



10 OF ROME'S MOST DESPICABLE CHARACTERS

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From crazed emperors to ruthless soldiers, meet some of the most depraved and treacherous characters that lurked in the darkest depths of the Roman Empire.

Roads, aqueducts, newspapers - these are just a few of the inventions the Roman Empire gave to the world. Not only was the empire home to the first shopping mall, but it also helped to create the system of social welfare that we use today, transforming an uncivilised old world into one of innovation and splendour. But there is a dark and sinister underbelly of this renowned ancient civilisation, one that runs thick with corruption, deceit and blood. A beacon of

but it housed some of the most depraved and disturbing men and women to ever grace the planet, making Rome one of the most dangerous places to live in the world.

From the world's first serial killer who rented her services out, to the teenage emperor whose idea of a good time was hiding lions in the beds of his guests, we examine some of the most menacing and memorable characters born of a world where almost anyone could be emperor, and

GAIUS VERRES 120-43 BCE

The greed that brought Sicily to its knees

Profession: Magistrate
Infamous for: Destroying the lives of an entire nation

X Born to a father who was accused of corruption himself, Verres would grow up to become one of the most abhorrent personifications of the Roman Republic's depraved final years. He became a financial administrator to a consul, and when civil war broke out he used his power to embezzle military funds. In 80 BCE he joined the staff of Governor Dolabella of Cilicia, and indulged his passion for works of art by stripping the temples of their paintings and statues for his own collection. When Dolabella stood trial for his extortions, Verres gave evidence to get him convicted and received a pardon for his own crimes as a result.

In 74 BCE he was appointed governor of Sicily, a rich and profitable province of the empire. The land had previously enjoyed a relatively peaceful and prosperous history, but Verres's appointment sent

that crashing down. When wealthy Sicilians died, Verres would use his corrupt judges to get a slice of the inheritance. If judges refused to comply they were swiftly killed. He ordered grand statues to be built in his likeness, abolished a successful agricultural system, thereby throwing farmers into abject poverty, and turned a prosperous trading nation into one that struggled to feed its own citizens. His henchmen prowled the country for works of art for their master and seized whatever they liked - even brazenly stealing a public statue of Mercury.

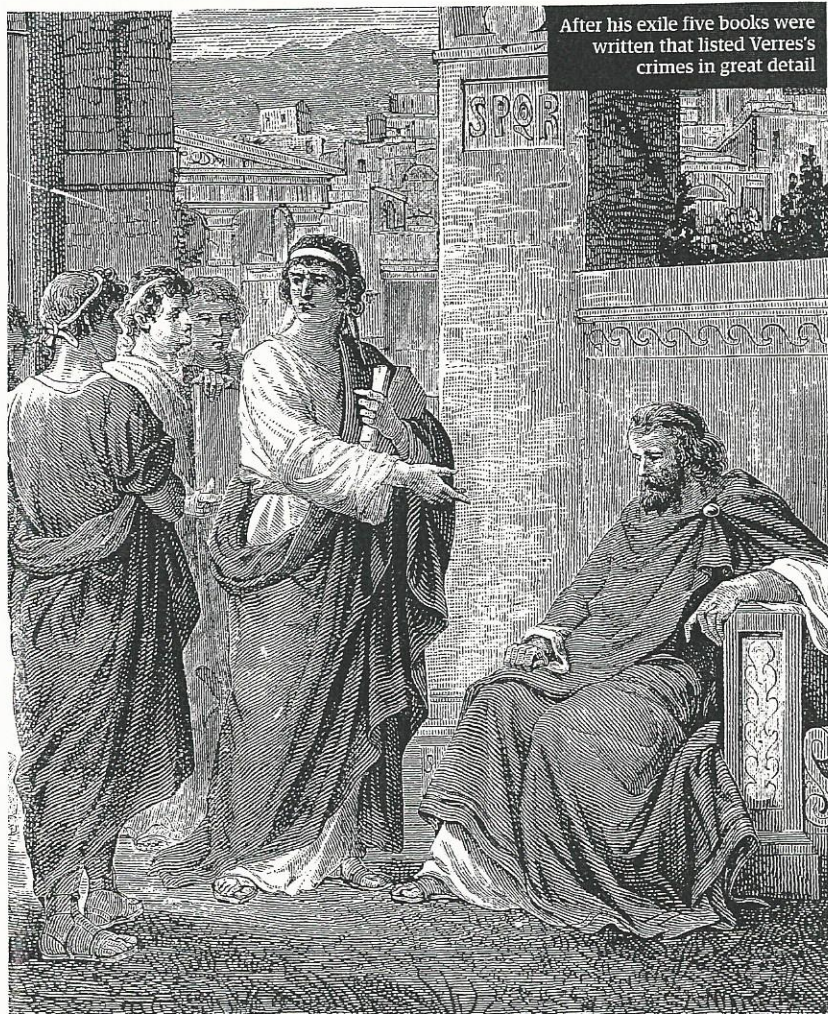
Verres's luck finally ran out when he was made to return to Rome after the pleas of desperate Sicilians. Although he tried to buy his way out of his trial, he was ultimately forced into exile.

