

7.7 Making It at Rome The Career of an Emperor: Septimius Severus

Since the first century of the Empire, provincials in increasing numbers entered the Roman Senate. There was nothing unusual about the process itself. For centuries in the Republic there had been a steady, if unspectacular, movement of outsiders into the ranks of the ruling elite. They came first from the immediate areas around Rome, then from farther afield in Italy. Julius Caesar was supposed to have outraged the Senate by introducing trousered Gauls. The rise of the great emperor Septimius Severus followed a predictable pattern. His ancestors pioneered the way, though not much is known of their rise to prominence from the out-of-the-way Punic town of Leptis in Libya.

Septimius' own career was as ordinary as the style of the author who relates it. Following a fairly typical career pattern, he moved from one post to another over much of the Empire—from Italy to Spain, to Sardinia, to France, to Hungary, to Sicily. Finally, as luck would have it, he ended up in a major military command in Hungary and was there when the current emperor was killed and his own troops took it upon themselves to proclaim him emperor. A bloody civil war followed from which Severus emerged victorious, establishing a dynasty that lasted from 193 until A.D. 235. When the Severan dynasty ended, Rome was plunged into half a century of even more violent civil war.⁷

After Didius Julius had been assassinated, Severus, who hailed from Africa, became emperor. His home town was Leptis Magna. His father was Geta, and his ancestors were Roman knights even before the citizenship had been extended to everyone in the Empire. Fulvia Pia was his mother, and his great-uncles were the consulars Aper and Severus. Macer was his father's father, and his mother's father was Fulvius Pius. He himself was born six days before the Ides of April in the second consulship of Erucius Clarus and the first consulship of Severus (A.D. 146).

When still a child, and before he began his Greek and Latin studies (in which he was highly educated), he would engage only in the game of "Judges" with the other children. When he played this game he would have the rods (the *fascēs*) and axes carried in front of him and, surrounded by the other children, would sit and pass

⁷Augustan History, *Septimius Severus* 1–5.

judgment. At eighteen he gave a speech in public, and after this came to Rome to continue his studies. With the help of his relative [*of the same name*] Septimius Severus, he petitioned and received the broad senatorial purple stripe from the Deified Marcus [*the Emperor Marcus Aurelius*].

On his arrival at Rome he met a man—not someone he knew—who at that very moment was reading the *Life* of the Emperor Hadrian. He took this as an omen of success in his career. . . . He performed the duties of quaestor diligently, having skipped the military tribunate. After the quaestorship he was assigned to the province of Baetica [*southern Spain*] by lot, and from there went back to Africa to settle the affairs of his family, his father having died. But while he was in Africa he was reassigned to Sardinia in place of Spain, which was being ravaged by the Moors. Having served his quaestorship in Sardinia, he was appointed legate to the proconsul of Africa. . . .

He was promoted to tribune of the plebs by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and executed his responsibilities with great strictness and vigor. It was at this time he married Marciana, although he says nothing of her in the story of his life as a private citizen. When he was emperor, however, he put up statues in her honor. He was designated praetor by Marcus [*Aurelius*]. . . . After he had been sent to Spain he dreamed that he should restore the temple of Augustus at Tarraco, which was in a state of ruin. Then he dreamed that he saw from the top of a very high mountain Rome and the whole world while the provinces sang in harmony to a lyre or flute. Although absent from Rome, he put on the usual games in the city.

He was then put in command of Legio IV Scythica, stationed near Marseilles. After this tour of duty he went to Athens to continue his studies, to perform some religious functions, and to see the public buildings and the ancient monuments. . . .

Next he was appointed legate to the province of Lyons [*in France*]. Meanwhile, since his wife had died and he wished to marry again, he made inquiries into the horoscopes of possible brides, being himself an expert in this field. When he heard there was a certain woman in Syria whose horoscope predicted she would marry a king [*Julia Domna*], he asked her to become his wife and with the aid of friends succeeded. He soon became a father. He was loved by the Gauls as no one else because of his strictness and his sense of honor.

Next he ruled the two provinces of Pannonia [*parts of modern Austria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia*] with proconsular power. After this he was selected by lot to govern the proconsular province of Sicily. Meanwhile another son was born at Rome. While he was in Sicily, he was indicted for consulting soothsayers or Chaldaean astrologers regarding the future of the emperor but was acquitted by the judges because Commodus [*the reigning emperor*] was already hated. His accuser was crucified. He was consul for the first time with Apuleius Rufinus as his colleague [*A.D. 190*] among a very large group appointed by Commodus. After the consulship he spent a year without an official posting. Then on the recommendation of Laetus [*another general*] he was given the command of the army in Germany. . . . In Germany he conducted himself in the legateship in such a way that he was able to increase his reputation, which was already significant.