

An essay by Nick Leonard.

The emperor of Rome, 'god and Panhellene,'¹ was not one to linger anywhere, and certainly not in the capital city that he despised. All the major hallmarks of Hadrian's reign – his civic architectural projects, his defensive fortifications, his drilling of the legions – stemmed from a restlessness that compelled him to travel to every corner of his domains, from the Scottish Highlands to the deserts of Egypt, like no other emperor before or after him.

Even his beloved Greece could not tempt the 'Greekling' to abandon his nomadic ways despite his many visits there. After one such stay in Greece in AD 128-29, during which he participated in the Eleusian Mysteries for the second time and restored Greece to a semblance of its former stature with the creation of the Panhellenic League, Hadrian set sail for Ephesus.

As he travelled through Asia Minor and then turned south through the Fertile Crescent, Hadrian, knowledgeable in history as in many fields, would have been fully aware that he was approximating the route taken two centuries earlier by the Roman general Pompey the Great. Before joining Marcus Crassus and Julius Caesar in the triumvirate that would bring down the 450-year-old republic and pave the way for the rule of Rome by a single man – rule that was now in the hands of Hadrian – Pompey had stormed through the east in a stunning campaign in the 60s BC. Having recently rid the Mediterranean Sea of pirates, he now established Roman provinces and client kingdoms from Pontus on the southern Black Sea coast to Judea on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. It was this stunning campaign that finally earned Pompey the 'Magnus' honorific that had been originally bestowed on him as an insult by the dictator Sulla to demean the young man's overstated earlier achievements.

But where Pompey had marched in search of fame, conquest and hitherto unknown lands, Hadrian's journey was merely another tireless, methodical inspection of the provinces and military camps that made up his empire, in order to maintain the Pax Romana. Where Pompey had sought war in Judea by besieging Jerusalem, Hadrian tried – albeit unsuccessfully – to stave it off by rebuilding and renaming the city and Hellenising the province. Where Pompey used his sword to demand loyalty from those he left with their territory intact, Hadrian gathered the client kings together for a conference in Ephesus to demonstrate Rome's commitment to peace. Hadrian implicitly understood that his methods were unorthodox by Roman standards, but 'since peace was procured from many kings by means of tributes, he used to say that he had obtained more by leisure than others had by arms.'²

Pompey had dragged his legions further than any Roman commander before him, to the shores of the Caspian Sea, becoming the latest hero in the relentless and seemingly limitless expansion of Rome in those days. Hadrian, by contrast, 'did not stir up any war, and he terminated those already in progress.'³ He even went one step further by presiding over the first voluntary withdrawal from conquered territory in Rome's history. It was a pragmatic and farsighted move that was nevertheless seen by the hawks in the Senate as not only cowardly, but diametrically opposed to the very Roman spirit that defined a man like Pompey the Great.

Hadrian was not chasing Pompey, then, but he found the triumvir anyway.



The Ecce Homo arch, a triple-arched gateway, built by Hadrian, as an entrance to the eastern Forum of Aelia Capitolina on the via Dolorosa, Jerusalem.

© Carole Raddato

Leaving Jerusalem behind as the newly renamed city of [Aelia Capitolina](#), Hadrian headed south by

road for Egypt in the summer of AD 130, arriving first in the coastal fortified town of Pelusium. As the easternmost city in Lower Egypt, Pelusium was the gateway to the ancient Pharaonic kingdom that was now the personal property of the Roman emperor. Before continuing to Alexandria and the Nile, a disastrous journey that claimed the life of his teenage lover Antinous, Hadrian stumbled upon the ruined tomb of none other than Pompey himself near the spot where he had been slain after fleeing from his defeat at the hands of Julius Caesar in Greece. Hadrian restored the tomb 'on a more magnificent scale'⁴ and inscribed a poem on it. Bothered by the state of the burial monument, considering the achievements of the man interred within, Hadrian wrote: 'Strange lack of tomb for one with shrines o'erwhelmed.'⁵

