

of the city of Rome. We see instead the frozen forests of Germany, a Spain not at all sunny, a North African desert village, and, most tellingly, a dark and claustrophobic Rome. Only the very last image in the film briefly grants us a full panorama of the city.

Still, the sense of conspiracy is strong in *Gladiator*. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* showed us the successful conspiracy to kill Marcus Aurelius, and Livius is finally drawn into another conspiracy to overthrow Commodus and to bring about Marcus' plan to transform an exploitative and violent domination over the world into a multicultural and peaceful global system. In *Gladiator*, the family-revenge plot is connected to the conspiracy of Lucilla, Gracchus, and his fellow-senator Gaius to murder Commodus and fulfill Marcus Aurelius' vision of a restored republic run by the senate. It is only Maximus' obsession with farming and revenge that lends credibility to his pledge that once he has killed Commodus he will withdraw from politics altogether. The conspiratorial atmosphere of the film is reinforced by the counterplotting of Commodus and Senator Falco and by Commodus' menacing narrative to Lucius and Lucilla of a conspiracy against Emperor Claudius long ago. Taken together, the spatial panoramas of the empire and the conspiracy plots or subplots of both films convey a message of the overwhelming complexity of a worldwide system that escapes the control of individual protagonists. With their endings, both films despair of meaningful change.

To Scott, the fundamental flaw in the system is the mob, the people of Rome seen as the audience in the arena, who in turn stand in for the cinema audience. This self-reflexive aspect, absent from *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, is central to *Gladiator*. Lucilla and Maximus, the conspirators, confirm Commodus' observation that the people will love him for the "vision" he will give them with the games in the arena:

Lucilla: The gods have spared you. Don't you understand? Today

I saw a slave become more powerful than the emperor of Rome.

Maximus: The gods have spared me? I am at their mercy with the power only to amuse a mob.

Lucilla: That is power. The mob is Rome.

The director's cynical self-congratulation about the power of the medium he controls and manipulates is built into the politics of his film as a whole. Glorifying in the fictive universe which the bottomless pockets and complex technology of Hollywood can create and at the same time despairing of any truly meaningful deployment of that power, he might say with Proximo: "I am an entertainer."

## The Major Ancient Sources

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## Cassius Dio on Commodus

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Greek historian Cassius Dio (ca. A.D. 163–ca. 235) came to Rome as a young man. He was senator under Commodus and went on to a distinguished political career, twice holding the consulship. He wrote his *Roman History* in eighty books from the arrival of Aeneas down to his own time.

The following excerpts are from the epitome by Xiphilinus of Dio's Book 73. Translator's annotations have been omitted. Editor's additions appear in ⟨ ⟩; textual omissions are indicated by [ . . . ].

Reprinted by permission of the publishers and trustees of the Loeb Classical Library from *Dio's Roman History in Nine Volumes*, tr. Earnest Cary, vol. 9 (LCL 177; Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1927; rpt. 1969). The Loeb Classical Library is a registered trademark of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

1. This man [Commodus] was not naturally wicked, but, on the contrary, as guileless as any man that ever lived. His great simplicity, however, together with his cowardice, made him the slave of his companions, and it was through them that he at first, out of ignorance, missed the better life and then was led on into lustful and cruel habits, which soon became second nature. And this, I think, Marcus ⟨Aurelius⟩ clearly perceived beforehand. Commodus was nineteen years old when his father died, leaving him many guardians, among whom were numbered the best men of the senate. But their suggestions and counsels Commodus rejected, and after making a truce with the barbarians he

hastened to Rome; for he hated all exertion and craved the comfortable life of the city.

2. The Marcomani by reason of the multitude of their people that were perishing and the constant ravaging of their lands no longer had an abundance of either food or men. At any rate they sent only two of their chief men and two others of inferior rank as envoys to sue for peace. And, although Commodus might easily have destroyed them, yet he made terms with them; for he hated all exertion and was eager for the comforts of the city. In addition to the conditions that his father had imposed upon them he also demanded that they restore to him the deserters and the captives that they had taken in the meantime, and that they furnish annually a stipulated amount of grain – a demand from which he subsequently released them. Moreover, he obtained some arms from them and soldiers as well, thirteen thousand from the Quadi and a smaller number from the Marcomani; and in return for these he relieved them of the requirement of an annual levy. However, he further commanded that they should not assemble often nor in many parts of the country, but only once each month and in one place, and in the presence of a Roman centurion; and, furthermore, that they should not make war upon the Iazyges, the Buri, or the Vandili. On these terms, then, he made peace and abandoned all the outposts in their country beyond the strip along the frontier that had been neutralized.

3. Commodus granted peace to the Buri when they sent envoys. Previously he had declined to do so, in spite of their frequent requests, because they were strong, and because it was not peace that they wanted, but the securing of a respite to enable them to make further preparations; but now that they were exhausted he made peace with them, receiving hostages and getting back many captives from the Buri themselves as well as fifteen thousand from the others, and he compelled the others to take an oath that they would never dwell in nor use for pasturage a five-mile strip of their territory next to Dacia. [. . .] Sabinianus also, when twelve thousand of the neighbouring Dacians had been driven out of their own country and were on the point of aiding the others, dissuaded them from their purpose, promising them that some land in our Dacia should be given them.

4. Commodus was guilty of many unseemly deeds, and killed a great many people.

Many plots were formed by various people against Commodus, and he killed a great many, both men and women, some openly and some by means of poison, secretly, making away, in fact, with practically all those who had attained eminence during his father's reign and his own, with

the exception of Pompeianus, Pertinax and Victorinus; these men for some reason or other he did not kill. I state these and subsequent facts, not, as hitherto, on the authority of others' reports, but from my own observation. On coming to Rome he addressed the senate, uttering a lot of trivialities; and among the various stories that he told in his own praise was one to this effect, that once while out riding he had saved the life of his father, who had fallen into a deep quagmire. Such were his lofty pratings. But as he was entering the hunting-theatre, Claudius Pompeianus formed a plot against him: thrusting out a sword in the narrow entrance, he said: "See! This is what the senate has sent you." This man had been betrothed to the daughter of Lucilla, but had intimate relations both with the girl herself and with her mother; in this way he had become friendly with Commodus, so that he was his companion both at banquets and in youthful escapades. Lucilla, who was no more modest or chaste than her brother Commodus, detested her husband, Pompeianus. It was for this reason that she persuaded him to make the attack upon Commodus; and she not only caused his destruction but was herself detected and put out of the way. Commodus also put Crispina to death, having become angry with her for some act of adultery. But before their execution both women were banished to the island of Capreae (Capri).

There was a certain Marcia, the mistress of Quadratus (one of the men slain at this time), and Eclectus, his cubicularius (domestic steward); the latter became the cubicularius of Commodus also, and the former, first the emperor's mistress and later the wife of Eclectus, and she saw them also perish by violence. The tradition is that she greatly favoured the Christians and rendered them many kindnesses, inasmuch as she could do anything with Commodus.

5. Commodus also killed Salvius Julianus and Tarrutenius Paternus, who was enrolled among the ex-consuls, and others with them, including even a woman of the nobility. And yet Julianus, after the death of Marcus, could have done at once anything whatever that he wished against Commodus, since he was a man of great renown, was in command of a large army, and enjoyed the devotion of his soldiers; but he had refused to make any rebellious move, both because of his own probity and because of the good will that he bore to Marcus even after that emperor's death. And Paternus, if he had plotted against Commodus, as he was accused of doing, could easily have killed him while he himself was still in command of the Pretorians; but he had not done so.

