MARCUS AURELIUS - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

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Angie Hobbs
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And

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Transcript:

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello, Marcus Aurelius 121 to 180 AD is known as the last of the five good emperors of Rome and is a model of the the philosopher king. He was a stoic and while on military campaigns, he compiled ideas on how best to live his life and how best to rule. These became known as his meditations. They've been treasured ever since as an insight into the mind of a Roman emperor and an example of how to avoid the corruption of power in turbulent times. With me from their homes to discuss Marcus Aurelius are Simon Goldhill, Professor of Greek Literature and Culture and Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, Angie Hobbs Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield, and Catharine Edwards Professor of Classics and Ancient History at Birkbeck, University of London. Catherine

Edwards, what was it about the Roman Empire in the second century that made it seem stable?

[Catharine Edwards] Well, I think in some ways it's a piece of good fortune that there had been a succession of emperors who were all relatively sensible and conscientious and all of whom who had had relatively long reigns. So the Emperor Trajan reigned for around 20 years, was followed by Hadrian for another 20 odd years, then Antoninus Pius who reigned for another 20 odd years to 161, and then he was succeeded by Marcus Aurelius. So ... that makes an enormous difference, really. There's very little sort of disruption in terms of the transmission of power.

[Melvyn Bragg] Why were they called good emperors by Machiavelli? He added Marcus Aurelius to that list. How did he define that?

[Catharine Edwards] Well, I suppose that they managed not to be too much despised and resented by their subjects. And perhaps particularly influential, there would be those subjects who were recording history, someone like the historian Cassius Dio, who's writing a history in the early third century. And he looks back on these emperors and is largely admiring of them. And of course, there's also the very sharp contrast between their rules and particularly the rule of Marcus's son Commodus, which was a very unhappy state of affairs. He was eventually assassinated.

[Melvyn Bragg] They ruled for a long time. What else made it seem stable?

[Catharine Edwards] On the whole, these are all rulers who devote a lot of attention to communicating with provincial governors, to paying attention to the legions, to managing the population of the city of Rome. All these different requirements on an emperor's time are ones that they are largely attentive to, although with some variation. So at the same time we could see this stability as perhaps, to a degree, illusory. There are all kinds of threatening things, kind of on the edges of the empire, with the Germanic tribes in the north already creating difficulties earlier and difficulties on the eastern frontier as well.

[Melvyn Bragg] How did Marcus Aurelius come to power?

[Catharine Edwards] Well, Marcus Aurelius was really picked out from a very young age as a potential Emperor. His father, Annius Verus [III], was a distinguished Roman senator, but it's particularly his grandfather - his father died when he was quite young - but his grandfather, Annius Verus [II], was clearly a very sort-of big cheese. Marcus had family connections to the Emperor Hadrian. His aunt was married to the Emperor Hadrian, and then he also had a family connection to Hadrian's heir, Antoninus Pius. And when Hadrian's initial plan for his succession, because he didn't have any children of his own, but he had a plan for his succession that didn't work out. But then he adopted Antoninus Pius, and at the same time, he got Antoninus Pius to adopt Marcus and another young man, Lucius Verus. He then has sort-of over 20 years of being kind-of in training to take over as Emperor.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Simon. Simon Goldhill, how Greek was Rome at this point? You can quote Horace if you want.

[4:19]
[Simon Goldhill] I will quote Horace. Yes. It's fascinating that in this day of fascination with postcolonialism and with decolonising the curriculum, that the mother of all empires, the Roman Empire, was actually overwhelmed by the culture of one of the countries that it itself conquered. And as you said, Horace said that captured Greece, managed to capture its fierce conqueror. And it's the case that if you look at Roman architecture, it's borrowed from Greek. Greek art is the basis of Roman art. There would be no literature in Rome without Greek literature. Education - the education system started with Homer, with Greek texts. And perhaps most importantly of all, the Roman elite spoke Greek as a normal part of their language. And of course, maybe the soldiers on the street didn't, but the elite did. To the extent that we're very used to hearing about... from Shakespeare, that when Caesar was being assassinated, he said, "Et tu Brute?". But actually what he said was “Kaì sý, téknon?” in Greek - he said "And you child?". So at the moment at which he's actually being killed, you might think he could go to his mother tongue, but for him, the mother tongue is Greek, and that's the emperors Caesar.

[Melvyn Bragg] What effect did this have on the politics as pertaining to Marcos Aurelius?

[Simon Goldhill] Well, I think it's more of a cultural politics. It's a fascinating time for thinking about how the cultural politics of the period worked. They tended to build cities of a particular sort, and there was a lot of benevolent patronage of towns from the very wealthy, and the literature and the culture of the period took over in that way. Greeks became senators and Greeks could even become consuls. So there was a huge overlap between these areas. Of course, some Romans were always a bit worried about the Greeks of being a bit too effeminate with their arts and their philosophy. But when we see Marcus Aurelius writing something like the Meditations, he writes, of course, in Greek.

[Melvyn Bragg] Was this the real Greece or was this an idealized or heavily appropriated version?