GREED

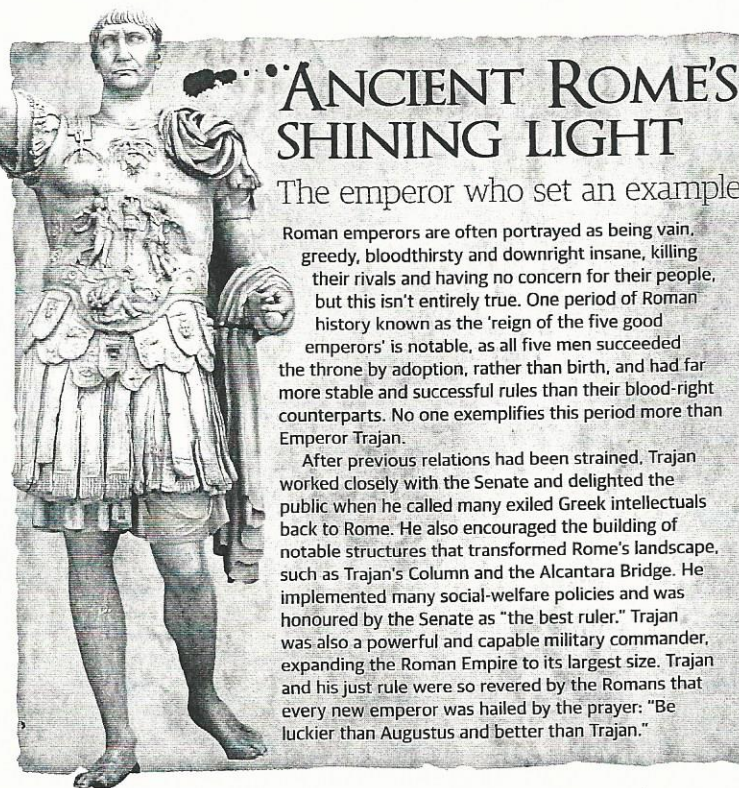
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After his exile five books were written that listed Verres's crimes in great detail

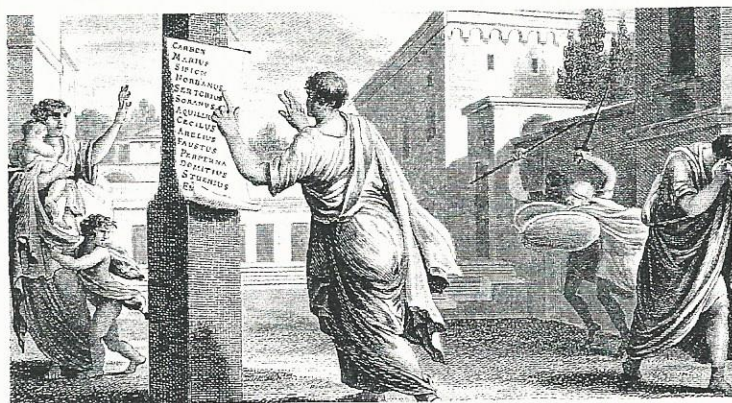


ANCIENT ROME'S SHINING LIGHT

The emperor who set an example

Roman emperors are often portrayed as being vain, greedy, bloodthirsty and downright insane, killing their rivals and having no concern for their people, but this isn't entirely true. One period of Roman history known as the 'reign of the five good emperors' is notable, as all five men succeeded the throne by adoption, rather than birth, and had far more stable and successful rules than their blood-right counterparts. No one exemplifies this period more than Emperor Trajan.

