

# THE ROMAN EMPIRE

## IN THE FIRST CENTURY

### Episode 4: Years of Eruption

Reconstruction voiceover: “My mind trembles to remember, but I will begin. The earth had been shaking for many days, but we weren't very frightened because that's common here. But by night, the tremors had grown so strong that everything shook and fell.”

Narrator: In the twilight of the first century, the Roman Empire shook to its foundations.

Reconstruction voiceover: “The buildings around trembled with such force that we were sure to die if we stayed. As we fled, I took my mother's hand. The sea swallowed itself and then hurled back in a huge wave. You could hear women wailing, babies bawling, and men shouting. A few were so afraid of death; they prayed it would come soon.”

Narrator: The author would survive the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. But other disasters would rock his life, and the lives of millions around the empire. For as the first century passed its mid-point, civil war would be unleashed and despotism would once again stalk the capital city. Many wondered if Rome would collapse after a century of glory; if the years of eruption would destroy the Roman Empire in the first century.

Narrator: As the year 68 unfolded, the city of Rome was approaching a century of unbroken peace. Prosperity reigned and dangerous times seemed buried in history as people pursued lives of comfortable routine. They rose at dawn and prepared to make, or receive, morning visits. Women used cosmetics of mineral and ash and imported perfumes. The more affluent dressed in dazzling colors, wore fine jewelry, and elaborate hairstyles. Fashion required men be clean-shaven. But according to one ancient humorist, the tools of the day made fashion a painful pursuit.

Reconstruction voiceover: “These scars on my chin make me look like an old boxer. They were not made by my wife in a fit of anger, but by the criminal hand and evil razor of my barber. The billy goat is the only animal to have the courage to wear a beard and avoid the blade.”

Narrator: Such peaceful vanities, however, were swept aside in 68 AD, the year Emperor Nero was overthrown and with him, the dynasty that had ruled Rome for a century. The revolt had begun in Gaul and spread quickly to Spain. The Imperial Army posted there rose up and marched toward Rome. Nero committed suicide. The empire echoed with the fury of civil war. Generals worldwide wondered if they too should enter the fray.

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Narrator: In the province of Judea, one man was already hardened by battle, his name was Vespasian. He was one of the empire's most successful generals. For three years, Vespasian had been fighting to suppress a local revolt. With victory in sight, Vespasian's ambitions suddenly turned in directions unprecedented for a man of his station. Vespasian is not from the old aristocracy. His family comes from a small town not very far from Rome, but a world away in social class. His father and grandfather had been tax collectors and soldiers. He himself liked to put on the image of a man of the people, a man of the camp, a man who is one with the soldiers. Vespasian's troops urged him to seize power. Soldiers in other provinces backed him, too. Emboldened by the opportunity, Vespasian directed them to march on the capital.

Narrator: His advance troops began in the Balkans. They rounded the Adriatic Sea, and descended on Rome. Upon reaching Italy, they found themselves face-to-face with the enemy and for the first time in a hundred years, "the enemy" were fellow Romans. The historian Cassius Dio describes the tragedy.

Reconstruction voiceover: "They fought as if against foreigners and not kinsmen. Even when night fell, they would not relent. But whenever the moon broke through the shifting clouds, you could see exhausted opponents talking. While over here, some battled on. Over there, others rested, leaning on their swords. Occasionally, one would take another aside and say, 'Fellow soldier, citizen, what are we doing? Why are we fighting? Defect to my side.' The other would reply, 'No indeed, you come to mine.' And so they spent the night, alternately fighting and talking, until sunrise."

Narrator: In the morning, Vespasian's forces gained the upper hand. They cut down their countrymen, ransacked a nearby town, and inflamed by blood and plunder, they closed on Rome. Soon the empire's capital was a battleground for competing armies and Rome's civilians were caught in the middle.

Reconstruction voiceover: "The city of Rome was under siege and the inhabitants were fighting or fleeing or even joining the looting and hoping that they may be taken for invaders and save their lives."

Narrator: Some 50,000 were killed. Vespasian's forces won the day and the feeble Senate ratified the result: Vespasian, a rustic man of the camp, was now Emperor of Rome.

Ronald Mellor, Professor of History, UCLA: The civil war revealed the dirty secret of the empire, that power really rested on military force. Anyone who had

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sufficient military might at his back could make a run at the imperial throne. Any emperor in the future would have to bear that in mind.

