

SECRETS OF ROME

roman emperors did not die in their bed (part ii)

How Roman Emperors died:

History repeats itself... Galba, Otho, Vitellius and the Flavian Dynasty.

Nero committed suicide in 68 AD. During the 12 months that followed it, four different candidates tried to sit on the imperial throne. That is why the year 69 AD was called the "Year of the Four Emperors".

The first who tried to seize the imperial throne was Galba. He was already 70 years old when he proclaimed himself emperor. During the reign of Nero he had a reputation for having strong feelings about Old Roman discipline and traditions. He reached Rome in October, together with Otho, the Governor of Lusitania. Things started to go awry almost from the beginning. His first reforms alienated him from the army and in January 69 he was killed by a soldier sent by his old colleague Otho. It occurred in Roman Forum, by the Basilica Julia. When the old emperor saw his assassins approaching, he presented his throat and exclaimed "Strike, if it is for the good of Rome". A soldier of the XVth Legion drove his sword into Galba's throat. At that point, the others mutilated his arms and legs. Otho then, seized power.

In Rome he had the reputation of being dissolute, idle and a lover of luxury. The Senate did not back his rise to power, and the imperial guard was constantly making new financial demands which he was unable to meet. He was challenged by Vitellius, who had been proclaimed emperor by the Rhine Legions. They fought the final battle in the north of Italy, close to Cremona. Otho, after receiving the news that his army had been defeated, decided to commit suicide in order to avoid any further bloodshed. He stabbed himself inside his own room, after having said farewell to his soldiers and staff. Vitellius, who, in his youth, had been one of Tiberius' favourite catamites (his nickname at the time had been "Spintria", i.e. "sphincter artist"), had the reputation of being a yes-man and a great hedonist. He came from a renowned family. He was not with his army during the battle against Otho. After receiving the news of its victory, Vitellius went to Rome. During his journey, he stopped by the battlefield where his army had defeated Otho's. To the dismay of many, he remarked that the smell of dead enemies was sweet, but the smell of slain citizen was even sweeter. Once in Rome, he proclaimed himself consul for life. However, soon he received word that the armies of the east had put forward a rival candidate: Vespasian, a popular general. The Danube legions backed this latter one, and invaded Italy. Vitellius' men were defeated by them almost exactly on the same spot where they had defeated Otho's army. The victorious legions reached Rome. Vitellius went into hiding in his wife's home on the Aventine. Then, he changed his mind and returned to the palace, where he gathered some gold and fled into a gatekeeper's booth. There he was found by a cohort of the winning army. His hands were tied behind his back. The soldiers forced him to keep his head up and watch as his statues were pulled down. People poked fun at his physical imperfections, and pelted him with horse dung and mud. And yet, when a soldier tried to get a laugh out of the crowd with scornful remarks, Vitellius had the dignity to say "And yet I was your emperor". He was then, tortured to death. His head was chopped off, and his body was thrown into the Tiber.

Vespasian, who belonged to the second class, the knights. He had been born into the gens Flavia. Under Nero, he had been proconsul for the province Africa. In July 69, the legions of Egypt declared his support for him, and two days later, the legions in Judea did the same. In August, the Danube legions joined in. He reached Rome few months later, in 70 AD. During his reign was built the Flavian Amphitheatre, better known as the Colosseum. Vespasian died in 79 AD. He was almost 70 years old and had been suffering from gout for some time. During a tour of Campania, he began to have attacks of fever. He returned to Rome and then headed off to Aquae Cutiliae, near Reate (modern Rieti), where he would often seek rest and relief from the heat. Complications arose since his intestines had become irritated from all the cold water he had been drinking. However, he continued to fulfil his imperial duties. According to some, he died during a violent attack of diarrhoea, in June 79 AD.

His eldest son Titus succeeded him. He conquered Jerusalem in 70 AD and is remembered for his sack and destruction of the Temple. He was known to be very cruel with enemies, and had a bad reputation because of his association with catamites and eunuchs, and his great love for Queen Berenice, a Jewish princess whose ghost is still seen in Rome. However, after he had succeeded his father as emperor, he became a new man. In fact, he proved to be one of the best emperors Rome ever had. He died in 81 AD, soon after he had attended the inaugural games of the Colosseum. He had a violent attack of fever and was carried to Aquae Cutiliae, and shortly thereafter, died, probably in the same room as his father Vespasian some two years before. The Jews believed God had taken his revenge on him and had exacted retribution for his destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. Others rumored that Titus had been killed by his brother Domitian, whose wife apparently had had an affair with him.

Domitian succeeded him on the throne. He was a man with two faces. On the one hand, he made every effort and spend a lot of money to beautify Rome with great monuments. On the other hand, he was a cruel and megalomaniacal tyrant who did not hesitate to use violence to reach his goals. He declared himself dominus et deus (i.e. "Lord and God"), and had gold and silver statues of himself placed on the Capitol. He was killed in 96 AD. He was stabbed to death by a group of members of his court. After his death, the Senate chose a new emperor from its own ranks: Nerva.