This episode demonstrates much about the complicated character of Hadrian, who was, 'in the same person, austere and genial, dignified and playful, dilatory and quick to act, niggardly and generous, deceitful and straightforward, cruel and merciful, and always in all things changeable.'⁶ His curiosity was so insatiable that 'people found fault with him'⁷ for it, and it often led to 'meddlesomeness'⁸. The emperor fancied himself an expert in many varied pursuits, from the poetry on display at Pompey's tomb to philosophy, flute-playing, medicine, sculpture and architecture. Meanwhile, in his long years travelling throughout the empire, he barely passed through a town without commissioning civic improvements or making plans to build new monuments or restore existing ones. And aside from the practical purpose of his tours of the empire, there was also a leisurely aspect to it, for 'so fond was he of travel, that he wished to inform himself in person about all that he had read concerning all parts of the world.'⁹

But the seemingly insignificant trait on display at Pelusium that would have the greatest consequence for the city of Rome, long after the empire had fallen, was Hadrian's well-documented interest in tombs. His obsession with burial was not limited to this one incident, or to people he knew, or to fellow Romans, or even to humans. During a trip to Troy he restored the tomb of the Greek warrior Ajax, while on another occasion he inscribed a poem next to a tomb dedicated to two Greek lovers after being moved by their story. Meanwhile, 'his horses and dogs he loved so much that he provided burial-places for them',¹⁰ particularly his favourite hunting horse Borysthenes, for whom Hadrian 'prepared a tomb for him, set up a slab and placed an inscription on it.'¹¹

Hadrian's most lavish funerary monuments were naturally built for those close to him. Plotina, the wife of Trajan whose machinations after her husband's death in 117 are generally believed to have delivered the throne to her former ward, was honoured 'exceedingly'¹² and Hadrian dedicated a

memorial of ‘marvellous workmanship’¹³ to her in Gaul. For Antinous, aside from the cult he created and the countless statues he commissioned, Hadrian built an extravagant funerary complex at his villa in Tivoli, including a specially commissioned [Egyptian obelisk](#) that still stands today in Rome’s Pincian Hill Gardens.

Given the importance Hadrian ascribed to tombs for all manner of creatures, from lovers to pets, and the AD 123 brick stamps that have been discovered at his mausoleum, it is evident that he began contemplating his own death and burial place early in his 21-year reign, or possibly even before he donned the purple. It is likely that, while meditating on the grave of Pompey, the 54-year-old emperor again turned his mind to his own tomb. A small, plain monument at the mercy of sandstorms in a frontier desert town like Pompey’s ‘lack of tomb’ wouldn’t do at all for ‘the one who has 30 legions’¹⁴, but a more appropriate model would not have been far from his mind. If Hadrian needed inspiration for his future mausoleum as he left Pelusium behind and entered Egypt, he needed only to contemplate the man who had captured that land for Rome in the first place.

In death – as in life – Hadrian would be less Pompey and more Augustus.



The Mausoleum of Hadrian, completed in AD 139 but since greatly modified to become a Papal fortress known as Castel Sant'Angelo, and the AD 134 Pons Aelius (now the Ponte Sant'Angelo) – Rome, Italy.

© Nick Leonard

It was Augustus, a century-and-a-half earlier, who first dared to defy the entire history of Rome's continuous expansion and suggest that the pan-Mediterranean empire was already large enough as it was. Emerging successful from the final round of civil wars that defined the late Republic, a generation after Pompey, Rome's first emperor wisely elected not to follow the disastrous examples of Crassus and Mark Antony by marching to war in the east. Instead, Augustus made peace with the Parthian Empire, recovering Crassus' lost legionaries' standards in the process in a deal he considered one of the great achievements of his four-decade reign. This treaty, combined with his deployment of 30 legions on the frontiers throughout the provinces, set the stage for a stable, defensible empire that would last for centuries. He implored his successors to resist the natural Roman urge for expansion and retain defensible boundaries, and, Claudius' annexation of Britain aside, for the most part they

deferred to his wishes until Trajan became emperor in AD 98. A career military man, Trajan rekindled Rome's adventurous spirit with his conquests of Dacia and Mesopotamia, but in the process extended Rome's defences beyond the Danube and Euphrates rivers, precisely the types of natural borders that Augustus had used to define the boundaries of the empire.