Narrator: Rome was now a military dictatorship, and the empire's citizens braced for an uncertain future.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Greetings my friend, I write to you in deepest sadness: the younger daughter of our mutual friend, Fundanus, has died."

Narrator: Pliny the Younger was a witness to his age. His letters, published during his lifetime, show Pliny striving to reconcile with turbulent times in his public and private life.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I've never seen a girl more cheerful and friendly; more worthy of long life. Barely fourteen, she blended virginal modesty with the wisdom and dignity of a mature woman. And her early death was all the more tragic since she was soon to marry a fine young man. The day had been chosen and the invitations sent. Such joy has turned to such sorrow!"

Narrator: Pliny was just a child during Rome's civil wars. He was born into a wealthy family from the countryside of northern Italy. Far from the capital, he was spared the immediate violence of war, but he was not spared personal tragedy. His own father died while young Pliny was still a boy. It was a life-changing blow, but it was hardly unusual. Apart from the hazards of war, many Romans died young from infectious disease, famine; and women, from childbirth. Funerals and mourning were painful staples of daily life. Ancient monuments immortalize the timeless emotion of loss.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Here I'm laid to rest. I lived 27 years and was married for sixteen. I was a faithful wife who gave birth to six children, only one survives me."

Reconstruction voiceover: "To my most beloved wife who lived with me for 18 years and gave me no cause for complaint. But now I complain and I beg you spirits to return my wife to me, that I may not experience such criminal separation any longer."

Narrator: These were laments young Pliny could easily understand. For the events of Pliny's childhood taught him early and well that life was fleeting. Fame, he concluded, was the only tonic. By chronicling his times Pliny hoped he might shape the empire's legacy and write his own.

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Reconstruction voiceover: "Death seems bitter and premature for those composing timeless works. My own mortality, my own writings, come to mind. No doubt the same thoughts frighten you. While life is with us, we must struggle to make our mark so that death finds little it can wipe away."

Narrator: While Pliny confronted the precarious nature of first century life, the new Emperor Vespasian was in Egypt, confronting the realities of late-century politics. His troops controlled Rome, but Vespasian knew that Egypt was a key to supremacy. He needed to control Rome's food supply, the grain growing along the Nile. He needed to control the army stationed there and he needed the aura of grandeur that Egyptian culture readily supplied.

Reconstruction voiceover: "The unexpected and still new emperor lacked authority and majesty. But both these traits were offered to him."

Narrator: The biographer Suetonius recalled the new emperor's awkward first steps towards a new persona.

Reconstruction voiceover: "As Vespasian held court before a large audience, two men approached. They begged Vespasian to cure their afflictions. They told him a dream had predicted that sight would return if Vespasian spit in the blind man's eyes; that the other would walk if Vespasian's heel touched his lame leg. The emperor was dubious and at first refused. But his friends persuaded him to try, openly, before the crowd. To Vespasian's amazement the invalids were cured."

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Director, British School, Rome: All emperors needed legitimacy. They needed authority. They needed some sign that their power came from outside, had the will of the gods behind it. It is very common to have miracle-type stories hovering around emperors. Vespasian particularly, because he comes to power from nowhere. He's not part of the reigning dynasty. He needs these signs of authority.

Narrator: Vespasian embraced his newfound stature, but he knew image alone could not hold the empire together. He knew his real power came from the military and nothing would cement it more surely than a foreign victory. Vespasian fast returned his attention to Judea, to the province he left in haste the year before. Judea was still aflame. For five long years, the Jewish population had been waging a full-scale war of independence against Rome. The revolt showed stunning audacity, and brought staggering costs. By the year 70, Roman forces had reduced much of Judea to smoldering ruins. The Jewish army had been decimated and the few surviving rebels were now besieged inside the walled city of Jerusalem, with one notable exception: his name was Josephus.

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Ronald Mellor: Josephus was a Jewish aristocrat. He was educated as a Pharisee. He was very much a freedom fighter for his people and a military leader, but he became convinced or perhaps convinced himself that God was on the Roman side in this battle, in this war.

Narrator: Just months before, Josephus had been a rebel fighter. But he had been captured, and changed sides. Now, he operated freely in the Roman camp outside Jerusalem's walls and he offered useful information to the invading army. Josephus' former allies, even his own family, were still besieged inside the city. But on the Romans' behalf, Josephus now urged his fellow Jews to surrender.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I circled the wall. I begged them to spare themselves, their country and their temple. They knew Roman strength was irresistible. What land had escaped the Romans? Fortune's favor had turned to Rome and God was now in Italy. 'You stubborn men! Throw down your weapons and pity your collapsing city! My family is trapped inside with you. Perhaps you think that's why I urge surrender. But kill them! Take my blood as the price for your salvation. I, too, am ready to die if that will teach you sense.'"

