The emperor Trajan (pronounced TRAY-jin) was born in 53 C.E. in the Roman province of Spain. Trajan began his career with a series of military and political posts and did very well in each of them. When the Roman emperor Nerva came to the throne in 96 C.E., he appointed Trajan the governor of the province of upper Germany. The following year, Nerva—who needed support to help him rule because of his old age—adopted Trajan as his successor and began to share power with him. Nerva died in 98 C.E., and Trajan became emperor. Trajan’s modest personality, firm decisionmaking, and concern for the people made him one of the Roman Empire’s most respected emperors.

From the beginning of his reign, Trajan tried to make life better for ordinary citizens. He reduced taxes, increased the free distribution of food, and took steps to maintain a constant supply of grain. One of Trajan’s finest acts was the creation of special funds, or subsidies, for the poor, especially poor children.

Trajan also undertook a major building program in Rome to improve the quality of life. The emperor restored much of Italy’s road system. He had bridges built to carry the roads across rivers and streams. In addition, Trajan supervised the construction of several impressive structures. These structures included a great water channel, or aqueduct, and a meeting place, or forum, in which a unique five-level building of shops and offices called Trajan’s Market was built.

Although Trajan’s actions improved the lives of many Romans, he also encouraged bloodsport events that placed little value on human life. For years, Romans enjoyed sporting events in which two combatants, or gladiators, fought to the death with swords and other weapons. Under Trajan’s rule these events reached new heights. Sometimes as many as 10,000 gladiators fought each other as part of a festival honoring the emperor. During Trajan’s rule, Romans also delighted in watching the dangerous sport of chariot racing. The races often resulted in one or more drivers being dragged to their deaths, or one out-of-control chariot causing a spectacular chain-reaction crash with several others.

Trajan was very efficient at administering the provinces of the empire. He appointed honest and reliable governors who treated the people well. He sent capable administrators to solve the problems of provinces that were suffering financial difficulties. In addition, Trajan established military colonies in the northern areas of Germania and Moesia (pronounced MEE-shee-ah), areas that he felt needed to be “Romanized”—made to adopt Roman ideas and the Roman way of life.
Trajan waged three successful military campaigns that enlarged the empire during his rule. He fought the first two against Dacia (pronounced DAH-see-ah), a powerful kingdom near modern-day Romania. The two Dacian Wars took place from 101 to 105 C.E. By the end of the four years, Rome had put down all Dacian resistance, and Trajan had taken the Dacian kingdom as another province for the Roman Empire. Trajan also expanded the empire’s eastern frontier by defeating the Parthians (pronounced PAR-thee-ans), rulers of an empire that stretched from Syria to India. Victory over the Parthians extended the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire to Mesopotamia.

Trajan had much less success on the eastern frontier in one critical area: preventing serious unrest among the Jewish population. In 115 C.E. a revolt led by Jews in Cyrenaica (pronounced SIR-uh-NAY-kuh), a part of modern-day Libya, spread to the island of Cyprus and to Egypt. The uprising began as a religious revolt against the neighboring Greeks and their Gods. However, it soon grew into a direct challenge to Roman authority in the region. Trajan—who was in failing health and preoccupied by trouble elsewhere—was slow to put down the revolt. Before it was finally suppressed, more than 200,000 non-Jews were killed.

By 117 C.E. Trajan had spent more than three years on military campaigns in the east. When trouble developed on the northern frontier, he decided to return to Rome to take charge. The emperor was already suffering from a circulatory problem when he had a stroke and died in Cilicia (pronounced sih-LIK-ee-ah) in modern-day Turkey. Trajan’s death—and the role his wife played in naming his successor—remain mysterious. Some accounts claim that Trajan actually named his successor, Hadrian, although he waited until he was on his deathbed to do so. Other versions claim that the empress Plotina (pronounced plah-TEE-nah) concealed the emperor’s death for several days. She did so to secure Hadrian’s succession by writing the Senate and claiming it was Trajan’s dying wish to name Hadrian. Whichever version is true, Trajan’s body was returned to Rome for burial and honors befitting a worthy emperor.