

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #574
Commodus | The Gladiator Emperor
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Transcript

[00:00:05] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today it's part three of our three-part mini-series on "Tyrants Of The Roman Empire".

[00:00:30] In case you missed them, part one was on Caligula, part two was on Nero, and we are going to [round off](#)¹ the series by talking about Commodus, the so-called "Gladiator Emperor".

[00:00:42] You can listen to this episode without having listened to the previous two, but it will make more sense if you've listened to those, as I'll reference a few names and events from those periods.

[00:00:54] So, if you'd prefer to listen to those first and you haven't done so already, now is the time to press pause.

[00:01:02] OK then, let's get started and talk about Commodus.

¹ finish or complete

[00:01:08] Millions of people around the world today [turn to](#)² the [musings](#)³ of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius.

[00:01:16] Although it's almost 2,000 years old, his internal thoughts about “how to live a good life”, [immortalised](#)⁴ in Meditations, have become a sort of guidebook, a [blueprint](#)⁵ for how to be content and satisfied, even today, in a world that [bears](#)⁶ little similarity to the one in which Aurelius lived.

[00:01:40] As such, we think of Aurelius as a wise and thoughtful man, a man who carefully considered every decision, [evaluating](#)⁷ the advantages and disadvantages before choosing the wisest path.

[00:01:55] He was, undoubtedly, one of the better rulers of Rome and was praised both by his [contemporaries](#)⁸ and historians looking back on his 19-year [stint](#)⁹ in power.

² use or look at them for help or ideas

³ deep thoughts or reflections

⁴ made famous forever

⁵ a plan or guide

⁶ shows, has

⁷ thinking about the good and bad sides

⁸ people who lived at the same time

⁹ period of duty

[00:02:09] On a personal level, some decisions are more debatable, whether that's his [tolerance¹⁰](#) of his wife's frequent [infidelity¹¹](#), his [willingness¹²](#) to [turn a blind eye¹³](#) to court [scandals¹⁴](#), or even his habit of promoting his favourites over other, perhaps more talented, people.

[00:02:28] There is one decision, though, which has forever [tarnished¹⁵](#) his legacy.

[00:02:34] He named as his successor his son Commodus, a man who has [gone down in history¹⁶](#) as a [tyrant¹⁷](#), an [imbecile¹⁸](#), a [sadist¹⁹](#), a [megalomaniac²⁰](#), a madman, and,

¹⁰ acceptance

¹¹ being unfaithful in their marriage

¹² readiness or preparedness

¹³ pretend not to notice them

¹⁴ shocking or shameful events

¹⁵ made dirty or damaged

¹⁶ been remembered in history

¹⁷ a cruel and unfair ruler

¹⁸ a very stupid person

¹⁹ a person who enjoyed hurting others

²⁰ a person who believed he was very powerful or god-like

to quote the Roman historian Cassius Dio, “a greater [curse](#)²¹ to the Romans than any [pestilence](#)²² or any crime”.

[00:02:57] Now, one can certainly argue that Marcus Aurelius had little choice but to [nominate](#)²³ Commodus as his heir; he had no other surviving sons, and [failing to](#)²⁴ name Commodus as his successor would have put his son’s life in danger.

[00:03:14] And Marcus Aurelius was human after all.

[00:03:19] Any parent’s first [preoccupation](#)²⁵ is for the safety of their child, and it’s not difficult to see how Marcus Aurelius might have [overlooked](#)²⁶ some early signs of Commodus’ insuitability for the top job, if indeed there were signs.

[00:03:36] So, perhaps he had no other option, or at least no other good options, but the choice to go with Commodus would forever be a black mark on the [otherwise](#)²⁷ positive legacy of Marcus Aurelius.

²¹ something that brought bad luck or suffering

²² deadly disease

²³ officially suggest him

²⁴ not doing it

²⁵ main concern or worry

²⁶ not noticed or ignored

²⁷ in other respects, apart from that

[00:03:52] So, to the early life of Commodus.

[00:03:55] He was born in AD 161, the first emperor to be born “in the purple”, or born during his father’s reign.

[00:04:07] As you will remember from the previous two episodes, most Roman emperors didn’t have a clear successor; there was constant [jockeying](#)²⁸ for power through affairs, marriages, divorces, adoptions and poisonings, and parents—often divorced or [widowed](#)²⁹ mothers—tried to position their sons as first in line to the title of emperor.

[00:04:32] Marcus Aurelius was an [exception](#)³⁰, in that he had a relatively uncomplicated personal life.

[00:04:40] He was only married once, and the marriage [bore](#)³¹ at least 14 children. But only one son and four daughters were still alive at the time of their father’s death.

[00:04:52] The daughters, this being Ancient Rome, didn’t [get a look in](#)³²; they didn’t feature in the succession planning.