Narrator: The defenders ignored his appeal. The Roman noose continued to tighten. Roman soldiers stripped the countryside of trees for miles around. They built a giant siege tower to scale the Jewish fortress, but supply tunnels dug by the rebels had weakened Jerusalem's walls. To the amazement of all, one of them suddenly collapsed and the astonished Romans flooded in. Romans and Jews fought face-to-face through the narrow, winding streets. Soon, the surviving Jews were driven back into their last bastion: the walled sanctuary of Jerusalem's sacred temple, deep inside the city.

Erich Gruen, Professor of History and Classics, University of California, Berkeley: The temple was the symbol of the faith and not just for the Jews who happened to live in Jerusalem. This was true of the Jews all over the Mediterranean; most of whom had never been to Jerusalem, had never seen the temple, but for whom it was the emblem of continuity of Judaism.

Narrator: However sacred, the walls of the temple could not withstand the onslaught. A Roman soldier flung some burning wood into the temple grounds. Immediately the temple burst into flames and Roman troops invaded. Josephus witnessed the massacre.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Passion alone took charge. Flight and death were everywhere. Most of those killed were unarmed citizens; butchered wherever they were caught. Around the holy altar, corpses piled up and slid in a river of

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blood down the steps. The cries of the stricken spread everywhere. I can imagine nothing more horrifying than those cries.”

Narrator: The rebellion was broken. Thousands died. But for many Jews, the fate of the temple was even more devastating than the human carnage. With no place to conduct their timeless rituals, the Jews of Jerusalem braced for the extinction of their religion. But Judaism would not die. Jews outside Jerusalem would keep their practices and memories alive. Ironically, one of them was Josephus. The rebel-collaborator followed the conquering army back to Rome, even became a Roman citizen. But he did not abandon his heritage. Perhaps to ease his conscience, Josephus would dedicate his remaining life to recording the events he had witnessed. He would become one of the great chroniclers of Jewish history.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Recently, I have spent all my time among writing tablets and books. ‘How is that possible with the races on?’ you ask. They’re not the kind of spectacle that I find tempting. I marvel that thousands are so childish and long to see, again and again galloping horses pulling men standing in chariots.”

Narrator: While Judea burned, the empire’s capital returned to the rhythms of peace and Pliny, to the rhythms of a young Roman gentleman. Pliny and his widowed mother had moved to Rome. Only the capital, his family decided, could provide the boy a suitable education. But, writing later, the bookish newcomer found Rome a city of contrasts, both richly endowed, and wasteful with its culture.

Reconstruction voiceover: “This year has produced a great crop of poets despite the reluctance of the public to come and listen. People say that in our parent’s day, things were different. Once the Emperor Claudius was walking on a rare break from work, when he learned that a poetry reading was in progress. So great was his love of letters, that unexpectedly he joined the audience, but today, even men with ample leisure neglect the arts.”

Narrator: The lost refinement that Pliny mourned may have been more imagined than real, but Rome had changed over the course of the first century. Many old families had died out. And new ones, such as Pliny’s own, were rising to prominence. Foreigners also enjoyed growing influence and their cultures left a strong mark on Rome. New religions such as the worship of Isis and Mithras were absorbed from the East; and philosophy from Greece.

Karl Galinsky, Professor of Classics, University of Texas, Austin: The Romans were not cultural imperialists who came in and said, “You’ve got to do just like we

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are doing.” They were quite the opposite. They gave a lot of freedom. It’s not simply just Rome coming in, laying things down from the top. The local cultures are being given the opportunity to make their own contributions in many different ways.

Narrator: Rome's willingness to embrace cultures not its own was one key to the empire's strength, but for some, it was also profoundly unsettling. Toward the end of the first century, a man named Juvenal wrote scathing satire, voicing the frustrations of many Romans. Few groups escaped Juvenal's poison pen.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Now let me say something about that race that most appalls me. I just can't stand our city full of Greeks. For too long now the East has dumped this scum into our beloved Tiber, carrying with them their language and habits, their flutes and ridiculous stringed instruments. What a travesty! Foreigners just blown into Rome get a better deal than I do; I, who drew my first breath in the city.”

