

# Adoptive Succession in the Early Roman Empire

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## Abstract

The system of adopted son succession was a political system unique to the Roman Empire, a historical product of the Roman Empire in unique circumstances. It distinguished itself from traditional hereditary throne rule by adopting the criterion of selecting virtuous adopted sons as the next rulers. This selection criterion resulted in the creation of the world-famous "Five Wise Emperors," who ruled the Roman Empire at its peak during this period. During the "Five Wise Emperors" period, the Roman Empire solved the problem of power alternation in the empire and played a positive role in strengthening political rule, stabilizing power, and promoting economic development. The goal of this paper is to introduce the historical context, formation conditions, and factors influencing the success of adopted sons in the early Roman Empire, as well as to delve deeper into the Roman Empire's succession system.

## Keywords

Imperial succession; Political system; Selection of sages; Adopted son succession.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Roman Empire's leadership was distinct from that of our ancient monarchy, which had a sophisticated system of succession to the throne. Under the monarchy, the "divine right of kings" was emphasized, the emperor was appointed by heaven to act, and the will of heaven could not be disobeyed. Therefore, the emperor was the supreme ruler of the dynasty, and autocratic rule meant that power was in the hands of the emperor. The imperial throne was passed down from generation to generation until the dynasty was destroyed. However, the republican system of the Roman Empire was based on the patriarchal system, where the succession to the throne was based on the principle of election, and the election of the Senate was decisive. Although the emperor also had supreme power, his rule was limited to his reign and he could not be hereditary. This meant that the power of the head was not personal, but national, and in theory, there was no "hereditary headship", since elections in the Roman Empire under the republican system had to be approved by the Senate. At the same time, as the army grew stronger, a military intervention became an important force in the succession to the throne, and the army gradually changed from being the emperor's defense force to being the manipulator of imperial power. In the Antonine Dynasty, after the first two explorations of the succession system, the adopted son succession system was more accepted by the dynasty because of its rationality. In general, both the senatorial election system and the adopted son succession system had legal legitimacy and were accepted by the people, while the military intervention was a manifestation of external factors that made the succession system more chaotic due to violent interference. Therefore, in the early history of the Roman Empire, although the succession system was not explicitly provided for, hereditary succession existed, and it is feasible to argue for the adoption of the imperial succession system for the succession of the head of state in ancient Rome.

## **2. SUCCESSION TO THE THRONE IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE**

### **2.1. Adoption and Succession to the Throne in the Early Roman Empire**

During the Roman Republic, the adoption of an adopted son to carry on the family business was not an uncommon event, and adoption even gained judicial sanction. Adoption was the normal way to bring someone into a Roman family, for financial or emotional purposes, or to ensure the continuation of the family line through a male. But as society developed, adoption was more often applied by royalty and nobility who were more interested in maximizing their family's interests. Adoption was often adopted from the range of close relatives, which was in many ways a continuation of the practice during the Roman republic. In this case, adoption played a key role in ensuring the continuity of important families. Adoption in ancient Rome would be based on the closeness of blood Relationships are conducted. The scope of judicially recognized adoption is generally: blood relatives, in-laws, and legal relatives. Inheritance is generally limited to male heirs and is not passed on to females. First of all, if the nobleman who is the adopter does not have a male heir, but has a female heir, he usually adopts the husband of the female heir, i.e., the son-in-law, as the heir and passes the right of inheritance to the adopted son-in-law. In some cases, if the parents have no male heir, they will adopt the son-in-law as the adopted son, and also give the male heir to the grandchildren to inherit. And if there is no suitable next of kin candidate, the nobleman will also choose a suitable male heir from another nobleman of a better family for adoption.

