

# EMPEROR OF ROME

ALSO BY MARY BEARD

*Civilisations*

*Twelve Caesars*

*Women & Power*

*SPQR*

*Pompeii*

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*Laughter in Ancient Rome*

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*It's a Don's Life*

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*The Parthenon*

*The Colosseum (with Keith Hopkins)*

# EMPEROR OF ROME

RULING THE ANCIENT ROMAN WORLD

MARY BEARD

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by

PROFILE BOOKS LTD

29 Cloth Fair

London

EC1A 7JQ

*www.profilebooks.com*

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed by James Alexander/Jade Design

Typeset in Arno by MacGuru Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 378 7

eISBN 978 1 84765 440 3

WATERSTONES EDN ISBN 978 1 80081 878 1



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# THE MAIN CHARACTERS

## JULIO-CLAUDIAN DYNASTY

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**JULIUS CAESAR**, after defeating Pompey the Great, became *dictator* of Rome 48 BCE; assassinated 44 BCE.



**AUGUSTUS** (Octavian), adopted son of Julius Caesar. After defeating Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BCE, became sole ruler until 14 CE. Second wife, **LIVIA**.



**TIBERIUS**, natural son of Livia and adopted son of Augustus, ruled 14–37 CE. Rumours that Caligula was involved in his death.



**CALIGULA** (Gaius), great-grandson of Augustus, ruled 37–41. Assassinated by members of his guard.



**CLAUDIUS**, nephew of Tiberius, ruled 41–54. Third wife, **MESSALINA**; fourth wife, **AGRIPPINA** (the Younger) – by whom he was rumoured to have been murdered.



**NERO**, natural son of Agrippina, adopted son of Claudius. Ruled 54–68. Forced to suicide after army insurrections.

## CIVIL WAR 68–69 CE

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Three emperors ruling for just a few months each:  
**GALBA**, **OTHO** and **VITELLIUS**

## FLAVIAN DYNASTY

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**VESPASIAN**, final victor in civil war. Ruled 69–79.



**TITUS**, natural son of Vespasian. Ruled 79–81. Rumours that Domitian was involved in his death.



**DOMITIAN**, natural son of Vespasian. Ruled 81–96. Assassinated in palace coup.

## THE 'ADOPTIVE' EMPERORS – ANTONINE DYNASTY

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**NERVA**, chosen by senate. Ruled 96–8.



**TRAJAN**, adopted son of Nerva, of Spanish origin. Ruled 98–117. Wife, **PLOTINA**.



**HADRIAN**, adopted son of Trajan, of Spanish origin. Ruled 117–38. Wife, **SABINA**.



**ANTONINUS PIUS**, adopted son of Hadrian. Ruled 138–61. Wife, **FAUSTINA** (the Elder).



**MARCUS AURELIUS**, adopted son of Antoninus Pius. Ruled 161–80. Wife, **FAUSTINA** (the Younger).



**LUCIUS VERUS**, adopted son of Antoninus Pius. Co-ruler with Marcus Aurelius 161–9. Death from plague (though rumours of poisoning by mother-in-law).



**COMMODUS**, natural son of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina. Ruled 180–92 (and from 177 jointly with Marcus Aurelius). Assassinated in palace coup.

## CIVIL WAR 193

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Four short-term emperors or usurpers: **PERTINAX**, **DIDIUS JULIANUS**, **CLODIUS ALBINUS**, **PESCENNIUS NIGER**

## SEVERAN DYNASTY

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**SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS**, final victor in civil war, of North African origin. Ruled 193–211. Second wife, **JULIA DOMNA**, of Syrian origin.



**CARACALLA**, natural son of Septimius Severus and Julia Domna. Ruled 211–17 (earlier jointly with Septimius and Geta). Assassinated while on military campaign.



**GETA**, natural son of Septimius Severus and Julia Domna. Joint ruler with his father and brother, 209–11. Assassinated on the orders of Caracalla.



**MACRINUS**, of equestrian rank, took power after assassination of Caracalla. Ruled 217–18. Overthrown by supporters of Elagabalus.



