Hadrian

A man of culture and the arts who did not like war, Emperor Hadrian (HAY-dree-in) was also a jealous and willful person who struggled to tolerate open criticism. Although he was often vengeful towards anyone who he felt was critical of his decisions or opinions, Hadrian ruled during another “golden age” in Rome where succession to the throne happened relatively peacefully.

Hadrian succeeded the emperor Trajan (TRAY-jin) who was a cousin to Hadrian’s father. During Trajan’s reign, Hadrian stayed close to the emperor and advanced his career as a result of it. When Hadrian became emperor in 117 CE he continued Trajan’s precedent of internally stabilizing the empire.

One of Hadrian’s major reforms was his reform of the Roman legal system. For the first time, he appointed judges to help write legislation and administer criminal justice. All principles and procedures of Roman civil law was written into a document called an edict by legal experts.

Hadrian also worked to change the legal system outside of the city of Rome. Up to Hadrian’s reign, the legal system was slow and inefficient. Roman courts heard cases from all over the Italian peninsula. Hadrian divided the empire into four districts each with its own judge. This allowed legal matters to be settled more quickly and efficiently.

Hadrian traveled extensively throughout his empire. This allowed Hadrian to manage the provinces of his empire more directly. Over a period of 12 years, he traveled the length of the empire from Gaul (modern day France) and Britain, to Asia and Greece, from Sicily and Africa, to Syria and Egypt. This travel allowed him to listen to the specific concerns of the inhabitants of those areas. In order to continue to effectively govern these distant areas, he appointed well-trained officials to run each of the provinces.

While Hadrian had a strong military career, he had very little interest in military conquest. Unlike Trajan before him, Hadrian was more concerned with strengthening the empire’s borders with physical defenses than expanding the borders. He had forts, castles and barriers built along many of the empire’s frontiers. The most famous barrier constructed was Hadrian’s Wall – much of which is still visible today. This barrier was created in Britain as a defense against the tribes of the north. The wall included watch towers and forts placed strategically along the mostly stone wall. The wall itself was constructed 8 feet thick and 20 feet high with some sections built of turf 20 feet thick and 13 feet high.
Hadrian’s policy of peace was successful until 132 CE. In the province of Judea (joo-DAY-ah), a serious Jewish rebellion broke out as a result of Hadrian’s actions. A lover of Greece, Hadrian decided to build a new Greco-Roman city on the site of Jerusalem. The city had not been rebuilt from a previous revolt more than 50 years earlier. Hadrian had a temple built for the goddess Venus however it was the temple to the god Jupiter on the same location as the old Temple of Solomon that proved to be the undoing. The Jews rose up in revolt and tried to reclaim their city. The revolt lasted more than two years before Hadrian was able to restore peace. The rebellion cost more than 500,000 Jewish lives.

Hadrian continued to try to “root out” Judaism after the rebellion. He prohibited Torah law, burned sacred scrolls on the Temple Mount, renamed Judea to Syria Palaestina and forbid Jews from entering the capital.
EXTENT OF THE
ROMAN EMPIRE
AT THE TIME OF
EMPEROR HADRIAN
A.D. 117