### **2.2. The Mode of Succession During the Roman Empire**

The history of the imperial dynasty from Augustus, the founder of the patriarchate, to Commodus, the last ruler, spanned 219 years. There were 18 imperial rulers in the empire, and the average time between emperors was relatively short. This is due to the intense power struggle and mutual struggle of forces during the succession to the throne. In the early Roman Empire, several dynasties passed the throne in a peaceful manner (27 B.C. to 192 A.D.), namely the Julian Dynasty, Flavian Dynasty, and Antonine Dynasty. Both the Julian and Flavian dynasties were hereditary in their succession to the throne. The difference is that the heirs of the Julian dynasty were limited to the Claudian family, and the heirs were defined by family line, while the Flavian dynasty was defined by the first degree of consanguinity. The Antonine dynasty's adopted son succession system was different from the hereditary system of the first two dynasties, and its selection was not limited to blood, but the personal character and talent of the heir. The special feature of the adopted son succession system is that it gave rise to the reign of the "Five Emperors of the Empire", which was the golden age of the Roman Empire. Compared to other dynasties, where the military interfered with the government and the Praetorian Guard seized power, these three dynasties were representative of the Roman Empire's peaceful succession system, especially the adopted son succession system during the Antonine period, which was a unique political style of the Roman Empire. During the Antonine period, the political rule was stable and the economic, social, and cultural aspects of the empire developed rapidly, and there were fewer tyrannies and turmoil in the entire dynasty compared to other dynasties. The dynasty was known for its "Five Wise Emperors", including Emperor Nerva, who adopted Trajan, Trajan, who adopted Hadrian, Hadrian, who adopted Antoninus Pius, and Antoninus Pius, who adopted Marcus Aurelius. In general, the adoption of sons in the early Roman Empire produced many wise and talented emperors and contributed to the growth of the Roman Empire. The 1st-3rd centuries were dominated by the succession of adopted sons, while the 4th-6th centuries were dominated by the succession of the sons. Both reflect the traditional principle of the death of the father and the succession of the son, but also reflect the characteristics of the imperial autocracy. During this period, the influence of the army and the Senate on the mode of succession to the Throne Both have been gradually weakened, and the

adopted son inheritance system has developed into a lineal inheritance system with parental inheritance as the core and has been gradually weakened, and the adopted son inheritance system exists only as a supplementary way.

### **3. BASIC OVERVIEW OF THE ADOPTIVE SONSHIP SYSTEM**

#### **3.1. Characteristics of the Nature of Adopted Son Succession**

##### **(1) The nature of adopted son inheritance**

The system of adopted son succession was formed primarily by the influence of traditional authority and was a product of a combination with Jurisprudential-type authority. In the early days of the Roman Empire, there was no hereditary claim to imperial authority; the head of state had authority only because of this delegated role, and the loyalty of the citizens was to the system rather than to the head of state personally. However, as the personal selfishness of the Führer grew, he wanted to inherit the Führership through the death of his father and the succession of his son. Since the Führer still had a juridical type of authority, and traditional authority is always subject to precedent, patrilineal succession to the Führer took a relatively covert form, with the Führer naming an adopted or biological son as the heir, but with the heir's authority coming from a grant from the state, ultimately compromising on a system of succession through adoption. During the Byzantine Empire, even though the adopted son succession system still existed, the succession to the throne in the Roman Empire began to change from adopted son succession to blood family succession, which was based on parental succession. The reason for blood family succession was that the Christian style of marriage did not guarantee that the emperor would have his biological son, so blood family succession in the absence of parental succession became a supplementary form of family succession. Adopted son succession was a political system unique to the Roman Empire, a historical product of the Roman Empire under special background conditions, and the Roman Empire in this period solved the problem of alternation of power in the Empire better.

##### **(2) Characteristics of adopted son inheritance**

"No kinship ties adoptee and adopter together; your only connection is shared excellence that makes you worthy to choose or be chosen.....". Adopted son inheritance production to suit the early Roman empire. The system of succession to the throne, which was necessary for the political development of the country and the maintenance of imperial supremacy, was adopted in the early Roman Empire for nearly 250 years. There were 17 emperors in the century, 9 of whom succeeded to the throne through the system of adopted sons, whose characteristics are summarized as follows.

The system is compatible but different from the hereditary and republican systems. The adopted son succession system differed from the hereditary system in that the adopted son succession system also adopted the opinion of the Senate, which not only emphasized the proximity of blood relatives and family rank but also selected talents who were recognized by the Senate to be wise and capable. In this way, the early Roman Empire chose the best and most talented people to be in charge of the state, so that the power of the state would not fall into the hands of mediocre and incompetent people.