Commodus likewise killed the two Quintilii, Condianus and Maximus; for they had a great reputation for learning, military skill, brotherly

accord, and wealth, and their notable talents led to the suspicion that, even if they were not planning any rebellion, they were nevertheless displeased with existing conditions. And thus, even as they had lived together, so they died together, along with the son of one of them. They had offered the most striking example ever seen of mutual affection; and at no time had they ever been separated, even in the offices they held. They had grown prosperous and exceedingly wealthy, and were wont to hold office together and to act as assistants to each other.

6. Sextus Condiarius, the son of Maximus, who surpassed all others by reason both of his native ability and his training, when he heard that sentence of death had been pronounced against him, too, drank the blood of a hare (he was living in Syria at the time), after which he mounted a horse and purposely fell from it; then, as he vomited the blood, which was supposed to be his own, he was taken up, apparently on the point of death, and was carried to his room. He himself now disappeared, while a ram's body was placed in a coffin in his stead and burned. After this, constantly changing his appearance and clothing, he wandered about here and there. And when this story got out (for it is impossible that such matters should remain hidden very long), diligent search was made for him high and low. Many were punished in his stead on account of their resemblance to him, and many, too, who were alleged to have shared his confidence or to have sheltered him somewhere; and still more persons who had perhaps never even seen him were deprived of their property. But no one knows whether he was really slain, – though a great number of heads purporting to be his were brought to Rome, – or whether he made good his escape. Some other man, however, after the death of Commodus boldly claimed to be Sextus and undertook to recover his wealth and rank. And he played the part bravely, though questioned much by many persons; yet when Pertinax asked him something about Grecian affairs, with which the real Sextus had been well acquainted, he showed the greatest embarrassment, being unable even to understand the question. Thus, though nature had made him like Condiarius in appearance and practice had made him similar in other respects, yet he did not share in his learning.

7. As for this matter, now, that I have just related, I myself was present and heard it; and I will mention another thing, that I saw. There is in the city of Mallus, in Cilicia, an oracle of Amphilochus that gives responses by means of dreams. Now it had given a response also to Sextus, that he had indicated by means of a drawing; the picture which he had put on the tablet represented a boy strangling two serpents and a lion pursuing a fawn. I was with my father, who was governor of Cilicia

at the time, and could not comprehend what the figures meant, until I learned that the brothers had been strangled, so to speak, by Commodus (who later emulated Hercules), just as Hercules, when an infant, is related to have strangled the serpents sent against him by Juno (for the Quintilii, too, had been strangled), and until I learned also that Sextus was a fugitive and was being pursued by a more powerful adversary.

I should render my narrative very tedious were I to give a detailed report of all the persons put to death by Commodus, of all those whom he made away with as the result of false accusations or unjustified suspicions or because of their conspicuous wealth, distinguished family, unusual learning, or some other point of excellence.

Commodus displayed in Rome itself many indications of wealth and very many more, even, of a love of the beautiful. In fact, he occasionally performed an act of public service. Thus, when Manilius, who had been associated with Cassius, had been secretary of his Latin correspondence, and had possessed the greatest influence with him, was captured after taking to flight, the emperor would not listen to a word from him, though he offered to give a great deal of information, and he burned all the conspirator's papers without reading them.

8. He also had some wars with the barbarians beyond Dacia, in which Albinus and Niger, who later fought against the emperor Severus, won fame; but the greatest struggle was the one with the Britons. When the tribes in that island, crossing the wall that separated them from the Roman legions, proceeded to do much mischief and cut down a general together with his troops, Commodus became alarmed and sent Ulpius Marcellus against them. This man [. . .] ruthlessly put down the barbarians of Britain, and later, when, thanks to his peculiar excellence, he was all but on the point of being put to death by Commodus, he was nevertheless pardoned.

9. Perennis, who commanded the Pretorians after Paternus, met his death as the result of a mutiny of the soldiers. For, inasmuch as Commodus had given himself up to chariot-racing and licentiousness and performed scarcely any of the duties pertaining to his office, Perennis was compelled to manage not only the military affairs, but everything else as well, and to stand at the head of the State. The soldiers, accordingly, whenever any matter did not turn out to their satisfaction, laid the blame upon Perennis and were angry with him.

The soldiers in Britain chose Priscus, a lieutenant, emperor; but he declined, saying: "I am no more an emperor than you are soldiers."

The lieutenants in Britain, accordingly, having been rebuked for their insubordination, – they did not become quiet, in fact, until

Pertinax quelled them, – now chose out of their number fifteen hundred javelin men and sent them into Italy. These men had already drawn near to Rome without encountering any resistance, when Commodus met them and asked: "What is the meaning of this, soldiers? What is your purpose in coming?" And when they answered, "We are here because Perennis is plotting against you and plans to make his son emperor," Commodus believed them, especially as Cleander insisted; for this man had often been prevented by Perennis from doing all that he desired, and consequently he hated him bitterly. He accordingly delivered up the prefect to the very soldiers whose commander he was, and had not the courage to scorn fifteen hundred men, though he had many times that number of Pretorians. So Perennis was maltreated and struck down by those men, and his wife, his sister, and two sons were also killed.

10. Thus Perennis was slain, though he deserved a far different fate, both on his own account and in the interest of the entire Roman empire, – except in so far as his ambition for office had made him chiefly responsible for the ruin of his colleague Paternus. For privately he never strove in the least for either fame or wealth, but lived a most incorruptible and temperate life; and as for Commodus and his imperial office, he guarded them in complete security.

Commodus was wholly devoted to pleasure and gave himself up to chariot-racing, caring nothing for anything of that nature (his duties as emperor); and, indeed, even if he had been deeply concerned, he would not have been able to administer them by reason of his indolence and his inexperience.

And the imperial freedmen, with Cleander at their head, after getting rid of this man [Perennis], refrained from no form of mischief, selling all privileges, and indulging in wantonness and debauchery.

Commodus devoted most of his life to ease and to horses and to combats of wild beasts and of men. In fact, besides all that he did in private, he often slew in public large numbers of men and of beasts as well. For example, all alone with his own hands, he dispatched five hippopotami together with two elephants on two successive days; and he also killed rhinoceroses and a camelopard (giraffe). This is what I have to say with reference to his career as a whole.

11. A statue was set up to Victorinus, who had been prefect of the city. He had not died as the victim of any plot; in fact, at one time, when a persistent rumour and many reports, one may almost say, were being circulated about his death, he became emboldened, and approaching Perennis, said: "I hear that you men wish to kill me. Why, then, do you delay? Why do you put it off, when you might do it this very day?" Yet

not even after that was he molested by any outside person, but he took his own life; and yet he had been honoured among the foremost men by Marcus, and in point of moral excellence and forensic eloquence stood second to none of his contemporaries. [. . .]

12. As for Cleander, who possessed the greatest influence after Perennis, he had formerly been sold as one of a group of slaves and had been brought to Rome with the others to be a pack-carrier; but in the course of time he advanced to such a point that he actually became Commodus' cubicularius, married the emperor's concubine Damostratia, and put to death Saoterus of Nicomedeia, his predecessor in this office, together with many others. Yet Saoterus, too, had possessed very great influence, so great, in fact, that thanks to it the Nicomedeians had obtained from the senate the privilege of celebrating some games and of erecting a temple to Commodus. So Cleander, raised to greatness by the favour of Fortune, bestowed and sold senatorships, military commands, procuratorships, governorships, and, in a word, everything. In fact, some men became senators only after spending all they possessed, so that it was said of Julius Solon, a very obscure man, that he had been stripped of all his property and banished to – the senate. Besides all this, Cleander appointed twenty-five consuls for one year, a thing that never happened before or since; one of these consuls was Severus, who later became emperor. Cleander, accordingly, was obtaining money from every source, and he amassed more wealth than any who had ever been named cubicularii. A great deal of it he gave to Commodus and his concubines, and he spent a great deal on houses, baths, and other works of benefit either to individuals or to cities.