²⁸ competition

²⁹ having lost a husband through death

³⁰ someone who was not like the others

³¹ provided, delivered

³² have a chance or opportunity

[00:05:02] This left the one and only son: Commodus.

[00:05:07] And from a very young age, he had been [groomed](#)³³ for the role of Roman Emperor.

[00:05:14] He was officially made Caesar at the age of 5, together with his younger brother.

[00:05:20] Caesar, by the way, means the [designated](#)³⁴ heir; the son who will become emperor on his father's death.

[00:05:28] His younger brother, his co-Caesar, Marcus Annius Verus, died a few years later, which made Commodus the [sole](#)³⁵ heir.

[00:05:38] He travelled around with his father, following his military campaign in Germany, and is thought to have received personal tuition from the best [scholars](#)³⁶ at the time.

[00:05:49] As Marcus Aurelius grew older, and following a particularly threatening [uprising](#)³⁷ by one of his governors, Avidius Cassius, he gave his son increasing

³³ prepared or trained

³⁴ officially chosen

³⁵ only, single

³⁶ very educated people, teachers

³⁷ rebellion or revolt

responsibilities, making it [abundantly](#)³⁸ clear that Commodus was his [handpicked](#)³⁹ successor.

[00:06:07] First came the victory title of Germanicus, then the title of Imperator, then consul.

[00:06:15] And for a couple of years, he ruled jointly with his father, with Marcus Aurelius.

[00:06:22] And in March 180 AD, his father died, leaving the then 18-year-old Commodus the [undisputed](#)⁴⁰ and official Roman Emperor.

[00:06:35] At first, the [transition](#)⁴¹ was smooth.

[00:06:39] Commodus inherited an empire that was [stable](#)⁴², wealthy, and at relative peace, by Roman standards at least.

[00:06:48] His father's long wars on the Danube frontier were effectively coming to an end.

³⁸ extremely

³⁹ carefully chosen

⁴⁰ accepted by everyone, without question

⁴¹ the change from one condition to another

⁴² steady, not changing

[00:06:55] The Senate and the army accepted him without serious opposition.

[00:07:00] For many Romans, this looked like the best possible scenario: a young emperor, born into [legitimacy](#)⁴³, stepping into his father's shoes without the [messy](#)⁴⁴ power struggles that had accompanied so many of his [predecessors](#)⁴⁵.

[00:07:16] But the contrast between father and son soon became obvious.

[00:07:22] Marcus Aurelius was [austere](#)⁴⁶, philosophical, and [endlessly](#)⁴⁷ patient.

[00:07:29] Commodus was none of these things.

[00:07:32] Ancient writers describe him as lazy, [vain](#)⁴⁸, and obsessed with personal pleasure.

⁴³ being accepted as rightful or lawful

⁴⁴ complicated, chaotic

⁴⁵ people who had the same role in the past

⁴⁶ simple and strict

⁴⁷ without stopping

⁴⁸ too proud of his abilities

[00:07:40] Where his father had spent years in [muddy](#)⁴⁹ camps on the German [frontier](#)⁵⁰, fighting for the glory of Rome, Commodus preferred the comfort of the palace, the baths, and the arena.

[00:07:53] He made peace with the Germanic tribes almost immediately, abandoning his father's planned campaigns.

[00:08:01] For Rome's soldiers and generals, this felt like throwing away years of hard-won [gains](#)⁵¹.

[00:08:08] For Commodus, it meant he could return to Rome, parade in triumph, and present himself as the bringer of peace.

[00:08:18] And once back in Rome, his reign began to take on a different [tone](#)⁵².

[00:08:25] He [delighted in](#)⁵³ public shows, [extravagant](#)⁵⁴ spectacles, and above all, in himself.

⁴⁹ covered in wet dirt

⁵⁰ border or edge

⁵¹ benefits or successes

⁵² general feeling or style

⁵³ greatly enjoyed

⁵⁴ expensive and wasteful

[00:08:33] Coins were [minted](#)⁵⁵ showing him as Hercules, [draped](#)⁵⁶ in a lion-skin, carrying a [club](#)⁵⁷.

[00:08:40] Statues were [erected](#)⁵⁸ portraying him as a [demigod](#)⁵⁹.

[00:08:46] He renamed months of the year after his own titles and would even go so far as to rename Rome itself the “Colonia Commodiana”, the Colony of Commodus.

[00:08:59] If Marcus Aurelius had been the model of [self-restraint](#)⁶⁰, Commodus was the model of [self-indulgence](#)⁶¹.

⁵⁵ produced (coins)

⁵⁶ covered with

⁵⁷ a heavy stick used as a weapon

⁵⁸ built or put up

⁵⁹ half-god, half-human

⁶⁰ controlling his own actions or desires

⁶¹ giving himself too much pleasure

[00:09:08] And soon, that [indulgence](#)⁶² would [extend](#)⁶³ beyond self-glorification to something that [horrified](#)⁶⁴ Rome's elite, the emperor's decision to step into the gladiatorial arena, not as a spectator, but as a participant. As a gladiator.

