



The Emperor Commodus: God and Gladiator

John S McHugh

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Commodus is synonymous with debauchery and megalomania, best remembered for fighting as a gladiator. Ridiculed and maligned by historians since his own time, modern popular culture knows him as the patricidal villain in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. Much of his infamy is clearly based on fact, but is this the full story?

John McHugh reviews the ancient evidence to present the first full-length biography of Commodus in English. His twelve-year reign is set in its historical context, showing that the 'kingdom of gold' he supposedly inherited was actually an empire devastated by plague and war. Openly autocratic, Commodus compromised the privileges and vested interests of the senatorial clique, who therefore plotted to murder him. Surviving repeated conspiracies only convinced Commodus that he was under divine protection, increasingly identifying himself as Hercules reincarnate. This and his antics in the arena allowed his senatorial enemies to present Commodus as a mad tyrant to justify his murder, which they finally succeeded in arranging by having him strangled by a wrestler.

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