13. So this Cleander, too, who had been raised to so exalted a station, fell suddenly and perished in dishonour. It was not the soldiers, however, that killed him, as in the case of Perennis, but the populace. A famine occurred, sufficiently grievous in itself; but its severity was vastly increased by Papirius Dionysius, the grain commissioner, in order that Cleander, whose thefts would seem chiefly responsible for it, might incur the hatred of the Romans and be destroyed by them. And so it came to pass. There was a horse-race on, and as the horses were about to contend for the seventh time, a crowd of children ran into the Circus, led by a tall maiden of grim aspect, who, because of what afterwards happened, was thought to have been a divinity. The children shouted in concert many bitter words, which the people took up and then began to bawl out every conceivable insult; and finally the throng leaped down and set out to find Commodus (who was then in the Quintilian suburb), invoking many blessings on him and many curses upon Cleander. The latter sent some

soldiers against them, who wounded and killed a few; but, instead of being deterred by this, the crowd, encouraged by its own numbers and by the strength of the Pretorians, pressed on with all the greater determination. They were already drawing near to Commodus, whom no one had kept informed of what was going on, when Marcia, the notorious wife of Quadratus, reported the matter to him. And Commodus was so terrified (he was ever the greatest coward) that he at once ordered Cleander to be slain, and likewise his son, who was being reared in the emperor's charge. The boy was dashed to the earth and so perished; and the Romans, taking the body of Cleander, dragged it away and abused it and carried his head all about the city on a pole. They also slew some other men who had enjoyed great power under him.

14. Commodus, taking a respite from his amusements and sports, turned to murder and was killing off the prominent men. Among these was Julianus, the prefect, whom he had been wont even in public to embrace and kiss and address as "father." Another was Julius Alexander, who was executed for having brought down a lion with his javelin while on horseback. This man, when he learned of the arrival of the assassins, murdered them at night, and also destroyed all his enemies at Emesa, his native city; then he mounted a horse and set out to go to the barbarians. And he would have escaped, had he not taken along a boy-favourite with him, since he himself was an excellent horseman; but he could not bring himself to desert the lad, who had become wearied, and so, when he was being overtaken, he killed both the boy and himself. Dionysius, the grain commissioner, also met his death by the orders of Commodus.

Moreover, a pestilence occurred, the greatest of any of which I have knowledge; for two thousand persons often died in Rome in a single day. Then, too, many others, not alone in the City, but throughout almost the entire empire, perished at the hands of criminals who smeared some deadly drugs on tiny needles and for pay infected people with the poison by means of these instruments. The same thing had happened before in the reign of Domitian.

15. Now the death of these victims passed unheeded; for Commodus was a greater curse to the Romans than any pestilence or any crime. Among other reasons was this, that whatever honours they had been wont to vote to his father out of affection they were now compelled out of fear and by direct command to assign also to the son. He actually ordered that Rome itself should be called *Commodiana*, the legions *Commodian*, and the day on which these measures were voted *Commodiana*. Upon himself he bestowed, in addition to a great many other names, that of Hercules. Rome he styled the "Immortal, Fortunate Colony of the

Whole Earth"; for he wished it to be regarded as a settlement of his own. In his honour a gold statue was erected of a thousand pounds' weight, representing him together with a bull and a cow. Finally, all the months were named after him, so that they were enumerated as follows: Amazonius (Amazonian), Invictus (Invincible), Felix (Fortunate), Pius (Dutiful), Lucius, Aelius, Aurelius, Commodus, Augustus, Hercules (Herculean), Romanus (Roman), Exsuperatorius (Conquering). For he himself assumed these several titles at different times, but "Amazonius" and "Exsuperatorius" he applied constantly to himself, to indicate that in every respect he surpassed absolutely all mankind superlatively; so superlatively mad had the abandoned wretch become. And to the senate he would send messages couched in these terms: "The Emperor Caesar Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus Augustus Pius Felix Sarmaticus Germanicus Maximus Britannicus, Pacifier of the Whole Earth, Invincible, the Roman Hercules, Pontifex Maximus, Holder of the Tribunician Authority for the eighteenth time, Imperator (Supreme Commander) for the eighth time, Consul for the seventh time, Father of his Country, to consuls, praetors, tribunes, and the fortunate Commodian senate, Greeting." Vast numbers of statues were erected representing him in the garb of Hercules. And it was voted that his age should be named the "Golden Age," and that this should be recorded in all the records without exception.

16. Now this "Golden One," this "Hercules," this "god" (for he was even given this name, too) suddenly drove into Rome one afternoon from his suburb and conducted thirty horse-races in the space of two hours. These proceedings had much to do with his running short of funds. He was also fond, it is true, of bestowing gifts, and frequently gave largesses to the populace at the rate of one hundred and forty denarii per man; but most of his expenditures were for the objects I have mentioned. Hence he brought accusations against both men and women, slaying some and to others selling their lives for their property. And finally he ordered us, our wives, and our children each to contribute two gold pieces every year on his birthday as a kind of first-fruits, and commanded the senators in all the other cities to give five denarii apiece. Of this, too, he saved nothing, but spent it all disgracefully on his wild beasts and his gladiators.

17. In public he nowhere drove chariots except sometimes on a moonless night, for, though he was eager to play the charioteer in public, too, he was ashamed to be seen doing so; but in private he was constantly doing it, adopting the Green uniform. As for wild beasts, however, he slew many both in private and in public. Moreover, he used to contend as a

gladiator; in doing this at home he managed to kill a man now and then, and in making close passes with others, as if trying to clip off a bit of their hair, he sliced off the noses of some, the ears of others, and sundry features of still others; but in public he refrained from using steel and shedding human blood. Before entering the amphitheatre he would put on a long-sleeved tunic of silk, white interwoven with gold, and thus arrayed he would receive our greetings; but when he was about to go inside, he put on a robe of pure purple with gold spangles, donning also after the Greek fashion a chlamys (cloak) of the same colour, and a crown made of gems from India and of gold, and he carried a herald's staff like that of Mercury. As for the lion-skin and club, in the street they were carried before him, and in the amphitheatres they were placed on a gilded chair, whether he was present or not. He himself would enter the arena in the garb of Mercury, and casting aside all his other garments, would begin his exhibition wearing only a tunic and unshod.

18. On the first day he killed a hundred bears all by himself, shooting down at them from the railing of the balustrade; for the whole amphitheatre had been divided up by means of two intersecting cross-walls which supported the gallery that ran its entire length, the purpose being that the beasts, divided into four herds, might more easily be speared at short range from any point. In the midst of the struggle he became weary, and taking from a woman some chilled sweet wine in a cup shaped like a club, he drank it at one gulp. At this both the populace and we [senators] all immediately shouted out the words so familiar at drinking-bouts, "Long life to you!"

And let no one feel that I am sullyng the dignity of history by recording such occurrences. On most accounts, to be sure, I should not have mentioned this exhibition; but since it was given by the emperor himself, and since I was present myself and took part in everything seen, heard and spoken, I have thought proper to suppress none of the details, but to hand them down, trivial as they are, to the memory of those who shall live hereafter, just like any events of the greatest weight and importance. [. . .]