[00:09:28] Now, as you probably know, and as we [touched on](#)⁶⁵ in previous episodes, gladiators were right at the bottom of the social [pecking order](#)⁶⁶ in Ancient Rome.

[00:09:39] They were often slaves, criminals, or prisoners of war, trained to fight to the death for the amusement of the crowd.

[00:09:49] They might be admired for their bravery, and indeed, they could win their freedom if they were successful enough in the arena.

[00:09:56] But they were [disposable](#)⁶⁷. Their lives were cheap. They were entertainment, not citizens. And they certainly weren't emperors.

⁶² the act of enjoying too much of something

⁶³ stretch out or continue further

⁶⁴ shocked or scared very much

⁶⁵ mentioned briefly

⁶⁶ social ranking, levels of importance

⁶⁷ made to be thrown away, not important

[00:10:07] So when Commodus began not just [sponsoring](#)⁶⁸ games, but also entering the arena himself, it was [scandalous](#)⁶⁹.

[00:10:17] He is described as having fought hundreds of times, with one account saying that he fought as a gladiator on more than 1,000 occasions.

[00:10:28] Of course, the fights were carefully [staged](#)⁷⁰. He never faced a serious opponent.

[00:10:34] He would, reportedly, start with birds or animals kept in nets or cages, so they couldn't fight back. It wasn't a "fight" so much as an execution.

[00:10:47] Then he would move on to more exotic animals, cheetahs, lions and even elephants.

[00:10:55] Again, this wouldn't be a fair fight, man vs. beast. Commodus would stand high up in the gallery with a bow and arrow, and he would dispatch the animals from the comfort and safety of his private box.

⁶⁸ paying for or supporting

⁶⁹ shocking and shameful

⁷⁰ planned, not real

[00:11:10] In a single day, he is reported to have killed 100 lions, which is, of course, no reflection on his talents as a [marksman⁷¹](#), as an archer, but rather of his [insatiable⁷²](#) thirst for blood.

[00:11:25] And he is also remembered for getting into the arena himself, for a “fight” with human gladiators.

[00:11:33] Again, his survival is no reflection of his skill with a sword, but rather of the fact that his opponents were instructed not to fight back and given [blunt⁷³](#) and ineffective weapons.

[00:11:48] In some cases, they were completely unarmed, unable to defend themselves, and Commodus [merely⁷⁴](#) played the role of public executioner.

⁷¹ a person skilled at shooting

⁷² never satisfied

⁷³ not sharp

⁷⁴ only, just

[00:11:59] On one famous occasion, he is reported to have [rounded up](#)⁷⁵ all men in Rome who had lost a foot and had them tied together to [resemble](#)⁷⁶ giants, and he then [clubbed](#)⁷⁷ them all to death.

[00:12:15] And to make matters worse, or even more bizarre, he demanded payment for his “victories”.

[00:12:24] Cassius Dio writes that he would charge the city one million sesterces for each appearance, a [vast](#)⁷⁸ sum, practically [bankrupting](#)⁷⁹ the [treasury](#)⁸⁰ for what were essentially [vanity](#)⁸¹ performances.

[00:12:40] And it wasn't just the financial cost.

[00:12:43] For Rome's elite, this was [humiliation](#)⁸².

⁷⁵ gathered together

⁷⁶ look like

⁷⁷ hit with a club

⁷⁸ very large

⁷⁹ making it lose all its money

⁸⁰ the place holding the empire's money

⁸¹ self-love and pride

⁸² great shame or embarrassment

[00:12:47] Nero had acted in plays, which was embarrassing, but an emperor as a gladiator was on another level altogether.

[00:12:57] The emperor, who was supposedly chosen by the gods to rule the world, now played the part of a common slave for cheers and applause.

[00:13:08] The ordinary people, however, loved it.

[00:13:12] They **packed**⁸³ the Colosseum to watch their emperor dressed as Hercules, **club** in hand, **boasting**⁸⁴ of his **divine**⁸⁵ strength.

[00:13:21] Commodus **leaned into**⁸⁶ this image, declaring himself not only Hercules reborn but also the new founder of Rome.

[00:13:31] And while Commodus was “busy” in the arena, **lapping up**⁸⁷ the cheers of the audience or **giggling**⁸⁸ at the sight of the **bloodthirsty**⁸⁹ events **unfolding**⁹⁰ below, the

⁸³ filled up, crammed

⁸⁴ talking with too much pride about

⁸⁵ god-like

⁸⁶ accepted fully, used to advantage

⁸⁷ enjoying very much

⁸⁸ laughing in a silly way

⁸⁹ enjoying violence and killing

⁹⁰ happening or developing

day-to-day business of running Rome was left in the hands of favourites and [courtiers](#)⁹¹

.

