

Dalu Jones views an opulent exhibition celebrating a time of peace and prosperity for the Roman Empire, from AD 98-180

The Age of Balance

An exhibition entitled *The Age of Balance*, currently on show at the Musei Capitolini in Rome, focuses on the 2nd century AD when the Roman Empire reached its maximum expansion and prosperity. The years AD 98-180 were a time of splendid achievements, relative peace, and political equilibrium never before attained, between the imperial power, the senate and the army. All this was made possible by the effective rule of four exceedingly capable emperors: Trajan (r. 98-117), Hadrian (r. 117-138), Antoninus Pius (r. 138-161) and Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180). Each of these men had come to power not longer through their family connections but through adoption by their predecessors, by virtue of their experience and qualifications in the service of the empire. For the first time too, two of them, Trajan and Hadrian, came from the ranks of the provincial elites, they were both Spaniards.

1. Marble portrait of Marcus Aurelius. 2nd century AD. H. 89 cm. Palazzo Clementino Raffaelli, Musei Capitolini, Rome.

2. Marble sarcophagus showing a battle scene between Amazons and Greeks. Found in Rome in 1744 on the Via Collatina. AD 140-150. H. 98cm. L. 238cm. Palazzo Nuovo, Musei Capitolini, Rome.

3. Marble portrait bust of Trajan with paludamentum (military mantle). Formerly in the Albani collection. AD 103-108. H. 68 cm. Sala degli Imperatori, Musei Capitolini, Rome.

During these eight decades peace reigned in the Mediterranean, and the coinage was unified, as was the law. Generally there was more equal taxation and less hardship, due to the accumulated riches acquired by conquest that, in turn, encouraged economic growth and led to widespread prosperity – all underpinned by the work of an efficient class of civil servants.

A network of almost 2,000 cities whose subsistence was guaranteed by flourishing agriculture,

allowed almost a quarter of the whole population of the empire to lead relatively comfortable lives. The working infrastructure – sewage systems, cisterns, roads, bridges, city walls, harbours, and impressive public buildings – was financed by local notables who vied to out do each other with endowments to their home cities. Their philanthropic deeds were recorded, alongside those of the emperors, in sculpted reliefs and statues displayed in the *fora*, basilica, temples,

gymnasia, theatres, and public baths. A greater sense of *humanitas* prevailed: provision was made for the education of poor children, and food was distributed to the needy by public benefactors.

The numerous inscriptions from this period testify to a high level of literacy – in both Latin and Greek – certainly in the cities. Book markets thrived as well the new idea of libraries (*bibliothecae*) that were made available inside the public baths (*thermae*). If the imperial

policy before had been: ‘divide and rule’ now it was ‘unite and rule’.

But this exhibition also hints at the inner contradictions and tensions of a time of rapid dynamic change that anticipated the anguish of the future when increasing political and military uncertainties could not stem the encroaching pressure of foreign people at the borders. Financial and social crisis resulting from heavy military expenditure and sterile infighting among future emperors, as well as other

Changing hairstyles:

4. Marble portrait of Faustina Minor found at Villa Adriana in Tivoli in the 18th century. AD 147-148. H. 60cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome.