19. On the first day, then, the events that I have described took place. On the other days he descended to the arena from his place above and cut down all the domestic animals that approached him and some also that were led up to him or were brought before him in nets. He also killed a tiger, a hippopotamus, and an elephant. Having performed these exploits, he would retire, but later, after luncheon, would fight as a gladiator. The form of contest that he practised and the armour that he used were those of the *secutores* (pursuers), as they were called: he held the

shield in his right hand and the wooden sword in his left, and indeed took great pride in the fact that he was left-handed. His antagonist would be some athlete or perchance a gladiator armed with a wand; sometimes it was a man that he himself had challenged, sometimes one chosen by the people, for in this as well as other matters he put himself on an equal footing with the other gladiators, except for the fact that they enter the lists for a very small sum, whereas Commodus received a million sesterces from the gladiatorial fund each day. Standing beside him as he fought were Aemilius Laetus, the prefect, and Eclectus, his cubicularius; and when he had finished his sparring match, and of course won it, he would then, just as he was, kiss these companions through his helmet. After this the regular contestants would fight. The first day he personally paired all the combatants down in the arena, where he appeared with all the trappings of Mercury, including a gilded wand, and took his place on a gilded platform; and we regarded his doing this as an omen. Later he would ascend to his customary place and from there view the remainder of the spectacle with us. After that the contests no longer resembled child's play, but were so serious that great numbers of men were killed. Indeed, on one occasion, when some of the victors hesitated to slay the vanquished, he fastened the various contestants together and ordered them all to fight at once. Thereupon the men so bound fought man against man, and some killed even those who did not belong to their group at all, since the numbers and the limited space had brought them together.

20. That spectacle, of the general character I have described, lasted fourteen days. When the emperor was fighting, we senators together with the knights always attended. Only Claudius Pompeianus the elder never appeared, but sent his sons, while remaining away himself; for he preferred even to be killed for this rather than to behold the emperor, the son of Marcus, conducting himself in such a fashion. For among other things that we did, we would shout out whatever we were commanded, and especially these words continually: "Thou art lord and thou art first, of all men most fortunate. Victor thou art, and victor thou shalt be; from everlasting, Amazonian, thou art victor." But of the populace in general, many did not enter the amphitheatre at all, and others departed after merely glancing inside, partly from shame at what was going on, partly also from fear, inasmuch as a report spread abroad that he would want to shoot a few of the spectators in imitation of Hercules and the Stymphalian birds. And this story was believed, too, because he had once got together all the men in the city who had lost their feet as the result of disease or some accident, and then, after fastening about their knees

some likenesses of serpents' bodies, and giving them sponges to throw instead of stones, had killed them with blows of a club, pretending that they were giants.

21. This fear was shared by all, by us [senators] as well as by the rest. And here is another thing that he did to us senators which gave us every reason to look for our death. Having killed an ostrich and cut off its head, he came up to where we were sitting, holding the head in his left hand and in his right hand raising aloft his bloody sword; and though he spoke not a word, yet he wagged his head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us in the same way. And many would indeed have perished by the sword on the spot, for laughing at him (for it was laughter rather than indignation that overcame us), if I had not chewed some laurel leaves, which I got from my garland, myself, and persuaded the others who were sitting near me to do the same, so that in the steady movement of our jaws we might conceal the fact that we were laughing.

After the events described he raised our spirits. For when he was intending to fight once more as a gladiator, he bade us enter the amphitheatre in the equestrian garb and in our woollen cloaks, a thing that we never do when going to the amphitheatre except when one of the emperors has passed away; and on the last day his helmet was carried out by the gates through which the dead are taken out. These events caused absolutely every one of us to believe that we were surely about to be rid of him.

22. And he actually did die, or rather was slain, before long. For Laetus and Eclectus, displeased at the things he was doing, and also inspired by fear, in view of the threats he made against them because they tried to prevent him from acting in this way, formed a plot against him. It seems that Commodus wished to slay both the consuls, Erucius Clarus and Sosius Falco, and on New Year's Day to issue forth both as consul and *secutor* from the quarters of the gladiators; in fact, he had the first cell there, as if he were one of them. Let no one doubt this statement. Indeed, he actually cut off the head of the Colossus (the huge statue of Nero next to the amphitheater), and substituted for it a likeness of his own head; then, having given it a club and placed a bronze lion at its feet, so as to cause it to look like Hercules, he inscribed on it, in addition to the list of his titles which I have already indicated, these words: "Champion of *secutores*; only left-handed fighter to conquer twelve times (as I recall the number) one thousand men."

For these reasons Laetus and Eclectus attacked him, after making Marcia their confidant. At any rate, on the last day of the year, at night, when people were busy with the holiday, they caused Marcia to admin-

ister poison to him in some beef. But the immoderate use of wine and baths, which was habitual with him, kept him from succumbing at once, and instead he vomited up some of it; and thus suspecting the truth, he indulged in some threats. Then they sent Narcissus, an athlete, against him, and caused this man to strangle him while he was taking a bath. Such was the end of Commodus, after he had ruled twelve years, nine months, and fourteen days. He had lived thirty-one years and four months; and with him the line of the genuine Aurelii ceased to rule.

23. After this there occurred most violent wars and civil strife. [. . .]

24. Before the death of Commodus there were the following portents: many eagles of ill omen soared about the Capitol and moreover uttered screams that boded nothing peaceful, and an owl hooted there; and a fire that began at night in some dwelling leaped to the temple of Pax (Peace) and spread to the storehouses of Egyptian and Arabian wares, whence the flames, borne aloft, entered the palace and consumed very extensive portions of it, so that nearly all the State records were destroyed. This, in particular, made it clear that the evil would not be confined to the City, but would extend over the entire civilized world under its sway. For the conflagration could not be extinguished by human power, though vast numbers both of civilians and soldiers carried water, and Commodus himself came in from the suburb and encouraged them. Only when it had destroyed everything on which it had laid hold did it spend its force and die out.



## The Augustan History: Commodus

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The *Augustan History* (*Historia Augusta*, also referred to as *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*) is a collection of biographies of emperors and usurpers ostensibly written by six authors in the late third to early fourth centuries A.D. Scholars now believe that it is the work of a single author writing in the late fourth century.

The following biography of Commodus in the *Historia Augusta* is taken from *Lives of the Later Caesars*, tr. Anthony Birley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976; several rpts.). Reprinted by permission of Penguin Books. Translator's annotations have been omitted. Editor's additions appear in ⟨ ⟩; textual omissions are indicated by [ . . . ].

Concerning Commodus Antoninus' parents there has been sufficient discussion in the *Life* of Marcus Antoninus. Now he himself was born at Lanuvium with his twin brother Antoninus on the day before the Kalends of September, his father and uncle being the consuls [31 August A.D. 161], in the place where his maternal grandfather is also said to have been born. Faustina, when pregnant with Commodus and his brother, dreamed that she was giving birth to snakes, one of which however was fiercer than the other. But when she had given birth to Commodus and to Antoninus, the latter, for whom the astrologers promised a horoscope equal to Commodus, was carried off at the age of four. So when his brother was dead, Marcus tried to educate Commodus both by his own precepts and by those of great and excellent men. [ . . . ] But teachers in so many disciplines profited him nothing. So great is the

power either of innate qualities or of those kept as tutors at court. For straight from his earliest boyhood he was base, shameless, cruel, lecherous, defiled of mouth too and debauched, already adept at those arts which do not accord with the position of emperor, in that he could mould cups, dance, sing, whistle, even play the buffoon and the gladiator to perfection. He gave advance warning of his future cruelty in his twelfth year, at Centumcellae. For when he happened to have taken a bath in rather tepid water, he ordered the bath-keeper to be cast into the furnace. Whereupon a sheepskin was burned in the furnace by the slave-tutor to whom this order had been given, to make him believe from the smell of the fumes that the penalty had been paid.

He was called Caesar as a boy with his brother Verus, and in the fourteenth year of his age he was enrolled in the college of priests. He was [ . . . ] Leader of the Youth [ . . . ] when he assumed the toga. While still wearing the bordered tunic of a boy he gave largess and presided in Trajan's basilica. He was in fact robed in the toga on the Nones of July [7 July A.D. 175], the day on which Romulus disappeared from the earth, and at the time when Cassius (Avita) revolted from Marcus. Having been commended to the soldiers he set out with his father for Syria and Egypt, and returned with him to Rome. After this, when exemption from the law of the appointed year had been granted, he was made consul, and with his father he was hailed *imperator* ("supreme commander") on the fifth day before the Kalends of December, when Pollio and Aper were the consuls [27 November A.D. 176], and he celebrated a triumph with his father. Then he accompanied his father to the German war.