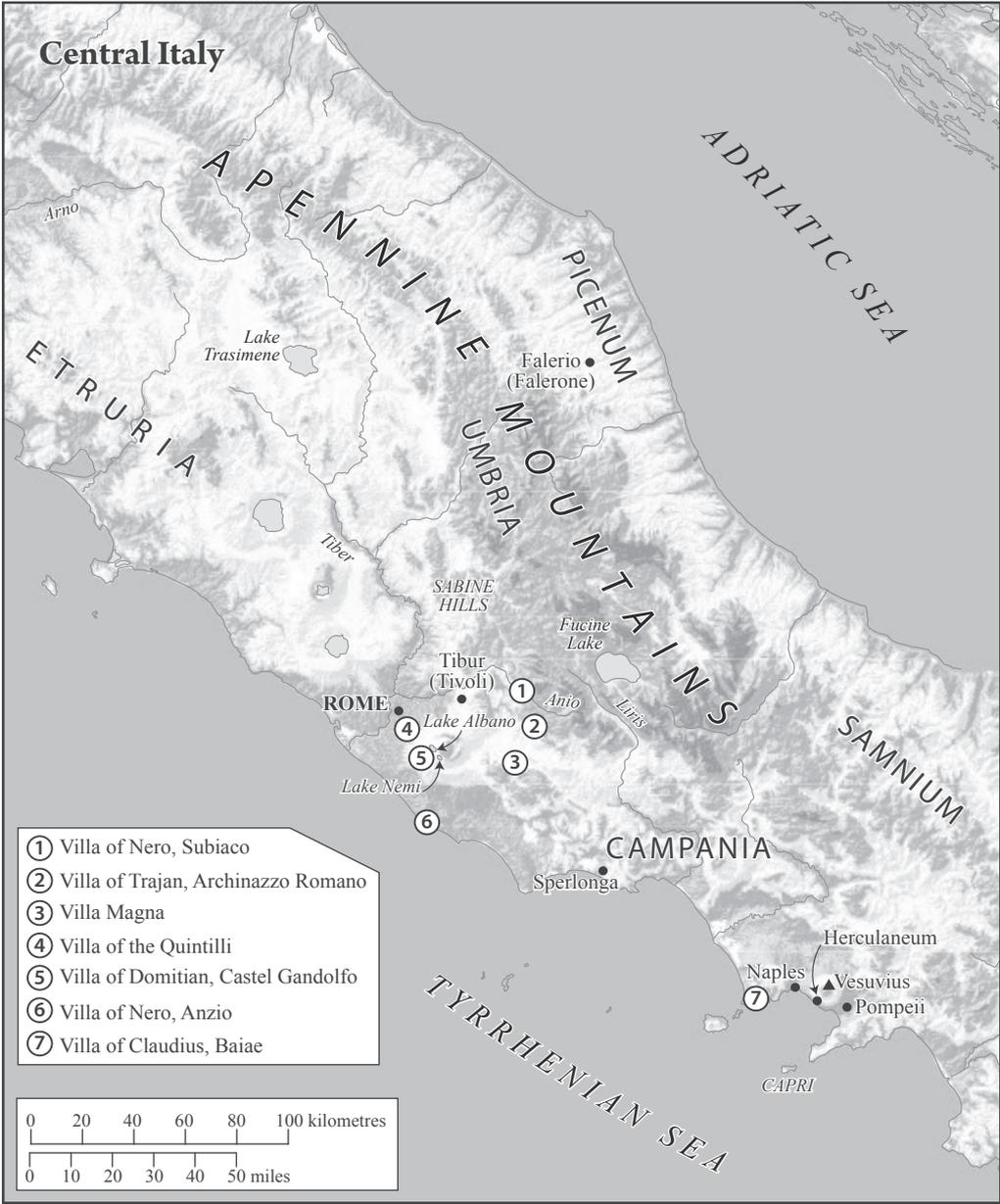
**ELAGABALUS**, great-nephew of Julia Domna, of Syrian origin. Ruled 218–22. Assassinated by his guard.



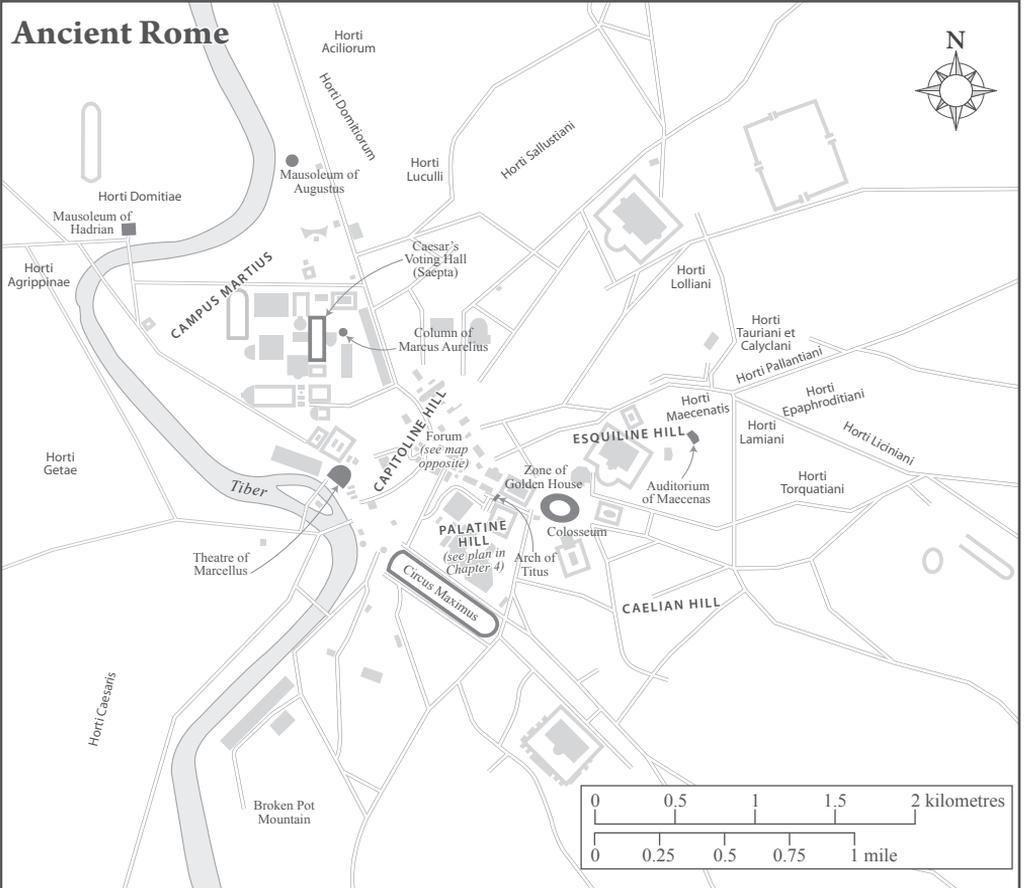
**ALEXANDER SEVERUS**, cousin and adopted son of Elagabalus, of Syrian origin. Ruled 222–35. Assassinated while on military campaign.







