

respected general and urban prefect named **Publius Helvetius Pertinax**. Pertinax was the son a freedman, and a former school teacher who had joined the army at age 35. Pertinax accepted the offer and the Praetorian Guard was won over with large bribes. Pertinax tried hard to reform the army, particularly the Praetorian Guard, which was out of control, and the corrupt freedmen who ran the day to Imperial bureaucracy. Unfortunately, he tried to do too much, too fast, and ended up making many enemies. Finally, after only three months on the job, he was stabbed to death by a mob of 300 soldiers who attacked him at his palace, shouting, “ The soldiers have sent you this sword!”

After the death of Pertinax, complete chaos broke out. On the frontiers of the empire, three generals were proclaimed emperor by their troops. **Clodius Albinus** in the West, **Pescennius Niger** in the East and **Septimius Severus** in the North, along the Danube frontier. Meanwhile, back in Rome, the Praetorian Guards, left in control and not knowing what else to do, offered the Imperial throne for sale in an auction.

The highest bidder in this bizarre episode was one **Didius Julianus**, a rich senior senator connected with the household of Marcus Aurelius. If Didius Julianus had gained the throne any other way than buying it, he might have been quite popular, since he was well connected and powerful. But as it was, people were so offended by the way he had gotten the throne, he did not have support of the people or the senators. Soon he even lost the support the Praetorians, since he could not keep all the extravagant promises he had made while bidding for the throne. When word arrived that Septimius Severus was marching on Rome, everyone turned on poor Didius, and a Senatorial decree was signed ordering that he be put to death. The soldier sent to carry out the order found Didius utterly abandoned by his supporters. And even though the old man cried out, “But what evil have I done? Whom have I killed?” the soldier quickly stabbed him to death. Didius Julianus had ruled only three months.

Terms to Know: Pertinax Didius Julianus

The Start of the Severan Dynasty: Septimius Severus 193-211 AD

Septimius Severus was born and raised in North Africa (he was the first Roman emperor to come from North Africa). He rose to prominence in the military and at the death of Pertinax, was proclaimed emperor by the Danube legions. Severus was popular and astute enough, he soon had the support of 16 legions. Severus then began his march on Rome, and as you read above, his rival, Didius Julianus, was dead before he even arrived. Within days Severus marched into Rome and established himself as emperor. As you can read at the right, Severus soon got the Praetorians under control and got on with the business of subduing his rivals, **Niger** and **Albinus**.

Niger, who was serving as the governor of Syria, rallied support there, but Septimius Severus swept and defeated Niger’s troops at two battles before crushing him for good in 194 at the battle of **Issus**. Many of Niger’s supporters fled to Parthia, where Severus pursued them.

Next, Severus had to deal with **Albinus**, governor of Britian. In the early days of his rule, Septimius Severus had tried to neutralize his threat by making Albinus his heir. But soon it became apparent that Severus was grooming his own two sons for the job. Albinus considered this a breach of trust and marched into Gaul, where he gained

additional support. It was not until the winter of 197 AD that Septimius Severus marched out to meet him, near Lyons. After a hard fought battle, Severus prevailed and Albinus fled. He was soon captured however, and beheaded. Severus, who had a reputation for being cruel, lived up to it here. He laid out Albinus' beheaded body and rode over it with his horse, then he threw the corpse in the Rhone River, together with the bodies of Albinus' family.

When he returned to Rome, Severus further consolidated his hold on government by putting to death 27 senators who had supported Albinus and Niger. Such mass proscriptions did little to make him popular among the senators and the people, and Severus had to rely on the military for support. He gained their favor by passing a law

Plautianus

One of Severus' long time friends was his Praetorian Prefect **Gaius Fulvius Plautianus**. Plautianus was known for his great wealth and cruelty and was very unpopular. Severus decided to marry this man's daughter to his son and successor, Caracalla. Caracalla, however, hated both father and daughter and although he was forced to go through with the marriage, would have nothing to do with his bride. Eventually Plautianus was accused of plotting to kill Caracalla and Severus (some say Caracalla planted these rumors, some say it was true). Plautianus was put to death and his daughter was exiled. This was only a first hint of what Rome had waiting for it when Caracalla became emperor.

which for the first time allowed soldiers to marry. Then, before they had time to become discontent, he set out on a new campaign to Parthia. He sacked Ctesiphon (killing all the men and selling over 100,000 women and children into slavery) and once again secured Mesopotamia, which had not been in Roman control since the days of Trajan, as a province.

