

Notes on Quiz #7

History of Ancient Rome • Spring 2023

1. Why are Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius called the “Five Good Emperors”?

These five emperors were thought to be most like the best models for the emperorship from its founding years: Augustus, Vespasian, and Titus: They came to power as mature, experienced men, and approached rule by understanding and embracing the responsibilities involved. They sought the loyalty and protection of the three constituencies of the princeps — the army, the masses, and the senate. These five emperors involved themselves deeply in the functioning of the empire, several of them spending many years in the provinces working to improve their protection and prosperity.

They were also extraordinarily fortunate, experiencing few natural or military disasters. They contrast markedly with the self-centered rules before and after them, Domitian and Commodus.

2. What trends in religion developed during first two centuries of the principate?

While Rome could not easily export its state religion, the gods and practices of local cults throughout the empire were aligned with Rome’s, bringing about a sort of international paganism that tied locals to Rome without repressing their traditions and identity.

As the sense of personal agency was affected by the almighty power of the emperor in Rome, there was a desire for sources of religious and magical power, such as oracles, astrologers, and miracle workers, while mystery cults offered a secret alternative identity.

Also, since a group of local pagan gods seemed weak compared to the central power of Rome, gods that could claim universal power. This opened up new cults like that of Isis and Mithras, but most benefitted Christianity, whose one, all-powerful god was not tied to one ethnic group or place, as most earlier gods were, and who moreover promised salvation and eternal life to both the rich and the downtrodden and despised.

EC1. The “silver age” of literature under Claudius and Nero included all of the following EXCEPT:

- (d) The seagoing Agrippa (M. Vipsanius Agrippa) [Agrippa was Augustus’s general and original heir]

EC2. How was the principate involved in the periods of growth and decline in Roman literature?

Augustus was both a great patron of the arts and an inspiration to great pride and enthusiasm for Rome, its culture, and its future. The paranoia and prosecutions for speech-related treason under Tiberius and Caligula stifled creativity, and even Claudius’s exile of Seneca instilled caution.

Nero’s recall of Seneca and his indulgence of the arts signaled a new era, only to have a whole generation of writers wiped out by Nero’s purge, and the Flavians banished the philosophers and seemed to oppose too much freedom of expression.

Increasingly artistic and scholarly expression was being found among the Greeks, further from Rome’s intrigues, leading up to a Greek literary movement called the Second Sophistic. Early Christians were also inspired to write about their experiences and beliefs.