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Commodus: Rome's third maddest emperor

Olivier Hekster

Everyone knows about the emperor Nero. He is one of the most infamous Roman emperors, held responsible for the great fire of Rome and for persecuting Christians. The emperor Caligula, too, is widely known for his insanity; he apparently even tried to make his horse consul. Classical historians often mentioned the emperor Lucius Aurelius Commodus alongside those 'mad emperors'. According to them Commodus was a good-for-nothing, a cruel madman, and generally the worst thing that could have happened to the Roman Empire. In this he was the complete opposite of his father, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who was the perfect example of what a good emperor should be like.

So what made Commodus such a bad emperor? Historians like Cassius Dio and Herodian went to great length to describe his cruelties: how he cut a fat man open down the middle of his belly, how he enjoyed killing prominent men, and even how he 'often mixed human excrement with the most expensive food'. They also tell us how he 'murdered many others in many places, some because they came to him in the costume of barbarians, others because they were noble and handsome' and how he even 'aped a surgeon, going so far as to bleed men to death with scalpels'.



Commodus in Tony Harrison's play The Kaisers of Carnuntum was dressed up both in women's 'drag' and with the club and lion skin of Hercules.

A cautious start

But in the early years of Commodus' life nobody expected he would grow up to be a monster. His father actually wrote that he was happy that Commodus was a normal, healthy boy. And indeed, before becoming emperor, Commodus seems to have been 'as sincere as any man that ever lived'. He was born, together with his twin brother, on the 31st of August A.D. 161. He had more brothers, but by the time he had turned eight years old, they had all already died, and Commodus was the only remaining heir to the throne. That he would eventually succeed his father as emperor was made evident as early as possible. All sorts of honours were given to him, and he figured on a great number of coins.

When he was fifteen he was named *Imperator Augustus*, the official title of the emperor, and effectively ruled the Roman Empire alongside his father, whom he accompanied on several military campaigns. So when Marcus Aurelius died (17th March 180), it was clear to everybody that Commodus was now the sole ruler of the empire. He was eighteen years old.

Marcus had tried to surround his son with the best tutors he could find. But Commodus' first action after his father's death was not exactly what all those advisers wanted. At the time of his death Marcus Aurelius had been waging war on various Germanic tribes. Commodus did not continue these wars: he settled for peace on terms that were quite good for the Romans, and returned as soon as he could to Rome. Many have blamed the young emperor for this truce. They thought he was just a lazy coward and that 'he hated all exertion and craved the comfortable life of the city'.

But there might have been good reasons for Commodus to return to the capital. He may have thought that the empire was big enough as it was, and that it was better to consolidate than to stretch its resources even further. And in fact it is not at all certain whether there was enough money to go round to finance all those very expensive military campaigns. Or perhaps he was afraid that people would try to get rid of him as emperor, because they thought he was too young. In that case it would be a lot better to be in the capital than somewhere far away. Finally, he might have been afraid of losing his first battles as sole emperor. That would have very much weakened his position. Who wants to be ruled by a young emperor who hasn't done anything yet and can't even win a war? It was important for Commodus to have his power recognised before taking risks like that. And only in Rome could he have that power properly recognised.

It appears that as emperor Commodus did not trust the senators. Already from the very beginning of his reign he confided more in his personal advisers than in these powerful rich men. They did not like that. This explains why two years later, in A.D. 182, when Commodus was walking to the amphitheatre, a man tried to stop him at the narrow entrance. He pulled out a sword and shouted that he had been sent by the senate to kill the emperor. But in the time it took him to make that little speech, Commodus' bodyguards seized him, and so this attempt to kill Commodus failed. The emperor executed everyone he believed to be involved.

After that the relationship between Commodus and the senators was even worse. Commodus did not trust anybody any more.

He even banished and killed his wife Crispina, whom he had married when he was only 16 years old, because he believed she too was involved in a plan to kill him. Some said the only reason Commodus killed people at all was that he wanted to take their money.

Hercules rules the Commodians

And Commodus needed a lot of money. He paid for gigantic gladiatorial games, and imported expensive animals that could be killed in the arena. He also wanted statues of himself everywhere in the city and even altered the colossal statue of the Sun god that stood in front of the Colosseum. That statue had been set up by Nero and looked like him, but Commodus changed that. 'Indeed, he actually cut off the head of the Colossus, and substituted for it a likeness of his own head; then he gave it a club and placed a bronze lion at its feet, so as to cause it to look like Hercules.'

For by the time this happened, Commodus had started to believe he was the demi-god Hercules, who was the son of the supreme god Jupiter. Hercules had fought against monsters all his life, and was allowed to become a god after he had died. He was one of the most popular gods in the Roman world, maybe because he had once been mortal, and could understand humans better than the other gods. Commodus believed that, like Hercules before him, he too could become a god. He even named a month after Hercules. He also named a month after himself. Hercules was famous as a founder of many cities. Commodus refounded Rome as 'the colony of Commodus'. The people living there were given the name *Commodians*, as were the legions, the Senate, and the fleet. Furthermore, Commodus fought in the arena as a gladiator, and often dressed up as Hercules when he did this. In this way he pretended that he too, like Hercules, killed monsters. He even 'once got together all the men in the city who had lost their feet as the result of disease or some accident, and then, after attaching images of serpents to their legs, and giving them cushions to throw instead of stones, killed them with blows of a club, pretending that they were giants'. By now he called himself the 'Roman Hercules'.