When Hadrian ascended to the throne following Trajan's death in 117, he immediately began trying to emulate not his just-departed relative, but Augustus himself. He rejected, for example, the title Father of the Country, 'offered to him at the time of his accession and again later on, giving as his reason the fact that Augustus had not won it until late in life'.¹⁵ For his own imperial propaganda, he used a seal showing the head of Augustus, and he later issued a coin with his image on one side and Augustus' on the other. Suetonius wrote that he presented a bronze statuette of Augustus to Hadrian and that the emperor cherished it.



Silver coin of Hadrian with the head of Augustus on the obverse and Hadrian standing and holding corn ears on the reverse.

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Hadrian sought not only to profit from the symbolism of Augustus, however, but to follow his example in deeds and policy. Indeed, the primary manifestation of Hadrian's emulation of Augustus was in their unified approach to border defence. Becoming emperor a matter of months after the Senate had

conferred the title of Parthicus on Trajan for his victories in the east, Hadrian found himself in control of an empire that had reached its largest territorial extent. Rather than trying to extend Rome’s domains further or even validating Trajan’s conquests, Hadrian immediately withdrew from the just conquered territories beyond the Euphrates and pondered doing the same in Dacia, inviting the wrath not only of his enemies in Rome but also the god Terminus, who was said to mark out the boundaries of the empire and whose movements could not be reversed. This seemingly timid approach and his still undefined role in the execution of four ex-consuls early in his reign earned him the enmity of the Senate that would last for the rest of his life, but in both this ruthless treatment of his enemies and his defensive strategy, Hadrian was merely mirroring the policies of Augustus, his ‘true hero among his predecessors’.¹⁶ The withdrawal from Mesopotamia, in particular, was executed so swiftly, and at a time when his rule had not yet been consolidated, that Hadrian must have been convinced of this ‘strategic realignment’¹⁷ even as Trajan’s campaigns were in progress. In fact, this decision went beyond mere policy for the emperor, as ‘the idea of withdrawing behind the traditional, defensible, Augustan borders of the Empire was at the very core of Hadrian’s being.’¹⁸

As he settled into his emperorship, Hadrian resolved to spend as little time as possible in Rome, giving disgruntled senators another reason to disapprove of him. In the second century AD, Rome – and not the emperor himself – was still the centre around which the empire revolved, and the days when Diocletian could refuse to visit the ancient capital for 20 years were still over a century-and-a-half away. Nevertheless, Hadrian spent at least half of his reign outside Italy, and in order to make himself comfortable when he needed to return to conduct the affairs of state, he had a 300-acre [villa](#) – a veritable Greece in miniature – built in Tivoli, 30 kilometres from Rome.



The Canopus at Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli.

© Carole Raddato

Tomb-hunting aside, the primary purpose of all this time spent abroad was for Hadrian to solidify the boundaries of the empire by strengthening the frontier defences and training the legions stationed in the border provinces. While Hadrian's reign is generally considered peaceful – the third Jewish War aside – there were still uprisings to take care of both inside and outside the borders of the empire. 'For the nations which Trajan had conquered began to revolt; the Moors, moreover, began to make attacks, and the Sarmatians to wage war, the Britons could not be kept under Roman sway, Egypt was thrown into disorder by riots, and finally Libya and Palestine showed the spirit of rebellion.'¹⁹

To quell these uprisings and prevent future ones, Hadrian sought specifically to improve defence in those areas where natural boundaries were absent, with the result being that 'in many regions where the barbarians are held back not by rivers but by artificial barriers, Hadrian shut them off by means of high stakes planted deep in the ground and fastened together in the manner of a palisade.'²⁰

In Upper Germania, where Augustus' attempts to extend the border from the Rhine to the Elbe river to create a more defensible Elbe-Danube frontier had been unsuccessful, the late first century emperor Domitian had built a *limes* - essentially a road fortified with watchtowers - to bridge the 500-plus-kilometre gap between the Rhine and the Danube and thus consolidate Rome's border from the North Sea to the Black Sea. Hadrian ordered the legions to construct a wooden fence the entire length of the *limes* to provide an even stronger defensive shield and to give the Romans further control of border movement.

