

The Roman Millennium

Written by Frank L. Holt

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The earnest crowds that gathered across Christian Europe 1000 years ago for "Y1K" were not the first to mark such an occasion; nor were we the second to do so on January 1, 2000. The original millennial celebration in western calendrical history reverberated across the Roman Empire in "Anno ML AUC"—otherwise known as the year AD 248, according to the later Gregorian calendar, which calculated from the birth of Jesus rather than the founding of Rome.

Like "Y2K" today, the Roman millennium celebration in 248 was extensive and bureaucratic, laden with official messages of inspiration and private hopes for human progress, but it took place in a world that, to its inhabitants, was far more insecure than ours, and it was masterminded by an emperor of unlikely heritage.

Marcus Julius Philippus, who was known as "Philip the Arab," hailed from Arabia Trachonitis, now part of Syria. This, and the fact of his humble birth, brought him scorn from Roman aristocrats who believed, however illogically, that such provinces were inhabited solely by bandits.

In fact, we know that Philip and his brother, Caius Julius Priscus, were sons of one Julius Marinus, and they were born in Shahba, a town that still exists today 100 kilometers (62 mi) east of the Sea of Galilee, and which, after Philip's accession, was renamed Philippopolis. Philip was born about 204, in the years of the Severan emperors, and both boys witnessed the growing autocracy and militarism of the Roman Empire as its rulers struggled to meet new dangers. To the north, Germanic tribes challenged Rome's once-legendary legions all along the Rhine and Danube frontiers. In the east, the aggressive Sassanid Persians, led by the remarkably able Ardashir, threatened to overrun several provinces. These crises were severe and persistent enough to cause major disruptions in trade, force higher taxes and spur the gradual debasement of the imperial currency. Moreover, the frontier wars began to expose Roman soldiers to new diseases that later spread to civilians. It was an age increasingly fraught with battle, pestilence and economic decline. The resulting instability, however, opened cracks in the political establishment that allowed for the rise of young provincials such as Philip and Priscus.

Then, politics was a game played more brutally than now, and in the early third century, the leading cause of death among Roman emperors was assassination. Every failure of leadership, real or imagined, brought swift retribution: Between April and July 238, five ill-starred emperors died violently in what some interpreted as the final death-throes of the Roman Empire. Citizens lost all confidence in their leaders and became desperate, and in the military each legion was like a law unto itself. Yet the troops united later that year sufficiently to hail as Rome's latest ruler a pliant lad of 13 years named Gordian III. (Gordian I and Gordian II had already been killed.)

In 243, Gordian's father-in-law Timesitheus, who was both his most faithful supporter and his Praetorian Prefect, or commander of the imperial guard, died under mysterious circumstances. It was immediately rumored that Timesitheus's successor in that post—"Philip the Arab"—had poisoned him, although he may well have died of intestinal disorders brought on by poor hygiene. Thus did Philip emerge from relative obscurity at a critical moment in Roman history. The anonymous, occasionally chauvinistic, *Historia Augusta*, a collection of biographies of the later emperors, notes that "*Philippus Arabs, humili genere natus sed superbus,*" ("Philip the Arab, arrogant in spite of his humble birth,") dared next to replace the emperor himself by contriving local shortages of food and supplies that served to undermine the army's confidence in young Gordian. Soon, nervous legions were demanding that Gordian share his crown as co-ruler with the mature Philip. But Gordian, who regarded himself as "noble-blooded," could not endure this, and so he attempted to sway the legionnaires with a direct appeal.

Gordian's oration on this occasion ranks among the great failures in the history of rhetoric. First, Gordian accused Philip of not keeping his proper place in Roman society, and he demanded that the army choose between the two. The troops voted for Philip. Gordian immediately back-pedaled, and stated that he would, after all, accept a co-regency with Philip. But, responded the army, this was no longer possible in light of the ballot he himself had just demanded. Gordian lowered the bar again: He would serve as Philip's "Caesar"—his deputy and heir. Again, the legions declined. Gordian then requested that he switch positions with Philip and become Praetorian Prefect in Philip's place. Again, the legions declined. Gordian then asked simply to serve as a general, and finally merely to be allowed to live. He was executed nonetheless, ending a reign of only six years, and in March 244, "Philip the Arab" acceded to sole power over the Roman world.

While this appears to be the most plausible account—others record Gordian succumbing to disease or falling in battle against the Persians—Rome needed an emperor with knowledge of eastern languages, geography and peoples. Philip's background, though scorned by Roman blue-bloods, was one of the reasons he inspired confidence among soldiers who were locked in a discouraging, seemingly endless, struggle with the Sassanids. Ardashir's successor, Shapur I, had launched his 30-year reign in 240 by defeating Gordian at Misiche, in Mesopotamia. (He would eventually hand Rome its ultimate humiliation in 260 by capturing a Roman emperor named Valerian and using him as a footstool. The complete disappearance of an emperor into the disgrace of foreign captivity left no doubt among Romans of the immediacy of the Sassanid threat.)