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill: With Juvenal, what you've got is a satirist who will fire at any target that moves. But in firing, he creates a consistent figure for himself. That figure is of a good Roman, what a Roman really ought to be in a city where everything is going wrong; where Rome has ceased to be Roman, where it's flooded with immigrants. Juvenal is a voice of the old-fashioned Roman protesting about the way the world is changing around him.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Really aggravating is that woman who sits down at a dinner party and immediately starts holding forth, weighing the merits of Virgil against Homer. Words spew from her mouth, clattering like pots and pans. Lawyers and vendors and even other women dare not speak. Such matters are men’s concerns.”

Narrator: Juvenal’s bitterness was not universal. Indeed, as the century entered its final decades, most Romans were enjoying a surge of optimism, a sense that the empire was back on course. Now, with Jerusalem conquered, the capital was marking its first foreign victory in years. The former rebel, Josephus, was there.

Reconstruction voiceover: “That day the city of Rome celebrated the victory over her enemies, the end of civil war, and the beginning of hope for a prosperous future. In the procession, spoils of war flowed like a river of gold, silver and ivory fashioned into all forms. Marvelous statues of the gods were carried, huge and made with great skill. There were creatures of many lands, but what stood out above the rest were those objects captured in the Temple of Jerusalem.”

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Narrator: Josephus well understood that this was a pivotal moment. It symbolized the revival of an empire traumatized by civil war; the mending of Rome's frayed society and the unassailable authority of the new emperor, Vespasian.

Narrator: Vespasian restored the war-torn capital. He built temples, a theater, and began a massive amphitheater, later called the coliseum. Vespasian also constructed something less tangible – he constructed a fresh image for the position of emperor.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Vespasian was almost always in high spirits, his sense of humor often scurrilous and off-color. Once, his son Titus scolded the emperor for his unseemly new tax on public toilets. Vespasian held a coin up to his son's nose and asked whether the odor caused offense. And when Titus denied it, Vespasian said, 'But it comes from piss.'"

Narrator: Vespasian approached the business of government with an earthy humor and common sense rarely shown by his predecessors. He was frugal: expenditures were financed by new taxes. And he was approachable.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Vespasian was stocky, with strong, firm limbs and a strained expression. Once, when Vespasian invited a local wit to take a job at him, the man replied, 'I will, when you have finished unloading your bowels.'"

Narrator: The emperor roared with laughter and the empire sighed with relief. For after decades of abuse and uncertainty, Vespasian became much more than a conquering general. He became the empire's hope for stability.

Keith Bradley, Professor of Greek and Roman Studies, University of Victoria: Vespasian, an adventurer in politics, was able to found the new dynasty and he held onto power for ten years, against the odds, one might say. He was able to restore the stability that Augustus had first introduced many decades earlier.

Narrator: All of Rome benefited by Vespasian's steady hand. But for young Pliny, the unconventional emperor opened the world. He was not yet a teenager when Vespasian took control, and for the next decade of his life, Rome would be an exhilarating place to live. Pliny studied with famous teachers, particularly his uncle, a man born far from the center of power, whose prodigious talents brought him to the attention of the emperor and into the inner circle of imperial advisors. Pliny's uncle was an accomplished scholar, and a prolific author. He compiled a 37-volume encyclopedia on the natural world. His writings covered everything from marine life to planetary motions. They provided a unique glimpse into the world view of ancient Rome.

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Reconstruction voiceover: “An octopus, when he fears capture, emits a dark ink, which he has instead of blood and is able to conceal himself in the darkened water. The whole world is divided into three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. When bees die, some people think they can be brought back to life by covering them with the stomach of a newly killed cow.”

Narrator: “We are now in such a happy time of peace,” the elder Pliny wrote, “under an emperor who welcomes the pursuit of research and writing.” Young Pliny was deeply impressed by his uncle’s exhaustive curiosity, and exhausting efforts. Industry and proficiency, the boy observed, paved the road to success and made his revered uncle a celebrated figure.

Reconstruction voiceover: “You marvel how my uncle could have written so many volumes when he was so busy. His enthusiasm was unbelievable and he would rise before the sun to pursue his studies by lamplight. Sometimes, while working, he would nod off and wake again. Still before dawn, he would go to the Emperor Vespasian, who also worked at night, and only then start his professional duties.”