Of those appointed to supervise his life he could not endure the more honourable, but retained all the most evil men and those that were dismissed he yearned for to the point of falling ill. When they were reinstated through his father's soft-heartedness, he always kept cookshops and low dives for them in the palace, and never spared either decency or expense. He played at dice in his house. Women of particular beauty of appearance he gathered together like bought harlots, creating a brothel to make sport of their chastity. He purchased chariot-horses for himself and drove chariots in the dress of a charioteer. He conducted himself like a procurer's attendant, so that you would have believed him born rather for shameful things than for that station to which fortune had advanced him. His father's older ministers he dismissed, and aged friends he cast away. The son of Salvius Julianus, who was in command of armies, he vainly tempted to immodest conduct, and then plotted against Julianus. All the most honourable men he cast aside either by insult or by an unworthy office. He was named by actors as a defiled person and he

exiled them so quickly that they did not appear again. The war, also, which his father had almost completed, he abandoned, having accepted the enemy's conditions, and then returned to Rome.

When he came back to Rome he celebrated a triumph, with Saoterus his debaucher placed behind him in the chariot. In the course of the triumphal procession Commodus several times turned his head and kissed him, quite openly. He even did this in the orchestra. He would drink till dawn and squander the resources of the Roman empire. In the evening he even flitted through the taverns to the brothels. He sent to rule the provinces persons who were either his allies in crime or had been recommended by criminals. He became so hated by the Senate that he was filled with a savage passion to destroy that great order; and from having been despised, he became cruel.

Commodus' way of life compelled Quadratus and Lucilla to initiate plans to murder him, with the advice of the prefect of the guard Tarrutienus Paternus (in A.D. 182). But the business of carrying out the murder was given to Claudius Pompeianus, a kinsman. He approached Commodus with drawn sword, when he had the chance of action, bursting out with these words: 'This dagger the Senate sends,' gave away what he was doing, the fool, and did not carry it out; and there were many who had a share in the business with him. After this, Pompeianus first, and Quadratus, then Norbana and Norbanus and Paralius were put to death; and the latter's mother and Lucilla were sent into exile.

Then the prefects of the guard, having seen that Commodus had become so detested on account of Saoterus, whose power the Roman people could not endure, had the man courteously led out of the palace on the pretext of a sacrifice, and murdered him, as he was returning to his own mansion, by means of commissary agents. But that was more offensive to Commodus than the plot against himself. At any rate, at the instigation of Tigidius (Perennis), by the expedient of giving the honour of the (senator's) broad stripe, he removed Paternus from the administration of the prefecture. Paternus not only appeared to be the instigator of this murder but had also, as far as could be seen, been involved in the attempt to kill Commodus himself – and had stood in the way of further punishment of the conspiracy. A few days afterwards he accused him of conspiracy [. . .]. Hence he put to death both Paternus and Julianus and Vitruvius Secundus, a very close intimate of Paternus, who had charge of the imperial correspondence. Besides this, the whole house of the Quintilii was wiped out, [. . .] and savage treatment was meted out in various ways against many others.

After this, Commodus never readily appeared in public, and never permitted anything to be announced to him unless Perennis had previously dealt with it. Perennis in fact, knowing Commodus very well, discovered how to gain power for himself. He persuaded Commodus to free himself for a life of pleasure while he, Perennis, would devote himself to the administration; and this Commodus gladly accepted. Under this agreement, therefore, Commodus began a life of orgiastic abandonment in the palace, amid banquets and baths; he had three hundred concubines, whom he assembled together for the beauty of their person, recruiting both married women and whores, together with youths of ripe age, also three hundred in number, whom he had collected, with beauty as the criterion, equally from the commons and the nobility, by force and by payment.

In the meanwhile, in the dress of a victim-slayer, he slaughtered sacrificial victims, and he fought in the arena with foils and as a gladiator, among the chamberlains, with the swords' points uncovered. By this time, Perennis had arrogated everything to himself: he made away with anyone he wanted, robbed a great many, subverted all the laws, and put all the booty into his own purse. Commodus himself, indeed, killed his sister Lucilla after he had sent her to Capreae [Capri]. Then, having debauched his other sisters, as it is said, and being joined in embraces with a cousin of his father, he even gave one of the concubines the name of his mother. His wife, whom he had caught in adultery, he drove out, then banished her, and subsequently killed her. He used to order the concubines themselves to be debauched before his own eyes, and he was not free from the disgrace of submitting sexually to young men, being defiled in every part of his body, even his mouth, with both sexes.

At this time also Claudius, whose son had once approached Commodus with a dagger, was killed, ostensibly by brigands; and many other senators were made away with, without trial, and rich women as well. In the provinces not a few, having been falsely accused by Perennis on account of their riches, were robbed or even made away with. Those who could not be prosecuted even on a trumped-up charge were accused of being unwilling to name Commodus as their heir.

At that time Perennis gave his own son the credit for successes in Sarmatia won by other generals. Yet in spite of his great power, because he had dismissed senators and put men of equestrian status in command of the troops in the British war, when the matter was made known by the legates of the army this same Perennis was suddenly declared a public enemy and given to the soldiers to be lynched. Commodus appointed

Cleander, one of the chamberlains, to his position of power. Of course, after the execution of Perennis and his son Commodus rescinded many measures, as though they had not been carried out with his authority, on the pretext that he was restoring things back to normal. In fact, he could not keep up this repentance for his crimes for longer than thirty days – what he was to do through the agency of Cleander was more serious than what he had done through the aforementioned Perennis. [. . .] Then, for the first time, there were twenty-five consuls in a single year. All the provinces were sold – Cleander sold everything for cash. He rewarded with office men recalled from exile, and rescinded legal decisions. [. . .]

Eventually, however, Cleander's life too had a fitting end. When Arrius Antoninus was killed on charges that were trumped up as a favour to Attalus, whom Arrius had convicted during his proconsulship of Asia, Commodus was unable to endure the ill-feeling that ensued at that time, for the populace were in a fury. So Cleander was presented to the common people to pay the penalty. At the same time, Apolaustus and other court freedmen were put to death in like manner. Cleander, among other things, had debauched some of Commodus' concubines, on whom he begot sons. They were put to death after his removal, together with their mothers. Julianus and Regillus were appointed to his post. Subsequently Commodus condemned them as well.

When these men had been killed, Commodus put to death [. . .] countless others. He had intended to kill another fourteen also, when the resources of the Roman empire could not sustain his expenditure.

In the meantime, as an act of mockery on the part of the Senate, Commodus was named Pius after he had designated his mother's lover to the consulship, and Felix after he had killed Perennis – amidst a great many murders of many citizens, as if he were some new Sulla. This same Commodus, the 'Dutiful' (*pius*), the 'Fortunate' (*felix*), is said to have invented a plot against his own life as well, to justify the killing of a great many people. Yet there was no other rebellion apart from the one by Alexander, who subsequently took his own life, and those of his family, and by Commodus' sister Lucilla. Commodus was named Britannicus by flatterers, although the Britons even wanted to choose an emperor in opposition to him. He was called 'the Roman Hercules' too, because he had killed wild animals at Lanuvium in the amphitheatre; for it was his practice to kill wild beasts at home. Besides this, he was insane enough to want the city of Rome to be called the 'Commodian Colony': this crazy idea is said to have been instilled into him in the midst of Marcia's blandishments. He also wanted to drive four-horse chariots in the circus. He appeared in public in the Dalmatian tunic and in this garb gave the signal

for starting the chariots. Indeed, at that time, when he proposed to the Senate his motion to make Rome *Commodiana*, not only did the senate gladly accept this mockery as far as can be understood, but it even called itself 'Commodian', naming Commodus 'Hercules' and 'god'.