In northern Britain, Hadrian built what is - remarkably, considering the astounding beauty of the Pantheon in Rome, and the fabulous history of his own mausoleum - the most famous of his architectural projects: Hadrian's Wall. At 120 kilometres in length, the wall bisected the territory of the local Brigantes and, as with the German *limes*, it enabled the Romans to control movement along the wall and use it as a base for further explorations.



Hadrian's Wall (built AD 122) is the most famous Roman site in Britain and served as one of the

prime examples of Hadrian's realisation of the Augustan concept of Roman frontier defence.

© Nick Leonard

Hadrian's relentless pursuit of organised frontier defence continued in North Africa, where another watchtower-sprinkled wall cemented Rome's southern frontier in the former heartland of her greatest enemy, Carthage. With both the African wall and the Britannic one, construction appears to have begun early to enable the emperor to inspect its progress personally when he arrived in the province, showing how invested he was in these projects.

The second key aspect of Hadrian's defensive policy was to occupy the legions not only in these defensive building works, but also in military exercises and physical training to restore the discipline 'which since the time of Octavian [Augustus] had been growing slack through the laxity of his predecessors.'²¹ This was particularly crucial on the Rhine and Danube frontiers, which had successively been the main centres of imperial military action since the rule of Augustus but, with the German tribes disorganised and Dacia conquered, had recently ceased most of their activity. Hadrian understood that with the empire at a time of relative peace on all its frontiers, inactive and complacent soldiers could not only find themselves on the losing end of a battle should one arise but could also become a source for discontent and rebellion. To this end, he 'subjected the legions to the strictest discipline'²² in order to keep the soldiers active and in fighting shape during peacetime in a way unseen since the time of Marius and his mules more than two centuries earlier.

Had he approached this training differently, it might have earned Hadrian the same scorn from the legions that had been cast upon him by the Senate. But Hadrian 'actually led a soldier's life'²³ by participating in the day-to-day activities of the troops, who loved him for it. The emperor enjoyed military life, and participated in the exercise drills, always walking – up to 20 miles fully armed – or riding on horseback and never being carried in a chariot. He wore ordinary clothes, ate camp rations of bacon, cheese and vinegar, and visited sick soldiers, all of which greatly boosted morale.

The results of this rigorous training were more extraordinary than perhaps even Hadrian could have imagined. The training not only kept the legions occupied, it also kept the peace, according to Hadrian's near-contemporary, the historian Cassius Dio.

This best explains why he [Hadrian] lived for the most part at peace with foreign nations; for as they saw his state of preparation and were themselves not only free from aggression but

received money besides, they made no uprising. So excellently, indeed, had his soldiery been trained that the cavalry of the Batavians, as they were called, swam the Ister with their arms. Seeing all this, the barbarians stood in terror of the Romans, they employed Hadrian as an arbitrator of their differences.

Far from being the overly pacifist emperor that the hawks in the Senate saw, Hadrian's shrewd and pragmatic military policies – appropriately described in modern terms as a 'highly aggressive defence'²⁴ – paved the way for the greatest period of peace and prosperity that the Roman Empire would ever know.

Two decades of imperial travel and ceaseless activity eventually wore Hadrian down, and he was ill for the last two years of his life. This sickness caused the emperor to be 'seized with the utmost disgust of life'²⁵ and he ordered a servant to kill him and, when that did not work, he unsuccessfully tried to kill himself. Eventually Hadrian died of natural causes in July of AD 138, and although he was initially buried outside Rome on land that once belonged to Cicero, that was merely a provisional interment; Hadrian would still have one final opportunity to follow in Augustus' footsteps.