[00:13:50] First came a freedman called Saoterus, who acted as a [chamberlain](#)⁹² and enjoyed enormous influence.

[00:13:58] He only lasted a couple of years, as he was murdered in 182 AD by another freedman named Cleander, who assumed the roles and responsibilities previously held by Saoterus.

[00:14:13] Cleander effectively ran the empire for several years, selling offices, governorships, and even Senate seats to [the highest bidder](#)⁹³.

[00:14:24] It was government as an open auction, and it [bred](#)⁹⁴ [resentment](#)⁹⁵ and chaos.

⁹¹ advisers in the royal court

⁹² a high official managing the royal household

⁹³ the person who offered the most money

⁹⁴ caused or created

⁹⁵ anger because of unfair treatment

[00:14:30] In AD 190, when a shortage of [grain](#)⁹⁶ caused riots in Rome, the [mob](#)⁹⁷ turned on Cleander, demanding his execution.

[00:14:41] Commodus, whose primary concern was self-preservation, had his former favourite killed, but the episode left the empire unstable, and the emperor even more isolated.

[00:14:56] And by this point, AD 192, Commodus was a man completely [consumed by](#)⁹⁸ his [delusions](#)⁹⁹.

[00:15:05] He renamed the legions after himself, declared every day a holiday in his honour, and [insisted](#)¹⁰⁰ that statues of himself as Hercules be [erected](#) across the empire.

[00:15:18] And while the emperor lived in this god-like fantasy, the city he ruled was sinking into [misery](#)¹⁰¹.

⁹⁶ crops like wheat, rice, or corn

⁹⁷ a large, angry crowd

⁹⁸ filled with

⁹⁹ false beliefs

¹⁰⁰ demanded strongly

¹⁰¹ great unhappiness or suffering

[00:15:27] The **treasury** was empty, the Senate was **humiliated**¹⁰², and the people of Rome, who might have once been entertained by his games, now only saw corruption and instability.

[00:15:41] And **the final straw**¹⁰³ came with what he planned to do on New Year of AD 193.

[00:15:49] Now, New Year was an important day in the Roman calendar. It was when **magistrates**¹⁰⁴ **took office**¹⁰⁵, **sacrifices**¹⁰⁶ were made, and the emperor made public appearances to mark Rome's continuation and stability.

[00:16:05] Commodus had an unusual idea.

[00:16:09] According to Cassius Dio, he announced that in the New Year's festivities he would appear not as the emperor, but as a gladiator.

[00:16:20] For Rome's **ruling class**¹⁰⁷, this was too much.

¹⁰² made to feel very ashamed

¹⁰³ the last problem that made the situation unbearable

¹⁰⁴ Roman officials or judges

¹⁰⁵ began a job in government

¹⁰⁶ religious offerings to gods

¹⁰⁷ the group with most power

[00:16:24] The Senate might [flatter¹⁰⁸](#) an emperor, [tolerate¹⁰⁹](#) [excess¹¹⁰](#), even [turn a blind eye](#) to corruption, but the idea of the emperor reducing himself to a professional gladiator on this highly symbolic day, and [dragging¹¹¹](#) the empire down with him, was [intolerable¹¹²](#).

[00:16:43] And as with Caligula and Nero before him, [plots¹¹³](#) began to form.

[00:16:49] There had, in fact, been multiple attempts to kill him, and it is in many respects surprising that he managed to hold onto power for as long as he did.

[00:17:00] Indeed, in AD 182, just a couple of years into his reign, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt led not by senators or generals, but by his own sister, Lucilla.

[00:17:14] Lucilla was the widow of the former co-emperor Lucius Verus, and she had expected to play a significant role in Roman politics.

¹⁰⁸ praise too much, often not honestly

¹⁰⁹ accept or allow

¹¹⁰ having too much of something

¹¹¹ pulling

¹¹² impossible to accept

¹¹³ secret plans

[00:17:24] She was older than Commodus and, according to Cassius Dio, she **resented**¹¹⁴ being **sidelined**¹¹⁵.

[00:17:32] So, together with a group of senators, she **hatched**¹¹⁶ a plan to have him killed.

[00:17:39] It was a simple enough plan. Wait until he was coming into a theatre, and **stab**¹¹⁷ him.

[00:17:46] It should have worked, but it went disastrously, almost comically, wrong.

[00:17:54] One of the conspirators confronted Commodus in public with a **dagger**¹¹⁸, but he couldn't **resist**¹¹⁹ the **urge**¹²⁰ to **indulge in**¹²¹ some Hollywood-style theatrics.

¹¹⁴ felt anger about unfair treatment

¹¹⁵ pushed aside, not allowed to take part

¹¹⁶ devised or designed secretly

¹¹⁷ push a knife into him

¹¹⁸ a short knife, used as a weapon

¹¹⁹ fight against

¹²⁰ strong desire

¹²¹ allow himself to enjoy them

[00:18:05] So instead of [stabbing¹²²](#) him immediately, he declared “The Senate sends you this!”, and before he could [plunge¹²³](#) the [dagger](#) into the emperor, he was seized by Commodus’ guards, and the whole conspiracy was [unravelling¹²⁴](#).