Narrator: Vespasian rewarded Pliny’s uncle with important posts in Spain, Gaul and Africa. The boy rejoiced when the elder returned to Italy to command the Roman fleet. But in the year 79, a shadow fell across young Pliny’s path. After ruling for a decade, the family patron, the Emperor Vespasian, became gravely ill. The emperor knew he was dying, but his humor remained to the end. “Oh, dear!” he quipped, mocking Rome’s habit of deifying dead emperors, “I think I’m becoming a god.”

Narrator: Vespasian had brought Rome through the gravest crisis of the century: civil war, and left the empire stronger and more resilient than ever. But Vespasian passed on a troubled legacy too. “My sons will succeed me,” he declared openly, “Or no one will.” The empire was still plagued by the scourge of hereditary rule. Vespasian had done nothing to change that.

Reconstruction voiceover: “The people had already gathered for the spectacle of our punishment, and those who were about to die, were forced to march through the arena.”

Narrator: Ritualized violence had been a favorite entertainment of the Roman populace for centuries. Criminals, slaves and war captives were often sent to the arena where they fought to the death before roaring crowds.

Reconstruction voiceover: “All around, I could hear the instruments of death. I could hear the sound of a blade being sharpened, of metal weapons heating in the fire, the clatter of sticks, and the cracking of whips. The trumpets sounded the

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death knell. Stretchers for the dead were brought on a funeral parade before death. Everywhere there were wounded men, groans, gore; nothing but danger before my eyes.”

Keith Bradley: We have to recognize that the Romans actually enjoyed the spectacle of seeing people die. This is one of the fundamental characteristics of Rome. They were a militaristic society from their very beginnings. And when they saw gladiatorial combats, they were seeing in many ways a symbol of their own martial prowess and enjoying the blood lust that was always part of the national character. While most had no choice, some volunteered to enter the arena. Ancient graffiti hint at the attraction.

Reconstruction voiceover: “The gladiator called Celadus is the heartthrob of all the girls.”

Reconstruction voiceover: “Crescens, who fights with a net, ensnares his female fans.”

Keith Bradley: In many ways, gladiators were like movie stars today. They could achieve great fame, great success and become extremely wealthy. There was almost a show business atmosphere to what went on there. The desire for popularity certainly must have impelled many gladiators to go out into the amphitheater and fight, despite all the risks that were involved.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Suettius Certus presents a band of gladiators to fight in Pompeii on May 31. Shade will be provided.”

Narrator: In the summer of 79, the city of Pompeii was a thriving community of some 10,000 people. Many are known to us, thanks to a twist of fate that preserved their world for 2,000 years. Like most Roman cities, Pompeii boasted a stadium, theaters, temples, public baths and shops. On any given day, the residents of Pompeii ate, drank and socialized in the cafes and taverns that lined the streets.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Here a decent drink costs a few coins. Twice that buys something better and for four times the price, you can savor the best wine.”

Narrator: The wine may have been supplied by Pompeii’s Vettii Brothers. Former slaves, they entered the wine trade and prospered. Their home was large and elegant, radiating signs of newly acquired wealth. This couple is thought to have owned a bakery. They posed for their portrait holding symbols of education and status. Across town lived a woman named Julia Felix, a wealthy landowner who rented real estate on the grounds of her expansive villa.

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Reconstruction voiceover: “On the estate of Julia Felix, the following are for rent: luxurious baths, shops, cafes, workspaces, and second-story apartments.”

Narrator: And then there was Eumachia, a woman of wealth and authority, so esteemed for her contributions to Pompeii’s civic life that a statue was erected in her honor. These people and countless others, rich and poor, lived and flourished in the region. Ancient graffiti reveal the vitality of their everyday lives.

Reconstruction voiceover: “A copper pot has vanished from this shop. Whoever returns it, the reward is yours.”

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill: Pompeiian graffiti are wonderful because they give a sort of unedited voice, an informal voice when we’re so used to hearing from antiquity those very formal voices of formal literature, or imperial pronouncements and so on. You go into a bar and you find this little inscription about the barkeeper’s daughter.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Successus the weaver loves the handmaiden Iris, who does not care for him, but he begs her to pity him.”

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill: And then written in another hand beneath, “Ha, so says the jealous rival. Eat your heart out.”

Reconstruction voiceover: “You’re bursting with jealousy. I wish you wouldn’t harass the handsomer man, the one who is the most noble.”

