

We've all heard memorable tales of the "noble death" of great Roman emperors, statesmen and military heroes. R.L. Porter even scribed an interesting article on "The Noble Death", way back in *Labyrinth*, no. 43. However, for every Roman emperor who died nobly, for every general whose death was "worthy of a song", and for every disheartened patriot who threw himself upon his sword in a fit of romanticism, there were those whose final moments could only be described in the tabloids. To that end, I present to you a very few examples of great Romans who suffered less than noble ends.

In 90 BC, King Mithridates of Pontus broke an agreement with Rome and invaded the neighboring kingdoms of Cappadocia and Bithynia. The two ousted kings, Ariobarzanes of Cappadocia and Nicomedes III of Bithynia, called on Rome for aid. The senate appointed Manus Aquilius to arrange a peace treaty to force Mithridates to leave Cappadocia and Bithynia, and return both kings to their thrones. Aquilius was very successful in his mission and peace was restored. However, Aquilius then encouraged King Nicomedes to invade Pontus in order to seize enough booty to reward Rome (and Aquilius) for their assistance. In 88 BC Nicomedes invaded Pontus, only to be quickly defeated by Mithridates, who then conquered most of Bithynia. In the process, Aquilius was captured by Mithridates, who repaid Aquilius the money that he had demanded, by pouring molten gold down his throat.

The Imperial period abounds in similar tales. Let us begin by considering some of those who died from what can loosely be described as "stomach disorders". Who could forget Claudius' death by poisoned mushrooms? In reality, Claudius' wife (and niece!) Agrippina gave Claudius a dish of his favorite (poisoned) mushrooms, which only gave Claudius a bad case of diarrhea. So, Agrippina called in Xenophon, the imperial doctor, and publicly told him to help Claudius purge the poison from Claudius' stomach by sticking a feather down his throat. However, in private, she also instructed the doctor to coat the feather in poison, which made poor Claudius' demise inevitable. Along the same lines, the Emperor Vaspasian died of a bad case of "Montezuma's Revenge" in 79 AD, but not before uttering those famous last words, "Oh, dear! I think I'm

becoming a god!". Before leaving this less than tasteful topic behind, consider the less than dignified death of the emperor Caracalla in 216 AD. While on campaign in Parthia, Caracalla felt the call of nature, and walked a short distance away from his bodyguard for some privacy. While his bodyguard was discretely looking the other way, and Caracalla was otherwise occupied, Martialis, a member of his bodyguard, crept up on the emperor and struck him dead. Apparently Caracalla had executed Martialis' brother a few days earlier and the assassination was simply about revenge. Within minutes, Martialis was struck down by the now attentive members of the late emperor's bodyguard.

Thirdly, we have those poor individuals who really needed to learn appropriate stress reduction techniques. Perhaps the most memorable achievement of the emperor Nerva's reign (96-98) was that he adopted the very capable Marcus Ulpius Traianus (Trajan) as his heir. His least memorable moment was his death. Apparently, during an interview with a man named Regulus, Nerva became quite angry and began to shout and rant at the man unmercifully. Imagine poor Regulus' face when the emperor began to shiver, seat, and then drop dead of apoplexy. Do not imagine that Nerva was the last of the great Roman shouters. The emperor Valentinian I (321-375) also died of apoplexy, this time brought on by berating a barbarian ambassador. But for pure "B-movie" comedy, one has to look at the death of Bardas Phocas. Phocas rebelled against the emperor of the Eastern Roman (i.e. Byzantine) Empire, Basil II, in 988. During the Battle of Abydos in 989 Phocas saw his chance to kill the emperor Basil and win the crown for himself. Racing ahead of his army on a swift charger, Phocas fell towards Basil like a bolt of lightning. Then, just before the two great men were about to meet in personal combat, Phocas fell from his horse and was showered with javelins, effectively ending his bid to be emperor! Some suggested poison or a stomach ailment as the cause for Phocas' fall, but most agree that in all the excitement Phocas had a massive stroke and died on the spot.

Finally, the emperor Valerian (253-260) suffered one of the saddest ends of all. While on campaign against King Shapur of Persia, Valerian's army was struck down by plague and then besieged in the city of Edessa. Finding himself in a hopeless situation, Valerian tried to parlay with Shapur, only to be treacherously dragged off to Persia in chains. In Persia, Valerian was not treated as an Imperial hostage, but used as a living foot stool to help Shapur mount and dismount his horse. When

Valerian finally died, King Shapur had the skin flayed from his body, dyed in preservatives, and hung in a temple as an example to all future Roman ambassadors.

The list of “not so noble deaths” of the noble Romans goes on and on. If this were not enough, I haven’t even begun to cover the sad ends of so many of Rome’s noble enemies. I could tell you the one about how Attila the Hun died of a nosebleed on his honeymoon....but that’s another story!