All together, Severus spent five years campaigning and administrating in the East. Then he returned briefly to Rome. By 208, even though he was now

in poor health, Severus set out with his sons **Caracalla** and **Geta** on a new campaign aimed at subduing Northern Britain. Over the next two years, his troops had some success, though they never fully subdued Britain. In February of 211 AD, Severus died in York, England. His sons immediately called off the Scottish campaign and returned to Rome. In terms of legacy, Severus brought an era of relative prosperity to Empire. He expanded borders for the first time in several decades. Severus was an energetic builder who erected many monuments, particularly in the North African city of **Leptis Magna** and in Rome. In Rome his most famous monument is the **Arch of Septimius Severus** which celebrates his Parthian victory and is notable because Caracalla later had Geta's name scraped off.

Terms to Know: Septimius Severus Albinus & Niger Plautianus

Caracalla 211-218 AD:

Sibling Rivalry Gone Wrong

Septimius Severus had groomed his son **Caracalla** for the throne from the time he was a little boy. But in the last years of his reign, Septimius Severus decided to make Caracalla's younger brother, **Geta**, his co-heir. The two boys, who were only a year

Formidable Lady

Caracalla and Geta's mother was a formidable woman named **Julia Domna**. She was of an old, distinguished North African family and held considerable sway over her husband, Septimius Severus, and later her sons. She tried to keep the peace between them, but was unsuccessful. Geta died in her arms. Julia Domna died shortly

apart in age, were extremely competitive with each other, and perhaps Severus thought this would ease tensions. As it was, it just seems to have made matters worse. By the time Severus died, the two hated each other intensely and were

rivals in everything they did. They each had separate groups of supporters, tried to make competing bureaucratic appointments, and even went so far as to divide the imperial palace into two and block off all passages that connected the two halves. They tried to divide up the empire, too. But their mother **Julia Domna** feared this would lead to civil war, so she forbade it. Soon both became involved in plots to try to murder the other, and it was Caracalla who finally succeeded. He attacked Geta with a knife when the two were alone with their mother. Geta died in his mother's arms after ruling less than 10 months. Caracalla knew that Geta had many supporters and quickly moved to stamp out their support. Over the next few months, a horrifying 20,000 people were killed because of they had been linked to Geta in one way or another. Caracalla also set about systematically erasing all memory of his hated brother by having statues of him destroyed, coins bearing his image melted down and inscriptions with his name rubbed smooth.

Because of the uproar his cruelty inspired, Caracalla decided to leave Rome and go on campaign. First he won some minor victories in Germany, then he headed off to the east. Things went well until he arrived in Alexandria, where some incident (probably involving the Alexandrians criticizing him for killing his brother) led him to massacre thousands of Alexandrians. On a happier note, Caracalla conducted a fairly successful war against King Artabanus V of Parthia. In the winter of 217, Caracalla stayed in Edessa, Mesopotamia, planning the next spring's campaigns against the Parthians. He never got a chance to carry out those campaigns, because a conspiracy of dissatisfied officers was forming against him. An officer named Martialis finally managed to murder Caracalla as he took a pee break while on campaign. It is said that Martialis killed him with one stab of his sword while Caracalla was busy putting down his underwear.

In terms of legacy, Caracalla was actually a pretty decent ruler, except in matters pertaining to his hated brother, where he was a beast. His most notable act, as emperor, was to pass the **Antonine Constitution**, which extended citizenship to all residents of the empire. While this was probably intended to bring in more tax revenues from citizens, it also had the effect of uniting all the people of the empire on a more equal footing, with more sense of common purpose. Caracalla also introduced a silver coin to currency called an antoninianus.

Terms to Know: Caracalla Geta Julia Domna Antonine Constitution

Did you know ?

Caracalla's real name was Marcus Aurelius Severus Antonius Pius. Caracalla was a nickname he was given because he liked to wear a close fitting hooded Celtic cloak called a *caracallus*.

Macrinus 217-218 ad

Caracalla died without any appointed heir, and with no obvious candidates. After three days, the praetorian commander **Macrinus** stepped forward. Macrinus came from a middle class family in Mauretania in North Africa, and was the first Moorish emperor (apparently he even wore an earring in one ear in the Moorish fashion). Macrinus had a short and unsuccessful rule. He fought unsuccessfully against the Parthians, alienated the soldiers and eventually was forced to flee when a nephew of Caracalla gained support

from the troops. Macrinus was eventually captured and killed.