As he had done with virtually all aspects of post-Republican administration, Augustus had set the standard for imperial burial practices by constructing an enormous cylindrical drum on the banks of the Tiber in 28 BC. It was the largest tomb in the Roman world with an outer diameter of 89 metres and was a key feature of Augustus' redesign of Rome's Campus Martius. The mausoleum was located at one end of a north-south marble boulevard that led to another of Augustus and his indispensable colleague Marcus Agrippa's architectural achievements, the Pantheon – which, not coincidentally, was later rebuilt on a grander and more magnificent scale by Hadrian, whose version still stands and is often considered the greatest masterpiece of Roman architecture. The geographer Strabo, writing in Augustus' lifetime after the mausoleum had already been completed, described it as the most striking tomb in Rome: 'The most noteworthy is what is called the Mausoleum, a great mound near the river on a lofty foundation of white marble, thickly covered with ever-green trees to the very summit.'²⁶



The Pantheon, built during Hadrian's reign and completed around AD 125, is topped by a poured concrete dome and is generally considered to be the most extraordinary building the Romans ever built – Rome, Italy.

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By Hadrian's time, however, Augustus' imperial mausoleum was full. Nerva, the emperor who preceded Trajan and who died in AD 98, had been the last person interred there. The ashes of Trajan himself were placed in an urn at the base of his column in the forum he had constructed in Rome – a process that was, naturally, overseen by Hadrian, who personally inspected the remains in the east before sending them by ship to Rome.

The need for a new imperial mausoleum gave Hadrian, a man who was obsessed with tombs, architecture and Augustus, an opportunity he could not pass up. Just 800 metres away from the first imperial tomb, and on the other bank of the Tiber, Hadrian erected a virtual copy of the Mausoleum of Augustus, with the same orientation and dimensions that were almost identical – but, respectfully, not

larger.

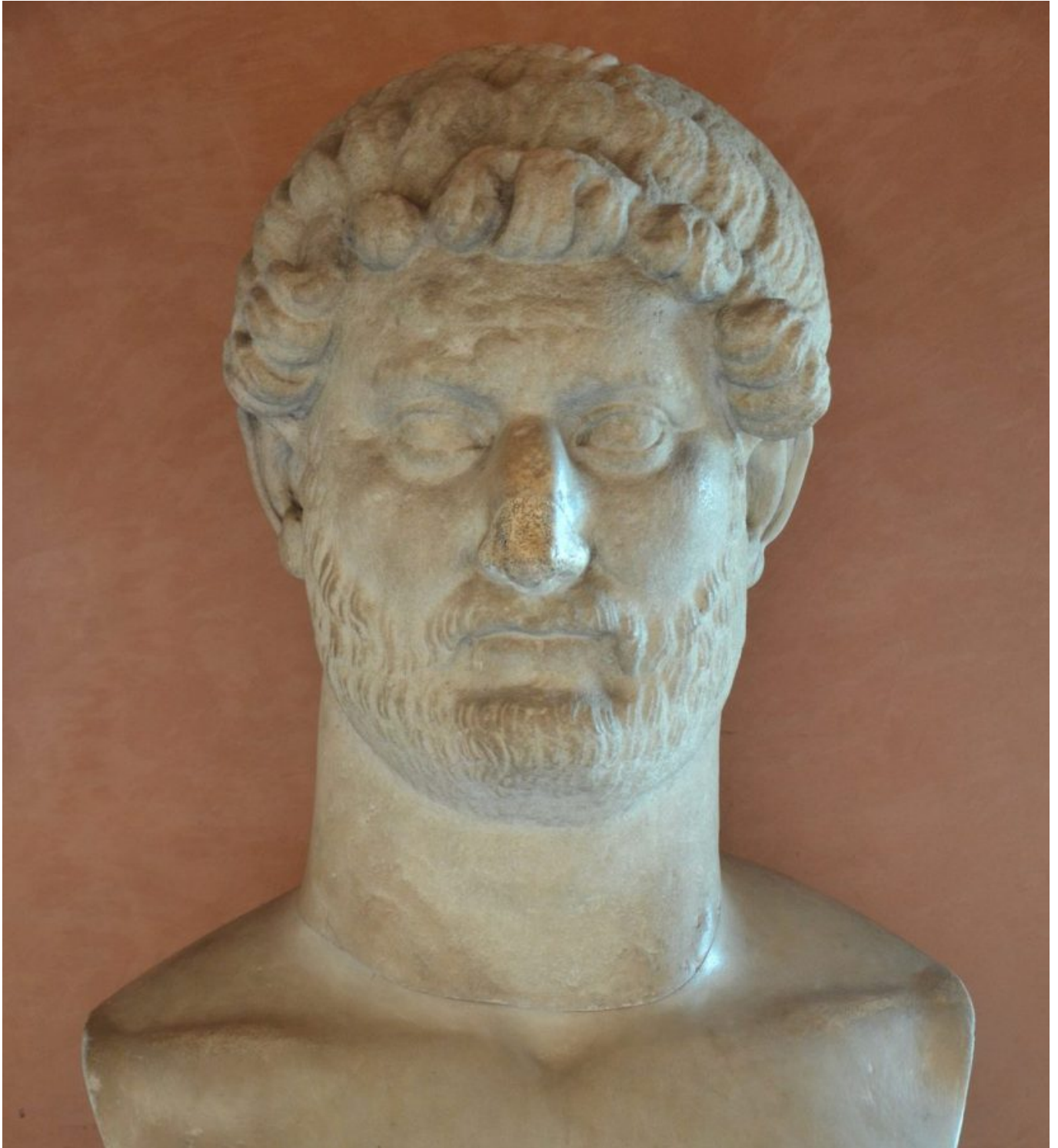
A year after his death, in AD 139, Hadrian's remains were exhumed and reinterred in his mausoleum, known as the *Sepulcrum Hadriani* in antiquity. With this second burial, the journey of the travelling emperor had finally drawn to a close, but that of his tomb was just beginning. Subsequent emperors were buried inside until at least Caracalla in AD 217, and possibly for nearly two centuries beyond that. But the building's original purpose would not be its ultimate legacy; far from lying dormant like the emperors interred within, the Mausoleum of Hadrian would act not just as a witness, but as a participant, in centuries of Roman history to come.