[00:18:22] Lucilla was [banished¹²⁵](#) to Capri and later executed, while many of her allies were put to death.

[00:18:30] This was the most famous of the failed assassination attempts.

[00:18:35] The successful one came ten years later, on New Year’s Eve, AD 192.

[00:18:43] It’s not clear exactly what [precipitated¹²⁶](#) the plot, but it’s believed that it was in reaction to Commodus’ plan to arrest and execute three of his closest allies: his new [chamberlain](#), Eclectus, the head of the Praetorian Guard, Laetus, and his mistress, Marcia.

¹²² pushing the knife into him

¹²³ push quickly into

¹²⁴ fell apart, failed

¹²⁵ sent away as punishment

¹²⁶ caused suddenly

[00:19:05] When Marcia **got wind of**¹²⁷ this plan, and **presumably**¹²⁸ realising “it’s either me or him”, she sent for the other two names on the “**hit list**¹²⁹”, and the three **conspired**¹³⁰ to murder Commodus.

[00:19:20] There were **frantic**¹³¹ attempts to poison him during the day, but none of them succeeded.

[00:19:27] Eventually, they called upon a wrestler called Narcissus, who was actually one of Commodus’s wrestling partners.

[00:19:36] He was sent into Commodus’ **chamber**¹³² with instructions to kill him.

[00:19:41] He entered the emperor’s **chamber** and found him in the bath, where he proceeded to **strangle**¹³³ him.

¹²⁷ heard about secretly

¹²⁸ probably, likely

¹²⁹ the list of people to be killed

¹³⁰ planned secretly

¹³¹ very worried and hurried

¹³² room

¹³³ kill by squeezing the neck

[00:19:49] Commodus might have been Rome's most [decorated](#)¹³⁴ and highly-paid gladiator, but there, naked in the bath, he was [no match for](#)¹³⁵ a man armed only with his [bare hands](#)¹³⁶.

[00:20:03] The emperor, now ex-emperor, was thirty-one years old.

[00:20:08] And with his death, the dynasty of the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius ended in blood and [disgrace](#)¹³⁷.

[00:20:16] There were calls for Commodus' body to be [dragged](#)¹³⁸ through the streets of Rome on [hooks](#)¹³⁹ before being dumped into the Tiber, and it almost would have been, had it not been for the [intervention](#)¹⁴⁰ of a [consul](#)¹⁴¹ called Pertinax, a man who would in fact go on to be Emperor, [albeit](#)¹⁴² only for 87 days.

¹³⁴ given honours, medals, or titles

¹³⁵ not as strong as

¹³⁶ hands without weapons

¹³⁷ shame, loss of respect

¹³⁸ pulled along forcefully

¹³⁹ curved metal pieces for holding

¹⁴⁰ action to stop or change the situation

¹⁴¹ one of the highest Roman officials

¹⁴² although

[00:20:39] Although his body wasn't **dragged** through the streets, the Senate wasted no time in **condemning**¹⁴³ his memory. They declared a damnatio memoriae, erasing his name from **inscriptions**¹⁴⁴, **tearing down**¹⁴⁵ his statues, and **branding**¹⁴⁶ him a public enemy.

[00:20:58] To them, he was not just a bad emperor, but a tyrant who had nearly destroyed Rome.

[00:21:05] In the words of Cassius Dio, Commodus' rule marked the descent "from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and **rust**¹⁴⁷".

[00:21:16] And Rome itself was left in chaos.

¹⁴³ saying it was wrong or bad

¹⁴⁴ words carved or written in stone/metal

¹⁴⁵ destroying or pulling down

¹⁴⁶ marking

¹⁴⁷ the reddish substance formed on iron when it reacts with air and water

[00:21:19] Commodus's death did not bring [stability](#)¹⁴⁸; instead, it [plunged](#)¹⁴⁹ the empire into what historians have called the Year of the Five Emperors, a [rapid](#)¹⁵⁰ succession of rulers backed by [rival](#)¹⁵¹ generals and [factions](#)¹⁵².

[00:21:35] The imperial throne, which was handed on a silver plate to Commodus, became the most dangerous seat in the world.

[00:21:45] Now, as with the two other subjects of this mini-series, it's important to remember that everything we know about them was written by men with an [agenda](#)¹⁵³, and was often written many years after their death.

[00:22:00] Cassius Dio, in particular, clearly [loathed](#)¹⁵⁴ him.

[00:22:04] Yes, it seems very likely that Commodus was a pretty awful individual and a terrible emperor, but it was very convenient for him to be [painted](#)¹⁵⁵ as such.

