



Statue of Emperor Hadrian, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

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By Don Fenton 28th August 2021

1,900 years later, the nation this Roman emperor tried to erase, ironically exhibits his bronze statue under glass.

This rare bronze of Hadrian from Jerusalem gives us a sense of the complexity of the man, at once kind and cruel, spiritual and emotional, powerful and indecipherable. He managed, in his brief life, to become the finest soldier, travel the world several times over, create high art, and shape the world's deadliest armed force. He also tried to erase an entire nation, the one that now displays this intriguing museum piece, a snapshot of an extraordinary man.

Publius Aelius Hadrianus, 76 to 138 AD, was a member of the gens Aelia in Italica, on the Guadalquivir River in southern Spain, with easy access to the sea and North Africa. Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who defeated Hannibal in the Second Punic or Carthaginian War, founded Italica for his sick and wounded veterans in 206 BC.

The elites of the town, including the families of Trajan and Hadrian, grew very rich selling olive oil to Rome and the empire. Hadrian probably wasn't born there though, despite what many sources say, and first saw the light of day in Rome. The historian Dio Cassius tells us Hadrian became Caesar and emperor after Trajan died childless. His guardian Attianus and Trajan's wife Plotina, who was in love with him, concealed Trajan's death for several days so that Hadrian's adoption could be announced first.

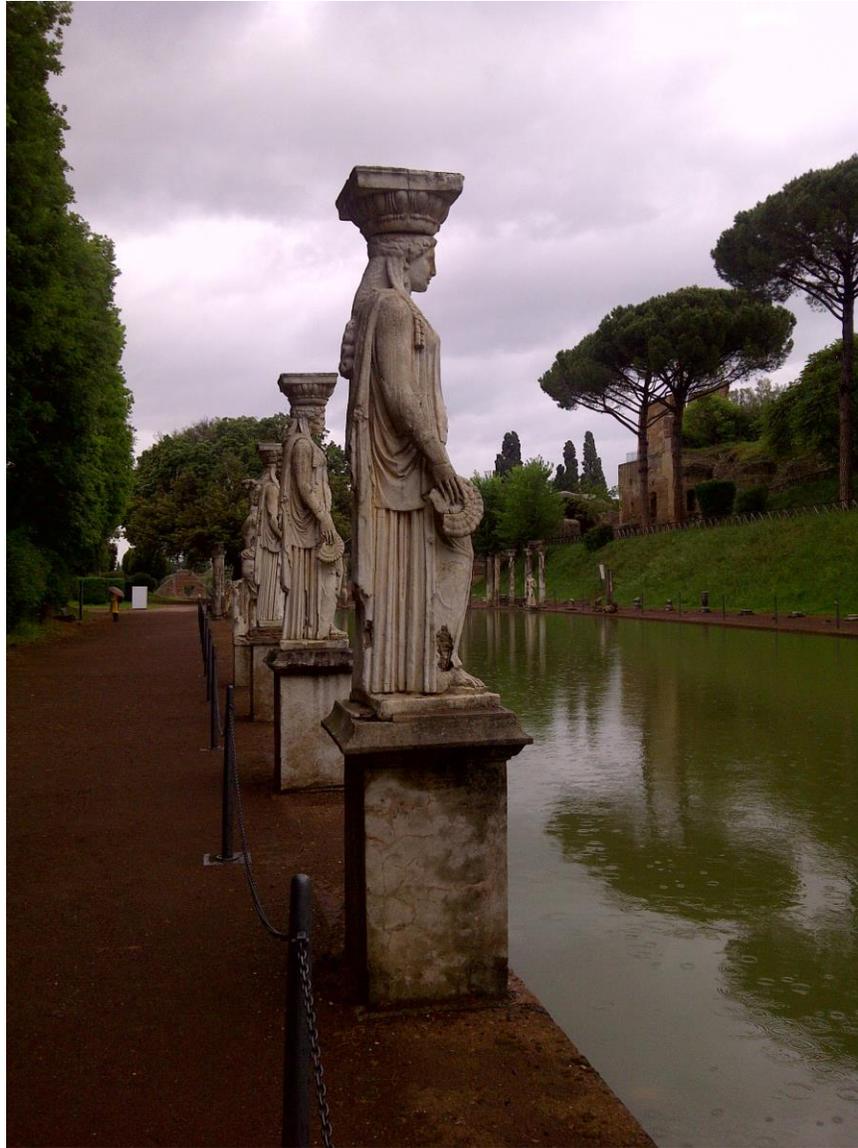
Hadrian is possibly the most successful Roman emperor. He sealed the empire and the Pax Romana from the barbarians with walls along all the frontiers, wherever there wasn't a river or mountain boundary. In Germany, other parts of Europe and North Africa he used wooden palisades. In northern Britain, eighty Roman miles of stone wall, because trees are so scarce. Look for that story in an upcoming feature.



Hadrian built this wall in 122 AD closing the northern border of England from coast to coast.
Steven Fruitsmaak, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

He loved Greece and made Athens the empire's spiritual, artistic and cultural capital, with Rome its military head, a superpower with two beating hearts, so to speak. Although Dio Cassius says he ruled with the greatest mildness, he also put some Senators to death just like his admired predecessor, the first emperor Augustus. Hadrian was a pleasant man to meet and he possessed a certain charm, Dio writes.