We know of all of this from several sources. The senator Cassius Dio describes Commodus' reign in detail in his *Roman History*, as does Herodian in his *Histories of the Empire*. But that is not all. Several of the statues of the emperor wearing Hercules' lion-skin and club have survived, as have many coins which mention the HERCULES COMMODIANUS. Some coins even name Rome the 'colony of Commodus'. Inscriptions mentioning offerings made on behalf of the emperor and papyri in which people make requests to him describe Commodus as the 'divine Commodus Hercules'. Finally, the inscriptions on the pedestals of Commodus' statues regularly name him 'gladiator'. There seems to be no doubt whatsoever that Commodus really presented himself as a divine gladiator-emperor.

Strangled by Narcissus

So his reign could not last. But how it would end was not at all clear. The senators and noblemen, who had most to gain by Commodus' death, were too afraid to try to kill him. The people were perhaps fearful of Commodus' cruelty, but they loved the spectacular games he held and the generous gifts he distributed to keep them happy. They did not want to kill him. So the conspiracy in which he would eventually die had to come from an unexpected corner. And it did.

After Commodus had killed his wife Crispina, he had several mistresses. But one of them was his absolute favourite. He treated her as his wife, and gave her most of the privileges an empress would have. She was a freed slave called Marcia. Another person Commodus put his trust in was his chamberlain Eclectus. The guard prefect Laetus, responsible for the emperor's personal safety, was equally important to him. And these three, of all people, conspired to bring about Commodus' death.



Another picture from Tony Harrison's play *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*: Commodus, played by Barrie Rutter, is carrying the heads of ostriches killed in the arena.

Commodus was murdered on New Year's night A.D. 192. The story goes that he had planned to dress up as a gladiator the next day and so 'open' the year, walking around accompanied by gladiators. Apparently Laetus and Eclectus complained, telling Commodus to dress in imperial purple, as was usual and, they may have added, more dignified. Marcia supported their idea. Commodus was furious. He retreated into his bedroom and wrote down an order for their execution, as well as that of many more people.

This message was found by a small boy of whom Commodus was particularly fond and who played freely anywhere in the palace. The boy took Commodus' notebook to play with it,

and walked along the corridor. By coincidence the boy happened to meet Marcia, who was also very fond of him. She gave him a hug and a kiss, and then took the tablet from him because she was afraid that he might destroy something important by mistake while innocently playing with it. But when she realized that it was Commodus' writing she became curious to have a look at the contents. Finding that it was a death-warrant, and that she was going to be first to be executed, with Laetus and Eclectus next, and similar deaths awaiting the others, she let out a scream.

Marcia talked to Laetus and Eclectus, and together they decided to kill Commodus before he could execute them. As Marcia always prepared Commodus' drinks, poisoning seemed to be the easiest option. So they poisoned his wine. The emperor drank it without suspecting anything. But Commodus was so drunk that he threw up. Maybe that is why the poison did not work properly: it only made Commodus very sleepy. So the murderers sent in a powerful athlete, Narcissus, who strangled the emperor while he was still unconscious from wine and poison. Commodus died when he was thirty one years old. He had been sole emperor for thirteen years.

Letting Commodus off the hook?

If anyone was overjoyed by Commodus' death, it was the members of the senate. According to the *Augustan History, Lives of the Later Caesars*, they chanted acclamations, applauding the emperor's end and damning his memory. For an emperor like Commodus, it said, a proper burial was too good. Dragging him by a hook down to the Tiber, as happened to common criminals, was a better way of getting rid of his body.

From him who was a foe of his fatherland let his honours be taken away; let the honours of the murderer be taken away; let the murderer be dragged in the dust... He is foe to the gods, slayer of the senate, foe to the gods, murderer of the senate, foe of the gods, foe of the senate... He who slew the senate, let him be dragged by a hook; he who slew the guiltless, let him be dragged by a hook – a foe a murderer, verily, verily... More savage than Domitian, more foul than Nero. As he did unto others, let it be done unto him... He who slew all men, let him be dragged by a hook. He who slew young and old, let him



This large gilded bronze statuette of Hercules found near Hadrian's Wall was probably inspired by Commodus' claim to be the reincarnated demi-god.



An ivory bust of Commodus as Hercules.

be dragged by a hook. He who slew man and woman, let him be dragged by a hook. He who spared not his own blood, let him be dragged by a hook... He who sold the senate, let him be dragged by a hook... The murderer dug up the buried; let the body of the murderer be dragged in the dust.

The extreme reaction of the senate once again draws attention to the relationship between the senators and the emperor. It is when that relationship broke down that problems arose. For most of the people who wrote the histories that we now use as sources were senators or associated with them. So the people who wrote Commodus' biography were senators, and senators did not like Commodus. It is not strange, then, that the story they wrote was a negative one.

But that story might not be the entire truth. Though few people nowadays would argue that Commodus was 'a nice man', he may not have been the monster he has been made out to be. There were more people in the Roman empire than just the senators. And those other people may well have liked an emperor who gave money and games, built beautiful statues, and even fought himself in the Romans' favourite pastime, the gladiatorial games. Indeed, one of Commodus' successors even called himself the 'brother of the divine Commodus'; and many sarcophagi and mosaics show pictures of a Hercules who looks remarkably like the Hercules on the statues and coins of Commodus that have survived. At least two centurions kept a shrine for Commodus after the emperor's death; and an obscure poem of the 6th century A.D. describes Commodus as a good and pious man. Just because the people who liked or even worshipped the emperor Commodus-Hercules did not write history does not mean that such people did not exist.

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