The tomb was likely first fortified less than a century-and-a-half after Hadrian's death by Aurelian and was eventually incorporated into the same emperor's city walls. That Hadrian's mausoleum would form part of Aurelian's defence of Rome after he dragged the empire out of its third-century crisis is appropriate; it was Aurelian who finally withdrew from Dacia, which Hadrian had wanted to do, and Aurelian who redefined the Augustan-Hadrianic conception of empire-wide defence and reduced it to city level to meet the vastly different geo-political reality that he faced. Despite Aurelian's defensive additions and a return to Roman prosperity in the fourth century, however, Rome could not survive the fifth century crisis as it had the third. Sacked by the Visigoths in 410 and by the Vandals in 455, Rome - and Italy - fell out of the imperial orbit in 476 and the peninsula was soon ruled by the Ostrogoths, while the rump Roman state in the east held court at Constantinople.

Rome may have fallen, but Hadrian's tomb survived. By the time the eastern Roman emperor Justinian sought to reconquer the land of the empire's birth in the sixth century, the fortified mausoleum's size and location on the Vatican side of the Tiber had made it the most strategically important building in the realigned city. It was described by Procopius, the secretary of Justinian's general Belisarius, as a 'very noteworthy sight'²⁷ - but Hadrian's tomb was no mere tourist attraction for the visitors from Constantinople. In one of the sieges that characterised the ruinous conflict between Belisarius and the Goths, the east Romans found themselves taking a last stand inside the mausoleum, about to capitulate to the advancing enemy. As a last resort, according to Procopius, the defenders turned to the ancient artwork still contained inside the mausoleum, 'broke in pieces the most of the statues, which were very large, and taking up great numbers of stones thus secured, threw them with both hands down upon the heads of the enemy, who gave way before this shower of missiles.'²⁸ For the first time - but certainly not the last - Hadrian's tomb had saved those defending Rome and themselves.

Justinian’s war brought an end to antiquity in Italy and ushered in the medieval era. During the instability in Rome that typified those centuries, the fortifications of the mausoleum and surrounding area were strengthened multiple times by vastly different rulers: the Gothic king Totila in the sixth century, the Frankish king Charlemagne in the early ninth century, and Pope Leo IV in the mid-ninth century. When Charlemagne came to Rome in AD 800, he stationed his troops inside the mausoleum and then received the title of emperor from the pope on Christmas Day – a title that had been absent from the west for more than 300 years and which had once belonged to Hadrian himself.

