Learning Objective

- Describe the reigns of the emperors who followed Augustus

Key Points

- Tiberius was the second emperor of the Roman Empire, and was considered one of Rome’s greatest generals.
- Tiberius conquered Pannonia, Dalmatia, Raetia, and temporarily, parts of Germania. His conquests laid the foundations for the northern frontier.
- When Tiberius died on March 16, 37 CE, his estate and titles were left to Caligula and Tiberius’s grandson, Gemellus. However, Caligula’s first act as Princeps was to void Tiberius’s will and have Gemellus executed.
- Although Caligula is described as a noble and moderate ruler during the first six months of his reign, sources portray him as a cruel and sadistic tyrant, immediately thereafter.
- In 38 CE, Caligula focused his attention on political and public reform; however, by 39 CE, a financial crisis had emerged as a result of Caligula’s use of political payments, which had overextended the state’s treasury. Despite financial difficulties, Caligula began a number of construction projects during this time.
- In 41 CE, Caligula was assassinated as part of a conspiracy by officers of the Paretorian Guard, senators, and courtiers.
- Claudius, the fourth emperor of the Roman Empire, was the first Roman Emperor to be born outside of Italy.
- Despite his lack of experience, Claudius was an able and efficient administrator, as well as an ambitious builder. He constructed many roads, aqueducts, and canals across the Empire.
- Claudius’s appointment as emperor by the Praetorian Guard damaged his reputation. This was amplified when Claudius became the first emperor to resort to bribery as a means to secure army loyalty. Claudius also rewarded the Praetorian Guard that had named him emperor with 15,000 sesterces.

Terms

Julio-Claudian dynasty

The first five Roman emperors who ruled the Roman Empire, including Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.

Praetorian Guard

A force of bodyguards used by the Roman emperors. They also served as secret police, and participated in wars.

Tiberius

Tiberius was the second emperor of the Roman Empire and reigned from 14 to 37 CE. The previous emperor, Augustus, was his stepfather; this officially made him a Julian. However, his biological father was Tiberius Claudius Nero, making him a Claudian by birth. Subsequent emperors would continue the blended dynasty of both families for the next 30 years, leading historians to name it the Julio-Claudian Dynasty. Tiberius is also the grand-uncle of Caligula, his
successor, the paternal uncle of Claudius, and the great-grand uncle of Nero.

Tiberius is considered one of Rome’s greatest generals. During his reign, he conquered Pannonia, Dalmatia, Raetia, and temporarily, parts of Germania. His conquests laid the foundations for the northern frontier. However, he was known by contemporaries to be dark, reclusive, and somber—a ruler who never really wanted to be emperor. The tone was set early in his reign when the Senate convened to validate his position as Princeps. During the proceedings, Tiberius attempted to play the part of the reluctant public servant, but came across as derisive and obstructive. His direct orders appeared vague, inspiring more debate than action and leaving the Senate to act on its own. After the death of Tiberius’s son in 23 CE, the emperor became even more reclusive, leaving the administration largely in the hands of his unscrupulous Praetorian Prefects.

![Tiberius](image1.jpg)

**Tiberius, Romisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne**

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**Caligula**

When Tiberius died on March 16, 37 CE, his estate and titles were left to Caligula and Tiberius’s grandson, Gemellus, with the intention that they would rule as joint heirs. However, Caligula’s first act as Princeps was to void Tiberius’s will and have Gemellus executed. When Tiberius died, he had not been well liked. Caligula, on the other hand, was almost universally heralded upon his assumption of the throne. There are few surviving sources on Caligula’s reign. Caligula’s first acts as emperor were generous in spirit, but political in nature. He granted bonuses to the military, including the Praetorian Guard, city troops, and the army outside of Italy. He destroyed Tiberius’s treason papers and
declared that treason trials would no longer continue as a practice, even going so far as to recall those who had already been sent into exile for treason. He also helped those who had been adversely affected by the imperial tax system, banished certain sexual deviants, and put on large public spectacles, such as gladiatorial games, for the common people.

Although he is described as a noble and moderate ruler during the first six months of his reign, sources portray him as a cruel and sadistic tyrant immediately thereafter. The transitional point seems to center around an illness Caligula experienced in October of 37 CE. It is unclear whether the incident was merely an illness, or if Caligula had been poisoned. Either way, following the incident, the young emperor began dealing with what he considered to be serious threats, by killing or exiling those who were close to him. During the remainder of his reign, he worked to increase the personal power of the emperor during his short reign, and devoted much of his attention to ambitious construction projects and luxurious dwellings for himself.