Reconstruction voiceover: “I’ve said this to you and now I have written. You love Iris who doesn’t care for you.”

Narrator: Such rivalries would all be forgotten on the afternoon of August 24. On that day, Pliny the Younger, now seventeen years old, was vacationing with his mother on the Bay of Naples, across the water from Pompeii. His uncle had come down from Rome on naval business. Suddenly an unusual cloud appeared in the sky above Mount Vesuvius.

Reconstruction voiceover: "The cloud was shaped like an umbrella pine, with a long trunk that branched at the top. It was so remarkable, my uncle wanted to study it closer. He ordered a boat to be prepared. Fearlessly, he headed across the bay, straight for danger, all the while making notes of the movements and shapes of the clouds. Soon, ashes were falling, hot and dense. Next came pumice stones, black and scorched by fire. He came ashore near his friend’s villa

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and hoping to calm him by his own composure, my uncle asked to bathe and rest.”

Narrator: Soon the courtyard outside his room filled with ash. The buildings swayed with heavy tremors. The sky turned blacker than night. Then flames and sulfur fumes sent everyone into flight. He asked for water, then stood up and suddenly collapsed: his breath choked by the thickening fog. Daylight came three days later. The young Pliny survived. But his uncle, Pliny the Elder, felled by his own curiosity, was one of thousands who perished. Pompeii and the nearby city of Herculaneum were buried in a torrent of ash and mud and lost to history for the next 1,600 years.

Reconstruction voiceover: “We hired a porter called Corax, who turned out to be more trouble than help. He often dropped his load, complaining about the pace and griping, ‘What do you think I am? A horse? I am no less free than you, even if my father left me a pauper.’ Not content with cursing us, he lifted his foot and filled the air with the noise and stench of his fart.”

Narrator: The people who toiled to earn their living rarely wrote about their lives. The vibrant mass of porters, cooks, builders, and merchants was mostly illiterate. Even those who could write had little time to reflect. Instead, we hear of them through the voices of their patrons, men whose ancestral fortunes often freed them from the need to work.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Some trades are too coarse and vulgar for a gentleman. We disdain customs officers and moneylenders. Also beneath us are all occupations requiring labor alone without skill. They are no better than slavery.”

Narrator: Even less vocal were the throngs of slaves who kept the empire running. They worked everywhere: in Roman mines, fields, and households. Many came as war captives; others were born into bondage. And while the ancient institution of slavery festered with the same abuses seen later in history, in the Roman Empire it had a different complexion.

Keith Bradley: Slavery was not based on race. In fact, it was what you could call an equal opportunity condition. Anyone was liable to become a slave at any time. And, in fact, the biggest difference between ancient forms of slavery and modern forms of slavery is this absence of a sharp color contrast.

Narrator: Roman slaves merged so well into the population that the Senate once considered a plan to distinguish them by special dress. The idea was rejected. If

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slaves saw how numerous they were, the Senate decided, they might be emboldened to rebel.

Narrator: Pliny the Younger was no stranger to slavery. His family owned a large country estate, several homes. Like most affluent Romans, they had many slaves. While secure that full-scale revolts were rare, Pliny knew well that discontent simmered beneath the surface.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I must tell you what has happened. The atrocity Larcus Macedo suffered at the hands of his slaves deserves public outrage. He was washing in his bathhouse. Suddenly, his servants surrounded him. One grabbed his throat, others beat him, and, it sickens me to say, they even crushed his genitals. You can see what danger of violence, what outrageous contempt we live under! He was an arrogant and cruel master, but there is no security for anyone; not even those who are lenient and gentle. Slaves kill, not to bring justice to their master but from their criminal nature."

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill: For Pliny and for the ancients in general, slavery was just part of the natural order of things. When it was rationalized, it could be rationalized quite simply in terms of the natural superiority and inferiority that's built into nature.

Narrator: In such an ordered society, landed gentry, such as the family of Pliny the Younger, had rich prospects. At age eighteen, after inheriting his uncle's fortune, young Pliny set out to follow his elder's footsteps. He launched a career in law and politics. But while his uncle had flourished under a good emperor, the younger man would seek his fame and fortune under very different circumstances.

Narrator: In the year 81, Vespasian's youngest son ascended to power. His name was Domitian. As the biographer Suetonius recounts, he would prove to be as terrible a tyrant as any who came before.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Early in his rule he would seclude himself for hours, catching flies and sticking them with sharpened pens. So that once, when someone asked whether anyone was inside with the emperor, a palace wit cleverly replied, 'Not even a fly.' Domitian's savagery was unexpected. He once called a steward into his bedroom to dine. The next day the man was crucified."

