



In the *Historia Augusta*, we learn some interesting background facts about Septimius Severus, the Roman Emperor from Africa. As it happens, he had several premonitions that one day he might rule Rome.

The *relevant Historia Augusta passage* is presented here, in bullet-point format, for easier reading:

Soon after he had come to Rome he fell in with a stranger who at that very moment was reading the life of the Emperor Hadrian, and he snatched at this incident as an omen of future prosperity.

*He had still another omen of empire: for once, when he was invited to an imperial banquet and came wearing a cloak, when he should have worn his toga, ** he was lent an official toga of the emperor's own. And that same night he dreamed that he tugged at the udders of a wolf, like Remus and Romulus.*

He sat down, furthermore, in the emperor's chair, which a servant had carelessly left accessible, being quite unaware that this was not allowed.

And once, while he was sleeping in a tavern, a snake coiled about his head, and when his friends awoke from their sleep and shouted at it, it departed without doing him any harm.

During the last three years of his life, Severus lived in the town of York (in the Roman province of Britannia). The town, then called Eboracum, served as a good base for an Emperor to push back Caledonians (from Scotland) who were attacking Rome's interests in northern Britannia. As a result, York (during those years) became one of the most important cities in the world.

After serving nearly eighteen years as Rome's emperor, Severus died (in Britannia, today's England) during 211 AD. His body was burned on a pyre, in York.

What about the Emperor's African roots? We learn more about that topic from the British Museum:

Septimius Severus was the first Roman Emperor born in Africa. He ruled between AD 193 and 211. Although his family was of Phoenician rather than black African descent, ancient literary sources refer to the dark colour of his skin and relate that he kept his African accent into old age.

He was an accomplished general who, having defeated his internal enemies in a series of civil wars, went on to victories at the furthest frontiers of the Empire, from Mesopotamia to Britain, where he died, at York (Eboracum) in AD 211.

He is shown with his characteristic forked beard and tight curled hair, and is wearing military dress. The statue is not carved fully in the round, but is flat and unfinished at the back, suggesting that it was part of an architectural design. It probably stood in a niche which decorated a public building or monument such as a bath building or a fountain-screen. Much of the statue's detail would have been added in paint.

Severus' two sons Caracalla and Geta were instructed by their father on his death-bed to "pay the troops, get on with each other and ignore everyone else." Within a year, however, Caracalla had murdered his brother and reigned alone, with all vestiges of Geta's image and name removed from buildings, official inscriptions and dedications; a process known as "Damnatio Memoriae" [officially "condemning the memory" of a Roman Emperor].

This image, of a wooden tondo, depicts the imperial family and is currently maintained at the Altes Museum (in Berlin). We see Septimius Severus and his wife Julia Domna (who died in 217, six years after her husband), their son Caracalla (who became Rome's Emperor in 211) and their son Geta (whose image was erased after Caracalla had his brother killed).

Click on the image for a better view.

** Hadr. xxii.2.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

What does this contemporary image of Septimius Severus tell you about him?

What would cause Rome's Emperor, and his family, to live in York (a town in today's England)? Why did York become one of the most-important cities in the world during that time frame?

In this image we see the erased face of an Imperial family member. Why would Caracalla officially order the condemnation of his brother's memory? Does "out of sight" always translate into "out of mind?"

Do citizens actually stop thinking about events (or a murder victim) just because a government officially condemns the memory? What power does one individual, even a high-ranking government official, have over the memory of another person?

Credits:

Photo of the "Berlin Tondo" by Jona Lendering, online [via Livius.org](http://www.livius.org).

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Septimius-Severus-Rome-s-African-Emperor)

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Media Stream



Septimius Severus - Rome's African Emperor

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