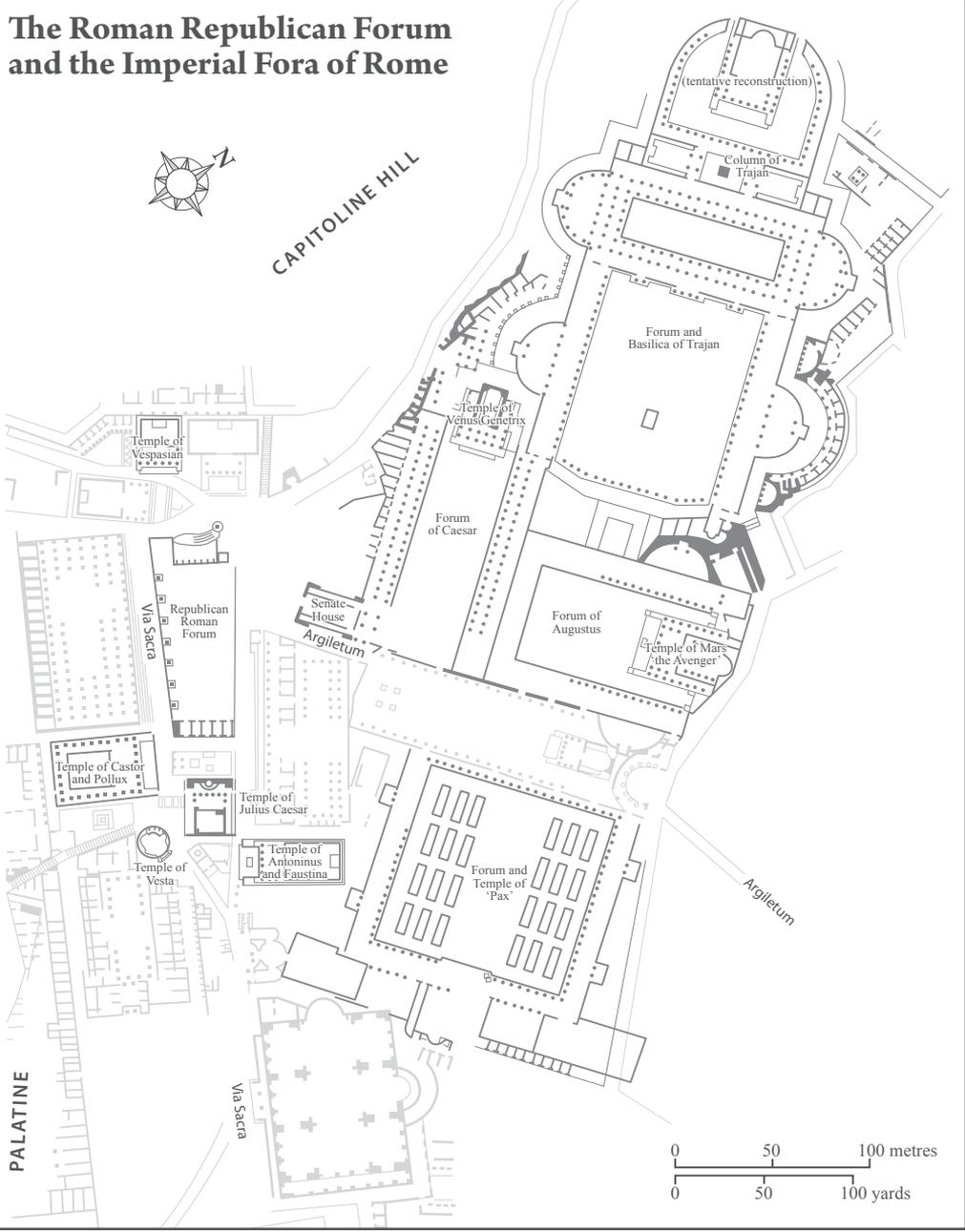
# Ancient Rome



# The Roman Republican Forum and the Imperial Fora of Rome



CAPITOLINE HILL



PALATINE

0 50 100 metres  
0 50 100 yards

# WELCOME ...

... to the world of the Roman emperors. Some, like Caligula and Nero, are even now bywords for excess, cruelty and casual sadism. Some like the ‘philosopher-emperor’ Marcus Aurelius, with his *Meditations* (or better, as I shall call them, *Jottings to Himself*) are still international bestsellers. Some are almost unknown, even to specialists. Who now recognises Didius Julianus, who in 193 CE was supposed to have bought his place on the throne for a few weeks, when the imperial guard auctioned the empire off to the highest bidder?

*Emperor of Rome* explores the fact and fiction of these rulers of the ancient Roman world, asking what they did, why they did it and why their stories have been told in the extravagant, sometimes lurid, ways that they have. It looks at big questions of power, corruption and conspiracy. But it also looks at the day-to-day practicalities of their lives. What, and where, did they eat? Who did they sleep with? How did they travel?

In the course of the book, we shall meet many people who were not, and did not aspire to be, emperors themselves, but who made the imperial system possible: wary aristocrats, enslaved cooks, diligent secretaries, court jesters – even a doctor who treated one young prince for his tonsillitis. And we will meet many women and men who brought their problems, large and small, to the man at the top, from lost inheritances to chamber pots falling from upstairs windows with fatal consequences.

