

How Didius Julianus Bought the Empire at Auction

Source: Herodian of Syria (3rd Cent. CE): History of the Emperors II.6ff. From: William Stearns Davis, ed., Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West. Scanned by: J. S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton. Prof. Arkenberg has modernized the text.

In 193 CE the Praetorian Guards murdered the Emperor Pertinax, who had striven to reduce them to discipline. The sale of the purple which followed forms one of the most fearful and dramatic incidents in the history of the Empire, illustrating: (1) how completely the guardsmen had lost all sense of decency, discipline, and patriotism; (2) how the idea that all things were purchasable for money had possessed the men of the Empire. It ought to be said that the Praetorians were an especially pampered corps, and probably the rest of the army was less corrupted. Didius Julianus held his ill-gotten power only from March 28th, 193 CE, to June 1st of the same year, being deposed and slain when Septimius Severus and the valiant Danube legions marched on Rome to avenge Pertinax. The ringleaders of the Praetorians were executed; the rest of the guardsmen dishonorably discharged and banished from Italy.

When the report of the murder of the Emperor Pertinax spread among the people, consternation and grief seized all minds, and men ran about beside themselves. An undirected effort possessed the people—they strove to hunt out the doers of the deed, yet could neither find nor punish them. But the Senators were the worst disturbed, for it seemed a public calamity that they had lost a kindly father and a righteous ruler. Also a reign of violence was dreaded, for one could guess that the soldiery would find that much to their liking. When the first and the ensuing days had passed, the people dispersed, each man fearing for himself; men of rank, however, fled to their estates outside the city, in order not to risk themselves in the dangers of a change on the throne. But at last when the soldiers were aware that the people were quiet, and that no one would try to avenge the blood of the Emperor, they nevertheless remained inside their barracks and barred the gates; yet they set such of their comrades as had the loudest voices upon the walls, and had them declare that the Empire was for sale at auction, and promise to him who bid highest that they would give him the power, and set him with the armed hand in the imperial palace.

When this proclamation was known, the more honorable and weighty Senators, and all persons of noble origin and property, would not approach the barracks to offer money in so vile a manner for a besmirched sovereignty. However, a certain Julianus—who had held the consulship, and was counted rich—was holding a drinking bout late that evening, at the time the news came of what the soldiers proposed. He was a man notorious for his evil living; and now it was that his wife

and daughter and fellow feasters urged him to rise from his banqueting couch and hasten to the barracks, in order to find out what was going on. But on the way they pressed it on him that he might get the sovereignty for himself, and that he ought not to spare the money to outbid any competitors with great gifts to the soldiers.

When he came to the wall of the camp, he called out to the troops and promised to give them just as much as they desired, for he had ready money and a treasure room full of gold and silver. About the same time too came Sulpicianus, who had also been consul and was prefect of Rome and father-in-law of Pertinax, to try to buy the power also. But the soldiers did not receive him, because they feared lest his connection with Pertinax might lead him to avenge him by some treachery. So they lowered a ladder and brought Julianus into the fortified camp; for they would not open the gates, until they had made sure of the amount of the bounty they expected. When he was admitted he promised first to bring the memory of Commodus again into honor and restore his images in the Senate house, where they had been cast down; and to give the soldiers the same lax discipline they had enjoyed under Commodus. Also he promised the troops as large a sum of money as they could ever expect to require or receive. The payment should be immediate, and he would at once have the cash brought over from his residence. Captivated by such speeches, and with such vast hopes awakened, the soldiers hailed Julianus as Emperor, and demanded that along with his own name he should take that of Commodus. Next they took their standards, adorned them again with the likeness of Commodus and made ready to go with Julianus in procession.

The latter offered the customary imperial sacrifices in the camp; and then went out with a great escort of the guards. For it was against the will and intention of the populace, and with a shameful and unworthy stain upon the public honor that he had bought the Empire, and not without reason did he fear the people might overthrow him. The guards therefore in full panoply surrounded him for protection. They were formed in a phalanx around him, ready to fight; they had “their Emperor” in their midst; while they swung their shields and lances over his head, so that no missile could hurt him during the march. Thus they brought him to the palace, with no man of the multitude daring to resist; but just as little was there any cheer of welcome, as was usual at the induction of a new Emperor. On the contrary the people stood at a distance and hooted and reviled him as having bought the throne with lucre at an auction.