He was the son of a senator, Hadrianus Afer, and was orphaned as a boy. By nature, he was fond of literary study in both Greek and Latin and left a variety of prose writings and verse. He was ambitious, somewhat arrogant and sometimes couldn't restrain his anger. He held a grudge against Trajan's architect Apollodorus for a long time. When Hadrian became emperor and designed the Temple of Venus and Rome in the Forum, he killed Apollodorus for criticising the design.



Hadrian's Villa, the Canopus Caryatids. Photo by Don Fenton ©

Hadrian's complex character and mixed relations with the elites in Rome, may explain his decision to build his villa in 120 AD near Tivoli, although there was a Spanish community there and his wife had land in Tibur (Tivoli). Most emperors ruled from the palace on the Palatine Hill. Not Hadrian. His so-called villa is really a centre of government built on some 300 acres of land. From 128 until the end of his reign, he governed from here with a large court. Rome, only 18 miles away, was easily reached by travel or post.



**A model of the Villa Hadrianus at Tivoli.
Trajan, wife of Hadrian.**

Vibia Sabina, daughter of

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For most of his reign Hadrian subjected the legions to the strictest discipline, and lived and traveled with them more than any other emperor, so he was mostly absent from Rome itself. He traveled many times over long distances throughout the vast Empire and gave many cities generous gifts, a water supply, harbours, food, public works, money and various honours.

In the *Historia Augusta*, we read that he often bathed in the public baths even with the meanest crowd. Once, seeing a veteran from his army rubbing his back against the wall, he asked him why, and the man said because I have no slave. Hadrian not only gave him some slaves but also the cost of their maintenance. Later, when he saw a number of old men rubbing themselves this way to arouse his generosity, he ordered them to rub one another.

He sometimes held court in the Pantheon, the temple he rebuilt for all the gods, loved hunting and breakfasted without wine, says Dio, which must have been unusual. On his birthday, he gave a spectacle free to the people where two hundred lions were slain. He distributed gifts by means of little balls which he threw in the theatres and in the Circus. He commanded men and women to bathe separately, women in the morning, men in the afternoon, reviving the practice from the time of Augustus.



**Hadrian's almost perfectly preserved Pantheon, 126-128 AD, rebuilt and dedicated to honour all the gods and Augustus' friend Marcus Agrippa.
Photos by Don Fenton ©**

Hadrian traveled through one province after another, visiting the various regions and cities and inspecting all the garrisons and forts. Some of these he removed to more desirable places, some he abolished, and established new ones. He personally investigated absolutely everything in the camps, weapons, engines, trenches, ramparts and palisades, and the private affairs of the men serving in the ranks and the officers - their lives, quarters, habits — and reformed them if they had become too luxurious. He drilled the men for every kind of battle and led a rigorous life himself, walked or rode on horseback on all occasions, never once setting foot in a chariot or a four-wheeled vehicle. He never covered his head in hot or cold weather, neither in German snows nor under scorching Egyptian suns. He so trained and disciplined the whole military force throughout the entire empire that, for the most part, Rome enjoyed peace with all neighbouring nations.

He constructed theatres and held games as he traveled from city to city. In Greece he was admitted to the highest grade at the Eleusinian mysteries involving initiations for the Demeter and Persephone cult, with visions and dreams of an afterlife. Perhaps Antinous, his favourite, who drowned in Egypt was in fact offered in sacrifice. Hadrian built the city of Antinopolis in his honour, the first Hellenic city in the region with a new deity, Osiris-Antinous.

Jerusalem and the Jewish people were the one major exception to the successful Pax Romana under Hadrian. Judea had been through three Jewish-Roman wars. The first in 66-73 AD, put down by Vespasian and his son Titus, the story told for us in the Arch of Titus, not far from Hadrian's Temple of Venus and Rome. The second in 115-117 when Trajan was fighting the Parthian War. In 132-136 Hadrian faced the third Jewish-Roman war, the Simon Bar Kokhba revolt.

Jerusalem had been razed and Hadrian constructed a new city naming it Aelia Capitolina for the gens Aelia in Italica, as noted above. Hadrian built a temple to Jupiter on the Temple Mount. This sacrilege started a revolt all over Judea with hostile guerilla warfare raids and skirmishes.



Map of the Roman Empire in 125 AD during the reign of Emperor Hadrian.

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Hadrian put together a large Roman force of more than six legions led by his best generals including Julius Severus, governor of Britain, against the Jews. Dio writes that five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in various raids and battles and by famine, disease and fire. The Romans also suffered serious losses. Some historians claim that Hadrian changed the name of Judea to Syria Palaestina. And even after Hadrian's death, the Romans barred Jews from Jerusalem.

Hadrian died a painful, prolonged death. He may have had congestive heart disease and suffered for a couple of years. He toyed with thoughts and plans of suicide according to Dio Cassius. In the end, he retired to an imperial villa at Baiae, the seaside resort in Campania, and expired, now a God, Divus Hadrianus.

He adopted Antoninus Pius as his heir and named Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus to succeed him, prolonging the succession of good emperors.

He lived sixty-two years and was emperor 117 to 138, twenty years and eleven months. He was buried in the tomb he built close to the Aelian Bridge (named for his Spanish family) or Pons Aelius, which he also built before 134 AD because the Tomb of Augustus, where earlier

emperors had lain, was full. Today the bridge is the popular Ponte Sant'Angelo and Hadrian's re-purposed tomb is called the Castel Sant'Angelo.

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