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# The Path of Succession from Nero to Marcus Aurelius

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## **The Path of Succession from Nero to Marcus Aurelius**

This is not an account of the character of Nero for there are many such accounts elsewhere. However, I will begin with some context relating to the time of Nero as a requisite to understanding the path of succession which led to the military commander, Vespasian, becoming emperor.

Nero was the last in the bloodline of emperors known as the Julio Claudians. This line began with the first emperor of the Roman Empire, Augustus. When Augustus died the role was inherited by Tiberius. Then came the rule of Caligula, followed by Claudius who in turn was succeeded by Nero.

The first five years of Nero's reign were actually regarded in high esteem and considered an adequate mode of rule to replicate for future emperors. At this stage Nero was heavily influenced by his two most noted advisors and mentors, these being the philosopher Seneca, whom he would later persecute by insisting upon Seneca taking his own life, and also by Burrus who was a respected soldier. His mother Agrippina was also said to have largely kept him on the straight and narrow, although she later met a similar fate to Seneca when Nero had her killed. He proceeded to do the same with other members of his immediate family.

Towards the end of Nero's reign there were many issues that the empire was confronted with. In Britain, the Iceni tribe under Queen Boudica rose up against the Roman rule and many of Britain's cities, including London, were burnt to the ground. To the east, in Judea, incensed by the burning of their temple, there were Jewish revolts against the emperor and as a result of which, he dispatched the general Vespasian to quell the uprising. Vespasian at this stage was already an experienced general and had been a prominent soldier in the conquest of Britain under Claudius.

Then, on 18th July 64AD, the Great Fire of Rome broke out. The fire burned for 9 days, destroying much of the city and rendering a great number of people homeless. To his credit, Nero did allow these people to reside in the palace gardens as well as helping to rebuild the city to rehouse the displaced peoples and in doing so consideration was given to a new buildings risk factor against future fires. However, to divert attention away from himself after he was, almost certainly wrongly, accused of starting the fire, he put the blame on the Christians. At this time the Christian population was extremely small and they were viewed as somewhat of a cult and thus

were an easy target. It was at this stage that the first significant persecution of Christians in the empire began.

Amidst the challenges facing the empire and uprisings against his rule, Nero eventually committed suicide.

As Nero died without a bloodline heir, there was no imminent successor to the throne. This was seen as a time of crisis in Rome with the Senate left unsure of who to appoint and the Praetorian Guard, the soldiers whose duty it was to protect the emperor, feared for their own roles and future well being. This led to the civil wars of 69-70AD which saw the role of emperor change hands four times in eighteen months.

The first of which was Galba, who had bribed his troops in order to aid his seizure of power. However, on being proclaimed emperor he failed to pay what he was deemed to owe his troops. As a result of this, his own lieutenant, Otho, in turn bribed the Praetorian Guard to murder Galba; which they duly obliged to do, resulting in Otho becoming the new emperor.

But this was not the end of the chaos. Due to the empire's vast size by this stage, there were a number of commanders each assigned to protect different regions of the empire. Each of these commanders would have their own legions who were loyal to them. Once Otho had become emperor, Vitellius marched his troops down from the German frontier and two battles against Otho's forces ensued. Vitellius won these battles leading Otho to commit suicide and Vitellius was now proclaimed emperor.

Over in the east of the empire, the troops in Syria, Judea and those in Egypt believed that Vespasian was the ideal leader for the empire and being loyal to him they proclaimed him as the emperor elect. Although Vespasian did not march on Rome himself, he did allow his troops to do so whilst he relocated to Egypt leaving his son, Titus, to complete the quelling of the rebels in Judea. It is possible that by moving to Egypt and not accompanying his troops to Rome he was providing himself another means to aid his victory by having the ability to cut off the supply of grain and other rich resources from Egypt to Rome should his troops struggle in their endeavours. His troops however, were successful and thus, the reign of Vespasian began and this was a reign which once more brought stability to the empire.

Vespasian was seen as a more compassionate and less domineering ruler. Although he still yielded complete power, he would often delegate to other officials and responded to criticism

diplomatically as opposed to eliminating those who spoke out against him. Overall he ruled with a more relaxed attitude but he also brought in reforms that made the roles of the emperor more formal. With the aid of the Senate a list of these roles was created known as the Lex de Imperie Vespasian. These roles were committed to a bronze tablet that still survives today and can be seen on display at the Capitoline Museum in Rome. These laws included the following rights of the emperor: to make treaties, convene the Senate, appoint magistrates, adjust city boundaries and to be exempt himself from all laws. It also included the inscribed quote:

*“And whatever he shall deem to be according to the customs of the Republic and to be for the greatest of divine, human, public, and private matters, he has the right and power to undertake and to do.”*

Much of the Senate had been desecrated during the turbulent times that preceded Vespasian's reign and choosing from aristocrats from all over the empire and its provinces he added an additional 400 senators. He also created many positions of power in the municipalities and allowed those offered such roles to exert a greater degree of authority throughout their municipality. These actions on reflection, may have played a huge role in reducing revolts from distant parts of the empire and aided a greater acceptance to his leadership than had been experienced by his predecessors.

