

correspondence in English. Readers have found in them evidence that Rolfe was a corruptor of innocent youth, an insatiable and unrepentant sodomite, or contrariwise mere begging letters concocted out of the literature of homosexuality and the author's own imagination. They in effect promise his patron the sexual services of fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boys, many of them inexperienced.

Rarely has any man left so clear an account of his own sexual nature and his passionate hunger for its fulfillment, along with the tragic evidence of its constant frustration. Rolfe's own preference was for boys sixteen to eighteen years old—the upper limit of the pederast's range of interest. But with his slender and uncertain means he simply could not pay hustlers' fees or rent suitable premises for the rendezvous. He felt real sympathy for the Venetian boys—gondoliers and the like—with whom he associated, and bitterly regretted that he could do no more for them. His failure to achieve the erotic conquests for which he longed paralleled all of the other disappointments of his life. He succeeded in nothing that he attempted, and was denied everything that he sought from the church except faith itself.

Rolfe has been the object of a cult, inspired perhaps by the fascination which the career of a pretender with equal touches of the holy and the demonic exerts on those fated to live their adventures vicariously through literature. He is a classic type of the homosexual "begging intellectual," constantly trying to live by his wits and to bask in the favor of the wealthy and powerful, yet doomed by the inner flaws of his personality to the margin of society and even of sanity. Born without the means and social position to realize his grandiose ambitions, he nevertheless left a heritage that is part of English literature.

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## ROMAN EMPERORS

Although many Roman sovereigns took their official duties seriously, others—especially in the first century of the empire—used their almost limitless powers to secure personal pleasure. Roman biographers and historians supply abundant records of their careers, including their characteristic weaknesses. The first emperors, known as Julio-Claudian, came from the family of Julius Caesar. Although no Roman emperor ever failed to marry, Edward Gibbon remarked that "of the first fifteen emperors Claudius was the only one whose taste in love was entirely correct" (heterosexual).

*Julio-Claudian Dynasty.* Julius Caesar (ca. 102–44 B.C.), notorious as "the husband of every woman and the wife of every man," prostituted himself as a teenager to the Hellenistic monarch Nicomedes of Bithynia. His grand-nephew and successor Octavian—known as Augustus when emperor from 31 B.C. to A.D. 14—was a handsome lad beloved, perhaps physically, by Cicero, although in later life his wife Livia, the sole empress, provided him with as many women as he wished. The slide of Tiberius (ruled 14–37) into debauchery in his old age, analyzed by the genius of Tacitus in his *Annals*, on the isle of Capri, from whose fatal cliffs he pushed 76 suspect senators, is embellished by Suetonius, who in his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* described the swimming pool he kept filled with his "minnows," young boys and girls he taught to swim through his ancient legs and nibble his private parts. His vicious minister Sejanus had once been a senator's catamite.

Tiberius' nephew and assassin, the mad Caligula (37–41), who made his horse consul, ripped open the womb of his sister Drusilla out of fear that the progeny might succeed him and also indulged in pederasty with the patricians Marcus Lepidus and Valerius Catullus, Mnester the Comedian, and even foreign hostages. The drooling hunchback and stutterer Claudius (41–54), who survived Caligula's

tyranny by pretending to be an imbecile, was dragged from his hiding place in a closet in the palace by the Praetorian guards who after assassinating Caligula made him Emperor, although his own sympathies were republican. He later had his first wife Messalina beheaded after she "married" a courtier in a revel without divorcing the Emperor. Claudius' son-in-law was, however, found dead in bed with a boy, and he himself was poisoned with a bowl of deadly mushrooms by his beautiful niece Agrippina, whom he had forced to marry him in spite of his repulsiveness, but she did so to arrange the succession of her son by a previous marriage, Nero.

Nero (54–69), who succeeded in murdering his mother on the third attempt and forced his tutor Seneca, the greatest Latin writer and philosopher of stoicism, of the Silver Age, to commit suicide, was quite effeminate, but took as his bride in an elaborate wedding the eunuch Sporus because his face resembled that of his former wife Poppea. Nero's patrician contemporary Sempronius Gracchus, who degraded himself to fight as a gladiator, married a young male cornet player.