¹⁴⁸ the state of being steady and safe

¹⁴⁹ pushed or moved suddenly

¹⁵⁰ very fast

¹⁵¹ opponent, competitor

¹⁵² small groups within a larger group

¹⁵³ a hidden plan or aim

¹⁵⁴ hated strongly

¹⁵⁵ shown or described

[00:22:16] And this is the [thread](#)¹⁵⁶ that runs through all three of the tyrants we've covered in this series. Caligula, Nero, Commodus.

[00:22:26] Each of them is remembered as a monster, a [caricature](#)¹⁵⁷ of cruelty and [excess](#), [albeit](#) in different ways.

[00:22:35] Each of them was accused of madness, of [megalomania](#)¹⁵⁸, of treating Rome as their personal stage.

[00:22:44] And yet, in every case, the sources we rely on were written by [senators](#)¹⁵⁹, historians, or [chroniclers](#)¹⁶⁰ who hated them, and who often had very good reasons to [exaggerate](#)¹⁶¹ their faults.

[00:22:59] So perhaps the question is not just “were they really this bad?” but “why were they remembered this way?”

¹⁵⁶ common idea or theme

¹⁵⁷ an over the top and funny image

¹⁵⁸ obsession with power and greatness

¹⁵⁹ members of the Roman Senate

¹⁶⁰ people who wrote history

¹⁶¹ make them seem bigger or worse than they were

[00:23:08] Part of it was certainly deserved; all three were [tyrants](#)¹⁶² in different ways.

[00:23:14] But part of it was also politics: it served the interests of their successors, and of Rome's [elite](#)¹⁶³, to present them as [villains](#)¹⁶⁴ so that later emperors might seem like [saviours](#)¹⁶⁵ by comparison.

[00:23:30] In that sense, their reputations tell us as much about the [anxieties](#)¹⁶⁶ and [priorities](#)¹⁶⁷ of Roman society as they do about the emperors themselves.

[00:23:40] What was intolerable was not only cruelty or [extravagance](#)¹⁶⁸, which were both not uncommon in Rome, but the [violation](#)¹⁶⁹ of expectations: emperors acting like gladiators, emperors singing on stage, and emperors [humiliating](#)¹⁷⁰ the Senate.

¹⁶² cruel and unfair rulers

¹⁶³ the most powerful or rich people

¹⁶⁴ evil or bad people

¹⁶⁵ people who saved others

¹⁶⁶ worries

¹⁶⁷ the most important things

¹⁶⁸ spending or using too much

¹⁶⁹ breaking a rule or limit

¹⁷⁰ making them feel ashamed

[00:24:00] These were lines Rome's [ruling class](#) could not accept, and so the rulers who crossed them became [immortalised](#) as [bywords](#)¹⁷¹ for [tyranny](#)¹⁷².

[00:24:11] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on Commodus, and with that comes the end of this three-part mini-series on "Tyrants Of The Roman Empire".

[00:24:21] I hope you enjoyed the mini-series and that it shone some light on these characters that you no doubt had heard of, but perhaps were not [acquainted with](#)¹⁷³ every aspect of their life.

[00:24:32] To state the obvious, each of these episodes could have been ten times longer, and choosing what to include and what not to include was a task in itself.

[00:24:42] But we will probably return to some of the topics and stories in future episodes, like the story of the [luckless](#)¹⁷⁴ eunuch, Sporus, so you have that to look forward to at some stage in the [not-too-distant future](#)¹⁷⁵.

[00:24:55] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

¹⁷¹ words that represent the idea

¹⁷² cruel and unfair rule

¹⁷³ knowing about

¹⁷⁴ unlucky

¹⁷⁵ fairly soon, not far in time

[00:25:01] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Round off	finish or complete
Turn to	use or look at them for help or ideas
Musings	deep thoughts or reflections
Immortalised	made famous forever
Blueprint	a plan or guide
Bears	shows, has
Evaluating	thinking about the good and bad sides
Contemporaries	people who lived at the same time
Stint	period of duty
Tolerance	acceptance
Infidelity	being unfaithful in their marriage
Willingness	readiness or preparedness
Turn a blind eye	pretend not to notice them

Scandals	shocking or shameful events
Tarnished	made dirty or damaged
Gone down in history	been remembered in history
Tyrant	a cruel and unfair ruler
Imbecile	a very stupid person
Sadist	a person who enjoyed hurting others
Megalomaniac	a person who believed he was very powerful or god-like
Curse	something that brought bad luck or suffering
Pestilence	deadly disease
Nominate	officially suggest him
Failing to	not doing it
Preoccupation	main concern or worry
Overlooked	not noticed or ignored
Otherwise	in other respects, apart from that
Jockeying	competition

