

# Polgehrorieon

## Epics and triumphs: Roman emperors

Everyone has seen a Roman emperor. Whether at the British Museum's current *Hadrian* exhibition, or in Derek Jacobi's stuttering Claudius, or in Joachim Phoenix's psychotic Commodus, most people are aware of Roman emperors to some extent or other.<sup>1</sup> They can be semi-legendary, or have been entirely ignored by posterity. Some of the most famous are notorious – and some of the legends are now indistinguishable, in the public imagination, from fact. There have been multiple attempts to categorise the various Roman emperors, in multiple media.

The earliest interpretation of the lives of the first emperors was that of Suetonius. He wrote his *Lives of the Caesars* in around 120, beginning with Julius Caesar and ending with Domitian, giving him twelve biographies. His work is highly significant, for a number of reasons. He is strongly pro-Senate and anti-taxation, reflecting perhaps his own status as a middle-class Senator. The problem for the future historian is that we have so little else. It is Suetonius who has painted Tiberius as lazy and negligent – other records suggest he was rather better. Suetonius is one of very few sources for Caligula's reign: Robert Graves has used him as his major source. Suetonius is a gossip-monger, perhaps in order to write better literature and perhaps in order to diminish the memories of those emperors whom he saw as less competent than Hadrian, whose secretary he was.

Future historians have rarely sought to write a history of the entire principate: there were simply too many emperors. They have, instead, divided the emperors up into particular periods and categories. Machiavelli arrived at the concept of 'five good emperors' (Nerva to Marcus Aurelius, 96-180) to express his admiration for a series of emperors who were adopted by their predecessors rather than born into power (and were therefore competent).<sup>2</sup> Edward Gibbon agreed, praising these emperors for their moderation and for listening to the Senate.<sup>3</sup> In each case the well-known pre-occupations of these authors shine through. Nerva's reputation has been enhanced by the shortness of his reign – modern historians have seen growing problems over tax collection and the state of the army.<sup>4</sup> The other four good emperors have survived with their reputations intact. These emperors have caught the popular imagination for good reasons. Trajan was a master-builder and excellent strategist. Hadrian was an administrator and traveller who ensured the stability of his whole empire. He is, of course, particularly known in Britain for his wall – and,

following the British Museum's exhibition, for his personal life. Antoninus Pius is known for having presided over peace for his twenty-three year reign. Marcus Aurelius, whose reign did feature military campaigns (in areas which, arguably,

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Antoninus had neglected), was an important philosopher. He is the emperor at the beginning of *Gladiator*, although it should be said that he was entirely happy for Commodus (who was ultimately murdered not by a gladiator but by a wrestler) to succeed him.

These emperors have featured widely in modern culture. Julius Caesar, although not technically an emperor, caught Shakespeare's imagination in a play which was, at least in part, about how politicians build up the reputations and legacies of their dead predecessors for their own ends. Augustus has appeared in the TV series *Rome* (not suitable for Year 7, please note) as an ambitious and well-advised youth (although with the domineering wife of his later years replaced by a domineering mother). He is also the subject of a historical novel by Allan Massie, who imagines what his uncensored biography might look like.<sup>5</sup> Augustus is the model of a highly competent, but also very lucky ruler (future Roman emperors were wished *felicius Augusto*, more lucky than Augustus). Caligula has been seen as a parody of corrupt madness (maybe...) while Claudius has been seen as a stuttering fool (he was not). Nero fiddled while Rome burned (another myth attributable to an historian writing under Hadrian, this time Tacitus). These characters stand out – but they stand out from a paucity of primary sources.

The Roman emperors, however, are iconic. Power was so centralised in the Empire (or at least, it had the appearance of being so centralised) that eras became known by their emperors. Their characters seem to be a source of power, politics and intrigue, and the histories written of them by their near contemporaries have left plenty for future generations to work with.

# Designing enquiries to make your students think about interpretations of Roman emperors

## A Level: 16 to 19 years

What else are your students studying? You may well have some obvious overlaps – with Media, English Literature and Classical Civilisation, for example, not to mention with Latin. If they are studying war literature in English, get them onto Robert Graves – *How did Robert Graves use the past?* Start your students thinking about some of the broader questions of history. *How have Roman emperors' reputations been built?* might be a good starting point. This might well lead you into comparative work with historical characters from other units students are studying, or from their GCSEs. You might move into some specific political and historical thought: *Does the concept of the 'five good emperors' tell us more about the first century or about Machiavelli?* If you are looking at the whole of the Roman Empire you could ask a question about labelling – *How helpful are the traditional divisions of Roman emperors?*

## Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years

Can you get to the British Museum? If so, ask, *What decisions has the curator made and why?* This question can serve for any high-quality exhibition of Roman artefacts. A question more specific to Hadrian might work well – *Why are the British so interested in Hadrian?* has an interpretations as well as a significance angle – given that Hadrian is not very controversial, why all the interest? You might also ask students to read or watch an extract from some historical fiction – suitably sanitised, of course – such as Marcus Aurelius's death from *Gladiator*, or the initial description of Claudius in *I, Claudius*. Ask them, *Why has the author made things up?* after, of course, getting them to work out what has been fabricated. You can then present them with some Suetonius (which is, of course, a secondary rather than a primary source!) and ask, *What were Suetonius's priorities?* All of which brings us neatly back to Hadrian, whose secretary Suetonius was...



## Further Reading

Grant, M. (1975) *The Twelve Caesars*, Scribner: an excellent piece of history as well as a guide to Suetonius.

Harris, R. (2006) *Imperium*, Simon & Schuster: the story of Cicero, a leading Roman of the generation immediately before that of Augustus

### REFERENCES

1. Graves, R. (1969) *I, Claudius*, Penguin
2. Machiavelli, N. (1531) *Discourses on Livy*
3. Gibbon, E. (1776) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Strahan & Cadell
4. Syme, R. (1939) *The roman Revolution*, Oxford University Press
5. Massie, A. (1986) *Augustus: a Novel*, Sceptre

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Tony McConnell, Mill Hill County High School (11-18 comprehensive), London.

Polychronicon was a fourteenth-century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.