After previous relations had been strained, Trajan worked closely with the Senate and delighted the public when he called many exiled Greek intellectuals back to Rome. He also encouraged the building of notable structures that transformed Rome's landscape, such as Trajan's Column and the Alcantara Bridge. He implemented many social-welfare policies and was honoured by the Senate as "the best ruler." Trajan was also a powerful and capable military commander, expanding the Roman Empire to its largest size. Trajan and his just rule were so revered by the Romans that every new emperor was hailed by the prayer: "Be luckier than Augustus and better than Trajan."



LUCIUS CORNELIUS SULLA 138-78 BCE

The dictator who dealt in fear and death

Profession: Dictator
Infamous for: Purging Rome of 9,000 people

IX Born into relative poverty, Sulla was led by his ruthless spirit to become a famed general and eventual dictator of the Roman Empire. Sulla was a beloved general among his troops, but he also had a ruthless and vicious streak that emerged in his 'proscription'.

As soon as he grasped control of Rome, Sulla was determined to purge the land of anyone he perceived as an enemy. The Greek historian Plutarch wrote: "Sulla now began to make blood flow, and he filled the city with deaths without number or limit." Sulla

officially ordered the execution of some 1,500 people, but it is believed that more than 9,000 lost their lives in this brutal purge. A young Julius Caesar only just managed to escape the city. Anyone who dared to shelter a proscribed person would also face death, and the sons and grandsons of the named person were barred from political office. The property of anyone who was executed would be sold off at auction, giving Sulla and his supporters great expanses of wealth.

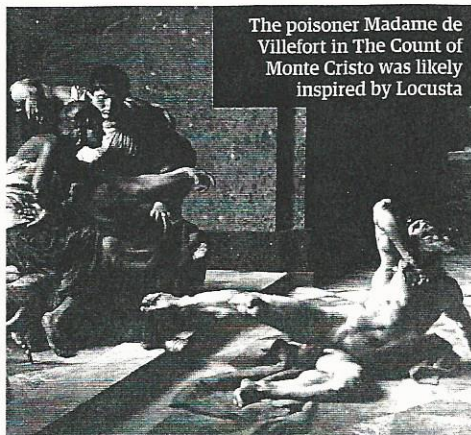
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The poisoner Madame de Villefort in The Count of Monte Cristo was likely inspired by Locusta

LOCUSTA OF GAUL

UNKNOWN-69 CE

The world's first serial killer

Profession: Killer for hire

Famous for: Poisoning Emperor Claudius

VIII

Growing up in the quiet countryside of Gaul, Locusta learned much about the herbs and

plants that grew around her home. Upon moving to Rome, she found her knowledge of herbal lore in demand by ambitious men who wished to get rid of their rivals. She began a business as a professional poisoner and made a name for herself. In 54 CE she attracted her most influential patron yet, Empress Livia. The wife of Emperor Claudius requested help in killing her husband so her young son, Nero, could claim the throne.

After getting him drunk, they fed him poisoned mushrooms, which quickly suffered extreme stomach pains and died. Locusta's talents were required again when Nero ordered her to poison his stepbrother and rival to the throne, Britannicus. When the boy consumed the poison he went into mad convulsions, but Nero calmly told everyone present that he was epileptic. The dinner party continued and Britannicus died a few hours later.

Nero rewarded Locusta richly for her assistance, giving her a grand villa and luxurious gifts. With the emperor on her side, her skills became renowned that she set up a school where she passed on her knowledge to eager students. Locusta even gave Nero a poison kit of his own to use in the event of taking his own life. Unfortunately, when Nero was condemned to death in 68 CE, he forgot the kit and had to use his own dagger. With her most powerful ally gone, Locusta was arrested and taken through the city in chains before being executed.

