

CAUSES OF DEATH AMONG THE CAESARS (27 BC-AD 476)

ABSTRACT

The Roman Empire was ruled by 77 emperors between 27 BC and AD 476 (503 years); 18 (23,4%) of them held sway during the Early Empire (27 BC–AD 193, 220 years), and 59 (76,6%) during the Late Empire (193–476, 283 years). On the average emperors in the Early Empire ruled for a longer period (12,7 years as against 6,0 years), and died slightly later (53,4 years as against 46,0 years) than subsequent emperors. During the Early Empire 55,6% of the emperors died of natural causes or illness, as against 25,4% during the Late Empire. Of the second group more were murdered or executed (55,9% versus 33,3%) and more died on the battlefield (5 versus none). The incidence of suicide was slightly higher among the early emperors (11,1% as against 6,8%). Seven emperors abdicated before death brought an end to their rule — only 2 died of natural causes. 30 of the 33 murdered were killed by the sword or dagger (5 were beheaded), one was strangled, one was hanged and one was killed by stoning.

1. INTRODUCTION

After its founding, traditionally dated to 753 BC, Rome was ruled by kings as a city-state for two centuries, until in 509 BC a republic was established, to be ruled by a Senate led by two consuls who were elected annually. As its area of influence increased, this republican system of government became ineffective, and in 27 BC Augustus became the first Roman Emperor. From then until the deposition of the last emperor, the 16 year old Romulus Augustulus, by Germanic invaders from the North in 476, the Western Roman Empire was ruled by 77 emperors. After this, the Eastern Roman Empire, with Constantinople as its capital, continued to exist for a further ten centuries, until 1453.

This article investigates the causes of the deaths of the emperors who ruled the Empire from Rome over a period of 503 years.

2. EMPERORS

Table I provides details pertaining to 77 emperors.¹

Table I: Detail of emperors

	Early Empire (27 BC-AD 193) 220 years	Late Empire (193-476) 183 years	Total
Number of emperors	18	59	77
Average age at death	53,4 years (31-77 years)	46 years (19-80 years)	48 years
Average period of rule	12,7 years (2 months-41 years)	6,0 years (3 months-30 years)	7,8 years

The Roman Empire may be viewed as comprising two eras, namely the Early Roman Empire, 27 BC-AD 193 (a period of 220 years) and the Later Roman Empire, 193-AD 476 (283 years).² The emperors who ruled during the two eras — the initial flowering and the later gradual decline of the empire — will be discussed separately. Certain emperors will not be considered: the interloper-emperors who were not officially recognised in Rome, the Gallic emperors (260-274), and emperors who ruled in Constantinople (the Eastern Roman Empire).

It is clear that the Early Roman Empire was characterised by longer regnal periods (averaging 12,7 years) than the Later Roman Empire (averaging 6 years). The earlier period consequently had proportionally fewer emperors than the later period: 18 as opposed to 59. The average age at death of the first group (53,4) was slightly higher than that of the second (46).

In the Later Roman Empire in particular, it was not uncommon for emperors to rule jointly, or for their regnal periods to overlap in part, with the result that the 503 calendar years between 27 BC and AD 476 equate to 583 regnal years.

1 Scarre (1995:15-232); Parker (1958:3-310); Bury (1958:Vol. I, pp. 106-264, 314-347, 389-410); Cary & Scullard (1975:331-535); Jones (1973:Vol. I, pp. 1-317).

2 Kapp *et al.* (1992:79).

Seven emperors abdicated, two of them voluntarily (Diocletian and Maximian, who then committed suicide in AD 305), but the rule of all the others was ended by death. Three of the five cases of forced abdication (Severus II, Licinius and Avitus) were followed by executions, while the other two (Glycerius and Romulus Augustulus) died of natural causes.