My headline cast of characters, though, are the almost thirty emperors, plus their partners, who ruled the Roman empire from Julius Caesar (assassinated 44 BCE) to Alexander Severus (assassinated 235 CE). These had a relatively small part to play in my earlier book, *SPQR*, which told the story of the development of Rome, over the thousand years from the eighth century BCE to the third century CE. There was a very good reason for that. Once the system of one-man rule had been fully established under the first emperor Augustus in the first century BCE, not much changed on a grand scale for over 250 years: the Roman empire hardly grew in size; it was administered in more or less the same way; and political life in Rome itself followed the same broad pattern. But in this book, I want to put the emperors back in the spotlight. I shall not be going through their careers one by one, or be giving more than a nod to the likes of Didius Julianus. And I certainly do not expect readers to hold each individual ruler in their heads. No one does: so, for reference, there is a handy thumbnail guide to the complete line-up on pp. vii–ix. Instead, I shall be exploring what it *meant* to be a Roman emperor. I shall be asking some basic questions about how they actually ruled the vast territory notionally under their control, how their subjects interacted with them and whether we can ever recapture what it felt like to sit on the throne.

There are fewer psychopaths in *Emperor of Rome* than you might expect from the movie image of imperial Rome. This is not to deny that the Roman world was, in our terms, an almost unimaginably cruel place of premature death. Leaving aside the hundreds of thousands of innocent victims of plague, needless warfare or collapsing sports' stadia, murder was the ultimate way of resolving disputes, political and otherwise. 'The corridors of power', as well as many other humbler corridors in Rome, were always bloodstained. But the survival of the Roman empire as a system makes no sense if it was ruled by a series of deranged autocrats. I am more interested in how those stories of

WELCOME

madness arose, in how the business of empire was really conducted, and in Roman fears that the rule of the emperors was not so much bloodstained (they expected that), but was a strange and unsettling dystopia built on deception and fakery.

No reign captures those fears of dystopia better than that of the occasionally resuscitated, but usually half-forgotten, Elagabalus. It is with him that we start *Emperor of Rome*.

Mary Beard, Cambridge, December 2022

## PROLOGUE

# DINNER WITH ELAGABALUS

### *The deadly host*

Elagabalus was a Syrian teenager who was emperor of Rome from 218 CE until his assassination in 222 – and a memorably extravagant, inventive and occasionally sadistic party host. His menus, so ancient writers tell, were ingenious. On some occasions the food would be colour-coded, all green or blue. On others, it would feature delicacies that were exotic – or revolting – even by upmarket Roman standards (camels’ heels or flamingos’ brains, with foie gras served to his pet dogs). Sometimes he indulged his nasty, or juvenile, sense of humour by inviting ‘themed’ fellow diners: groups of eight bald men, eight men with one eye or with hernias, or eight very fat men, who raised a cruel laugh when they couldn’t all fit on the same dining couch.

His other party tricks included whoopee cushions (the first ever recorded in Western culture), which gradually deflated under the guests so that they ended up on the floor; fake food, of wax or glass, served up to the least important banqueters, who would be forced to spend the evening, tummies rumbling, watching their betters eating the real thing; and tame lions, leopards and bears released among the revellers as they slept off the excesses of the night before, and such a

surprise for some that, when they awoke, they died not from a mauling but from fright. Equally deadly, and capturing the imagination of the nineteenth-century painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Elagabalus once reputedly showered his fellow partygoers with flower petals in such over-generous quantities that the guests were smothered and suffocated (pl. 1).

The emperor's faults did not stop with these dubious tactics as a host. He was apparently so committed to extravagance that he never wore the same pair of shoes twice (an uncanny echo here of Imelda



1. A marble portrait bust of Elagabalus. The youthful emperor, no more than a teenager, is shown with long sideburns and just the hint of a moustache, hardly looking like the monster that he appears in the literary accounts of his reign.

Marcos, once ‘first lady’ of the Philippines, who was alleged to have had more than three thousand pairs stashed away in her cupboards). And with perverse and expensive bravura, he piled up his summer gardens with snow and ice from the mountains, and would only eat fish when he was many miles from the sea. Meanwhile he was said to have snubbed religious proprieties by *marrying* a Vestal Virgin, one of the most august Roman priestesses, bound to virginity on pain of death. In a further religious transgression, he reputedly initiated a subversive, though short-lived, revolution by replacing Jupiter as Rome’s principal god with ‘Elagabal’ – who was the god of his home town of Emesa, modern Homs in Syria, and the source of the name by which the emperor is now almost universally known (snappier than the ‘Marcus Aurelius Antoninus’ as one version of his official title ran). Nor did he leave untouched the traditional norms of sex and gender. Several stories focus on his cross-dressing, his make-up and even his attempt to surgically transition. One contemporary writer, Cassius Dio, the author of a massive eighty-volume history of Rome from its origins to the third century CE, claimed that the emperor ‘asked doctors to give him female private parts by means of an incision’. In our own day he has sometimes been heralded as a transgender pioneer, mounting a radical challenge to rigid binary stereotypes. Most Romans would probably have thought that he was turning their world upside down.

Ancient accounts of his reign devote page after page to an extravagant listing of the emperor’s puzzling eccentricities, his disconcerting subversions and heinous cruelties – including, at the top of some lists, the human sacrifice of children. These, and other tales like them, are one focus of *Emperor of Rome*. Where do they come from? How well known were they to the ordinary inhabitants of the Roman empire? Who muttered, and why, about Elagabalus’s parties? And true or not, what can those tales tell us about Roman emperors, or about Romans more generally?