He pretended that he was going to go to Africa too, so that he could exact travelling expenses; and he did exact them and spent them on banquets and gambling instead. He put to death Motilenus, the prefect of the guard, by means of poisoned figs. He accepted statues in the dress of Hercules, and sacrifices were made to him as to a god. He had intended to put many others to death in addition, as was revealed by a little boy who tossed out of his bedroom a tablet on which were written the names of those who were to be killed.

He practised the rites of Isis, even to the extent of shaving his head and carrying the figure of Anubis. He ordered the votaries of Bellona actually to cut off an arm, in his zeal for cruelty. The Isis worshippers, indeed, he forced to beat their breasts with pine-cones, to the point of death. When he was carrying the Anubis figure he used to strike the head of the Isis worshippers hard with the face of the statue. Clad in woman's dress and a lionskin he struck with his club not only lions but many humans as well. Men who were lame in the feet and those who could not walk he dressed up like giants, in such a way that they were covered from their knees downwards with bandages and cloths, to look like serpents, and he dispatched them with arrows. He polluted the Mithraic rites with real murder, although the custom was merely for something to be said, or pretended, to create an impression of fear.

As a boy he was already both gluttonous and lewd. As a youth he disgraced every kind of person that was with him and was disgraced by all of them. Those who mocked him he cast to the wild beasts. One man who had read (Suetonius) Tranquillus' book containing the *Life* of Caligula he even ordered to be cast to the beasts, because his own birthday was the same as Caligula's. [. . .] In his jokes, too, he was destructive. For example, he put a starling on the head of a man who, he had seen, had some hairs that were going white among the black ones, like worms; the bird thought it was chasing worms and made the man's head fester with the striking of its beak. He cut open a fat man in the middle of the stomach so that his innards suddenly poured out. He used to name men 'one-footed' or 'one-eyed' when he had removed one of their eyes or snapped off one of their feet. Besides this, he murdered many others in different places, some because they had met him when they were wearing barbarian dress, others because they were noble and rather handsome. He had among his minions men called after the private parts

of either sex, and on them he used to bestow his kisses with particular pleasure. He had, too, a man whose penis projected further than does that of animals; he called him Onos (Donkey) and was very fond of him – he even enriched him, and appointed him to the priesthood of the Rural Hercules. He is said often to have mixed human excrement with the most expensive foods, and did not refrain from tasting it, making a fool of other people, as he thought. He displayed on a silver dish two misshapen hunchbacks covered with mustard; and straight away he gave them advancement and riches. He pushed into a swimming-pool his prefect of the guard Julianus, clad in a toga, in the presence of his staff; and he ordered him to dance – naked, as well – before his concubines, shaking cymbals and with his face contorted. It was seldom that he did not call for every kind of cooked vegetable for a banquet, to provide continuous luxury. He used to bathe seven or eight times a day and eat actually in the baths. He used to enter the temples of the gods polluted with adulteries and with human blood. He even posed as a surgeon, to the extent of letting blood, using scalpels that were deadly in their effect.

The months, too, flatterers renamed in his honour: Commodus instead of August, Hercules instead of September, Invictus instead of October, Exsuperatorius instead of November, and Amazonius, after his own surname, instead of December. He was called Amazonius because of his passion for his concubine Marcia, whom he loved to have depicted as an Amazon, and for whose sake he even wished to enter the Roman arena in Amazon's dress. He also engaged in gladiatorial combat and accepted a gladiator's name, with pleasure, as if he were accepting triumphal honours. He always entered the public shows and as often as he did so, he ordered it to be inscribed in the public records. He is in fact said to have fought seven hundred and thirty-five times.

[. . .] In the meantime, it is recorded, he fought three hundred and sixty-five times under his father and further, he subsequently achieved so many gladiatorial crowns by defeating or killing net-fighters that he reached a thousand. Moreover, he killed with his own hand many thousands of wild animals, even elephants. Frequently it was before the eyes of the Roman people that he did these things.

For such things as these, to be sure, he was strong enough, but otherwise he was weak and feeble, even having something wrong with him in the groin, which stuck out so much that the Roman people could detect the swelling through his silk clothing. Many verses were written on this subject [. . .]. Such was his strength in slaying wild animals that he transfixes an elephant with a pole, pierces a wild goat's horn with a spear, and dispatched many thousands of huge beasts, each with a single

blow. Such was his lack of propriety that he very often drank in public, sitting in the amphitheatre or theatre, in women's clothing.

The Moors were conquered during his reign, but, since he himself lived in this way, it was by means of legates; the Dacians were conquered too, and the Pannonian provinces were set in order; while in Britain, Germany and Dacia the provincials rejected his rule. All these troubles were settled by generals. Commodus himself was tardy and careless in signing documents; he used to answer many petitions with a single formula, while in very many letters he used to write merely 'Farewell'. All business was carried out by others, and they are said to have used even condemnations for the benefit of their purses. In fact, through this carelessness, when the men who were administering the republic had been plundering the grain-supply, a tremendous famine arose at Rome, although there was no shortage of crops. As for those who were plundering everything, Commodus subsequently killed and proscribed them. But he himself, pretending that there was a golden age, 'Commodian' by name, declared that prices were to be cheap, as a result of which he caused a greater shortage.

In his reign many persons obtained for cash both punishment for others and acquittal for themselves. He also sold alternative punishments and the right of burial and alleviation of wrongs; and he killed different people in place of others. Provinces and administrative posts he sold also, and in these instances the men through whose agency he made the sale received one share and Commodus the other. To some he even sold the murder of their enemies. In his reign the freedmen sold even the results of lawsuits. He did not long put up with Paternus and Perennis as prefects; even in the case of those prefects whom he had appointed himself, none of them completed three years' tenure, and many of them he put to death either with poison or the sword. Prefects of the city he changed with the same readiness. He took pleasure in killing his chamberlains, even though he had always done everything at their behest. The chamberlain Eclactus, when he saw how readily Commodus put his chamberlains to death, forestalled him and took part in the conspiracy which caused his death.

Commodus would take up the weapons of a gladiator as a 'pursuer', covering his bare shoulders with a purple cloth. Besides this he had the practice of ordering that everything he did that was base, impure, cruel, gladiatorial or pimp-like, should be included in the *Records of the City* [. . .]. He called the people of Rome the 'Commodian people', since he had very often fought as a gladiator in their presence. But although the people had applauded him as if he were a god at his frequent bouts, in

the belief that he was being mocked he had instructed the marines who spread the awnings to slaughter the Roman people in the amphitheatre. He had ordered the city to be burned, seeing that it was his own colony; and this would have been done if Laetus the prefect of the guard had not deterred him. At any rate, among his other triumphal titles he was called 'First stake of the Pursuers' six hundred and twenty times.

There were the following prodigies in his reign of both a public and a private kind. A comet appeared. Footprints of gods were seen in the Forum, going out of it. And before the deserters' war the sky blazed. A sudden mist and darkness arose in the circus on the Kalends of January; and before dawn there had been fire-birds too and Furies. He himself moved from the palace to the Vectilian House on the Caelian Hill, saying that he could not sleep in the palace. The twin gates of Janus opened of their own accord, and the marble image of Anubis was seen to move. In the Minucian Portico a bronze statue of Hercules sweated for several days. A horned owl was caught above his bedroom, both at Rome and at Lanuvium. He himself moreover created a not insignificant omen: after thrusting his hand into the wound of a gladiator who had been killed, he wiped it on his head and, contrary to custom, ordered the spectators to come to the show in cloaks, which was usual at funerals, instead of togas, while he presided in dark clothes. Further, his helmet was twice carried out through the Gate of Libitina (through which the corpses of gladiators were removed). He gave largess to the people, seven hundred and twenty-five denarii apiece. Towards everyone else he was very mean, because he had been draining the treasury by his expenditure on luxury. He held many circus races, but for pleasure rather than for religion, and also in order to enrich the faction leaders.

