

# Hadrian

<sup>1</sup> The Roman Empire had its fair share of bad emperors, but it also had some good ones. Up to 180 A.D., for example, there were several good emperors in a row who reigned over the vast kingdom. Hadrian was one of them.

<sup>2</sup> Hadrian was born to a rich and well-connected family on January 24, 76 A.D. When he was about ten years old, his father suddenly fell ill and passed away. After that Hadrian became the ward of Acilius Attianus and Trajan. The former was his father's friend. The latter was his father's cousin.



<sup>3</sup> Growing up, Hadrian never did anything notable. Like most ambitious men at his time, he joined the military. He fought at the frontlines. He ran for public office. And he held several government posts. Throughout them all, his performance was fair. But it was not remarkable. Then, a big break came in 97 A.D. During the fall of that year, Emperor Nerva (the first of the so-called "Five Good Emperors") adopted Trajan as his son. He also made the young man his successor. As Trajan was away from Rome then, Hadrian was sent to deliver the message. Merely a few months later, Hadrian would repeat the same journey again. This time, he acted on his own will. He wanted to be the first person to tell Trajan about Emperor Nerva's death. He wanted to be the first person to congratulate Trajan for being the next emperor. Riding tirelessly for days and even walking the last few miles, Hadrian did beat out the competition. He reached Trajan before anyone else and relayed the news. In the early months of 98 A.D., Trajan ascended the throne. He became the first non-Italian ruler for the Roman Empire. He was also the second of the "Five Good Emperors."

<sup>4</sup> Trajan was obviously impressed by Hadrian's devotion. So he did everything he could to advance his ward's career. He even let Hadrian marry his grandniece, Vibia Sabina. While the marriage was not a happy one, Hadrian was on very good terms with his mother-in-law, Matidia Augusta. He was on even better terms with the empress, Pompeia Plotina. Years later, his close ties with Trajan's wife would come to help him a great deal.

<sup>5</sup> In early August of 117 A.D., Trajan was sick. As he lay dying, he adopted Hadrian as his son. Shortly after that, he died, and the empress broke the news about the adoption. Because everything took place so fast and so suddenly, many people had doubts. They wondered if Trajan really adopted Hadrian or if Plotina simply forged the will. The answer to that question would forever remain unsolved.

<sup>6</sup> No matter what had actually happened, Hadrian became the new king. His reign of twenty-one years was among the most peaceful and prosperous of all time.

<sup>7</sup> During Hadrian's era, the Roman Empire had few conflicts with its neighbors. And it inflicted only a handful of wars. While the kingdom had few enemies, Hadrian never let his guard down. He traveled around the country often to inspect the troops. He established rigid drilling routines for the soldiers. He ordered the armies to build fortifying walls. All those efforts helped to beef up the empire's defense. One of his most ambitious projects, for example, was to build a stony wall across central Britain. The

construction began in 122 A.D. and probably ended in 130 A.D. Once done, the entire wall stretched from coast to coast for a total distance of 80 Roman miles (about 117 kilometers or 73 miles). The wall itself was 6-10 feet wide and 15 feet high. On both sides, the Roman soldiers dug out a ditch running the length of the wall. For every Roman mile (about 0.92 mile), they built a fort or a "milecastle" to house up to about sixty-four men. In between any two forts, they had two watchtowers with soldiers stationed year-round. On the southern side of the wall, there were a total of seventeen garrisons where tens of thousands of Roman soldiers lived. Each of those garrisons was like a small town, complete with bathhouses, hospitals, and marketplaces. The idea of the so-called Hadrian's Wall was to seal off the Roman Empire's northernmost border. For hundreds of years, it served its purpose. It helped to protect the empire's territory from the tribesmen in Scotland.

<sup>8</sup> Aside from spending time fortifying the country, Hadrian also left behind several remarkable buildings for us to admire. His rebuilding of the Pantheon, for example, showcased the Romans' superb skills in architecture. The structure had three parts -- an entrance portico, a rotunda, and a connection between the two. The rotunda was a circular building with a domed top. Its height of 142 feet was exactly the same as its diameter. At the apex of the dome, there was a circular opening, called the Great Eye. Measuring 27 feet in diameter, this circular opening was a symbol of the sun. It was also the only source of lighting inside the Pantheon. Hadrian began to build this temple to honor all the gods in 118 A.D. The entire construction took nearly a decade to complete.

<sup>9</sup> Like both Emperors Nerva and Trajan before him, Hadrian had no son with his wife. So he had to adopt one for succession. His first pick was Lucius Ceionius Commodus. The choice was a bit puzzling. Commodus, who was later called Aelius Verus, had limited military experience. As a politician, he was more famous for his luxurious lifestyle than his governing records. Some historians believed that Commodus was actually Hadrian's son out of wedlock, but there was no proof supporting this theory. Regardless of what prompted Hadrian to make such a call, it soon became irrelevant. Already in poor health, Commodus died not long after Hadrian's adoption. He never made it to the throne, so Hadrian had to choose another heir.

<sup>10</sup> Hadrian's second pick was far better than his first one. On February 25, 138 A.D., he adopted Antoninus Pius under one condition. That is Antoninus Pius must adopt Marcus Annius Verus, the son of his brother, and Lucius Verus, the son of Aelius Verus, too. Merely five months after this seemingly strange arrangement, on July 10, 138 A.D., Hadrian died of natural causes. Antoninus Pius succeeded him and became the fourth of the "Five Good Emperors." After he himself died in 161 A.D., his two adopted sons took over and were co-rulers of the Roman Empire. Eight years into the throne, Lucius Verus got sick and passed away, leaving his adoptive brother, Marcus Annius Verus (now called Marcus Aurelius), as the sole ruler. Marcus Aurelius was the last of the "Five Good Emperors."

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Hadrian's foresight, the Roman Empire was able to live peacefully and prosperously for the decades to come. His choice of successors was definitely one of the many marvelous gifts he had bestowed on his people.

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