

Were the Roman emperors bulimic?

In the politically stable and very prosperous early years of the Roman Empire it was common practice to enjoy food to excess. Huge banquets, with large quantities of exotic foods gathered from distant parts of the empire, were served as symbols of wealth and power to a pampered elite. At the time, some of the most famous physicians of antiquity including Hippocrates, recommended the use of emetics as an intermittent cleansing measure, and these agents were often used to induce vomiting after excessive eating so that guests could return to the banquet table.

According to the historian Petronius, the Roman emperor Claudius “left the dining room bloated and sodden, then when asleep, had his servants insert a feather into his throat to induce vomiting to relieve his stomach.” Emperor Vitellius was a huge man, given to disgusting gluttony and frequent binge eating as well as habitual vomiting through expensive banquets with combination of rare foods such as peacock brains and flamingo tongues. He had such a ravenous appetite that, according to Suetonius’ *The Lives of the Caesars*, he also “snatched the sacrificial cakes from the church altar or ate the previous day’s half-eaten scraps.” Both men drank to excess, though neither seems to have had one of the essential components of bulimia nervosa- a morbid fear of fatness. There was even a special room-the vomitorium- where people could swallow their emetics so that the sound and smell of vomiting would not interfere with the sensual pleasures of the other guests.