

Severus Alexander (222–235 AD): The Calm before the Storm

Severus Alexander came to the throne after the disastrous rule of his cousin Elagabalus. His grandmother, Julia Maesa, had hoped to control the eccentric Elagabalus and govern as the power behind the throne, but she had failed, so she raised up Severus Alexander instead. Alexander was only fourteen years old when he came to the throne, and required guidance. However, Julia Maesa soon died, and Severus Alexander came under the control of his mother, Julia Mamaea. Mamaea was a wise and astute woman, and she surrounded her son with capable councilors, such as the famous jurist Ulpian. She formed a board of sixteen senators to help guide her son's policy. Alexander was himself a capable emperor, and was well respected by the senate for respecting their power.

In Rome, Alexander, under his mother's guidance, sponsored building projects, such as the construction of a new aqueduct and an expansion of the baths Nero had built. He encouraged the provinces to build roads and bridges in exchange for tax deductions. The economic situation improved to the point that Alexander was able to actually increase the silver content in the coins, temporarily reversing a dangerous long-term policy of devaluing the currency. At the same time, Alexander and his mother faced several threats. The Praetorian Guard fought with, and eventually murdered Ulpian. In 225 Alexander married Sallustia Orbiana, but Julia Mamaea soon grew jealous of her influence over her son, and convinced Alexander to divorce her. Still, despite these intrigues, Alexander's early rule was prosperous.

However, a new and unprecedented threat was to emerge from the east. The Parthian Dynasty, battered by repeated Roman invasions, collapsed and was replaced by the Sasanian Dynasty, which took control over Iran and Mesopotamia. This new, native Persian dynasty was intent on restoring control over the lands ruled by the Persians before the time of Alexander the Great, and attempted to overrun the Roman eastern provinces. When Severus Alexander tried to negotiate with them, the Persians simply demanded that the emperor cede his eastern territories before they were taken by force.

In response, Severus Alexander and his mother gathered legions from across the empire and went east to meet the Persians in battle. The resulting war was difficult and bloody. The Roman soldiers prevented the Persians from overrunning the frontier, but suffered heavy casualties. The Romans and Persians concluded a hasty peace. Severus Alexander, now growing into an adult, returned to Rome to celebrate a triumph. However, with many of his legions off fighting in the east, German tribes overran the Rhine frontier. Alexander and his mother moved to counter this new threat. After the heavy losses of the Persian campaign, Alexander decided to try to pay the Germanic tribes to cease their attacks instead of fighting them. The troops—many of whom had their families in the lands overrun by the Germanic tribes—were eager for revenge, not diplomacy, and mutinied. They murdered Severus Alexander and his mother in the middle of the night. The troops proclaimed Maximinus Thrax, a Thracian soldier of low birth, the new emperor, and thus the Severan Dynasty came to an end.

If he had lived longer, or in more peaceful times, Severus Alexander might have been a great emperor. He was a wise young ruler surrounded by able administrators,

but the situation of the empire after the misrule of Caracalla and then Elagabalus proved to be more than he could handle. The rise of Sassanid Persia created a powerful new rival that the Roman Empire was ill equipped to deal with. Though Severus Alexander kept them in check, after his death the Persians overwhelmed the eastern Roman defenses. The murder of Severus Alexander put control of the empire in the hands of a long line of short-lived soldier-emperors, launching the empire into civil war. His judicious economic policies were abandoned, and the currency was devalued once again. Thus, the death of Severus Alexander is considered the beginning of the Crisis of the Third Century, a disastrous period when the Roman Empire was brought to its knees and nearly collapsed.

Summary:

- Severus Alexander came to the throne at the age of fourteen, and was soon thereafter under the guidance of his mother.
- His reign followed the disastrous reigns of Caracalla and Elagabalus, but with his mother's help he began a recovery, reducing taxes while also encouraging building, and temporarily reversing a dangerous long-term policy of devaluing the currency.
- The rise of Sassanid Persia created a powerful threat to the Roman East, and Severus Alexander struggled to keep the Persians in check.
- Alexander was eventually murdered on the Rhine frontier by his troops, who were angry at him for attempting to negotiate with the Germanic tribes. The death of Severus Alexander marks the end of the Severan Dynasty and the beginning of the disastrous Crisis of the Third Century.