Stirred up by these things, but all too late, Quintus Aemilius Laetus the prefect and Marcia the concubine entered into a conspiracy to kill him. First they gave him poison; and when that was less than effective, they had him strangled by an athlete with whom he used to train.

Physically, at least, he was well proportioned. His expression was vacant as is usual with drunkards, and his speech disordered. His hair was always dyed and made to shine with gold dust. He used to singe his hair and beard from fear of the barber.

Senate and people demanded that his body be dragged with the hook and thrown into the Tiber. But subsequently, by order of Pertinax, it was transferred to Hadrian's tomb. No public works of his still exist except the baths which Cleander had built in his name. Where his name was inscribed on public works of others, the Senate deleted it. Indeed, he did not even complete his father's public works. He did organize the African

fleet, which was to be in reserve if the Alexandrian grain-supply happened to fail. He even gave Carthage the name Alexandria Commodiana Togata, after naming the African fleet Commodiana Herculea as well. He made certain embellishments to the Colossus, of course, all of which were subsequently removed. In fact he took off the head of the Colossus, which was that of Nero, and put his own on it, inscribing beneath it an inscription in the usual style, not even omitting those gladiatorial effeminate titles. Yet Severus, a stern emperor and a man like his own name, from hatred of the Senate, as it seems, enrolled this man among the gods, with the grant of a Herculean-Commodian *flamen* (priest) (which Commodus had planned to have for himself while still alive). Three sisters survived him. Severus ordained that his birthday should be celebrated.

There were great acclamations by the Senate after Commodus' death. In fact, so that the Senate's verdict on Commodus may be known, I have included the acclamations verbatim from Marius Maximus, and the content of the decree of the Senate:

From the enemy of the fatherland let the marks of honour be dragged away! Let the parricide's honours be dragged away! Let the parricide be dragged along! Let the enemy of the fatherland, the parricide, the gladiator, be mangled in the charnel-house! The executioner of the Senate is the enemy of the gods, the murderer of the Senate is the enemy of the gods! The gladiator to the charnel-house, he that killed the Senate, let him be put in the charnel-house! He that killed the Senate, let him be dragged with the hook, he that killed the innocent, let him be dragged with the hook! Enemy! Parricide! Truly! Truly! He that did not spare his own blood, let him be dragged with the hook! He that was about to kill you, let him be dragged with the hook! [. . .] Let the slayer of citizens be dragged along, let the murderer of citizens be dragged along! Let the statues of the gladiator be dragged away! [. . .] Let the remembrance of the parricide, the gladiator, be wiped out, let the statues of the parricide, the gladiator, be dragged down, let the remembrance of the foul gladiator be wiped out! The gladiator to the charnel-house! [. . .] More savage than Domitian, more foul than Nero, as he did to others, let it be done to him! Let the remembrance of the innocent be preserved, restore the honours of the innocent, we ask! [. . .] The innocent have not been buried – let the parricide's corpse be dragged along! The parricide dug up the buried – let the parricide's corpse be dragged along!

When, by Pertinax's order, Livius Larensis, procurator of the patrimony, had given Commodus' corpse to Fabius Cilo, consul designate, it was buried during the night. The Senate cried out: 'On whose authority did

you bury him? Let the buried murderer be dug up, let him be dragged along!' Cincius Severus said:

Wrongly was he buried. I speak as pontifex; the college of pontiffs says this. Since I have recounted glad tidings, now I turn to what is needful: I give it as my opinion that those things which that man who lived only for the destruction of citizens and for his own shame, compelled to be decreed in his own honour, must be wiped out; that his statues, which are everywhere, should be destroyed; that his name be erased from all public and private monuments; and that the months be called by the names by which they were called when that evil first fell upon the republic.

## Herodian on the Death of Commodus

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Greek historian Herodian (born ca. A.D. 180) was probably an imperial freedman. His *History of the Empire from the Time of Marcus Aurelius*, not free from factual errors and often highly novelistic but still valuable, covers the period from A.D. 180 to 238 (the accession of Gordian III) in eight books. The following excerpts are from Chapters 16 and 17 of Book 1. Translator's annotations have been omitted. Editor's additions appear in ⟨ ⟩; textual omissions are indicated by [ . . ].

Reprinted by permission of the publishers and trustees of the Loeb Classical Library from *Herodian in Two Volumes*, tr. C. R. Whittaker, vol. 1 (LCL 454; Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1969). The Loeb Classical Library is a registered trademark of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

16. At last it became imperative to check the madness of Commodus and to free the Roman empire from tyranny. [ . . ] In the middle of this general festivity ⟨on New Year's Day, A.D. 193⟩ Commodus planned to make his public appearance before the Roman people, not from the palace, as was usual, but from the gladiators' barracks, dressed in armour instead of the purple-bordered toga of the emperors, and escorted in procession by the rest of the gladiators.

Commodus communicated his intentions to Marcia, his favourite mistress. She was treated just like a legal wife with all the honours due to an empress apart from the sacred fire. When she was told of Commodus'

extraordinary plan which was so undignified for him, she fell on her knees earnestly begging him with tears in her eyes not to bring disgrace on the Roman empire and not to take the risk of entrusting himself to gladiators and desperadoes. But she achieved nothing by her many entreaties and left in tears. Commodus then summoned Laetus, the praetorian prefect, and Eclectus, the chamberlain, and gave them instructions to make arrangements for him to spend the night in the gladiators' barracks, from where he would start the procession to the festival sacrifices, dressed in armour for all Rome to see. They made every effort to try and dissuade him from any action unworthy of an emperor.

17. Commodus in a fury dismissed the two men and retired to his room as though he were going to take his usual mid-day siesta. But instead he took up a writing tablet (one of the kind made out of lime wood cut into thin sheets with two hinged pieces that close together) and wrote down the names of those who would be executed that night. Heading the list was Marcia; then Laetus and Eclectus, followed by a great many leading senators. Commodus' intention was to be rid of all the remaining, senior advisers of his father, since he felt embarrassed at having respectable witnesses to his degenerate behaviour. He was going to share out the property of the rich by distributing it to the soldiers and the gladiators, so that the soldiers would protect him and the gladiators amuse him. After writing on the tablet he left it on the couch, thinking no one would come into his room. But he forgot about the little boy, who was one of those that fashionable Roman fops are pleased to keep in their households running around without any clothes on, decked out in gold and fine jewels. Commodus had such a favourite, whom he often used to sleep with. He used to call him Philocommodus ("Commodus' Lover"), a name to show his fondness for the boy. This young lad was playing about aimlessly when Commodus left the room for his regular bath and drinking session. He ran into the bed-chamber as he normally did, picked up the tablet, which was lying on the couch – only to play with, of course – and then ran out again. By some extraordinary chance he happened to meet Marcia, who was also very fond of him. She hugged and kissed him and then took away the tablet from him, because she was afraid that he would destroy something vital without realizing it while innocently playing with it. But as she recognized Commodus' writing she became much more curious to have a look at the contents. Finding it was a death warrant, and that she was going to be the first victim followed by Laetus and Eclectus and the others in the same way, she let out a cry. "Ah, Commodus," she said to herself, "so this is all the thanks I get for my loyal