5. Marble portrait of Faustina Minor. AD 170-180. H. 31cm. Sala degli Imperatori, Musei Capitolini, Rome.

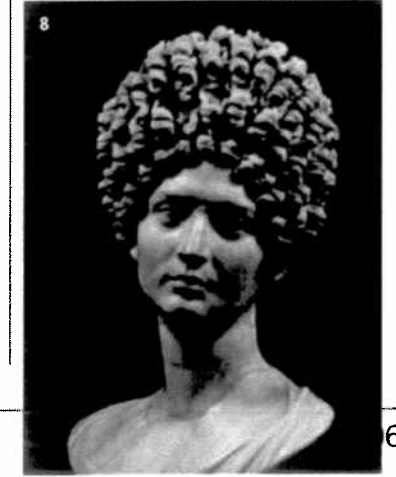
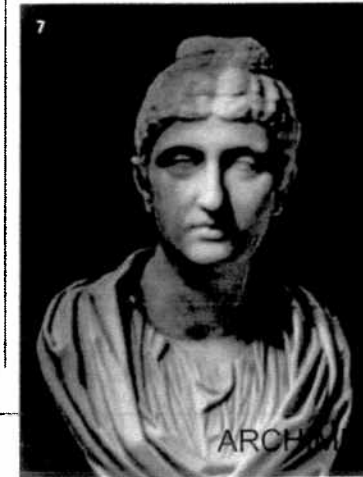
6. Marble portrait of Sabina. 2nd century AD. H. 61cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome.

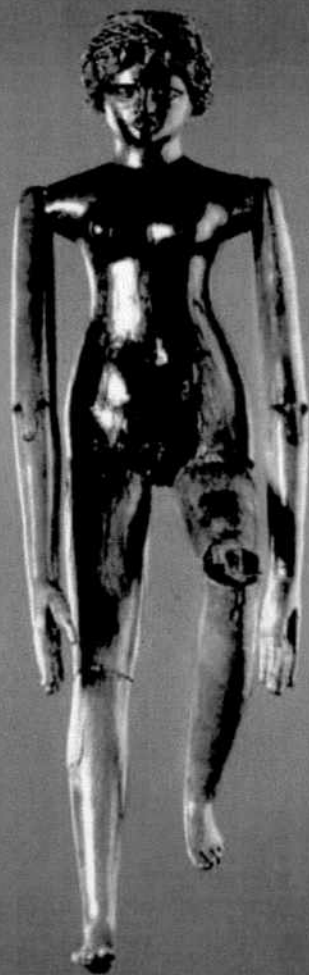
7. Marble portrait of Faustina Major. Possibly from the villa Antonini at Lanuvium. AD 138-141. H. 63cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome.

8. Marble portrait of a lady, the ‘Fonseca head,’ found in the 18th century in Rome. Beginning of 2nd century AD. H. 63cm. Palazzo Nuovo, Musei Capitolini, Rome.

factors causing unrest: a plague of smallpox, devaluation, and food shortage, would ultimately lead to the fall of the empire. Emperors like Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius were represented as all-conquering heroes, but the reality was very different. Marcus Aurelius was even obliged to sell works of art to balance funds and when his son Commodus (r. 180-192) succeeded him, he ushered in a period of serious unrest and decline.

The works of art in the exhibition





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the Museo di Antichità in Turin in 1936. Meantime however, some of the original objects had been dispersed – some pieces were even identified in a private collection in Cairo in the 1950s – but there are still 24 left from the original group. The most impressive is the life-size silver portrait of a bearded man in armour (*lorica*), probably emperor Lucius Verus (r. AD 161-169) as he was at the time he co-ruled with Marcus Aurelius. It is likely that the silver lamina was nailed over a wooden core and that the portrait was paraded as a military emblem when the legions moved or was set in the army camps in a special shrine for worship.

The 2nd century saw a shift in funerary practices from cremation to burial. Increasingly intricately carved marble sarcophagi with an emphasis on dramatic crowded scenes rendered in chiaroscuro, were preferred to the simpler urns. Two tombs with their goods are reconstructed here: the tomb of the Haterii originally on the via Casilina in Rome and that of Claudia Semne whose contents were dispersed between the Louvre and the Vatican museums and which are now reunited for this occasion.

The exhibition ends in the great domed hall built especially to



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12. Mosaic, made of glass and marble tesserae set into an alabaster slab, found in 1737 at Villa Adriana in Tivoli. First half of the 2nd century AD. 89 x 25cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlung, Dresden.