*Images of autocracy, then and now*

Elagabalus, or ‘Heliogabalus’ in an alternative spelling, is not exactly a household name, even though his reported misdeeds (or, if you prefer, his desperate attempts to break the bounds of Roman convention) have inspired modern writers, campaigners and artists, beyond Alma-Tadema, from Edgar Allan Poe and Neil Gaiman to Anselm Kiefer. His crimes and misdemeanours far outbid better-known, and earlier, Roman imperial villains and their supposed villainies: whether Nero, who played his lyre (‘fiddled’) while the city of Rome went up in flames; Domitian, who relieved his boredom by skewering flies with his pen; or, from the end of the second century CE, Commodus, the anti-hero of the movie *Gladiator*, who took potshots at the audience in the Colosseum with his bow and arrow. The horror stories about Elagabalus are worse. How seriously should we treat them?

‘Not very’, is the usual answer. Even Elagabalus’s Roman biographer, writing almost two centuries after the emperor’s death – and the source of most of the lurid details of his party tricks and dietary fancies – conceded that some of the implausible anecdotes that he had just recounted were most likely inventions, concocted after the emperor’s assassination by those who wanted to curry favour with his rival and successor on the throne. Scrupulous modern historians have trodden a very careful path through the tall stories. They try to sort the fiction from the fact, occasionally extracting a nugget of information that appears to have some independent support elsewhere (the fact, for example, that the Vestal Virgin’s name is featured on coins minted under Elagabalus suggests some kind of connection between the two, even if not marriage). But what is left is often not much more than the dates of the reign and a few other very bare essentials. At the same time, they rightly warn of the prejudicial spin that can be given to relatively innocent activities. It would largely depend on your attitude to the emperor overall whether you presented the colour-coded

dinners as a despicable, self-indulgent luxury or – as is equally possible – the most deliciously refined form of haute cuisine. The bottom line, however, must be Elagabalus's age. He was just fourteen years old when he came to the throne, and eighteen when he was murdered. Whoopee cushions, maybe; calculated religious policies, hardly.

Serious history, however, is about more than the bare facts. I am trying to shine a light, from different angles, on Roman emperors – whether benevolent elder statesmen or juvenile tyrants, would-be philosophers or wannabe gladiators, famous or forgotten – and trying to face such basic questions as why so many of them ended up, like Elagabalus, dispatched by an assassin's knife or a poisoned mushroom. In this kind of exploration, ancient exaggerations, fiction and lies have important parts to play. The toolkit with which people have constructed an image of their rulers, judged them, debated the character of an autocrat's power and marked the distance between 'them' and 'us' has always included fantasy, gossip, slander and urban myth.

The tales, for example, of Imelda Marcos's three thousand pairs of shoes (of which, suspiciously, rather fewer have ever been tracked down) are more about decrying a world of unimaginable and pointless privilege than about documenting a rich woman's passion for footwear. On a more modest scale, the tales of Queen Elizabeth II's pampered corgis, reputed to eat their dog food from solid silver bowls, offer us a peg on which to hang the difference, in day-to-day experience, between a 'royal' life and our own, while also allowing a harmless joke about the folly of conspicuous consumption in the palace.

The tall stories that fill the ancient descriptions of Elagabalus's reign, whatever their origin, provide some of the most precious evidence we have for how Romans imagined an emperor at his very, very worst. These untruths and flagrant exaggerations operate almost as a magnifying lens, in exposing and super-sizing what seemed 'bad' about a 'bad' Roman ruler. Some of it may be predictable enough: the acts of

cruelty and humiliation, from the child sacrifices to the unfortunate fat men unsuccessfully squashed onto a single dining couch; and the gratuitous luxury (Elagabalus's dogs enjoyed tasty foie gras even if they didn't gobble it from silver dishes). But buried in the seemingly preposterous anecdotes of the emperor's eccentricities are some very different, and equally chilling, terrors of autocracy.

The terror of power without limits is one of those. The curious anecdotes about Elagabalus's decision to decorate his summer gardens with ice and snow, or to consume seafood only when far from the sea – or, as another story has it, to live and work by night, while sleeping by day – point to more than his quirky, and costly, self-indulgence (the 'man-who-has-everything' syndrome). They raise the question of where the emperor's domination stops, casting him as a ruler who tried to make nature itself bend to his will, disrupting the natural order of things (ice in the summer?), and rearranging time, place and, for that matter, the divisions of biological sex to suit his own pleasure. Elagabalus wasn't the first to raise these fears. Two hundred and fifty years earlier, one of his critics – the Republican politician, philosopher and wit, Marcus Tullius Cicero – joked darkly of Julius Caesar that he had forced even the stars in the sky to obey him.

But that was only one aspect of Elagabalus's dystopian world. It was also a nightmare of deception, in which truth and falsehood were repeatedly confused and confounded. Nothing was as it seemed. The emperor's spectacular generosity turned out to be lethal – his kindness could literally kill (that is one message of the extravagant shower of rose petals). And for those at the bottom of the pecking order, the attractive food on their plates at palace dinners proved to be no more than an inedible, if artful, replica. Conversely, fakes could morph into the real thing. In one odd aside, Elagabalus's biographer claims that, when adultery was represented on stage, the emperor insisted that it be carried out 'for real'. No doubt it would make for a raunchier show, live sex included. But the unsettling logic was that he turned fact and

fiction upside down, creating a topsy-turvy world in which no one could know who (or what) was play-acting. A corrupt autocracy was all smoke and distorting mirrors. Or, as his Roman biographer summed up, Elagabalus had ‘a fake life’.