In 38 CE, Caligula focused his attention on political and public reform. He published the accounts of public funds, which had not been done under Tiberius’s reign, provided aid to those who lost property in fires, and abolished certain taxes. He also allowed new members into the equestrian and senatorial orders. Perhaps most significantly, he restored the practice of democratic elections, which delighted much of the public but was a cause for concern among the aristocracy.

By 39 CE, a financial crisis had emerged as a result of Caligula’s use of political payments, which had overextended the state’s treasury. In order to restock the treasury, Caligula began falsely accusing, fining, and even killing individuals in order to seize their estates. He also asked the public to lend the state money, and raised taxes on lawsuits, weddings, and prostitution, as well as auctioning the lives of gladiators at shows. Wills that left items to Tiberius were also reinterpreted as having left said items to Caligula. Centurions who had acquired property by plunder were also forced to turn over their spoils to the state, and highway commissioners were accused of incompetence and embezzlement and forced to repay money that they might not have taken in the first place. Around the same time, a brief famine occurred, possibly as a result of the financial crisis, though its causes remain unclear.

Despite financial difficulties, Caligula began a number of construction projects during this time. He initiated the construction of two aqueducts in Rome, Awua Claudia and Anio Novus, which were considered contemporary engineering marvels. In 39 CE, he ordered the construction of a temporary floating bridge between the resort of Baiae and the port of Puteoli, which rivaled the bridge Persian king Xerxes had constructed across the Hellespont. Caligula had two large ships constructed for himself that were among the largest constructed in the ancient world. The larger of the two was essentially an elaborate floating palace with marble floors and plumbing. He also improved the harbors at Rhegium and Sicily, which allowed for increased grain imports from Egypt, possibly in response to the famine Rome experienced.

During his reign, the Empire annexed the Kingdom of Mauretania as a province. Mauretania had previously been a client kingdom ruled by Ptolemy of Mauretania. Details on how and why Mauretania was ultimately annexed remain unclear. Ptolemy was had been invited to Rome by Caligula and suddenly executed in what was seemingly a personal political move, rather than a calculated response to military of economic needs. However, Roman possession of Mauretania ultimately proved to be a boon to the territory, as the subsequent rebellion of Tacfarinas demonstrated how exposed the African Proconsularis was on its western borders. There also was a northern campaign to Britannia that was aborted during Caligula’s reign, though there is not a cohesive narrative of the event.
In 39 CE, relations between Caligula and the Senate deteriorated. Caligula ordered a new set of treason investigations and trials, replacing the consul and putting a number of senators to death. Many other senators were reportedly treated in a degrading fashion and humiliated by Caligula. In 41 CE, Caligula was assassinated as part of a conspiracy by officers of the Praetorian Guard, senators, and courtiers. The conspirators used the assassination as an opportunity to re-institute the Republic, but were ultimately unsuccessful.

Claudius

Claudius, the fourth emperor of the Roman Empire, was the first Roman Emperor to be born outside of Italy. He was afflicted with a limp and slight deafness, which caused his family to ostracize him and exclude him from public office until he shared the consulship with his nephew, Caligula, in 37 CE. Due to Claudius's afflictions, it is likely he was spared from the many purges of Tiberius and Caligula's reigns. As a result, Claudius was declared Emperor by the Praetorian Guard after Caligula's assassination, due to his position as the last man in the Julio-Claudian line.

Despite his lack of experience, Claudius was an able and efficient administrator, as well as an ambitious builder; he constructed many roads, aqueducts, and canals across the Empire. His reign also saw the beginning of the conquest of Britain. Additionally, Claudius presided over many public trials, and issued up to 20 edicts a day. However, in spite of his capable rule, Claudius continued to be viewed as vulnerable by the Roman nobility throughout his reign, forcing
Claudius to constantly defend his position. He did so by emphasizing his place within the Julio-Claudian family, dropping the cognomen, Nero, from his name, and replacing it with Caesar.

Nonetheless, his appointment as emperor by the Praetorian Guard caused damage to his reputation, and this was amplified when Claudius became the first emperor to resort to bribery as a means to secure army loyalty. Claudius also rewarded the Praetorian Guard that had named him emperor with 15,000 sesterces.

Sources

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