Narrator: Domitian indulged mercurial whims. He launched treason trials, and executed or banished even his mildest critics. He terrorized the Roman elite and presented Pliny the Younger with the greatest challenge of his life: how to

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navigate treacherous times without compromising his values; how to maintain honor while climbing the ranks of a despotic system.

Narrator: Pliny admired, even befriended, those who balked at Domitian's rule, but the martyr's path was not for him. Instead, Pliny staked his morality on a ground of compromise, befitting his compromised times. He was efficient and dutiful, to friend and tyrant alike. Even while serving the emperor, he brokered marriages for the children of worthy exiles, promoted their careers, lent money. And through it all, Pliny's career thrived, but his success was tinged with remorse.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I have avoided shame, but deserve no praise. Admittedly, when Domitian expelled his critics from Rome, I visited one, even loaned him money, though this jeopardized my own position. Seven of my friends had already been killed or exiled. I was clearly standing amid a rain of thunderbolts and there were signs that a similar end was in store for me."

Keith Bradley: The fact remains that Pliny the Younger was a very successful career politician. He prospered under Domitian as did many of his social class. What I think we can see going on here is recognition on the part of upper class individuals like Pliny, that it was perfectly possible for them to collaborate with a political system that provided good government, even if the emperor of the day was an absolute tyrant.

Narrator: Pliny, like the empire itself, would outlast the troubling times. In the year 96, Rome once again shed its despot. Domitian was murdered by a group that included his own wife. Once again, the army would command Rome's future.

Narrator: From here events followed a remarkable new course. For the first time, Roman generals cooperated to choose the next emperor. They compelled him to adopt an acceptable heir from outside his own family.

Narrator: It was startlingly innovative and the result was resoundingly successful. For the next major emperor to rule Rome was a Spanish-born senator and general named Trajan. His reign took Rome one more step toward universality. Now educated and wealthy men from all over the empire became eligible for the highest office.

Narrator: Trajan expanded the Roman Empire to its greatest geographic size. He extended prosperity to levels of society not before reached. He launched public works, tax relief, and a child welfare program. Among his most trusted aides was Pliny the Younger. As the century turned, Pliny now reveled in the benefits of success and publicly praised the new Emperor Trajan.

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## IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Reconstruction voiceover: "We are suffering no longer; there is no need to flatter him as a god. We speak not about a tyrant but a fellow citizen, not a master but a parent. He is one of us and remembers that though he rules over men, he is himself a man.

Narrator: Trajan would close the door on the empire's defining epoch. He would set the course for generations to come and project the collective voice of the first century across two millennia where it resonates today.

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill: Europe today draws on the power of image created by the Roman Empire. Rome takes the cultural systems developed initially in the eastern Mediterranean and spreads them in a dramatic way and lays the foundations of a whole cultural zone that is our modern Europe.

Judith P. Hallett, Professor of Classics, University of Maryland, College Park: The first century provided us with a powerful model for a global society consisting of people from different ethnicities and different cultures, who were able to unite on certain fronts and remain distinct and separate in others.

Allen Callahan, Associate Professor of New Testament, Harvard Divinity School: In the first century we see in the midst, in the very teeth of the most powerful system of imperial domination that the world had ever seen up to that time. Right in the midst of that, the florescence of a notion of human freedom that grows up like a lotus out of the mud pond of Roman domination.

Reconstruction voiceover: "All around us, how much things have changed. My work brought me success, then danger, then success again."

Narrator: Toward the end of his life, Pliny the Younger prepared to enter history as a spokesperson for his age. Few had basked longer in the might and majesty of imperial Rome. Few knew better its darker side, but Pliny's perspective was long. Like those who came before, he trusted that his better side would endure.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Whether posterity will remember us I do not know, but we certainly deserve distinction – not for our genius, for this would sound arrogant, but for our dedication, labor, and concern for the future. We will continue on the road that we have taken which, while it carries few into the full light of fame, leads many from the shadows of oblivion."

Narrator: The Roman Empire would survive for centuries to come. But the men and women of the first century left a legacy for the ages, deserving forever, "the full light of fame."

ENDS

# THE ROMAN EMPIRE

## IN THE FIRST CENTURY