Historical introduction

Wars of Marcus Aurelius

With Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Empire was for the first time ruled by two emperors, both adoptive sons of the late Emperor Antoninus Pius (r. AD 138–161). Marcus had selected his nine-year-younger adoptive brother Lucius Verus to be his co-emperor. The two individuals could not have been more different in character. While the ascetic Marcus, whose main interest was philosophy, had been taught to “avoid the ways of the rich” (Meditations 1.3.), critics declaimed against Lucius’ luxurious lifestyle and his habits.

By Robert Heiligers

Marcus was born on 26 April 121. After his father died in 129, he was adopted by his paternal grandfather, Marcus Annius Verus. At the age of eighteen, Marcus served as consul under Emperor Antoninus Pius. He married Antoninus’ daughter Faustina and would have at least twelve children with her. The only son to survive childhood was Commodus, who would later succeed Marcus. In 140, Marcus was made consul again, with Emperor Antoninus Pius as his colleague. As the heir apparent, Marcus became princeps iuventutis, head of the equestrian order. He now took the name Marcus Aelius Aurelius Verus Caesar and as such officially became the designated next emperor.

The reign of Marcus Aurelius

When Emperor Antoninus Pius died in 161 AD, Marcus had spent 23 years learning the ropes of the administrative structures within the Roman Empire. The Senate had planned to confirm Marcus alone as Pius’ successor, but he had refused to take office unless his adoptive brother Lucius Verus received the same status and powers as himself. Even though the concept of dual emperorship was a novelty, the Senate actually welcomed the situation. Rome’s archenemies, the Parthians, had just invaded the Roman vassal state Armenia in the autumn of AD 161. The two imperial brothers acted in unison and the Senate thought it advantageous that one could stay at home and take care of the public administration while the other one dealt with critical situations at the front. Upon becoming emperor, Marcus took the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus.

No soldier by upbringing, experience, or nature, Marcus nevertheless spent more time away on campaign than any of his predecessors. The reign of Marcus Aurelius marked the end of a long period of relative peace in the second century AD. The Emperor faced financial problems caused by frontier wars in Parthia in the east. In the west, invading Germanic tribes along the borders made incursions across the Rhine and across the Danube. He also had to deal with a flood that engulfed Rome, causing a severe famine. To make matters even worse, a virulent disease – probably an extremely contagious kind of smallpox – was brought back from the east after the Roman interventions in Parthia. This resulted in significant loss of life as well as enormous losses in tax income. The disease reached Rome in 166 and would eventually kill off an estimated fifteen to twenty million people (25 to 30 percent of the empire’s population). Due to sheer lack of manpower, Marcus had the depleted ranks of the army supplemented with slaves, bandits, gladiators, and barbarians.
The Parthians
In autumn of 161, the Parthians invaded Armenia and Syria, subsequently beating the armies of the Armenian governor Severianus and of the governor of Syria, Attidius Cornelianus. Lucius Verus left Rome in the summer of 162 and reconquered Armenia in 163. He moved on to Mesopotamia, attacked Parthia and destroyed the city of Seleucia in 165. Avidius Cassius burnt down the palace at the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon, located directly across the Tigris. King Volgaes IV sued for peace and was forced to cede northern Mesopotamia to the Romans, who deployed units in the cities of Nisibis and Singara. Murray Dahm’s contribution discusses Lucius Verus’ campaigns in Parthia in detail.

Invasions
When a great number of Roman troops were withdrawn from the Limes in 162 in order to deal with the Parthian invasion of Armenia, German tribes could now more easily cross the Roman border. In late 165, 6,000 Langobardi, Obii, Marcomanni, and Quadi invaded Pannonia. Local forces defeated the invaders with relative ease. But two years later, a large force of Marcomanni and Quadi achieved a smashing victory against an army of 20,000 Romans near Carnutum (40km west of modern Vienna). While the larger part of their host moved southwards towards Italy, the remainder ravaged Noricum.