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MARCUS PERPENNA VENTO

History's worst-ever dinner host

Profession: Statesman

Infamous for: Betraying and murdering a guest

VII

When the military faction he belonged to was defeated by Lucius Cornelius Sulla, Perpenna

fled Rome with a small army and a wealth of money. With a greedy desire to rule, he decided to wage war against Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius of the region he had escaped to - Hispania. But Perpenna was a terrible leader and his soldiers soon rebelled against him, demanding to be handed over to Sertorius, the ruler of Hispania. Facing his own death, Perpenna agreed with great humiliation.

Still licking his scars, Perpenna could only watch on as Sertorius grew stronger and stronger. Perpenna encouraged the disdain of his fellow nobles and senators, hoping to feed on their jealousy for his own gain. Uprisings and revolts plagued the region, as the popular and eloquent Sertorius struggled to find the source

of discontent. When Sertorius won yet another victory, Perpenna invited him to a feast in his honour. The celebration, usually an occasion of much festivity, was specially designed to offend and disgust the famed general. Pushed to breaking point, Sertorius resigned to silently ignoring the humiliation. Perpenna used this opportunity to set his minions upon the unsuspecting guest, slaughtering him before he had a chance to defend himself. Perpenna's retribution was swift and brutal: faced with the anger of an even more powerful enemy - Pompey - he hopelessly pled for his life, offering all of Sertorius's papers. Pompey agreed, but when he was given the papers he burned them and executed the betrayer.

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SHOCKING PASTIMES

The depraved and vulgar activities that filled a Roman's spare time

Purging at feasts

The decadent, grand feasts of Ancient Rome are a well-kept secret. More unknown, however, is their penchant for vomiting during these feasts. Wealthy Romans loved their food so much that when they were full, they would induce vomiting so they could continue eating. This was considered a part of fine dining, and slaves were present to clear up any vomit that surfaced during the feast.

Slave abuse


The slave trade in Ancient Rome was a cornerstone of the economy, and the slaves themselves were treated as little less than tradable goods. As they were regarded as property, Roman law didn't view slave sex as infidelity. Seen as having 'no persona', Roman slaves would be sold at auctions or even in shops. If a slave was deemed as having defects, the buyer could take the slave back within six months for a refund.

Lewd graffiti

Some of the most impressive works of art originate from Ancient Rome, but they were also involved in a different art form - graffiti - and the messages were just as rude as today. Experts were surprised by the amount of graffiti on the walls of Pompeii. The messages include boasting, insults and profanities, such as "Phileros is a eunuch", "Celadus makes the girls moan" and "The boss isn't worth a rat's ass!"



Sejanus was responsible for the development of the powerful Praetorian Guard


"Sejanus secretly seduced Drusus's wife and together they slowly poisoned the heir"

SEJANUS 20BCE-31CE The emperor's puppet master

Profession: Soldier














Infamous for: Purging Rome of any who dared defy him

VI Born into the lower upper social class of the Roman Republic, Sejanus was led by pure ambition and drive to succeed. Slowly but surely Sejanus began to creep closer to Emperor Tiberius, and by 23 CE he held great influence over the decisions of the emperor, with Tiberius referring to his confidant as "Socius Laborum" or "My partner in my toils."

Sejanus consolidated his power by swiftly eliminating any potential opponents, but his primary target was the emperor's son, Drusus. The rivalry between the two was no secret, and Drusus had publicly punched Sejanus during an argument, voicing his objection that a "stranger was invited to assist in the government while the emperor's son was alive." Sejanus secretly seduced Drusus's wife and together they slowly poisoned the heir until he died of apparent natural causes in 23 CE.

Struck by grief, Tiberius bestowed most of his power to Sejanus. With effective control of Rome, Sejanus led a brutal purge of senators and powerful men. During the purge, Sejanus managed to exile the ambitious widow of Germanicus, Agrippina, and two of her sons, who seemingly starved to death. With statues erected in his honour and his rivals crippled by fear and tyranny, Sejanus was Rome's most powerful man.