*Year of the Four Emperors and Flavian Dynasty.* The suspicious, parsimonious Galba, who replaced Nero, was succeeded by the effeminate Otho, and he then by Vitellius, the last of the four emperors to die in the year 69. The victor in the civil war, doughty Italian Vespasian (69–79), of equestrian rather than senatorial background, tried to restore to the principate the rectitude that the elderly Augustus pretended to have, but the elder of his sons Titus (79–81) owned a troop of pathics and eunuchs. The embittered, tyrannical Domitian (81–96) went mad, indulging in heterosexual and homosexual orgies, although pretending to enforce chastity. Before conspirators, including his wife, succeeded in assassinating him, he executed three Vestal Virgins unfaithful to their vows and enforced the Lex Julia against pederasts.

*Adoptive and Antonine Emperors.* Although Suetonius and Tacitus, the main sources for the sexual lives of the first twelve Roman emperors, as pro-republican senators denigrated their character with scandal, their mostly creditable tales only slightly exceed the accounts of the immorality common in the late Republic in avant-garde aristocratic circles. About the five "good emperors" who succeeded one another "by adoption of the best" more than by the close family ties of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties and came from the provinces, the historian is far less well informed. They seem to have been more moderate sexually as well as less tyrannical. Nerva (96–98), septuagenarian when proclaimed Emperor, is, however, rumored to have buggered his younger predecessor Domitian.

Trajan (98–117), the hero whom the army forced the old senator to adopt as successor, descended from Roman colonists in Spain. A heavy drinker, Trajan practiced pederasty uninhibitedly and "without harming anyone." His cousin and successor, the philhellenic Hadrian (117–138), who composed pederastic verses in Greek imitating Anacreon—though respecting his wife Faustina—had a passionate affair with the beautiful Antinous. After the favorite drowned himself in the Nile, Hadrian declared him a god and erected so many statues for his cult that no other figure of antiquity has so many surviving representations.

Of Antoninus Pius (138–161) the least is known, but his successor Marcus Aurelius (161–180) noted that he had overcome any passion for boys. Unlike the other "good emperors," Marcus unfortunately produced a son and heir, the mad Commodus (180–192), sexually wild and impossibly tyrannical. Fancying himself a gladiator, he butchered cripples and other handicapped and otherwise shackled victims before seventy or eighty thousand spectators in the Colosseum. He is said to have prostituted himself to men and to

have kept a harem of 300 girls and 300 boys.

*Severans.* Although Commodus' successor the elderly Pertinax (193) reigned only 87 days and auctioned off Commodus' harem (except those who had been introduced into the palace by force, whom he freed), the old man bought some of them back for his own pleasure. The Praetorians sold the Empire to the wealthy, hen-pecked Didius Julianus, whose wife wished to be the first lady of Roman society, but murdered him after two months. Upon his assassination the "pax Romana" permanently ended in a bloody civil war in which Septimius Severus (193–211), of Punic descent, triumphed. The African Septimius married Julia Domna, the heiress of the priestly family of the sun god Baal from Emesa in Syria. She and her sister and daughter became the powers behind the throne during the reign of their mad progeny. Beside the unreliable continuators of the biographer Suetonius, known as the "Augustan historians," who wrote lives of the emperors from Hadrian to the last of the Thirty Tyrants in 284, the modern scholar has better sources, Herodian and Dio Cassius, to tell him of the political and sexual exploits of the Severi.

Using the term *Dominus* (Lord) to replace *Princeps Senatus* (Chief of the Senate), the Severi transformed the Empire into an overt military dictatorship that began to use the trappings of Oriental despotism and forbade Christians to proselytize, forcing Clement to flee Alexandria. Septimius was the first emperor to learn Latin as a foreign tongue, as in the eastern half of the Empire Greek remained the language of administration and Latin was used only in the army.

Septimius' elder son and successor Caracalla (211–217) treacherously murdered his brother and coemperor in his mother's arms. By enfranchising all free inhabitants of the Empire citizens in 212, Caracalla accidentally made it harder to find a legal homosexual partner because

only freedmen, slaves, and foreigners were fair game, Roman citizens being shielded from *stuprum* by Domitian's extension of the Lex Julia to homosexuality among citizens, if not by earlier decrees. In other words, provincials and members of other ethnic groups, henceforth Roman citizens, could no longer assume the passive role.