13. Fragment of a marble relief showing a Barbarian and a Roman soldier, perhaps from the Trajan Forum. 2nd century AD. H. 84cm. W. 88cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

14. Silver portrait probably of emperor Lucius Verus, found at Marengo in 1928. Second half of the 2nd century AD. H. 53.3cm. W. 50.2cm. Weight 2850 grams. Museo di Antichità, Turin.

protect the magnificent bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius which used to dominate the Capitoline square where there now stands a less fragile reproduction. Visitors can continue exploring the themes illustrated in the exhibition by walking down the Capitoline hill to the large and impressive remains of the Forum of Trajan that sprawls below it.

The last and greatest of the *fora*, the so-called Trajan market was built in AD 112 to celebrate the emperor's victories in Dacia (AD 101 and 106). Standing almost 40-metres high, Trajan's column has survived intact in its original location. It is entirely covered with bands of sculptured reliefs spiralling upwards that document the emperor's conquests. When made it was an architectural novelty which was then copied. First by Commodus for Marcus Aurelius's column in Rome (before AD 193) to celebrate the Danubian wars, then by Theodosius the Great (r. AD 379-395) and his son Arcadius (r. AD 395-408) in Constantinople when building their own triumphal columns.

Last December a few metres away from the column, archaeologists unearthed the remains of an auditorium built for emperor Hadrian in AD 123. It contained three large



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halls where literary gatherings were held. Remains of the brick walls of the complex, as well as sections of the elegant marble flooring, are visible at the bottom of a pit 5.5 metre-deep excavated in Piazza Venezia. A lofty arched ceiling 11 metres high, once covered the main hall. The complex was discovered during works undertaken to build a new underground railway line which will cross the heart of Rome. It is envisaged that the ruins of the auditorium will be incorporated into the new train station.

Hadrian, a cultured man well versed in Platonic and Epicurean philosophy, wished to be remembered as an architect and city planner. Certainly the Pantheon built between AD 118-125 for the imperial cult is one of the highlights of any visit to Rome, as is the emperor's mausoleum (now Castel Sant'Angelo) and the imposing ruins of the temple of Venus and Rome (begun AD 121), the largest temple ever built in the city, still standing in front of the Colosseum.

• *The Age of Balance: Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius* is on show at Musei Capitolini, Rome (www.museicapitolini.org) until ???



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9. Psyche punished, marble sculpture found at Villa Adriana in Tivoli in the 18th century. 2nd century AD. H. 170.5cm. Palazzo Nyovo, Musei Capitolini, Rome.

10. Marble relief from the arcus antonini in Rome destroyed in 1527, showing emperor Hadrian entering Rome. AD 2nd century AD 350 x 263cm. Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome.

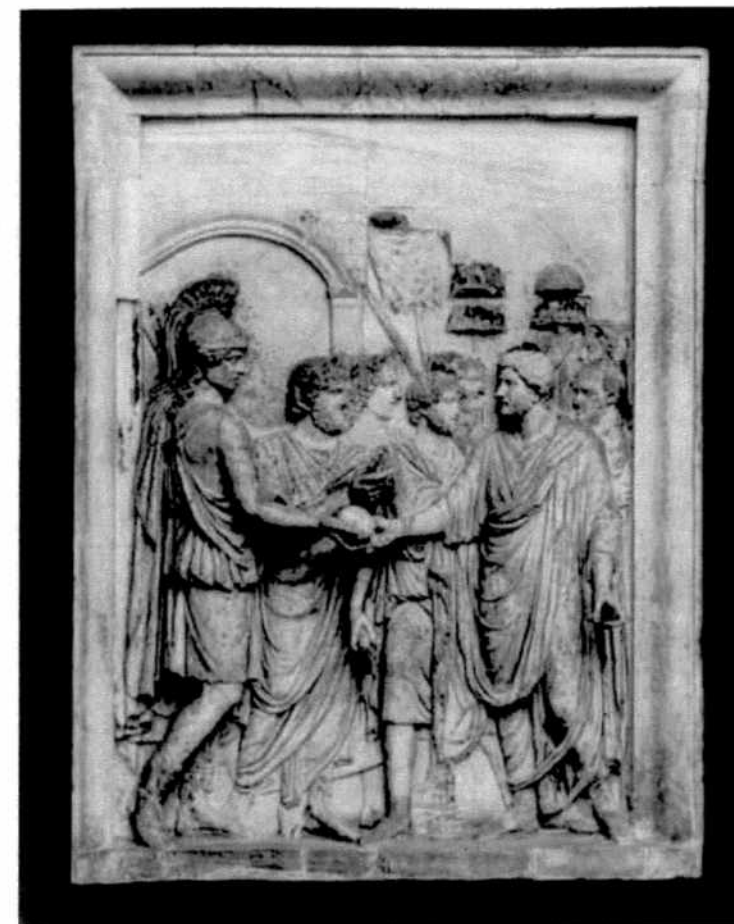
11. Ivory doll from the funerary goods of Creperia Thryphaena. AD 150-160. H. 23cm. Centrale Montemartini, Rome.