Tiberius was alerted to the growing threat and summoned Sejanus to a Senate meeting where he was ambushed and arrested. He was strangled and his body cast down the Gemonian stairs of execution, where a riotous mob tore it to pieces. So furious were the people with Sejanus's deception that they hunted down and killed anyone associated with him.

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**MARCUS
LICINIUS
CRASSUS**
115-53 BCE

The man who amassed wealth from others' misfortune












Profession: General

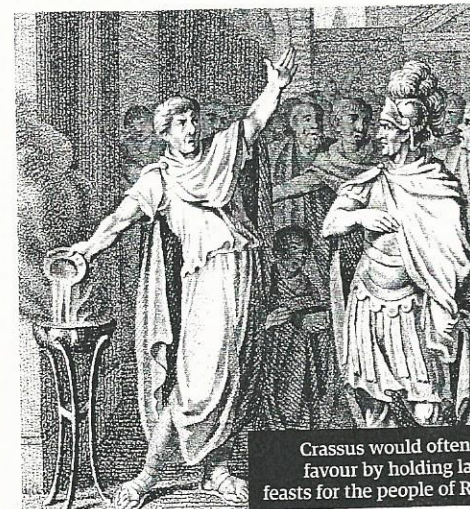
Infamous for: Executing 6,000 slaves

V Crassus is thought to be the richest man in the history of Rome, with an estimated 200 million sesterii, or about £5.4 billion (\$8.4 billion), but he did not earn his fortune from entirely moral means.

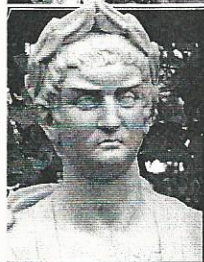
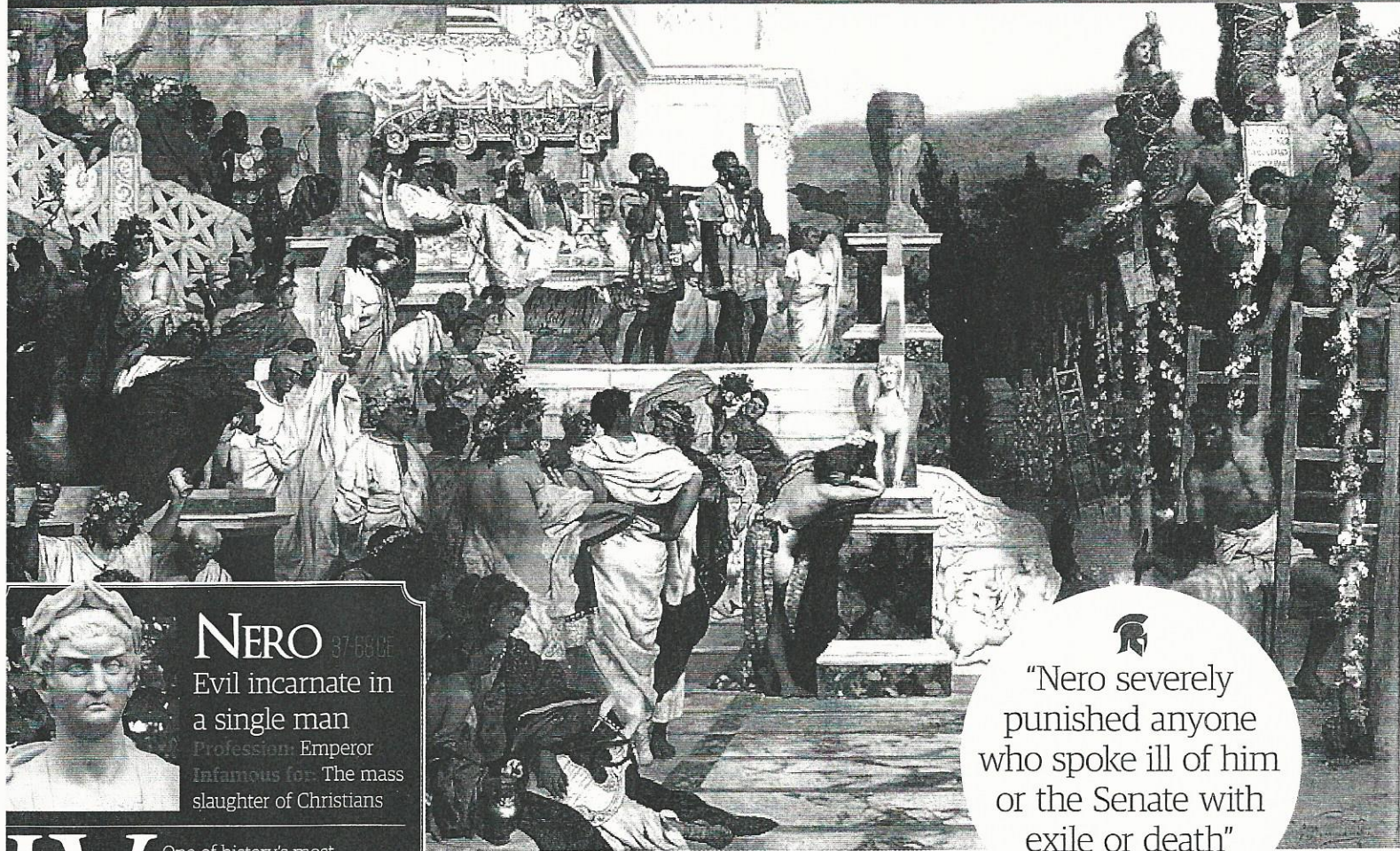
One of Crassus's moneymaking enterprises was control of the only fire department in Rome. When a fire broke out, Crassus and his team would arrive at the site and haggle with the owner of the property, offering to purchase the doomed building at an outrageously low price. The owner would have to let on hopelessly as their home burned, and more often than not would hand over the property to Crassus. Then Crassus's slaves would move in and eliminate the fire. Once Crassus had acquired the house he would rent it back to the previous owner for a profit.

