

Særemne: Rome's "mad" emperors: The corruption of power?

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The Roman empire had its share of murderous, megalomaniac, and downright unusual leaders. Caligula, Nero, and Commodus, among others, appear in the historical and cultural record not only as 'bad' Emperors, but also as 'mad'. But how accurate is the picture we have of these powerful figures, often shaped by sources written after their deposition and death? How close can we get to their character, achievements, and acts?

This subject will focus on the historical evidence for several of these mad and bad Roman emperors, as well as their how their legacy evolved into the modern world. We will analyse and discuss the major ancient sources for their lives and deeds, exploring how these contemporary historians and biographers, with their own aims and ideas, played a crucial role in shaping the reputations of emperors, as well as how modern media can perpetuate or alter these perceptions. Through several case-studies (including Caligula, Nero, Agrippina the younger, Messalina, and Commodus) we will ask the questions: What makes an emperor (or empress) 'mad'?; how can we manage biased or problematic sources?; and can any of these figures be redeemed?