3. CAUSES OF DEATH

3.1 The Early Roman Empire (27 BC-AD 193)

The causes of death of these eighteen emperors are summarised in Table II.³

Table II: 18 emperors in early Roman empire, 27 BC-AD 193 (220 years)

Name	Years of rule	Age at death (years)	Cause of death
Augustus	41	77	Fever and diarrhoea (? poisoned)
Tiberius	23	77	Chronic debilitating diseases with final episode of fever (? poisoned)
Gaius (Caligula)	4	29	Murdered by the sword/dagger
Claudius	13	44	Poisoned by Agrippina
Nero	14	31	Suicide by dagger
Galba	7 months	57	Murdered and decapitated by soldiers
Otho	2 months	37	Suicide by dagger
Vitellius	8 months	57	Tortured and murdered by soldiers
Vespasian	10	69	Fever and acute diarrhoea
Titus	2	42	Fever, possibly malaria
Domitian	15	45	Murdered with a dagger
Nerva	2	68	Fever, possibly malaria

³ Scarre (1995:15-232); Parker (1958:3-310); Bury (1958:Vol. I, pp. 106-264, 314-347, 387-410); Cary & Scullard (1975:331-535); Jones (1973:Vol. I, pp. 1-317).

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Name	Years of rule	Age at death (years)	Cause of death
Trajan	19	64	Stroke
Hadrian	21	61	Epistaxis, weakness, oedema and depression; tried to commit suicide
Antoninus Pius	23	75	Vomiting and fever after eating
Marcus Aurelius	19	59	Chronic lung disease, fever and abdominal disorders, possibly smallpox
*Lucius Verus	8	39	Stroke
Commodus	13	31	Strangled after an unsuccessful attempt at poisoning
Average	12,7	53,4	

* Ruled together with Marcus Aurelius

3.1.1 Natural causes

Ten emperors died of natural causes, including disease.

In two cases (Trajan and Lucius Verus) death due to apoplectic stroke is documented, and a further two (Titus and Nerva) died of an acute fever which could have been malaria.

Tiberius died in frail age in AD 37, after a final episode of fever about which no details are known.⁴ Marcus Aurelius (Fig. 14) had a chronic affliction of the lungs, but died in AD 180 after complaining of acute abdominal problems and a fever which may have been smallpox, since it occurred at the time of the so-called Epidemic of Antoninus (165-189), which was probably smallpox.⁵ He was a regular user of theriac (which contains opium) as an all-purpose remedy against poison, hence it has been suggested that opium addiction may have contributed to his final illness; others are of the opinion that he had terminal internal cancer.⁶

⁴ Suetonius, *Tiberius* c.72.

⁵ Retief & Cilliers (2000:268).

⁶ Scarre (1995:118).



Figure 14: Bust of Marcus Aurelius (161-180): died of fever and abdominal disorders, possibly smallpox. Capitoline Museum, Rome.

Augustus (AD 14) (Fig. 15) and Vespasian (AD 79) died of diarrhoea and fever, symptoms reminiscent of typhoid, dysentery or even communicable food-poisoning. Antoninus Pius (AD 161) met his end with vomiting and fever after a dinner of Alpine cheese, which was given as the cause of death; this may well also have been food-poisoning.

Hadrian (Fig. 16) died after a prolonged illness characterised by nose-bleeds, oedema and progressive depression, including unsuccessful attempts to kill himself by means of both poison and a dagger (AD 138). One may speculate that he died of chronic heart failure (which may have been hypertensive in origin).

The suggestion that Augustus died of poisoning, and that Tiberius was smothered,⁷ is most unlikely.

⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* I.6; Suetonius, *Tiberius* c. 73.

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Figure 15: Augustus (27 BC-AD 14): died of fever and diarrhoea.
Vatican Museum, Rome.



Figure 16: Bust of Hadrian (117-138): died of chronic heart failure.
Capitoline Museum, Rome.

3.1.2 Suicide

Nero (68) and Otho (69) committed suicide by dagger. Suetonius⁸ tells us that Nero was so paralysed by fear that his slave had to assist him in the act.

8 Suetonius, *Nero* c.49.

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3.1.3 Murder

Six emperors were murdered. It is generally accepted that Claudius (Fig. 17), who probably suffered from cerebral palsy, but without any diminution of his mental faculties,⁹ was poisoned by his wife Agrippina (54).



Figure 17: Statue of Claudius (41-54) as the god Jupiter:
poisoned with mushrooms.
Vatican Museum, Rome.

⁹ Levick (1990:14-15).

Commodus (Fig. 18) was throttled by a guard (193) after his concubine Marcia's failed attempt to poison him.