The magnifying lens of these stories helps us to see clearly the anxieties that surrounded imperial rule at Rome. It was more than the capacity to kill. The power of the emperor stopped at nothing. It warped the senses, and it thrived in malevolent chaos.

### *A history of emperors*

I shall be returning to Elagabalus from time to time in the pages that follow, not least to explain how a teenager from Syria came to occupy the imperial throne (one Roman answer, predictably enough, focused on the machinations of his mother and grandmother). And I shall also be returning to the fantasies (dystopian and other) that surrounded the ancient Roman court, scrutinising more tall stories that Romans told about their emperors. How Roman rulers appeared in risqué jokes and in satirical skits, as well as in such far-fetched anecdotes as clustered around Elagabalus, will come under my spotlight. We shall even find emperors appearing in various guises in their subjects’ dreams (not always a good sign: ‘to dream of being an emperor foretells death to anyone who is sick’, as one dream-interpreter warned in the second century CE).

But these will only be a part of the book. Alongside the ‘emperors of the imagination’, I shall be exploring down-to-earth questions about the everyday life of these Roman rulers, about the sharp edge of politics, the demands of military security, and the routine, humdrum business of governing a vast empire, which often gets overshadowed in the glare of all those vivid anecdotes of cruelty and luxury. I shall be thinking about the paper-pushing and the admin, the balancing of the

books, the hiring and firing. How far was the emperor himself involved in all this? Who were his staff and support network, from wives and heirs, secretaries and accountants, to cooks and clowns? And what if he was only fourteen years old?

We shall find another powerful, but very different, stereotype of imperial behaviour: the Roman emperor not so much as a dangerous libertine, but as a hard-working bureaucrat. Both will star in *Emperor of Rome*.

### *A working life*

Elagabalus was the twenty-sixth Roman emperor, more or less (his exact place in the numerical order depends on which unsuccessful usurpers you decide to count). Emperors came and went, and many have been forgotten. Some have left a distinctive mark on Western culture. Caligula (on the throne 37–41 CE) has become unforgettable for proposing to give one top political office to his favourite horse; and Hadrian (ruling 117–38) for building his ‘Wall’ across northern England. But not many people now have heard of Vitellius (a notorious overeater who ruled for a few months in 69), or the disciplinarian Pertinax (with a similarly brief reign in 193), or even Elagabalus. Not all were long remembered.

These men (all men: no ‘empress’ ever occupied the throne) ruled a vast territory stretching, at its furthest extent, from Scotland to the Sahara, Portugal to Iraq, with an estimated population, outside Italy itself, in the order of 50 million. Emperors made laws, waged wars, imposed taxes, adjudicated disputes, sponsored buildings and entertainments and flooded the Roman world with their portraits, much as the faces of modern dictators are plastered onto billboards by the thousand. They personally owned and exploited large tracts of the empire, from commercial farms to papyrus marshes and silver mines,

and some of them travelled widely to explore and admire it, not only in search of military glory and profits of war. Tourists now gather outside the town of Luxor on the river Nile to stare at a pair of colossal ancient Egyptian statues (dating back to 1350 BCE). They are standing in exactly the same spot as Hadrian and his entourage stood in 130 CE, also on a sightseeing trip. The emperor's party left their own appreciative reactions (in specially composed poetry) carved into the legs of one of the statues: 'I was here' elite Roman style (fig. 64).

Exactly how an emperor's control worked in practice is a puzzle. Apart from army units stationed in some 'hot spots', there was only a skeleton staff of senior administrators, spread very thinly across the empire as a whole (counting no more than senior staff, it was roughly one for every 330,000 or so inhabitants). So, for the most part, in comparison with some modern empires, the control must have been fairly light touch. And the vast distances involved, as well as the time – sometimes several months – that it would have taken for basic information or instructions to get from the centre to some of the more remote parts of the Roman world (and vice versa), would also have made day-to-day micro-management of the imperial territories impossible. That said, the closer we get to the Roman emperor himself, the busier we often find him to be.

Ancient writers refer to rulers apparently swamped in what we would call 'paperwork' (in their terms, wax tablets and papyrus jottings). Julius Caesar, dealing with his correspondence while watching the races, was said to have annoyed the rest of the audience, who took it as an insult to popular entertainments. Vespasian, one of those lucky emperors to die in his bed, in 79 CE, rose before dawn to read his letters and official reports. Elagabalus's successor, Alexander Severus, was apparently so wedded to the job that he kept a set of military records in his private apartments in order to 'go over the budgets and the troop deployments when he was on his own'. But the paperwork was only part of it. Emperors were expected to be accessible to their

subjects, in person as well as on paper. That idea is summed up in a story of Hadrian, who was out on a journey when he was intercepted by a woman trying to ask for a favour. When he replied that he didn't have time, she sharply retorted, 'Stop being emperor, then' – and he let her speak.