Julia Domna's and Septimius' great-nephew, the effete transvestite Heliogabalus (218–222) attempted to popularize the worship of the Black Stone, a symbol of Baal. Accompanied by eunuch priests in saffron robes with cymbals, he officiated in public, the soldiers cheering his dancing. Twice married, once to a Vestal Virgin, Heliogabalus had agents scour the Empire for men with "large organs and bring them to court so that he could enjoy them." He also offered a great reward to the physician who could perform a transsexualizing operation on him, but this feat lay far beyond the Greco-Roman art of medicine.

After his assassination, his cousin Alexander Severus (222–235), who ascended the throne at fourteen and at seventeen married the daughter of a senator, saw his jealous domineering mother banish his wife and afterwards remained single until his assassination.

*Imperial Crisis.* Of the Thirty Tyrants who reigned in the fifty years that separated the death of Alexander to the accession of Diocletian (235–284), only two died peacefully, if we exclude the one stricken by plague. Famine, pestilence, and war civil and foreign devastated the Empire during that half-century. Debasement of the coinage and ruinous overtaxation exacerbated the crisis. The barracks emperors who fought their way to the throne, if not illiterate, were generally peasants, often from Illyricum and unfamiliar with upper-class Greek (and Roman) pederastic traditions. Neoplatonists who attempted to refute Christians came to resemble their adversaries in trying to escape from a hopeless world and resorting

to mysticism, and the majority of them were sex-negative and disapproving of homosexuality.

The crude giant from Thrace, Maximus (235–238), who assassinated the whimpering Alexander Severus in his tent along with his mother and faithful friends, was the first Emperor never to visit Rome. Descended from the Gracchi, Gordian I managed only 36 days, but his grandson Gordian II (238–244) lasted under the control of his mother's eunuchs and then his father-in-law until assassinated by followers of Philip the Arab (244–249), reputed to be black and even Christian. Celebrating the thousandth anniversary of the founding of Rome in 247, he also attempted unsuccessfully to suppress male prostitution and to enforce the *Lex Scatinia*. Decius (245–251) began the great persecution of the Christians, but Gallienus (253–268) refused his father Valerian's (253–257) policy of persecution and replaced it with toleration, hoping to win over the Christians with his neo-Platonic arguments.

The grave disorders may have destroyed one-third of the population, devastated the cities, which had been the focus of classical pederasty, and destroyed the old upper classes. Provincial and even villa autarky (self-sufficiency) replaced the capitalistic trading network that had sustained the old cities. They also had to be walled to protect against marauders and invaders. Pederastic writing, like all other non-religious literature, declined sharply under the Thirty Tyrants. Physicians and philosophers increasingly recommended sexual restraint.

*Christian Emperors.* Even with the accession of Christian Emperors, who soon imposed the death penalty for sodomy, classical pederasty did not die out at once. Constantine's sons Constantius and Constans (the latter's bodyguards chosen for their beauty rather than their competence), following the lead of Church councils and ascetic theologians, first decreed death for even consenting, adult sodomites

in 342. In 390 Theodosius the Great (379–395) with his sons Arcadius and Honorius and coemperor Valentinian II prescribed burning at the stake for those found guilty of anal intercourse with another male. In two novellae appended to his summation of previous Roman laws condemning pederasty in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, Justinian the Great (527–565), who married the former showgirl Theodora, decreed death at the stake for unrepentant sodomites because the Biblical account of the conflagration of Sodom proved that they had brought ruin upon society, causing famines, earthquakes, and pestilences. Justinian, who closed the pagan schools of philosophy, also ended the classical pederasty institutionalized by the Greeks in Crete and Sparta toward the end of the seventh century B.C., 1300 years earlier. He set the tone for the persecution codified by Patristic writers, penitentials, canon law, and scholastic philosophy, as well as laws (feudal and royal) and laws (municipal) that still endures in Christian society, only relieved of the death penalty beginning with reforms of the French Revolution and of Joseph II of Austria inspired by the Enlightenment ideas of Beccaria.

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## ROME, ANCIENT

The erotic life of ancient Rome—the Republic and the Empire—has long fascinated philologists and historians, novelists and moralists. Whether on account of its long dominance of Western civilization, its role as the primary antagonist of early Christianity, or its apparently contradictory images of robust, virile military power and orgiastic, “polymor-