Figure 18: Bust of Commodus (180-193): strangled after an unsuccessful attempt at poisoning.
Capitoline Museum, Rome.

The other emperors were murdered by the sword or dagger — Gaius (Caligula) by his Praetorian Guard (41), and Galba decapitated by soldiers (69). Vitellus was tortured by soldiers, then murdered and dragged with hooks to the Tiber (69). Domitian died at the hands of his slaves (96).

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4. THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE (193-476)

The causes of the deaths of the 59 emperors of this era are presented in Table III.¹⁰

Table III: 59 emperors of the late Roman empire, 193-476 (283 years)

1. Natural causes and illness: 15 (25,4%)		
Uncertain	7	Constantine, Constantius, Theodosius, Honorius, Severus III, Glycerius, Romulus Augustulus
Epidemic disease	1	Claudius II
Extreme pallor	1	Constantius
Ulceration of abdomen and genitals	1	Galerius
Stroke	1	Valentinian I
Carbon monoxide poisoning	1	Jovian
Chronic gout	1	Septimius Severus
Lightning	1	Carus
Oedema	1	Olybrius
2. Suicide: 5 (6,8%)		
Hanging	2	Gordian I, Maximinian
Exsanguination (slit wrists)	1	Quintilius
Starvation	1	Diocletian
Poison	1	Maximinus Daia

¹⁰ Scarre (1995:15-232); Parker (1958:3-310); Bury (1958:Vol. I, pp. 106-264, 314-347, 387-410); Cary & Scullard (1975:331-535); Jones (1973:Vol. I, pp. 1-317).

3. Executed, murdered: 32 (55,9%)		
By the sword or dagger	29	Pertinax*, Didius Julianus, Caracalla, Geta, Macrinus, Elagabalus*, Alexander Severus, Maximinus*, Pupienus, Baldinus, Gordian III, Trebonius, Aemilius, Gallienus, Aurelianus, Tacitus, Florianus, Probus, Carinus, Numerianus, Severus II, Constans I, Gratian, Valentinian II, John the Illicit, Valentinian III, Maiorianus*, Anthemius*, Nepos
Hanged	1	Licinius
Strangled	1	Avitus
Stoned	1	Petronius Maximus
4. Other: 7 (11,9%)		
On battlefield	5	Gordian II, Philip the Arab, Decius, Constantine II, Julian
In prison	1	Valerian
Drowned	1	Maxentius

* decapitated

4.1 Natural causes and disease

Fifteen of the emperors died of natural causes. In seven cases (as listed in Table III) the exact nature of the death is uncertain. In the remaining cases there are indications of the process of certain diseases.

Septimius Severus (Fig. 19) suffered for a long time from severe gout, and his prolonged terminal illness (211) could have been caused by complications related to that disease. Jovian died in Asia Minor during a campaign (364), being overcome by gas from a brazier in his tent, in the manner of classic carbon monoxide poisoning.

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Figure 19: Bust of Septimius Severus (193-211):
died of complications related to chronic gout.
Mansell Collection, London.

Claudius II died in 270, during a campaign in the northern provinces, of what was commonly identified as the plague. Genuine bubonic plague, however, did not make an appearance as an epidemic disease until the 6th century, in the Epidemic of Justinian.¹¹ It is more likely that Claudius died as a result of the Epidemic of Cyprian which ravaged the Roman Empire in 251-266 and then spread to the rest of Europe. We have suggested elsewhere that this was smallpox, but it may well in fact have been influenza.¹²

¹¹ Retief & Cilliers (2000a:243).

¹² Retief & Cilliers (2000:271).

According to tradition, Carus died in 283 after being struck by lightning during a campaign in Mesopotamia, but the possibility that he was murdered by his colleagues cannot be ruled out.

Constantius I was given the nickname “Chlorus” (Paleface), and was very frail for a lengthy period towards the end of his life. He could well have had chronic anaemia, i.e. pernicious anaemia rather than aplastic anaemia or leukaemia, which would have led to a shorter, more eventful end. Chronic haemolytic anaemia, i.e. thalassaemia, would be unlikely without a family history of severe anaemia.

Galerius, a persecutor of the Christians, died (311) of extensive chronic ulceration of the abdomen and genitals which lasted about a year and was accompanied by deep fistulae and malodorous sepsis — there were even worms in the wounds. Eusebius¹³ described this as divine punishment. It could have been a malignancy, or a chronic infection such as tuberculosis or actinomycosis.