Elagabalus 218-222: Crazy sun god

The man the troops had chosen to support not really a man at all, he was Varius Avitus Bassianus, 14 year old son of Julia Maesa, Julia Domna's sister. He was Syrian by birth, and was the hereditary priest of a Syrian sun god named Elagabal. As emperor, he became known by the name of this god he worshipped, **Elagabalus**. It was his mother, and his mother's lover, **Gannys**, who really wanted him on the throne and maneuvered to get him there. Elagabalus was obsessed with the Elagabal, and cared more for his religious duties than for ruling. When he and his entourage arrived in Rome, they brought a huge black stone, which was a cult symbol with them. Elagabalus had a special temple, called the Elagaballium built for the stone and made sacrifices there every day at dawn. Look at the box to see some of the crazy things Elagabalus did...

Eventually Elagabalus' bizarre, foreign behavior caught up with him, and troops began to throw their support behind his cousin, Bassianus Alexanius. Elagabalus tried to kill his rival, but his soldiers rebelled and killed him instead as he hid in a toilet.

You might be wondering how this crazy guy lasted so long in an era when much more competent rulers were being killed for lesser offenses. Elagabalus probably clung to power so long because his mother and grandmother, both powerful and ambitious women, took care of the day to day ruling, while he lived out his bizarre life.

Terms to Know: Elagabalus Gannys

Chronicle of Crazyiness:

- He would wear tunics of cloth of gold and wore shoes encrusted with jewels. When doing so, he would say he felt oppressed by the weight of his pleasures.
- He tried to force all Romans to worship only Elagabal, and tried to have Elagabal married to Pallas Athena.
- He forced senators and military commanders to assist him in sacrifices to Elagabal
- He married a Vestal Virgin.
- He practiced bizarre sexual behavior and enjoyed dressing like a woman
- He had his mother's lover Gannys killed for forcing him to live "temperately and prudently"

Alexander Severus 222-235 AD:

Last of the Severans, Beginning of Chaos

The young cousin who successfully challenged Elagabalus for the throne was the 13 year old son of **Julia Mamaea** (daughter of Julia Maesa, if you can still remember who she was). His mother and grandmother ruled together with determination and skill, while young Alexander basically did everything he was told to. To set the regime apart from that of Elagabalus, Alexander was scrupulously Roman. He sent the black rock of Elagabal back to Syria and rededicated its temple to Jupiter the Avenger. Julia Mamaea was a clever ruler, but was harsh, bossy and jealous was well. She entirely dominated her son, and even when he disagreed with her, he obeyed.

Things went well for Alexander until 230 AD, when the Persians, who had not been a strong power for some 300 years, overran the Roman province of Mesopotamia. Alexander dutifully led a campaign against the Persian ruler **Artaxerxes**. The entire campaign was quite unsuccessful, and Alexander's troops in particular hung back and performed poorly. This gave him the reputation of a coward. Alexander did nothing to improve this reputation in his next campaign against the Germans, where he tried to buy off German tribes with large amounts of time.

Alexander's poor military record lost him the support of the troops, and it was only a matter of time before a challenger was put forward by the disgruntled soldiers. Sure enough, a soldier named **Maximinus Thrax** was proclaimed by his troops in Germany. Alexander, who was campaigning nearby, hid in his tent. He stayed there until soldiers burst in and killed him as he wept and clung to his mother. Alexander Severus' death marked the end of the Severan Dynasty and the beginning of 50 years of chaos during which no fewer than 25 Emperors gained and lost the throne in quick succession.

Terms to Know: Alexander Severus Julia Mamaea Artaxerxes Maximinus Thrax

THE SHORT & DIRTY ...

I have just given you the long hand account of what happened fore nearly a 100 years of Roman history. I hope you read it to get sense of the context and flow of events. This short list lets you know what it is MOST important to know about different people and events listed in the past 6-8 pages

Marcus Aurelius– Last of the good emperors; father of Commodus; was a Stoic philosopher who wrote the *Meditations*

Lucius Verus– co-ruler with Marcus Aurelius who ruled for only 9 years

Commodus– rather nutty son of Marcus Aurelius; he was obsessed with Hercules (dressed up like him, fought in the arena, etc.); he was strangled to death by a wrestler (after his mistress Marcia unsuccessfully poisoned him)

Didius Julianus –purchased the throne at an auction but only enjoyed his expensive treat 2 months