The tomb first became a prison in the tenth century as feudal families used control of the fortress to rule over the city and the papacy, and it was last used as a prison in the nineteenth century. In between, Hadrian’s mausoleum continued to serve as the effective citadel of Rome and to astound those who saw it even more than eight centuries after it was first built. An anonymous visitor around the year 1000 said ‘the memorial to the emperor Hadrian is a temple of marvellous size, all covered in marble and adorned with various sculptures.’²⁹



A bust of Hadrian in his one-time mausoleum - now the Castel Sant'Angelo - in Rome, Italy.

© Carole Raddato

In the fourteenth century the mausoleum was stripped of its adornments by a starving mob; in the fifteenth, it had three towers erected and first became a papal residency; and by the early sixteenth century, the tomb had been transformed into an unlikely palace – with even Michelangelo contributing to the redecoration – as the classical civilisation that Hadrian had so loved was reborn in the form of the Italian Renaissance.

In 1527, the latest in over a thousand years of assaults on Rome and its fortress came when the mutinous troops of Charles V sacked the city. Famously, most of the Swiss guard were massacred in the fighting but those who survived were able to protect Pope Clement VII as he fled to the safety of Hadrian's tomb. Clement reached the mausoleum by way of a fortified elevated passage from the Vatican – the *passetto*, so-called because of the little steps the popes would take while escaping down the tunnel towards the keep. The city was destroyed, but the impregnable fortress-tomb had survived yet again.

Nearly half a millennium later, the hulking drum now known as Castel Sant'Angelo still stands overlooking the Tiber and Hadrian's AD 134 *Pons Aelius* bridge, just as it did during the Age of the Antonines at the height of the Roman Empire. Hadrian, like Augustus before him, had dedicated his rule to creating defensive solutions that could sustain his empire for centuries. And while this empire eventually fell, Hadrian's final resting place has endured, primarily because it, too, became a defensive solution as the world changed around it, remaining in its adopted role as a castle until finally being decommissioned in 1901. As a tomb, a fortress, a wedding hall, a prison, a quarry, a sheep-grazing pasture, a palace, a fireworks set and finally a museum, the Mausoleum of Hadrian has for nearly 19 centuries proved to be the most eternal symbol of the Eternal City, reinventing itself at every turn, outlasting empires and ages and even the now-ruined building on the other side of the river that once inspired its construction.

And surely the farsighted Hadrian – who was himself 'always in all things changeable'³⁰ – could appreciate that.

1 Described on an inscription found at Eleusis.

2 De Caesaribus

3 Cassius Dio.

4 Historia Augusta.

5 Cassius Dio.

6 Historia Augusta.

- 7 Cassius Dio.
- 8 Cassius Dio.
- 9 Historia Augusta.
- 10 Historia Augusta.
- 11 Cassius Dio.
- 12 Cassius Dio.
- 13 Historia Augusta.
- 14 Favorinus, in the Historia Augusta.
- 15 Historia Augusta.
- 16 Everitt, Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome, p.190.
- 17 Duncan, The History of Rome.
- 18 Duncan, The History of Rome.
- 19 Historia Augusta.
- 20 Historia Augusta.
- 21 Historia Augusta.
- 22 Cassius Dio.
- 23 Historia Augusta.
- 24 Duncan, *The History of Rome*
- 25 Historia Augusta.
- 26 Strabo, *Geography*.
- 27 Procopius, *History of the Wars*
- 28 Procopius, *History of the Wars*.
- 29 In Castel Sant'Angelo (Electa), p.40.
- 30 Historia Augusta.

Nick Leonard spent four years as a tour guide in the city of Rome and has travelled widely throughout the former Roman Empire, from Hadrian's Wall to El Jem to Palmyra. He currently lives in the one-time Roman city of Olisippo - the modern city of Lisbon, Portugal - with a bust of Hadrian in his living room.

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