Philip, however, staved off that fate for a generation by negotiating a monetary settlement with the Persians shortly after his accession. His critics condemned the deal, but even now many scholars consider the 10,000 pounds of gold paid to Shapur to have been a statesman-like bargain for peace under the conditions of the time. That done, Philip wisely hurried west to Rome, where he dutifully honored the memory of Gordian and quickly humored the wary senate. He soon waged successful campaigns along the Danube frontier. He secured imperial titles for his wife, Otacilia Severa, and his son, Philip II, thus laying the foundation for a new dynasty and giving the Roman people the hope of future stability. But most popular of all was Philip's decision to hold a lavish millennial celebration in order to kindle hope in an anxious age.

Although Philip reigned from 244 to 249 according to the Christian system developed several centuries after his death, according to Roman practice he came to power in 997 AUC (*ab urbe condita*, "from the founding of the city"). The starting date in the Roman calendar was the legendary raising of the "eternal city" of Rome, by the hands of the hero Romulus, from the banks of the Tiber River on April 21 in the year that today would be referred to as 753 BC.

Thus, the Roman millennium happened to fall during the reign of Philip, and in a state that zealously observed anniversaries of every kind, from military victories to Nero's first shave, this escaped no one's attention. To mark the occasion, Philip staged *Ludi Saeculares* (Centennial Games) in April, 1001 AUC (AD 248), when Rome had actually completed its first millennium and embarked upon its second. Of all the many series of games that were staged in Rome, these *Ludi* were the greatest. Originally conceived to be held only once a century, they were in fact held to mark great occasions whenever imperial power was able to arrange them on a suitable pretext. (Claudius had sponsored them for Rome's 800th anniversary.) In addition, however, Philip also sponsored some earlier celebrations to hasten the euphoria that many people wanted to feel—and that fueled his popularity.

Much of the Roman hoopla outside the games would appear perfectly in tune with the western world's Y2K celebrations: prayers, hymns, theatrical performances, banquets, contests, and the minting of commemorative coinages. But the *Ludi Saeculares* were different, for, in the Circus Maximus, according to the *Historia Augusta*, there were "exhibited or slain" a rhinoceros, six hippos, 10 each of giraffes, hyenas, tigers and elk; 20 wild asses, 30 leopards, 32 elephants, 40 wild horses, 70 lions and "innumerable" other animals, all in addition to some 2000 gladiators.

Some of the more exotic members of this doomed millennial menagerie can be seen today on Philip's imperial coinage, which was unusually voluminous and diverse. The issues spilled into eager hands from six busy workshops of the Roman mint, and Philip kept track of each operation by a notable innovation: Every workshop had its identifying number (I through VI) stamped on the coins it produced. Never had the world witnessed such a well-coordinated show of pomp, power and monetary patronage.

Many coins declared *SAECLVM NOVVM* ("The New Age") and *MILIARIVM SAECLVM* ("The Millennial Age"). Some mintages projected the hope of better things to come with inspiring slogans: *PAX AETERNA* ("Eternal Peace"); *LIBERALITAS* ("Generosity"); *LAETITIA* ("Joy"); *FECVNDITAS TEMPORVM* ("Prosperity of the Times"); *FELICITAS* ("Success"); *SALVS* ("Health"); *FORTVNA* ("Luck"); *CONCORDIA* ("Harmony"); *PVDICITIA* ("Modesty"); *SECVRITAS ORBIS* ("Security on Earth"); *FIDES* ("Trust"); *PIETAS* ("Piety"), and *AEQVITAS PVBLICA* ("Public Justice"). Viewed together, such optimistic birthday wishes might easily have been splashed across our own billboards and television screens.

In Philip's case, however, these noble sentiments could neither erase the past, repair the present nor guarantee the future. The moment of imperial calm was shattered later that same year with news of fresh frontier misfortunes. Gothic raiders crossed the Danube, and revolts erupted in both Cappadocia (in today's Turkey) and Egypt in protest of everything from taxes to the toleration of Christians. Philip's brother Priscus, prefect (governor) of the east, had to face the growing power of a usurper named Jotapian. In the north, dissident troops hailed as emperor another general, Pacatian. Following Philip, he too tried to cash in on Rome's millennial euphoria, but he was late, and so he issued coins from a site near modern Belgrade, celebrating *ROMAE AETERNAE AN MILL ET PRIMO* ("The Thousand-and-First Anniversary of Eternal Rome"). But both frontier insurrections failed when the legionnaires assassinated their new leaders and looked for another. They chose Trajan Decius, an energetic general, and in 1002 AUC (AD 249), Philip and his loyal forces met him at Verona. There Philip the Arab was killed, and the rest of his family was slain shortly afterward.

Thus, the emperor who so enthusiastically observed Rome's millennium did not benefit from the sentiments of peace and good will that the occasion had inspired. Rather, matters quickly deteriorated once again, and in the years that followed, emperors rose and fell at alarming rates that reflected the vicissitudes of power among Rome's far-flung legions. Enemies watched, and took advantage of the continual crises. The empire struggled for several more centuries, besieged by forces that no emperor could wish away with slogans and celebrations.

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