

The Day the Praetorian Guard Went Batsh*t Crazy

There's a saying: It's good to be the king. Tell that to *Publius Helvius Pertinax Augustus*.

Pertinax came to power following the assassination of Commodus, the son of [Marcus Aurelius](#) whose reign was marred by erratic behavior, which included the slaughter of nobles and mass bloodshed in the Colosseum. (Commodus enjoyed fighting in the arena as a participant, miraculously winning every contest, and slaying exotic animals released as prey.)

Pertinax, who may have been involved in Commodus' assassination, was a military man who had risen up the ranks to proconsul. As such, he immediately attempted to restore order and discipline in Rome's military, which had grown both lax and corrupt. For his troubles, Pertinax was promptly slaughtered by the Praetorian Guard. But that's not the worst part.

Rome had a long if not healthy tradition of devouring its own rulers. Slaying an emperor was bad, but it was not as bad as slaying him and then putting the imperial throne up for sale to the highest bidder... which is exactly what happened on March 28, 193 A.D.

The historian Herodian of Antioch [wrote](#) that auctioning the throne was too much even for Rome:

“When this proclamation was known, the more honorable and weighty Senators and all persons of noble origin and property would not approach the military barracks to offer money in so vile a manner for a besmirched sovereignty.”

Alas, some people did not get the memo. A wealthy noble named

Didius Julianus, urged by his wife and daughter and friends, hurried to the barracks to bid against the other would-be successor—Pertinax's father-in-law. Julianus, who bid a fortune, won and was anointed Emperor. However, he was scorned by the people of Rome, who "reviled him as having bought the throne with lucre at an auction." And it soon got worse.

Just 86 days into his reign, Julianus was deposed by Septimus Severus, the third of what would be five—yes five!—emperors in 193. As Julianus was dragged away to face the headsman, he seemed to fail to understand that he had done anything wrong. "But what evil have I done?" he is said to have cried. "Whom have I killed?"

There's a moral in this story somewhere for all of us if you can find it. Also, next time you hear someone compare modern America to ancient Rome, you can politely remind him or her that we aren't quite there yet.