The emperor Hadrian (HAY-dree-in) was born in 76 C.E. in Rome. His father was a cousin of the emperor Trajan (pronounced TRAY-jin), and as Trajan’s career advanced over the years, so did Hadrian's. During Trajan’s 19-year reign, Hadrian served in several important military and political posts, and maintained close ties to the power of the throne. Nevertheless, there is some debate as to whether the dying Trajan actually named Hadrian as his successor. Still, with the help and support of the Empress Plotina (pronounced PLAH-tin-a), Hadrian became emperor upon Trajan’s death.

Hadrian’s personality was complex. He was a man of culture and the arts who avoided war whenever possible. He was also a practical ruler who used his energies to make improvements in the administration and government of the empire. Yet, Hadrian was also a willful and jealous person who could not tolerate open criticism. He could be quite vengeful against anyone he felt was critical of his decisions or opinions. Still, most historians consider him a very capable ruler, and one of the most intelligent emperors in the history of the Roman Empire.

Hadrian had a passion for Greek philosophy and learning, and as emperor he encouraged the spread of Greek culture throughout the empire. He surrounded himself with Greek scholars and writers, and encouraged Roman artists and writers to adopt Greek influences. He also instituted a Greek curriculum in Roman schools. Hadrian loved Athens, and made three separate visits there. He helped rebuild that declining city by completing a temple to Zeus and adding other new buildings.

As emperor, Hadrian helped reform the Roman legal system. He appointed judges to help him administer justice and write legislation. Experienced legal experts were instructed to put all of the principles and procedures of Roman civil law into one document, or edict. Hadrian also brought relief to the justice system outside of Rome. Until this time, Roman courts heard cases from all over the Italian peninsula. The legal process was slow and inefficient. The emperor divided the Italian peninsula into four districts, and appointed a judge for each. Legal matters in each region could thus be settled more quickly.

Hadrian also managed the provinces of the empire more directly. By traveling more widely throughout the empire than previous emperors, he was able to listen to the concerns of the inhabitants of each province. He traveled constantly across the width and length of the empire for 12 years—from Gaul (modern-day France) and Britain, to Asia.
and Greece, from Sicily and Africa, to Syria and Egypt. In all these areas Hadrian appointed well-trained officials to carry out his policies.

Unlike the previous emperor, Trajan, Hadrian had no real interest in military conquests. Instead, he concentrated on strengthening the empire’s borders with physical defenses. He constructed barriers, forts, and castles along many of the frontiers. The most famous barrier—an 80-mile-long stone structure called Hadrian’s Wall, which is still largely visible today—was built in Britain as a defense against invasion by northern tribes. The wall was built mostly of stone, 8 feet thick and 20 feet high, with some portions built of turf 20 feet thick and 13 feet high. In addition, forts and watchtowers were built into it, from which troops could guard the frontier and fight off enemy attacks.

Hadrian was successful in keeping peace in every province of the empire except Judea (pronounced joo-DAY-ah). There, a serious Jewish rebellion broke out in 132 C.E.—a rebellion Hadrian himself caused. The emperor decided to build a new Greco-Roman city on the site of Jerusalem. A previous Jewish revolt had destroyed the city more than 50 years earlier, and it was never fully rebuilt. Hadrian’s plan was to build a temple to the Roman God Jupiter on the same location of the old Temple of Solomon, a sacred Jewish site. Angry Jews rose up in revolt and captured the city. The rebellion lasted more than two years. Hadrian was finally able to restore peace, but not before more than 500,000 Jews died fighting the Romans.

Hadrian and his wife Sabina did not have children. By the time he was 60 years old, Hadrian was in poor health, and he became concerned about appointing an heir. The man Hadrian adopted as his heir—a consul named Lucius Ceionius Commodus (pronounced LOO-shuss say-oh-nee-us koh-MOH-duuss)—was a very able candidate. However, he was an unpopular choice with many people close to the throne, especially some of the emperor’s family. Hadrian believed that these people might try to prevent Commodus from becoming the new emperor. Hadrian forced his brother-in-law—90-year-old Julius Servianius (pronounced ser-vee-AN-ee-uss)—to commit suicide. Then he ordered the execution of Servianius’s son, whom he believed was part of a plan to seize the throne.

As it turned out, Hadrian’s chosen successor was in worse health than the emperor. He died before he could assume the throne. As Hadrian searched for a new heir, his health continued to worsen. He spent his final days in great pain, and he even begged his attendants to end his life. Finally, in desperation, the emperor adopted a man named Antonius Pius (pronounced an-TOH-nee-us PY-us) as his successor. Hadrian then left Rome for a vacation resort near the Bay of Naples. He died there in July of 138 C.E. The Roman people did not greatly mourn Hadrian’s death. They viewed his methods of ensuring his successor as unjust, and he was very unpopular when he died.