As the smallpox was ravaging the Empire, the punitive expedition against the invading tribes was postponed until AD 168. When the Emperors established their headquarters at Aquileia, the Marcomanni withdrew. Heading back to Rome, Lucius Verus suffered a stroke and died three days later at the age of 38. Marcus now returned to Rome alone to oversee his brother’s funeral. With the Emperors gone, the Marcomanni razed Opitergium (modern Oderzo) and besieged Aquileia. By the end of 171, the Romans forced them to sign a treaty promising they would leave a 7km-wide security-zone along the river unsettled. For details, refer to Sidney Dean’s contribution to this issue.
In the meantime, the Vandals and the Sarmatian Iazyges had invaded Dacia, while, farther to the east, the Sarmatian Costoboci had crossed the Danube, ravaging Thrace and Macedonia. Only 20km from Athens, they plundered and destroyed the temple of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Then, in 173, Didius Julianus, the commander of the Rhine frontier, had to repel another invasion of the Chatti and the Hermunduri, while the Chauci raided the shoreline of Gallia Belgica.

The Iazyges were defeated in several battles. Meanwhile, the Quadi revolted again. The war moved west and, in AD 174, the Quadi had to confront the Romans in their homelands (modern Slovakia). After their subjugation, garrisons were installed throughout their territory and they were forced to surrender hostages and provide auxiliary contingents for the Roman army. It was during these campaigns that Marcus Aurelius started writing his philosophical work Meditations (see Eugenia Russell’s contribution).

In 175, Roman troops crossed the Danube again to finally subjugate the Iazyges. Although Marcus was ill (which would give rise to rumours that the emperor had died), he decided to join the campaign. The enemy suffered a severe defeat, surrendering 100,000 Roman captives and providing a contingent of 8,000 horsemen, of whom 500 were immediately dispatched to Britain. Traces of these forces have been found in the Roman cavalry fort at Chesters on Hadrian’s Wall, amongst others. When, in 177, the Quadi and Marcomanni rebelled, Marcus Aurelius went to Carnuntum and moved against the Marcomanni. In 179, a decisive battle took place against the Quadi near modern Trencin in Slovakia. The Quadi were chased westwards, deeper into Greater Germany, where another decisive victory was achieved against them.

**The revolt of Avidius Cassius**

In 175, the false news of the death of the ailing emperor had prompted a revolt in Syria, led by the indigenous Avidius Cassius. When Marcus recovered, Cassius refused to forego his claim to the throne. He was killed by a centurion after only a hundred days in power.

As Cassius had been very popular with the inhabitants of the eastern provinces, Marcus decided to visit the renegade provinces, with his wife Faustina and his son Commodus, and to show clemency with Cassius’ followers and family. Unfortunately, Faustina would not survive the trip and she died in 176 on the way back to Rome in the village of Halala, Cappadocia.

**Change of military tactics**

To engage invading tribes simultaneously at different points on the border, smaller detachments (vexillationes) were created to move to critical areas. However, these flying squads did not smoothly interact, which resulted in severe organizational problems. In the Late Roman Empire the answer to this dilemma was the creation of the vexillationes comitatenses, reservists that were stationed behind the front lines and who could be deployed where needed. See also this issue’s contribution by Simon MacDowall.

The Marcomannic wars had exposed the weakness of Rome’s northern frontier, and henceforth, sixteen of the 33 Roman legions would be stationed along the Danube and the Rhine. For the Germanic tribes, however, the Marcomannic wars were only the prelude of the great invasions that would eventually disassemble and end the Western Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries.

On 17 March 180, the Emperor died, probably at Vindobona (modern Vienna), either as a result of the smallpox, or of cancer. His ashes were entombed in Hadrian’s Mausoleum – the present Castel Sant’Angelo in Rome – and in his honour, the Senate erected a column in the current Piazza Colonna; see Michael Taylor’s contribution to this issue. AN

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**Further reading**