The adopted sons were mostly adult males who had distinguished themselves in the political and military spheres. Early Rome The 17 emperors of the empire, except for the individual heads of state Nero, Nerva and Commodus, were all men of outstanding political and military ability.

Most of the adopted sons relied on the support of the Praetorian Guard or the Senate to become emperors. The military politics of the Roman Empire showed that the leader must have a strong background in the military-political sphere, and relying on the Praetorian Guard and

local legions to support or abolish the emperor was able to gain the full support of the Praetorian Guard.

Once you succeed to the throne, it is for life. When an adopted son becomes head of state, he is in office for life.

### **3.2. The Historical Role of the Adopted Son Succession System**

#### **(1) Consolidation of the political rule of the Roman Empire**

First, the adoption of an adopted son as the next new emperor ensured a smooth transfer of the throne, a type of transfer of power. By selecting a leader who met the Senate's expectations, the adoption system also ensured the stability of the regime and put the power of the Roman Empire in the hands of the country's better and more talented people. This played an important role in promoting the stability of the Roman regime, maintaining continuity of policy, and bringing into play a strong political and military advantage.

#### **(2) Facilitating the transition from "headship" to monarchical rule**

The benefits of the transition to autocratic rule were that a group of excellent and talented officials was trained, and the bureaucratic system established from the central to the local level greatly strengthened and developed the Roman Empire, ensured the normal functioning of the state apparatus, and effectively maintained the unity of the early Roman Empire.

#### **(3) The peace and stability of the Roman Empire for nearly a century**

"The successive efforts of the "Five Wise Emperors" enabled the Roman Empire to maintain peace and stability for nearly a century, a period of political clarity, economic development, and social stability, in contrast to the previous bloody rule. This period of peace was even called the "Golden Age" of Rome.

#### **(4) A lesson for the development of future polities**

The "Five Wise Emperors" period was a period of passing on the throne through subjective choice rather than blood succession, and the historical development proved the superiority of this type of succession, which had a significant impact on the development of Western history, including the "Renaissance" and the emergence of the "Enlightenment," and the subsequent development of the political systems of European nations, had a major impact.

## **4. DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION OF THE ADOPTED SON SUCCESSION SYSTEM**

### **4.1. Three Factors Influencing the Succession to the Throne of the Roman Empire**

The succession to the Roman throne was not entirely a product of the feudal dynasty, because the imperial power of the Roman Empire was not which is entirely in the hands of the emperor-father. There is also a distinction between legal theory and practice in the matter of the emperor's power. The emperor's legal authority was based on the tribune's authority and the consular authority, both of which were derived from the imperial heritage. Although scholars differ as to which of these prerogatives is more important, they agree that they are the dual foundation of the state. The question of imperial succession was subject to a tripartite balance of power between the Führer, the Senate, and the military. The Führer, as the supreme head of the state, should have a say in the choice of the successor, and his opinion usually becomes the decisive factor in the choice of the successor. The Senate intervened because the Roman system was a republic and the highest leader was elected, so the Senate had the power to elect the successor to the throne. The intervention of the army in the selection of the successor was with the power of the Roman army, so much so that the general imperial leader was also the leader of the army, and the strength of the army was linked to the power context that controlled the succession of the throne in the Roman Empire. A successor was announced by the Praetorian

Guard at the time of the Senate debate when power was held by military force. The Senate did not exercise the right to choose if it had a choice. A good emperor would be someone who could control the army, and who could also provide cession in a way that would keep the army stable, to prevent the legions from taking the throne as a prize for the victor. An inexperienced young man, acceptable to the Senate, but not to the army.

(1) The personal touch of the Führer

Augustus inaugurated the patriarchal system, a new era in Roman history. Since the time of Augustus, the Führer became the new leader of the Roman Empire. The powers possessed by the Führer were acquired within the framework of the old republican system. In other words, the Senate and the Roman Citizens' Assembly remained the supreme authority of the Roman Empire.

(2) The traditional authority of the Senate

The senators were patriarchs who lived under a republican system and were therefore active in the political arena. After the end of the Flavian dynasty, it was the Senate that elected Nerva as the successor of the Roman Empire in the new dynasty. What the senators wanted was to maintain the privileges of their class and the special social status granted by the state, and to have the Führer respect their decisions.