As his wealth poured in, Crassus was able to buy his way into political power, serving as a member of the First Triumvirate with Julius Caesar and Pompey. Crassus also led his own army against the slave uprising of Spartacus. He controlled his force with fear and when any soldier fled from battle, he executed one out of every ten men. When victory was finally achieved, Crassus demonstrated his brutal and bloodstreak by crucifying 6,000 of Spartacus's followers.

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DEPRAVITY	 



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NERO 37-68 CE
Evil incarnate in a single man
Profession: Emperor
Infamous for: The mass slaughter of Christians

“Nero severely punished anyone who spoke ill of him or the Senate with exile or death”

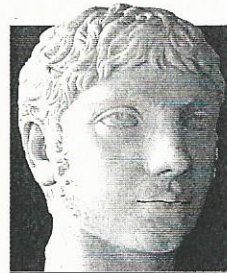
IV One of history's most infamous leaders, Nero won his throne through murder, and death is what he brought

to Rome. Although his mother's actions had helped him become emperor, Nero became wary of her influence. He attempted to kill his mother in a shipwreck, but when she survived he ordered her assassination, masking it as suicide.

He continued his bloody reign by divorcing his first wife before having her beheaded, apparently bringing her head to his second wife. She didn't fare much better, as Nero reportedly kicked her to death while she was pregnant. On a quest for ultimate power, Nero punished anyone who spoke ill of him or the Senate with exile or death. He hunted down his rivals and had them killed. When he was accused of treason, he simply had the accusers executed too.

A frequent visitor of bars and brothels, when a great fire decimated the city Nero spent a vast amount of the empire's money constructing a grand palace featuring a 30-metre (98-foot)-tall statue of himself. To retain some popularity, Nero blamed the fire on Christians, who faced horrific persecution as a result. They were arrested, impaled, torn apart by vicious dogs and even burned as torches to light his gardens.

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ELAGABALUS 203-222

The boy emperor and his deadly practical jokes

Profession: Emperor
Infamous for: Throwing poisonous snakes into crowds of people

III The reports of the cruelty of this notorious emperor are impossible to ascertain, but Elagabalus was certainly one of the most controversial and malicious Romans of all time.

