serve in the minor qualifying offices. Herodes now enjoyed the same rank that he would have had if he had actually served as quaestor, and he was also made one of the emperor’s amici, ‘friends’, a rare and coveted, if only quasi-official, status.

While the court was based in Attica, Hadrian toured the Peloponnese and much of central Greece, restoring buildings and dedicating new ones. He imagined himself to be restoring the ancient glories of Greece, but was more often putting a new and imperial stamp on its landscape. Hadrian’s Hellenophile enthusiasm was just one symptom of a much larger revival of interest in the cultural glories of Classical Greece that characterised the second century: it was in just this period that the learned antiquarian Pausanias, who came from Lydia in Asia Minor, was embarking on his massive Description of Greece, which is to this day a vital source for the geography and history of the region. Hadrian, for his part, returned to Athens in time for the Dionysiac Games of 125, where he played the role of agonothetes, or master of the games. He then visited both Delphi and Corinth, known respectively for its oracular shrine of Apollo and as the great Roman colony founded by Julius Caesar for veterans of his victorious civil wars. Hadrian then sailed up the Gulf of Corinth to Nicopolis, the settlement that commemorated the final triumph of Augustus over his rival Mark Antony, and then to Dyrrachium in Epirus (now Dürres in Albania), whence he set sail back to Italy for Brundisium (modern Brindisi). He had been away from Rome for four years.

Hadrian’s sojourn in Greece and Asia Minor tells us a great deal about
The Early Years of Hadrian

the public role that Roman emperors had to play. For instance, while there he accepted election as archon, chief magistrate of Athens, a very specific type of philhellenism that gave symbolic endorsement to ancient Greek traditions that had been hollow memories for many centuries. The Greek elites loved it when Hadrian meandered through their cities as if on historical tour. In the provinces of Achaea and Asia, in Syria and Egypt, Hadrian re-enacted and re-commissioned versions of Greek history. Among countless other examples, he rebuilt the supposed tomb of Ajax at Ilium, site of the Trojan war in Asia Minor, just as in Arcadian Scillus he visited the tomb of the great Athenian general Xenophon. On another eastern visit, he restored the tomb of Alcibiades in Melissa, deep in northern Phrygia. At Mantinea in Arcadia, he put up a memorial to the Theban Epaminondas, remembered as a liberator of the Greeks 400 years after his death. At Athens, he initiated a building programme that would continue through the century under both local and imperial patronage. Hadrian’s major personal contribution to the city was to order the final completion of the great temple of Olympian Zeus: the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus had begun it in the sixth century BC but the work was unfinished till Hadrian’s day. At Delphi, he was more aggressively philhellenic: he undid the oligarchic dominance of the Amphictyonic Council that managed Delphi’s prophetic shrine, which had been imposed on it by the emperors Augustus and Nero, widening the membership to what he imagined was its pristine, original state when the Greek world was still a mosaic of tiny, independent poleis. It was a fantasy version of Greek antiquity, but one that appealed to his audience. When he arrived in Egypt for the first time, in the year 130, there followed another orgy of historically symbolic acts, beginning with the restoration of the tomb of Pompey at Pelusium and continuing from there with a procession down the Nile.

Hadrian’s type of philhellenism marks an interesting stage in Roman imperial history. During his reign, it was still possible for disappointed rivals and others who disliked him to deride Hadrian as effete and un-Roman, a Graeculus, ‘little Greek’. In doing so, they recalled a very old strain of fear and jealousy that went back to the republic. Greek culture was self-evidently so much older and more sophisticated than Rome’s home-grown traditions, that affected disdain for all things Greek served a defensive function. A fondness for the hunt, for instance, was a stereotypically Greek pastime that Roman aristocrats had once thought of as beneath their dignity. Likewise romantic or affective homosexuality: no
one minded if Roman men preferred sex with other men, but romance was not meant to come into it and was an embarrassment if it did. The two cultures had long since come together in a great many ways, and Hellenistic tastes in art and literature tended to dominate in both Greek and Latin contexts, but at the start of the second century, to ride to hounds or to erotise the love of young men might still make one a Graeculus: old stereotypes still carried a sting. Hadrian's long reign drew much of that poison, not because Latin senators ever warmed to the man himself or his philhellenic enthusiasms, but because his embrace of the Greek aristocracies propelled many more of them into the upper reaches of the Roman senate and the increasingly transnational elite it symbolised.