(3) The impact of strong military strength

After the death of Claudius, Nero went to the barracks before going to the Senate. The power of the sword was the most naked form of power, more important than the approval of the Senate, and the praise of the Legion or the Praetorian Guard became the main factor in the final choice. While the army rebelled against the palace during Nerva's reign because of dissatisfaction with the Führer's rule, Turazin put down the national rebellion with the advantage of his army, and the country was smoother without major disturbances during his reign. Since then, the Hadrian, Antony, and Aurelius all had strong control over the real power of the military as their primary obligation to control the state. Therefore, his adopted sons had to have a strong military capacity, in addition to the administrative capacity to stabilize the general situation and to control the real power of the army.

#### **4.2. Development of the Adopted Son Succession System Through Three Dynasties**

Although the legitimacy of adopted sonship was explored in this period, it was not successful. During the Flavian dynasty (69-96 AD), the status of the adopted son succession was explored again, but without success. The dynasty came to an end with the assassination of the last ruler, who was not convinced by the atrocities he had committed. In the Antonine dynasty, the system of adopted son succession developed steadily again in this period through the first two practical explorations.

(1) The system of adopted son succession during the Juria and Flavian dynasties

In the system of adopted son succession under the Julian dynasty, the scope of adopted sons at this time was still limited to the family - with a certain degree of blood relationship. Augustus made great efforts to control the succession after his death, and Tiberius was Augustus' choice at the time of his death and was therefore accepted as his successor. Flavian dynasty adopted son succession. After the overthrow of the Flavian dynasty, the Senate elected Nerva as the new dynasty emperor. Before his death, Nerva adopted Turazin as his stepson. The choice of Turazen as the next successor to the throne was not due to blood relatives, but because of Turazen's ability to lead. This time, the selection of the adopted son broke the original principle of adoption by blood and shifted to the system of succession adoption based on ability. Later, Tulajin chose Hadrian as the next heir to the throne.

(2) Antonine dynasty adopted son succession



If the succession of adopted sons was a mainstream form of succession during the Julian dynasty, it developed over time and even became an "institution" during the Antonine dynasty - the previous head of state chose a wise and talented (military) stepson as the next heir in his old age. The previous head of state chose a capable (military) stepson as the next heir to the throne, and this lasted for the entire Antonine dynasty. However, the adoption of sons during the Antonine dynasty was not limited to the selection of adopted sons from within the family, the requirement of blood ties to the stepchildren was reduced, and the requirement of military ability was strict. So strictly speaking, it was beyond the scope of hereditary succession to the throne. Since all five emperors under Antony were relatively talented and solid in power. It was during the Antonine period that the Roman Empire was expanded to the largest extent, the regime developed to its peak, and the social economy and culture also flourished.

## 5. SUMMARY

Western scholars are positive about the Roman Empire's adoption of adopted sons or stepchildren to succeed to the throne. Compared with other countries' succession to the throne, this method not only objectively solved the problem of succession to the throne but also ensured the stability of the regime by selecting more excellent and talented successors for the state. Because the adopted son or stepchild has the basic requirement of choosing a "virtuous successor", that is, the successor should have some special skills or talents - especially military talents. Compared to the privatization of royal power and the hereditary system of the throne, the selection of the heir was broader and the requirements for the heir's character and talent were higher. From the family selection of the heir to the throne in the early stage to the denial of the "family hereditary throne" in the later stage, the adoption of a virtuous and talented adopted son was the focus, which highlighted the importance of the "virtue" of the heir to the throne, which undoubtedly made the rule of the Roman Empire more durable and stable. Therefore, it is said that the succession system of adopted sons in Rome was progressive. The balance of power among the heirs to the throne was dominated by the "traditional juridical authority of the patriarchs", the "selection of virtues as the heirs to the throne in the later years", and the "control of the army as the basic requirement for the heirs to the throne". This reflects the flexibility and versatility of the succession to the throne of the Roman Empire. Although the succession of adopted sons in the Roman Empire continued to develop and reached its peak only during the Antonine Dynasty, it was a significant part of the history of Roman succession.

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