are beautifully displayed in the magnificent rooms of the Palazzo dei Conservatori, one of the two palaces flanking the square designed by Michelangelo and which together now form the Capitoline Museums.

They are grouped according to a sequence of separate themes, the first one being a presentation of the main protagonists of the show: the four emperors. Their portraits fill the huge Sala degli Orazi e Curiazi decorated with 16th-century wall paintings depicting episodes of ancient Roman history.

It is quite an experience to move among the life-like portraits at this grand gathering of emperors, portrayed at various stages in their lives, their friends and lovers, their mothers, wives and daughters: ladies such as Plotina (Trajan's wife), Sabina (Hadrian's wife), Faustina Major, Antoninus Pius' wife, and her daughter Faustina Minor, wife of Marcus Aurelius, who changed her hairstyle seven times according to each pregnancy, a sure indication of dates and political influence.

The portraits of the emperors are less realistic and more iconic – symbols of the empire's eternity, are seen as abstracted, showing a god inspired calm and effortless superiority. Hadrian mostly looks soulful but can also take on the appearance



of a fierce warrior who treads on the head of his vanquished enemy. Marcus Aurelius on the other hand – although he was at war all his life – is never shown wearing armour and his countenance is that of a philosopher king, an autocrat by the will of the gods.

Important loans from abroad are set next to those already in the museum's outstanding collection of antiquities. The 2nd-century masterpieces are on display among other Greek, Roman and Renaissance masterpieces in a lavish setting, which actually evokes their original locations in the various imperial palaces and villas in Italy and abroad.

This is particularly true for the section concerning the time of Hadrian when the technical virtuosity of the artists working in the emperor's Villa Adriana at Tivoli is unequalled: marbles are polished to a silk like sheen and carved with lace-like accuracy, mosaic compositions are made up of minute tesserae (*opus vermiculatum*) set in intricate floor patterns, furnishings are exquisitely chiselled. Polychromy was highly fashionable for buildings and for statuary that were to be set in bucolic settings evoking a mythical landscape peopled with superhuman beings like the two large grey

marble centaurs, both allegories of the power of love, and the Dionysiac red marble drunken satyr, all found together in the 18th century in the Academia of Villa Adriana. Hadrian was the more philo-Hellenic of the four emperors and the artistic language that flourished thanks to his generous patronage shows a shift of taste away from the contained Classicism of Greek art, exemplified by Phidias and Policleto, to a more mannerist style permeated by Hellenistic influences brought to Rome by Asian craftsmen.

Among the outstanding items in the exhibition is a group of silver objects, belonging to the 'Marengo Treasure', a hoard found by chance in 1928, in a field near the town of Marengo in Northern Italy. The artefacts had been flattened to facilitate transport and in readiness for melting into ingots and then buried. Among them is a *tabula ansata* (a board) with a votive inscription dedicated to the shrine of the Fortuna Melior in Pavia (Ticinum), a city 50 kilometres away which may be the original location of this treasure. Opinions differ however and some archaeologists believe it may have pertained to a building devoted to the cult of the emperor. The hoard was rescued by local connoisseurs and, after restoration, shown in