Septimius Severus-1st North African Emperor; built an arch in Rome (commemorating his Parthian victories), fought against many other would-be emperors

Albinus & Niger– British and Syrian governors who were proclaimed Emperors by their troops, both defeated by Severus (hint: I always remember these guys as the White & Black duo because Albinus means “white” & Niger means “black”)

Caracalla– nicknamed for a cloak; built the huge impressive baths of Caracalla; hated and murdered his brother Geta; put into law the *Antonine Constitution* which extended citizenship to all residents of the Empire

Geta– Caracalla's brother and co-emperor, whom he murdered

Julia Domna– Syrian princess and domineering wife of Septimius Severus and mother of C & G; she helped call the shots

Elagabalus– teenage emperor obsessed with the sun god Elagabal; killed while hiding in a latrine

Alexander Severus— last of the Severans; completely dominated by his mother **Julia Mamaea**

OTHER USEFUL PEOPLE AND TIDBITS TO KNOW ABOUT THE LATE EMPIRE:

Aurelian – Emperor who defeated the rebellion of the Queen of Palmyra, a woman named **Zenobia**. He also built the current extensive wall around Rome, called the Aurelian Wall.

Philip the Arab –Emperor when Rome celebrated its 1000th anniversary

Diocletian – Emperor who divided the Empire into Eastern and Western halves; he also established the Tetrachy—rule by 4 rules (an emperor and an assistant for each half of the empire); Diocletian published an edict to try to limit inflation (which was rampant) and reformed the tax code. He eventually retired to his palace in Split, Croatia to raise cabbages.

Constantine –became sole emperor of Rome (thus briefly reuniting the empire) after he defeated rival emperor **Maxentius** at the battle of **Mulvian Bridge** in 312 AD. It was at this battle that he had the vision of a cross in the sky accompanied by a voice proclaiming “*In hoc signo vinces*”. After his victory he legalized Christianity and himself later became the first Christian emperor. Constantine renamed the city of Byzantium **Constantinople** after himself. His mother **Helena**, who was martyred, became a Christian saint.

Julian the Apostate – emperor who renounced Christianity to return to pagan beliefs

Valerian – only emperor ever to be captured and die in captivity; he was captured after his defeat by **Shapur I** of Persia at the Battle of **Edessa**.

Theodosius- last emperor to rule over a united Empire (which he reunited through military force). Theodosius defeated his chief rival, **Eugenius** at the **Battle of Frigidus**, where he was aided by a bizarre natural phenomenon called the bora (hurricane force winds). These winds blew straight in the face of his enemies, aiding his cause. Theodosius made Christianity of the sort defined by the Nicene Creed the state religion of Rome and outlawed paganism. His daughter **Galla Placidia** was kidnapped for some time by barbarians. Theodosius made the northern city of **Ravenna** a center of learning and culture at this time.

Flavius Stilicho- half barbarian (his mother was a Vandal) general and right hand man of Theodosius. He helped Theodosius win at Frigidus and later became guardian and chief defended of Theodosius’s son **Valentinian**, who became Western Roman emperor.

Stilicho fought constantly against the Gothic chieftain **Alaric** and defeated him in 402 at the Battle of **Pollentia**. This was the last battle celebrated with a triumph in Rome. Stilicho is also famous for destroying the **Sibylline Books**, the ancient tome of prophecies about Rome, because they were not favorable to his regime. Stilicho later became caught up in political wrangling and was eventually betrayed, captured and beheaded in 408.

Alaric – Gothic chieftain who sacked Rome in 410 AD

Gaiseric – king of the Vandals; he took over North Africa after he invaded with 80,000 of his men; during his siege of the North African city of Hippo, **St. Augustine** died. Gaiseric made Carthage his capital and spent the next 30 years conducting pirate raids around the Mediterranean. He eventually made a peace treaty with the Roman emperor **Valentinian III**. When Valerian was murdered and overthrown by a usurper named **Petronius Maximus**, Gaiseric figured the treaty was nullified and attacked Rome. He sacked the city of Rome with extreme violence (giving us the word vandalism). Petronius Maximus was killed by an angry Roman mob.

Romulus Augustulus – last Emperor of the Western Roman Empire; he was overthrown by the Ostrogoth chieftain **Odoacer** in 476 AD.

Justinian – ruler of the Eastern Roman Empire who attempted to reconquer the western Empire from the barbarians with the help of his talented general **Belisarius**. He was not terribly successful at that, but is famous for his law code, *The Corpus Iuris Civilis* and building the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.