Widowed	having lost a husband through death
Exception	someone who was not like the others
Bore	provided, delivered
Get a look in	have a chance or opportunity
Groomed	prepared or trained
Designated	officially chosen
Sole	only, single
Scholars	very educated people, teachers
Uprising	rebellion or revolt
Abundantly	extremely
Handpicked	carefully chosen
Undisputed	accepted by everyone, without question
Transition	the change from one condition to another
Stable	steady, not changing
Legitimacy	being accepted as rightful or lawful

Messy	complicated, chaotic
Predecessors	people who had the same role in the past
Austere	simple and strict
Endlessly	without stopping
Vain	too proud of his abilities
Muddy	covered in wet dirt
Frontier	border or edge
Gains	benefits or successes
Tone	general feeling or style
Delighted in	greatly enjoyed
Extravagant	expensive and wasteful
Minted	produced (coins)
Draped	covered with
Club	a heavy stick used as a weapon
Erected	built or put up

Demigod	half-god, half-human
Self-restraint	controlling his own actions or desires
Self-indulgence	giving himself too much pleasure
Indulgence	the act of enjoying too much of something
Extend	stretch out or continue further
Horried	shocked or scared very much
Touched on	mentioned briefly
Pecking order	social ranking, levels of importance
Disposable	made to be thrown away, not important
Sponsoring	paying for or supporting
Scandalous	shocking and shameful
Staged	planned, not real
Marksman	a person skilled at shooting
Insatiable	never satisfied
Blunt	not sharp

Merely	only, just
Rounded up	gathered together
Resemble	look like
Clubbed	hit with a club
Vast	very large
Bankrupting	making it lose all its money
Treasury	the place holding the empire's money
Vanity	self-love and pride
Humiliation	great shame or embarrassment
Packed	filled up, crammed
Boasting	talking with too much pride about
Divine	god-like
Leaned into	accepted fully, used to advantage
Lapping up	enjoying very much
Giggling	laughing in a silly way

Bloodthirsty	enjoying violence and killing
Unfolding	happening or developing
Courtiers	advisers in the royal court
Chamberlain	a high official managing the royal household
The highest bidder	the person who offered the most money
Bred	caused or created
Resentment	anger because of unfair treatment
Grain	crops like wheat, rice, or corn
Mob	a large, angry crowd
Consumed by	filled with
Delusions	false beliefs
Insisted	demanded strongly
Misery	great unhappiness or suffering
Humiliated	made to feel very ashamed
The final straw	the last problem that made the situation unbearable

Magistrates	Roman officials or judges
Took office	began a job in government
Sacrifices	religious offerings to gods
Ruling class	the group with most power
Flatter	praise too much, often not honestly
Tolerate	accept or allow
Excess	having too much of something
Dragging	pulling
Intolerable	impossible to accept
Plots	secret plans
Resented	felt anger about unfair treatment
Sidelined	pushed aside, not allowed to take part
Hatched	devised or designed secretly
Stab	push a knife into him
Dagger	a short knife, used as a weapon

Resist	fight against
Urge	strong desire
Indulge in	allow himself to enjoy them
Stabbing	pushing the knife into him
Plunge	push quickly into
Unravelled	fell apart, failed
Banished	sent away as punishment
Precipitated	caused suddenly
Got wind of	heard about secretly
Presumably	probably, likely
Hit list	the list of people to be killed
Conspired	planned secretly
Frantic	very worried and hurried
Chamber	room
Strangle	kill by squeezing the neck

Decorated	given honours, medals, or titles
No match for	not as strong as
Bare hands	hands without weapons
Disgrace	shame, loss of respect
Dragged	pulled along forcefully
Hooks	curved metal pieces for holding
Intervention	action to stop or change the situation
Consul	one of the highest Roman officials
Albeit	although
Condemning	saying it was wrong or bad
Inscriptions	words carved or written in stone/metal
Tearing down	destroying or pulling down
Branding	marking
Rust	the reddish substance formed on iron when it reacts with air and water
Stability	the state of being steady and safe

Plunged	pushed or moved suddenly
Rapid	very fast
Rival	opponent, competitor
Factions	small groups within a larger group
Agenda	a hidden plan or aim
Loathed	hated strongly
Painted	shown or described
Thread	common idea or theme
Caricature	an over the top and funny image
Megalomania	obsession with power and greatness
Senators	members of the Roman Senate
Chroniclers	people who wrote history
Exaggerate	make them seem bigger or worse than they were
Tyrants	cruel and unfair rulers
Elite	the most powerful or rich people

Villains	evil or bad people
Saviours	people who saved others
Anxieties	worries
Priorities	the most important things
Extravagance	spending or using too much
Violation	breaking a rule or limit
Humiliating	making them feel ashamed
Bywords	words that represent the idea
Tyranny	cruel and unfair rule
Acquainted with	knowing about
Luckless	unlucky
Not-too-distant future	fairly soon, not far in time

Language spotlight

1. Turn a blind eye

- **Meaning:** To pretend not to see or ignore something bad or wrong.
- **Synonyms:** ignore, overlook, pretend not to notice
- **Antonyms:** notice, pay attention to, confront
- **Examples:**
 - The Senate **turned a blind eye** to Commodus's strange behaviour for years.
 - Teachers sometimes **turn a blind eye** when students use their phones in class.