We have to treat these stories with care. Some emperors must obviously have worked harder than others. All systems of one-man rule have their diligent George VIs (the father of Elizabeth II, and a dutiful, self-effacing family man) as well as their flamboyant Edward VIIIs (with his string of mistresses and neglected obligations). But we should never assume that the tales of unglamorous administration are more trustworthy than the stories of glamorous excess. They too have a strongly ideological side in constructing an image of a perfect emperor. The story about Hadrian and the woman who stopped him is, in fact, told almost identically about some earlier rulers from the Greek world, suggesting that it reflected an ancient cliché of the 'good monarch'. Nevertheless, some of the most extraordinary documents to survive from ancient Rome back up that general picture. These are the records of decisions made by emperors in answer to requests, petitions and cries for help from their ordinary subjects, or from ordinary town councils, across the empire – sometimes inscribed on stone (presumably by a successful petitioner to celebrate a happy outcome), sometimes copied onto papyrus, or gathered together in austere ancient compendia of legal rulings. What is striking is how local or how trivial (though not, of course, to the parties concerned) so many of the problems that the emperor was expected to solve actually were.

'The case of the falling chamber pot' is just one example. In 6 BCE the emperor Augustus was asked to adjudicate a messy dispute in the town of Knidos, on the coast of modern Turkey. During a feud between two local families, one of the protagonists had ended up dead. Taking part in a nasty affray outside the house of his rivals, he had been hit on the head by a chamber pot, dropped from the upper floor by a slave

(who may, or may not, have intended only to pour out the contents). The local authorities were minded to prosecute the slave's owners for unlawful homicide, but, according to the surviving text of his judgement, Augustus was of the opposite opinion: that, accident or not, the killing was legitimate self-defence. Almost exactly three hundred years later, the emperor of the day, travelling in the Danube region, was confronted with hundreds of personal dilemmas and disputes to resolve: from the case of a woman who wanted compensation for a cow she had leased out, but which had then been killed in an 'enemy invasion', to a tricky dispute involving financial liability after the collision of two river boats; and the complaint of a man who was suing for non-payment of the fee he was charging for prostituting his wife (happily, he got short shrift). Whether the emperor himself struggled with these legal niceties we do not know. Sometimes, he probably did; sometimes, he would merely have signed off on the judgements devised by his staff (I can't imagine the young Elagabalus doing more). But the point is that, whoever did the work, it was the emperor who was *seen* to be the arbiter.

These cases are a useful antidote to the nightmare vision of imperial power. They are a reminder that, while some may have seen emperors as the orchestrators of a dystopian and terrifying world, others looked to them as a solution to their problems – right down to their lost cow. They are also a reassurance that a book which focuses on the figure of the emperor will not just be about men in the uppermost echelons of the elite. Far from it. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is through the eyes of the emperor and his dealings with his subjects that we see with the clearest focus and in the richest detail the ordinary people of Rome and its empire, who so often remain invisible. *Emperor of Rome* is about rulers *and* ruled.

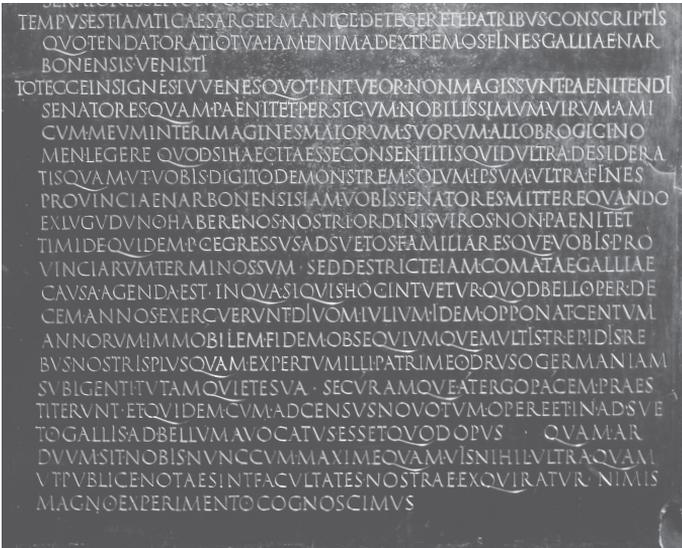
*Imperial texts and traces*

The records of emperors' decisions, and the striking view they offer of ordinary life in the Roman empire (and its difficulties), are just a few of the ancient texts and documents that I intend to set free from the lecture room and the research seminar. Of course, some of the best-known classics of ancient literature will guide our exploration too: above all, Tacitus, whose account of the rulers of the first century CE in his *Annals* and *Histories*, written soon after in the second century, has never been bettered as a cynical dissection of the corruption of autocracy; and, from roughly the same time, Suetonius, the palace insider (he was employed in the imperial archives and secretariat, under the emperors Trajan and Hadrian), whose colourful biographies of the first 'Twelve Caesars', from Julius Caesar to the fly-skewering emperor Domitian, have been a handbook to the period for historians over the last five hundred years. But I shall also be bringing into the limelight more curious and surprising works that are much less well known, and celebrating the richness of the literary material that has come down to us. The perilous process of copying and recopying, careful curation and, eventually, printing that has brought the words of ancient Roman writers from stylus and scroll onto the modern page or screen, has preserved a much wider range of material than we often imagine.

Some of this was intended to raise a laugh. We have a mini-collection of imperial jokes – Augustus, for example, teased his daughter Julia for picking out her grey hairs – and satires of various types. These include a skit on his predecessors by the fourth-century emperor Julian (in which Elagabalus has a walk-on part as 'the little lad from Emesa'); and a hilarious lampoon, written by Nero's tutor Seneca, ridiculing the whole idea that the emperor Claudius should be made a god after his death in 54 CE (we follow the slightly befuddled old emperor struggling up Mount Olympus to the home of the 'real' gods, only to be roundly sent packing when he gets there).