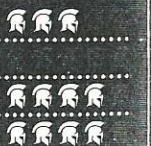
Becoming emperor at just 14 years old, Elagabalus flouted Roman traditions and quickly created a multitude of enemies. Early in his reign, he replaced the head of the Roman god Jupiter

with the head of the deity of his religion and forced the government to participate in his religious festivals. A picture of Elagabalus was placed over a statue of the goddess Victoria, forcing people to make offers to him rather than her. He also ignored tradition when he married a Vestal virgin who was forbidden from engaging in sexual intercourse, else be buried alive. He instated his divinity further when he had himself circumcised in order to be the high priest of his new religion.

One of the most shocking stories of Elagabalus is that he frequently sacrificed children and used their guts to read the future. The young emperor also seemed to delight in twisted practical jokes; in one instance he threw venomous snakes into a crowd in Rome, and even created a lottery with prizes ranging from wasps and dead dogs to an execution note. Credited with creating the whoopee cushion, he also enjoyed tormenting guests by serving them rocks and wax at dinner parties, and even snuck lions into their beds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Elagabalus was assassinated when he was just 18 years old.



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CALIGULA 12-41CE

The insane emperor who proclaimed himself a god

Profession: Emperor

Infamous for: Throwing innocent crowds to the lions in the Coliseum

I Caligula's reign was not bloody or vicious at first. When he entered Rome as emperor, he was hailed by adoring crowds as "our baby" and "our star", and the first few months were relatively peaceful. But in October 37 CE he suffered an illness that seemed to completely alter his mental state. He began joining in the brutal imperial tradition of killing off anyone he saw as a rival, and that included his own cousin, adopted son and possibly his grandmother. He kept his uncle Claudius alive but tormented him relentlessly with cruel practical jokes and public humiliations. The public weren't spared from his cruelty either, as people were executed without trial or forced to commit suicide.

Desperate for money, Caligula would also target people for execution purely to seize their property, and even auctioned the lives of gladiators at shows. Despite the financial worries, he splashed cash by

constructing two of the biggest ships of the ancient world, with the largest the equivalent of a floating palace, replete with marble floors. His obsession with his public image took a controversial turn when he appeared in public dressed as various Roman gods, and even referred to himself as a god, both in official documents and in person. Two temples were erected in his honour and Caligula removed the heads of statues of ancient gods, replacing them with his own.

Caligula's reputation for outrageous and despicable actions was encouraged when he found himself bored while watching the games at the amphitheatre, so ordered his guards to throw in some of the crowd to be eaten by animals. It was also reported that he enjoyed chewing up the testicles of his victims while they were still attached to them. Caligula was so universally loathed that he became the first Roman emperor to be assassinated, by being stabbed over and over again. The assassins even killed his one-year-old daughter by bashing her head against a wall, to ensure his bloodline would be destroyed for good.