affection and putting up with all your vicious, drunken behaviour for so many years. A fuddled drunkard is not going to get the better of a sober woman." Then she sent for Eclectus, who normally visited her in his capacity as the official chamberlain, quite apart from the gossip which said he was having an affair with her. She handed him the tablet and said, "There you are; that's the festival we are going to celebrate tonight!" Eclectus grew pale when he saw what was written. As an Egyptian he was characteristically given to act upon his impulses and be controlled by his emotions. Sealing up the tablet he sent it by one of his trusted messengers to Laetus to read. He too came to see Marcia in a panic on the pretext of consulting her and Eclectus about Commodus' orders to move to the gladiators' barracks. While they gave the impression they were working in the emperor's interests, they agreed that they must strike first or be struck down, and that there was no time for delay or procrastination. The plan was to give Commodus a lethal dose of poison, which Marcia assured them she could easily administer; she normally mixed and handed the emperor his first drink so that he could have the pleasure of drinking from his lover's hand. Commodus returned from his bath and Marcia put the poison into the mixing bowl, adding some fragrant wine, and gave it to him to drink. Accepting it as a loving-cup which he normally drank after his frequent baths or bouts in the amphitheatre with the animals, the emperor tossed it off without a thought. At once he fell into a coma and went to sleep, thinking that the drowsiness was the result of his exercise. Eclectus and Marcia told everyone to keep away and go home so that they could leave the emperor in peace, they said. This normally happened to Commodus on other occasions after he had been drinking heavily. He would take frequent baths and meals but have no set time for his sleep because he used to get caught up in a non-stop round of various pleasures, to which he was a compulsive slave at any hour. For a while he lay quiet, but, as the poison reached his stomach and bowels, he was attacked by dizziness and began to vomit violently. The reason for this may have been that the food and excessive drink he had taken earlier were reacting to the poison, or it may be that he had taken an antidote to the poison – a practice of the emperors before each meal. At any rate, after a prolonged bout of vomiting, Marcia and the others grew frightened that he would recover by getting rid of all the poison, and destroy them all. So they got hold of a strong, young athlete called Narcissus, and persuaded him to go in and strangle Commodus in return for a large reward. Narcissus rushed into the chamber of the emperor, as he lay there overcome by the effects of the poison and the wine, and strangled him to death.

Such was the end of Commodus after thirteen years' rule since his father's death. More nobly born than any emperor before him; he also had more handsome looks and a better physique than any other man in his day; as for more virile accomplishments, he was a better marksman and had a surer hand than anyone else; but all this talent he debased by corrupt living, as we have seen above.

## Aurelius Victor on Commodus

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Sextus Aurelius Victor's work *On the Caesars*, written and published around A.D. 360, deals with the Roman emperors from Augustus to Constantius II.

Reprinted from *Aurelius Victor: De Caesaribus*, tr. H. W. Bird (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994) by permission of Liverpool University Press. Translator's notes have been omitted; his additions appear in ( ). Editor's addition appears in [ ].

17. But his [Marcus Aurelius'] son was considered quite detestable for his despotism, which was savage from its beginning, especially when contrasted with the memory of his predecessors. This is such a burden on successive generations that, apart from our common hatred of the undutiful, they are more loathsome for being, as it were, the corruptors of their kind. Clearly energetic in war, because of his success against the Quadi he had called the month of September Commodus. He constructed a building to serve as a bath that was hardly worthy of Roman might. Indeed he possessed such an utterly harsh and cruel nature that he frequently butchered gladiators in mock battles, since he would use an iron sword, his opponents swords made of lead. When he had finished off very many in that manner, by chance one of them named Scaeva, who was very bold, physically powerful and a skilled fighter, deterred him from this passion. He, spurning his sword, which he saw was useless, said that the one with which Commodus was armed would be sufficient for both of



them. Fearing that in the struggle he might have his weapon torn away from him and be killed, which does happen, he had Scaeva removed and, (now) more fearful of the others, he transferred his ferocity to wild beasts. Since all people were horrified at his insatiable bloodthirstiness through these activities, his closest associates in particular plotted against him. In fact no one was loyal to his regime at all and even his cronies, by whom the power of those men was maintained, while they were wary of a criminal mind that was inclined to cruelty, thought it safer to overthrow him by any means whatever, and actually sought to poison Commodus, albeit very secretly at first, in about the thirteenth year of his reign. The poison's strength was rendered ineffective by the food with which he happened to have stuffed himself; since, however, he was complaining of a stomach ache, on the advice of his doctor, a leader of the group, he went to the wrestling hall. There he died at the hands of the masseur (for, by chance, he too was privy to the plot) by having his throat crushed tightly in an arm-lock as if it were part of the exercise. When this was known the senate, which had gathered in full complement at dawn for the January festival, together with the people, declared him an enemy of the gods and men and (ordered) his name to be erased; and straightway the imperial power was conferred upon the prefect of the city, Aulus Helvius Pertinax.

## Chronology: The Roman Empire at the Time of Commodus

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All dates are A.D.

161

August 31: Lucius Aurelius Commodus born to Emperor Marcus Aurelius and his wife, Annia Galeria Faustina (II).

166

October 12: Commodus becomes Caesar.

175

January 20: Admission to all priestly colleges. May 19: Departure for Germany. July 7: Commodus assumes the *toga virilis* and enters adulthood; becomes *princeps iuventutis* (Leader of the Youth).

175–6

Journey to the east with his father. Fall 176: Initiation into the Elysianian Mysteries.

176

October 28 or November 27: First acclamation as *imperator*. December 23: Triumph over Germans and Sarmatians, possibly together with his father.

177

Before June 17: Elevation to rank of Augustus; honorary title of *Pater Patriae* ("Father of the Country"). Official name: Imperator Caesar Lucius Aurelius Commodus Augustus.

178

Before August 3: Marriage to Bruttia Crispina. August 3: Departure for second expedition to Germany.

180

March 17: Death of Marcus Aurelius. Commodus becomes sole

ruler. October 22 (?): Triumph over the Germans. Official name: Emperor Caesar Lucius (since October: Marcus) Aurelius Commodus Augustus. Office of Pontifex Maximus (since 177, according to inscriptions; since 183 on coins).

181  
Second half of the year (?): Conspiracy of Lucilla, his sister (born March 7, 149). She is banished to Capri, then executed.

185  
April or May (?): Fall and death of Perennis.

185–6  
Further border campaigns.

187  
Before March 25: Conspiracy of Maternus.

188  
Third German expedition.

189  
Fall and death of Cleander, probably late in the year.

191  
Name change: Emperor Caesar Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus Augustus.

192  
October (?): Rome refounded as Colonia Commodiana. Months renamed after Commodus. Fall: Bruttia exiled to Capri, then exe-

cuted. Her memory is condemned (*damnatio memoriae*). December 31: Assassination of Commodus.

193  
Early January: Pertinax, Commodus' successor, reburies Commodus' body in Hadrian's tomb. Commodus suffers *damnatio memoriae*.

195  
Spring: Emperor Septimius Severus deifies Commodus (Divus Commodus) and declares himself brother of the Deified.

217  
April: Commodus suffers a second *damnatio memoriae* under Emperor Macrinus (until June, 218).

Commodus held the consulship seven times and was proclaimed *imperator* eight times. His official surnames (*cognomina*) were *Germanicus*, *Sarmaticus*, *Germanicus Maximus*, and *Britannicus*. He was *Pius* ("Dutiful"), *Felix* ("Fortunate"), *Pater senatus* ("Father of the senate"), *Invictus Romanus* ("Invincible Roman"), and *Hercules*. Other honorary names and titles were unofficial. Commodus had no children.

Source: Dietmar Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle: Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie*, 2nd edn (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996), 147–51.

## Further Reading

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following lists are intended to provide readers interested in specific topics with first suggestions; they are therefore not comprehensive. All items listed contain additional references. Works already mentioned in the essays above are not included here.

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