2. Gone down in history

- **Meaning:** To be remembered for a long time because of something important or famous.
- **Synonyms:** be remembered, be recorded, be famous for
- **Antonyms:** be forgotten, be ignored

- **Examples:**

- Commodus has **gone down in history** as one of Rome's worst emperors.
- The 2012 Olympics **went down in history** as one of the best games ever held.

3. The final straw

- **Meaning:** The last in a series of bad things that finally makes someone lose patience.
- **Synonyms:** breaking point, last insult, limit
- **Antonyms:** first warning, early sign
- **Examples:**
 - For the Senate, Commodus naming himself a god was **the final straw**.
 - When my computer crashed again, it was **the final straw**—I bought a new one.

4. Get a look in

- **Meaning:** To have a chance to take part or to be noticed or heard.

- **Synonyms:** get a chance, take part, be included
- **Antonyms:** be ignored, be excluded
- **Examples:**
 - Commodus made sure no one else **got a look in** when it came to power.
 - Everyone was talking so loudly that I couldn't **get a look in** during the meeting.

5. Hit list

- **Meaning:** A list of people someone wants to harm or remove.
- **Synonyms:** target list, blacklist, enemies list
- **Antonyms:** guest list, friends list
- **Examples:**
 - Commodus created a **hit list** of people he wanted to kill.
 - The new manager made a **hit list** of bad habits to eliminate from the team.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. How did Commodus react to his father's death?
 - a) He immediately went to war
 - b) He returned to Rome to celebrate his new title
 - c) He shared power with the Senate
 - d) He refused to become emperor

2. What was unusual about Commodus compared to earlier emperors?
 - a) He was born during his father's reign
 - b) He never lived in Rome
 - c) He came from a poor family
 - d) He became emperor after a war

3. How did Commodus like to present himself to the Roman people?
 - a) As a philosopher

b) As Hercules reborn

c) As a general

d) As a senator

4. Why did the Senate dislike Commodus?

a) He raised taxes on the rich

b) He made them fight in the arena

c) He ignored their advice and humiliated them

d) He banned all political debates

5. What happened after Commodus was killed?

a) Rome became peaceful

b) His sister took power

c) The Senate destroyed the Colosseum

d) The empire broke into rival factions

True or False

6. Marcus Aurelius was known as a wise and philosophical emperor. (True/False)
7. Commodus spent most of his reign fighting wars on the frontiers. (True/False)
8. Commodus renamed Rome after himself. (True/False)
9. The Roman elite admired Commodus for his bravery and self-control.
(True/False)
10. Commodus was killed by a wrestler called Narcissus. (True/False)

Fill in the Blanks

11. Commodus might have been Rome's most decorated and highly-paid gladiator, but there, naked in the bath, he was no _____ for a man armed only with his _____ hands.
12. If Marcus Aurelius had been the model of self-restraint, Commodus was the model of self-_____.
13. Gladiators were right at the bottom of the social _____ order in Ancient Rome.
14. Cleander effectively ran the empire for several years, selling offices, governorships, and even Senate seats to the highest _____.

15. When Marcia got ____ of this plan, and presumably realising “it’s either me or him”, she sent for the other two names on the “hit list”.

Vocabulary Practice

16. What does **legitimacy** mean?

- a) The right to rule or be accepted as lawful
- b) The ability to fight in wars
- c) The power to make people afraid
- d) The act of spending a lot of money

17. What does **banished** mean?

- a) To be sent away from a country or place as a punishment
- b) To be promoted to a higher position
- c) To be invited to join a group
- d) To be rewarded for good behaviour

18. What does **tyrant** mean?

- a) A kind and gentle ruler
- b) A cruel and oppressive ruler
- c) A person who tells jokes
- d) A religious leader

19. What does **uprising** mean?

- a) A public celebration
- b) A natural disaster
- c) A fight or rebellion against authority
- d) A change in the weather

20. What does **vain** mean?

- a) Honest and modest
- b) Very shy and quiet
- c) Interested in learning new things

d) Being too proud of his abilities or looks

Answers

1. b) He returned to Rome to celebrate his new title
2. a) He was born during his father's reign
3. b) As Hercules reborn
4. c) He ignored their advice and humiliated them
5. d) The empire broke into rival factions
6. True
7. False
8. True
9. False
10. True
11. match, bare
12. indulgence
13. pecking
14. bidder
15. wind
16. a) The right to rule or be accepted as lawful
17. a) To be sent away from a country or place as a punishment
18. b) A cruel and oppressive ruler
19. c) A fight or rebellion against authority
20. d) Being too proud of his abilities or look