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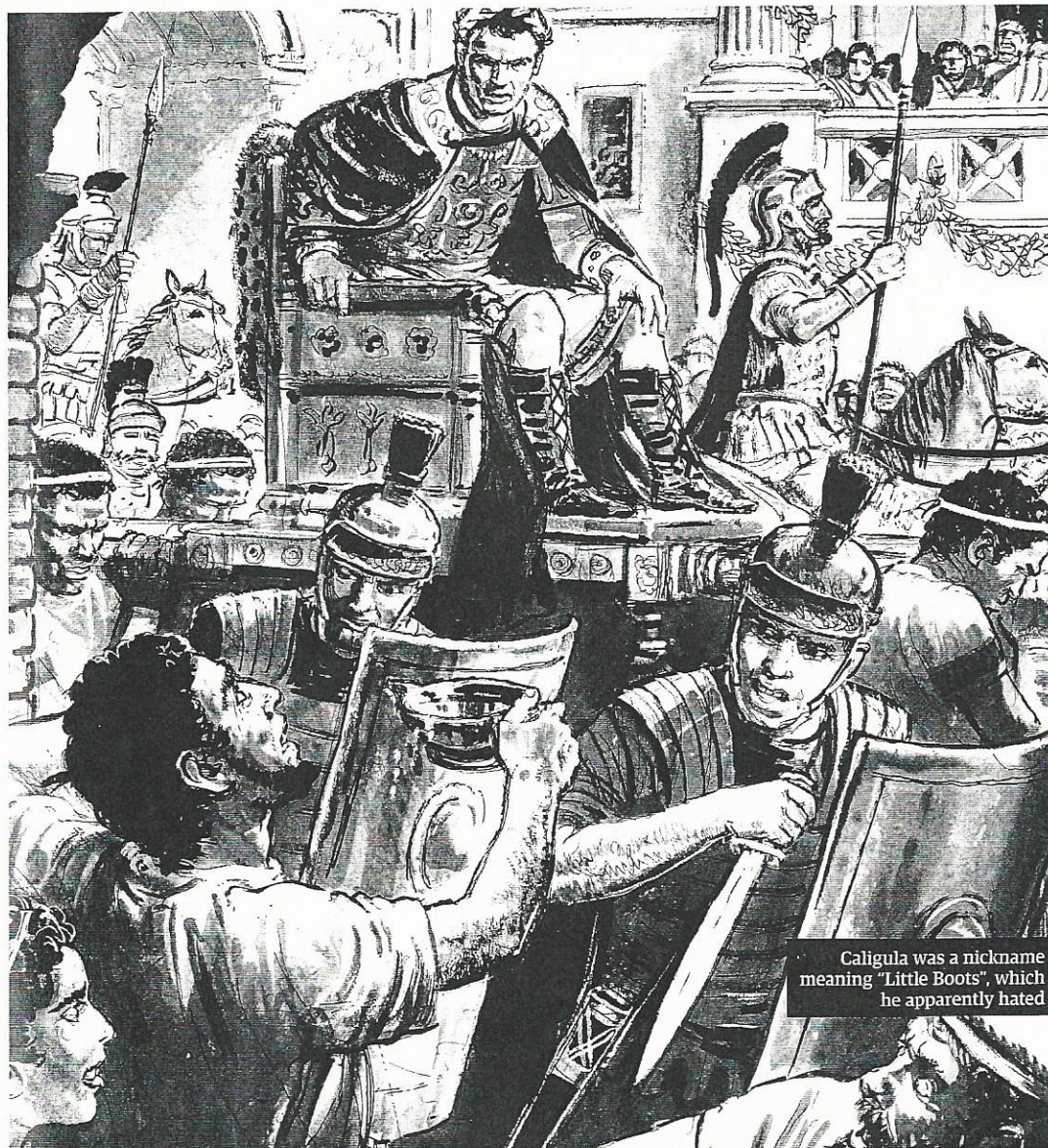
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Caligula was a nickname meaning "Little Boots", which he apparently hated



Irene was eventually kicked off the throne, exiled and had to survive by spinning wool

IRENE OF ATHENS 752-80

The empress that placed ultimate power above all else

Profession: Empress

Infamous for: Blinding her son

I Although considered a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church for her support of idols, Irene of Athens also had a much darker and bloodier streak. Although she came from a noble family, she was an unlikely bride of Leo IV, emperor of the Byzantine Empire. When her husband died, Irene became regent for her son, Constantine - just ten years old at the time. A group of powerful figures took the emperor's death as a chance to rebel, but Irene demonstrated her quick and brutal justice by arresting them and forcing them to become monks, making it impossible for them to rule.

Although she was regent, Irene clearly established her dominance by having herself, not her son, on the first coins printed during his reign, printing his name on the less prominent side of the coin. When Constantine came of age, Irene showed no signs of giving up power, but her son had inherited her ambition, so a political battle ensued between the two. The empress arrested her son's men and had them flogged and exiled, as well as any supporters. She also persuaded the army to swear to not accept him as emperor until she died. When Constantine was distracted by the birth of his son, she began to plot a way to become sole ruler. She had her supporters seize her son and imprison him, before he was blinded by having his eyes gouged out, eliminating any chance of him ascending the throne. He died either from his injuries or later in exile. With all her rivals stamped out and family dead, Irene finally had the ultimate control she so desired.

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