Valentinian I passed away after a stroke (455), while Olybrius went to his death (472) with severe oedema, possibly associated with heart failure or nephrotic syndrome.

4.2 Suicide

Five emperors committed suicide. Two hanged themselves (Gordian I, with his own belt (238), and Maximian (305), while Maximinus Daia drank poison and suffered for three days before expiring (313).

Diocletian (Fig. 20), another persecutor of the Christians, suffered a severe nervous breakdown in 304 which rendered him temporarily incapable of performing his public duties. He recovered, but allowed himself to be persuaded that the state needed the services of younger men, and abdicated in 305. He relocated to the countryside and began to cultivate vegetables. He died six years later, an embittered man. According to Lactantius, he starved himself to death (311).¹⁴

13 Eusebius VIII.16

14 Scarre (1995:203).

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Figure 20: Bust of Diocletian (284-305); suicide by starvation.
Turkey.

4.3 Murdered or executed

33 emperors were murdered or executed.

30 were despatched by sword or dagger, as listed in Table III. Of these, 26 were killed by Roman soldiers (five of them decapitated) and one (Valentinian III) by German mercenaries. Julianus Nepos was murdered by his house slaves (475) and Geta by his own brother, Caracalla (212). In his turn, Caracalla was stabbed to death by his bodyguard as he relieved himself in the countryside while on a journey (217). The Senate sentenced Didius Julianus to die by the sword (193).

Petronius was killed outside the city walls by a stone thrown by soldiers (455). Avitus was strangled by soldiers (456) and Licinius was hanged (324).

4.4 Other causes

Four emperors died on the battlefield — Gordian II (238) and Philip the Arab (249), in Carthage and Macedonia, respectively; Decius in a war against the Goths (making him the first Roman emperor to die in battle against foreign soldiers), and Constantine II in a civil war (340). Julian died of war wounds sustained in a campaign against the Persians (363).

Valerian, the first Roman emperor to be taken prisoner by an enemy (260), was defeated by the Sassanian Persians under the leadership of Shapur. He died in captivity about two years later, and a doubtful tradition holds that the Persians skinned him, coloured the skin purple, and hung it in a temple as a warning to the Romans. Early Christian writers saw this as divine vengeance on a persecutor of the Christians.

Maxentius lost the crucial battle in a civil war against Constantine I at the Milvian Bridge outside Rome (312) and drowned while attempting to swim to safety.

5. CONCLUSION

Table IV: Causes of death

Causes	Early Roman Empire 27 BC-AD 193 (220 years)	Late Roman Empire 193-476 (283 years)	Total
1. Natural causes, disease	10 (55,6%)	15 (25,4%)	25 (32,5%)
2. Executed, murdered by	6 (33,4%)	33 (55,9%)	39 (50,6%)
a. the sword/ dagger	4	30	34
b. poison	1	0	1
c. other means	1	2	3
3. Suicide	2 (11,1%)	4 (6,7%)	6 (7,8%)
4. Other	0 (0%)	7 (11,9%)	7 (9,1%)
a. in battle	0	5	5
b. other	0	2	2
Total	18 (100%)	59 (100%)	77 (100%)

As Table IV indicates, more of the Early Roman Empire's emperors died of natural causes and disease than in the later period — 55.6% as against 25.4%. Similarly, fewer — 33.3% as against 55.9% — were murdered or executed in the earlier period. Suicide was rare in both groups — two of the eighteen emperors in the earlier era as against four of the 59 in the later era. Five emperors of the Later Roman Empire died on the battlefield, as against none in the earlier era.

It has also been shown that the emperors of the earlier era ruled on average twice as long as those in the later era — 12,7 years as against 6,0 years — and that they died at a slightly more advanced age — 53,4 as against 46 (Table I).

These data also confirm that the Early Roman Empire was characterised by more stable governance and a higher rate of survival among the emperors than the later era.

Scheidel¹⁵ has statistically calculated that the Roman emperors who died of natural causes did not live longer than the average Roman of the time. Life expectancy among the Roman aristocracy was, on average, between 20 and 30 years.

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