Some of it takes us behind the scenes, in unexpected ways. A handbook written by a Greek teacher of rhetoric gives advice on how best to address an emperor, should you need to. There are observations on life at court (including a chilling reference to soldiers working as undercover agents) from the philosopher Epictetus, who had once been the slave of Nero's secretary, while imperial doctors from the palace have left us descriptions not just of their celebrity patients' sore throats but of their tummy troubles and drug regimens too – two thousand years later we can still examine the case notes. And we can still read an edited collection of second-century CE reports sent back to the emperor in Rome from Pliny, an official posted hundreds of miles away on the Black Sea coast, explaining his problems with everything from some troublesome Christians to dilapidated bath buildings and a worrying overspend on a jerry-built theatre.

Other surviving writing is almost stranger than we could ever predict. The *Life* of Elagabalus, for example, with its wonderfully revealing fantasies and exaggerations about the lifestyle of the 'little lad', is one of a set of more than fifty biographies of emperors, including usurpers, heirs and other claimants, which run from Hadrian in 117 CE to a bloodthirsty nonentity who died in 285. Though many of these individual 'Lives' are very short (in our terms, these are 'profiles' rather than 'biographies'), together they stretch to several hundred modern pages and go under the title *Imperial History* (or *Historia Augusta*). This bills itself as a collaborative work penned at the very end of the third century by six different, rather grandly named authors: Trebellius Pollio, Flavius Vopiscus of Syracuse, and so on. Careful analysis of its language and style has shown that it was nothing of the sort: it was written by just one person (unknown), about a hundred years later than it claims. As such, it is one of the great mysteries of ancient literature. Why would anyone pull such a trick? Was it a forgery? A rather lengthy joke or satire? Or a radical experiment in pseudo-historical narrative? Whatever the



2. Part of the bronze text found in Lyon in the sixteenth century, recording Claudius's speech to the senate, urging enhanced political rights for the Gauls. The unusually clear script makes the words quite easy to make out. The first line of this extract starts 'TEMPUS EST', 'now's the time'. See pp. 239–40.

answer, it pointedly straddles the boundary between history and fiction.

Thousands of original documents add to the richness and the variety of stories of the Roman emperors. Some were inscribed on stone and bronze for public display, others scrawled on papyrus, preserved in the sand of Egypt and dug out over the last century by modern archaeologists in huge quantities (many still unread). We have, for example, the text on bronze of a speech given in 48 CE by the emperor Claudius, arguing in favour of granting a bigger political role to men from Gaul, and treating his audience to a potted history of Rome at the same time. And we can still read on papyrus a transcript of the words of Germanicus, an imperial prince and father of the emperor Caligula, addressing the crowds in Alexandria, and saying among other things that he was missing his 'granny' (better known

as Livia, the wife of Augustus, and with a more fearsome reputation than the word ‘granny’ would suggest). We are also offered glimpses of what went on behind the scenes: from the surviving epitaphs of a hundred or so of Livia’s staff (including a masseuse, some dressers, a painter, even a window cleaner), to the disgruntled correspondence of an official in Egypt, who was having dreadful difficulties getting all the provisions together for an impending imperial visit.

We can enter the material world of the emperors too. It is still possible to walk around their palaces, not just on the Palatine Hill in central Rome (the origin of the word ‘palace’), but also their suburban pleasure gardens and out-of-town residences. One of those, the villa of the emperor Hadrian, at Tivoli, about 20 miles from Rome – with its parkland, accommodation blocks, multiple dining rooms and libraries – covered almost twice the area of ancient Pompeii. ‘Villa’ is a glaring



3. & 4. Two surprising places to find an image of the emperor. On the left, a modern replica of an ancient pastry mould (possibly for making the cookies distributed at religious festivals), showing an emperor standing in a chariot on his triumphal parade (pp. 46–7), being crowned by the goddess Victory. See also fig. 12. On the right, the emperor on an earring (the hook no doubt originally angled so that the head did not hang upside down).

understatement. It is more like a private town. And we can also look their portraits in the eye. Those that survive amount to just a fraction of what there once was (one reasonable guess is that across the Roman world there were originally between 25,000 and 50,000 statues of the emperor Augustus alone). But thousands of them still line our museum shelves. They come in all sorts, shapes and sizes. Some inhabitants of the Roman empire even ate cookies decorated with figures of emperors (or that, at least, is what some surviving pastry moulds suggest). Around 200 CE, one Roman lady went one better: she had the head of the emperor Septimius Severus, one of Elagabalus's immediate predecessors, cast into her gold earrings.

There is, of course, a range of questions about the world of the emperors that we cannot answer for lack of evidence (what that world looked like to a woman, for example, or how in detail their finances worked). But I hope that, overall, readers will go away from this book not frustrated by *how little* we know about these rulers of two thousand years ago, but amazed by *how much*.

### *Which emperors?*

Many emperors followed Elagabalus. In fact, if we concentrate on the eastern part of the empire, with its capital eventually established in Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in the fourth century CE, there was an unbroken succession of Roman rulers down to 1453, when the city fell to the Ottomans. *We* think of those later rulers as Byzantine. *They* thought of themselves as Roman. But, in this book, I shall not be looking much later than Elagabalus's cousin, adopted son and successor: Alexander Severus, the one who reputedly worked overtime on his military records and troop deployments. He was another boy emperor, coming to the throne at the age of thirteen or fourteen and ruling between 222 and 235. Starting the book with the architects of