On taking power, the empire was in a great amount of debt which Vespasian tackled pragmatically and methodically. He began by conducting a census of the land which provided a logical means by which to determine taxes. Financial stability was soon restored throughout the empire and a series of economic reforms were introduced. These reforms included the subsidising of education and culture. They also led to a number of public works projects such as a new Temple of Jupiter, a Temple of Peace and a huge new forum providing extra administration space. It was under the reign of Vespasian that the construction of a huge new amphitheater, the Colosseum, began. Following the crushing of the Jewish revolt many of the Jews were enslaved and these slaves were involved in the construction of the Colosseum.

Upon the death of Vespasian, power was passed to his son Titus and he continued to rule with much the same decree as his father had done. The building of the Colosseum was completed under his rule and to mark its opening the city enjoyed one hundred consecutive days of entertainment.

Titus too was a popular emperor albeit, he was soon presented with a number of challenges during his short time as emperor. First, there was a great plague outbreak and then came a second fire of Rome. On 24th August 79AD Mount Vesuvius erupted resulting in the destruction of many surrounding towns including the complete burial of the town of Pompeii.

Titus died after only two years on the throne, leaving his brother Domitian to take up the mantle. Although he was an emperor whose character was more akin to that of Nero and Caligula, the empire still operated without too much turmoil. However, he soon became paranoid that those around him were fighting for his position and as a result began having members of the Senate put to death. The fear induced amongst the Senate meant a conspiracy was set in motion which resulted in one of Domitian's servants being paid to murder him. This brought an end to the Flavian dynasty.

This time the Senate were prepared and acted quickly, announcing one of their own, Nerva, as the new emperor and the Antonian dynasty begun. By means of a series of adoptions Nerva was the great-great grandfather of Marcus Aurelius. During the Antonian period the empire reached its largest size stretching from Britain in the north to Egypt in the south and from Iberia in the west to Judea and Syria in the east. At its high point the empire contained 50 provinces and was home to 50 million inhabitants. Being in old age when he took to the throne, Nerva adopted one of his leading generals at the time to be his successor and two years later in 98AD this successor, Trajan, became the new emperor.

Trajan was the first emperor whose own origins were from outside of Italy, being born himself in Spain. Prior to becoming emperor he had a great deal of experience both in politics and in the military. He was the first emperor to lead protracted military campaigns in person which set a new trend of what was to be expected for those that followed him.

Trajan was seen as a popular and hardworking emperor and acquired the notion of being the ideal ruler, even obtaining the title "Optimus Princeps" (the best princeps).

More land was added to the empire under his reign, most notably the capturing of Dacia (modern day Romania), the region just north of the Danube river and immediately to the west of its estuary into the Black Sea. The crossing of the Danube was achieved by the construction of a huge timber bridge over the river, a remarkable feat for the time. The conquest was seen as a high point in the empire for Dacia was blessed with huge resources in gold and silver. This resulted in the empire acquiring 550 tonnes of gold and silver overnight and a great deal of this wealth was spent on extravagant building projects, most notably Trajan's Forum. Here, was constructed a 100ft high column that is decorated with a carved storyboard wrapping, depicting the conquest of Dacia and contains 2600 carved figures. The column, known as Trajan's column, still survives to this day.

Following further conquests to the east of Arabia and further parts of Mesopotamia, the empire was brought into direct conflict by means of its new borders with Parthia, modern day Iraq. This led to an attempted invasion of Parthia and although initially successful the campaign became bogged down and lengthy battles ensued. Around this time revolts began in other provinces, including another Jewish revolt, forcing Trajan to turn his attention to these.

Trajan fell ill and died in 117AD and was succeeded by his adopted son, Hadrian. There is an interesting context here in that Hadrian was also an accomplished military man and he too had commanded a provincial army, which set a precedent at the time that the military was a means to the throne itself.

Hadrian visited much of the empire himself throughout his reign. His childless marriage with Sabina meant that he adopted a senator, Lucius Ceionius Commodus, in 136AD. Ceionius Commodus already had a small son by the name of Lucius who would therefore have become heir upon Ceionius taking the throne.

Without prior military experience though, Ceionius was sent to the Danube frontier as it was perceived that trouble was about to grow in that area. However, soon after his return to Rome in 138AD Ceionius died of a brain haemorrhage at the age of 36. At the time his son, Lucius, was deemed too young to take over the throne in the event of Hadrian's death and thus, Hadrian turned to a man of distinguished senatorial experience in Antonius Pius. On adoption of Antonius Pius to be his successor, Hadrian did so with the provision that Antonius would in turn adopt the young Lucius as well as another youngster, Antonius' nephew, Marcus Aurelius. In

doing so Hadrian had laid the path, not only for his immediate successor, but for two potential heirs also. There is a train of thought here that this may not only have been with the foresight of having an additional heir in case anything would happen to one of the youngsters, but that Hadrian had started to believe the empire was becoming too large to be ruled by one man alone.

Antonius Pius ruled from 138-161AD. Despite the relatively long duration of his reign, he presided over a relatively uneventful period and did not undertake any major campaigns, not once leaving Italy himself. It was following his death that his two adopted sons, Lucius and Marcus Aurelius took up the roles of co-emperors.