

# Antoninus Pius

Titus Aurelius Fulvus Boionius Arrius Antoninus Pius (September 19, 86–March 7, 161) was Roman emperor 138 to 161. He was the fourth of the Five Good Emperors and a member of the Aurelii. He did not possess the sobriquet "Pius" until after his accession to the throne. Almost certainly, he earned the name "Pius" because he compelled the Senate to deify Hadrian.

## Childhood and family

He was the son of Titus Aurelius Fulvus, consul in 89 whose family came from Nemausus (modern-day Nîmes), and was born near Lanuvium. After the death of his father, he was brought up under the care of Arrius Antoninus, his maternal grandfather, a man of integrity and culture, and a friend of Pliny the Younger.

## Favour with Hadrian

Having filled with more than usual success the offices of quaestor and praetor, he obtained the consulship in 120; he was next appointed by the Emperor Hadrian as one of the four proconsuls to administer Italia, then greatly increased his reputation by his conduct as proconsul of Asia. He acquired much favor with the Emperor Hadrian, who adopted him as his son and successor on February 25, 138, after the death of his first adopted son Aelius Verus, on the condition that he himself would adopt Marcus Annius Verus, the son of his wife's brother, and Lucius, son of Aelius Verus, who afterwards became the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aelius Verus (colleague of Marcus Aurelius).

## Reign

On his accession, Antoninus' name became "Imperator Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pontifex Maximus". One of his first acts as Emperor was to persuade the Senate to grant divine honours to Hadrian, which they had at first refused; his efforts to persuade the Senate to grant these honours is the most likely reason given for his title of Pius (dutiful in affection; compare pietas). Two other reasons for this title are that he would support his aged father-in-law with his hand at Senate meetings, and that he had saved those men that Hadrian, during his period of ill-health, had condemned to death. He built temples, theaters, and mausoleums, promoted the arts and sciences, and bestowed honours and salaries upon the teachers of rhetoric and philosophy.

His reign was comparatively peaceful; there were several military disturbances throughout the Empire in his time, in Mauretania, Iudaea, and amongst the Brigantes in Britannia, but none of them are considered serious. The unrest in Britannia is believed to have led to the construction of the Antonine Wall from the Firth of Forth to the Firth of Clyde, although it was soon abandoned. He was virtually unique among emperors in that he dealt with these crises without leaving Italy once during his reign, but instead dealt with provincial matters of war and peace through their governors or through imperial letters to the cities such as Ephesus (of which some were publicly displayed). This style of government was highly praised by his contemporaries and by later generations.

Of the public transactions of this period we have scant information, but, to judge by what we possess, those twenty-two years were not remarkably eventful in comparison to those before and after his; the surviving evidence is not complete enough to determine whether we should interpret, with older scholars, that he wisely curtailed the activities of the Roman Empire to a careful minimum, or perhaps that he was uninterested in events away from Rome and Italy and his inaction contributed to the pressing troubles that faced not only Marcus Aurelius but also the emperors of the third century. German historian Ernst Kornemann has had it in his *Römische Geschichte* [2 vols., ed. by H. Bengtson, Stuttgart 1954] that the reign of Antoninus comprised "a succession of grossly wasted opportunities," given the upheavals that were to come. There is more to this argument, given that the Parthians in the East were themselves soon to make no small amount of mischief after Antoninus' passing. Kornemann's brief is that Antoninus might have waged preventive wars to head off these outsiders. Conversely, Ivar Lissner [*Power and Folly; The Story of the Caesars*, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London 1958] has written, "...[Antoninus Pius] lived 'with his head in the clouds where external affairs were concerned'... however, I think it is unfair to criticize him for that. Every monarch or statesman who genuinely believes in the possibility of lasting peace and wishes to spare his people bloodshed does, fundamentally, live with his head in the clouds... for all that, his name makes less impact on the memory than that of such members of the imperial rogues' gallery as Nero or Domitian." The debate will no doubt continue.

He maintained good relations with the Senate (in contrast to Hadrian).

## Death

After the longest reign since Augustus, Antoninus died of fever at Lorium in Etruria, about twelve miles from Rome, on March 7 161, giving the keynote to his life in the last word that he uttered when the tribune of the night-watch came to ask the password &mdash; "aequanimitas" (equanimity). His body was placed in Hadrian's mausoleum, a column was dedicated to him on the Campus Martius, and the temple he had built in the Forum in 141 to his deified wife Faustina was rededicated to the deified Faustina and the deified Antoninus.

## Marriage and issue

In his domestic relations Antoninus was not so fortunate. His wife, Faustina the Elder, has almost become a byword for her lack of womanly virtue; but she seems to have kept her hold on his affections to the last. On her death in the third year of his reign, he honoured her memory by the foundation of a charity for orphan girls, who bore the name of *Alimentariae Faustinae*, following the practice of prior emperors in endowing an *alimentaria* to promote the welfare of children and an increased population. He had by her two sons and two daughters; but they all died before his elevation to the throne, except Faustina the Younger, who became the wife of Marcus Aurelius. The names of his children that didn't survive to adulthood were Marcus Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus, Marcus Galerius Aurelius Antoninus and Aurelia Fadilla.

## Sources

The only account of his life handed down to us is that of the *Historia Augusta*, an unreliable and mostly fabricated work. Antoninus is unique among Roman emperors in that he has no other biographies. Historians have therefore turned to public records for what details we know.

#### In later scholarship

Antoninus in many ways was the ideal of the landed gentleman praised not only by ancient Romans, but also by later scholars of classical history, such as Edward Gibbon or the author of the article on Antoninus Pius in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

"A few months afterwards, on Hadrian's death, he was enthusiastically welcomed to the throne by the Roman people, who, for once, were not disappointed in their anticipation of a happy reign. For Antoninus came to his new office with simple tastes, kindly disposition, extensive experience, a well-trained intelligence and the sincerest desire for the welfare of his subjects. Instead of plundering to support his prodigality, he emptied his private treasury to assist distressed provinces and cities, and everywhere exercised rigid economy (hence the nickname *&kappa;&upsilon;&mu;&iota;&nu;&omicron;&pi;&rho;&iota;&sigma;&tau;&eta;&sigma;f*; "cummin-splitter"). Instead of exaggerating into treason whatever was susceptible of unfavorable interpretation, he spurned the very conspiracies that were formed against him into opportunities for demonstrating his clemency. Instead of stirring up persecution against the Christians, he extended to them the strong hand of his protection throughout the empire. Rather than give occasion to that oppression which he regarded as inseparable from an emperor's progress through his dominions, he was content to spend all the years of his reign in Rome, or its neighbourhood."

#### References

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