[Simon Goldhill] Well, for both the Greeks and the Romans of the second century, there was a fantastic projection of what we ourselves are interested in as the classical city, the city of Athens in the fifth and the fourth century [BCE]. So, quite remarkably, most of the people who wrote grown up Greek, that is to say, the elites, the doctors, the philosophers, wrote Greek of a sort that was being spoken and written by Plato some 600 years earlier. So little like us sitting around talking Chaucer to each other on the grounds that we're really English. So it's quite remarkable that there is this sort of fantasized version. People... If you read Greek novels of the period, and there are some great Greek novels of the period, they write as if Rome didn't exist and they're as if they were living in a world of the fifth century BCE. So there was a deed... a fantastic sense of an ideal Greece which people were trying to live up to.

[Melvyn Bragg] Angie, Angie Hobbs, stoicism is going to be part of this discussion. It was very much part of Marcus Aurelius' life. What were the main aspects of Stoicism relevant to him?

[Angie Hobbs] Yes, so we live in a materialist cosmos interpenetrated by divine, rational fire, which has arranged everything for the best, and our individual human reason is a spark of this divine reason and our task is to understand how everything has in fact been arranged for the best and accept that something which appears terrible to us now is in fact part of this greater providential plan. And as rational beings, we are connected to all other rational beings in the "cosmopolis" - the world city. So, for Marcus, there's always going to be this tension between his allegiance to the city of Rome and to the cosmopolis, the ctoic world city.

[Melvyn Bragg] What particularly drew Marcus Aurelius to it? I mean, that's a very good wide shot, but what particularly drew him to it? Why did he go for it and stick with it so tenaciously and profitably for the rest of his life?

[8:35]
[Angie Hobbs] Well, because if we understand and follow the tenets that we've looked at, then that is what it means to live in accordance with nature, and our virtue and happiness lie in this. And virtue is the only thing good in itself for the Stoics. Everything else, which people call good, such as wealth or status or even health, are usually to be preferred, in stoic terminology, but they're not actually good. So this means, and this is what I think is crucial for Marcus, this means that our virtue and happiness are up to us and are not dependent on external factors outside our control. So Catharine's been talking about all the problems he has with the Germanic tribes and Britain and the eastern edges of the empire. There's a plague as well. He's got all these problems, but what can he control? He can control his inner rational virtue and happiness. So the past is gone, the future is yet to come. All we can do is live in the present moment and accept it and enjoy it. So don't waste time regretting the past or fearing the future. Stoicism is a therapy of the soul, and it's that notion of therapy, of a guide through life as philosophy, as medicine, that's I think what attracts Marcus most of all.

[Melvyn Bragg] One of the things that attracts him most you're correct me if I'm wrong, is the insistence on and the attraction to him of self control.

[Angie Hobbs] Yes, I think that's a really good point. Because although stoicism was intended by its Greek founding fathers as a philosophy for all times, both peaceful and turbulent, it was developed in Greece in the late fourth and third century species by Zeno of Citium and Chrysippus and others during a period of enormous upheaval after the Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great had swept away the old political structure of independent city states. So many people were feeling powerless over external events and feeling that they could only exert control over their inner selves, over their thoughts and how they responded to events, over their inner rational virtue. Now, you might think, well, goodness me, Marcus is the most powerful person in the Roman Empire. Why is he feeling out of control? Well, he often does. It's very clear from the intimacy of his Meditations that he often feels that external events... his job is to accept them, to embrace them too, and all he can do is to respond to them virtuously.

[Melvyn Bragg] Would it be true, or would it be accurate to say that although he's emperor, this massive empire and lives in enormous buildings and has all the money in the world ... let's leave it at that ... he still insists on leading a simple a life as possible? He sleeps on the floor until he's told that it doesn't do if an emperor sleeps on the floor.

He is revolted by ... sexual congress, let's call it ... and anything to do anything to do with the body, dirt, sweat ... that sort of thing. He seems determined to sort-of ... what we might call ... sort-of normalize himself and get rid of the imperial carapace. Does that make any sense?

[Angie Hobbs] I think it makes complete sense, because in some ways, Marcus is not a typical stoic. But what you've picked out is this sort of almost revulsion ... disgust at the the earthly world and particularly at the functions of the body and bodily fluids. And he almost sort-of veers towards the Platonic two-world view at times, though, as a good Stoic, unlike Plato, he always thinks that the divine world is still material, it's made of matter. But he seems to think there is still a separation between our earthly bodily sort of confinement, and often it disgusts him. And he does go for the sort of simple purity and that's what is attracting him. And as you say, he loathes court life a lot of the time. He dislikes the flatterers and the hypocrisies of it. There's a very famous quote in VI-30 [Chapter 6 Verse 30] when he reprimands himself and says, be careful, don't become Caesarified, don't become like Caesar. Don't be dipped in the purple dye - purple being, of course, the color not just of emperors but also of tyrants. So he finds that world morally disgusting, but he's also honest enough to accept that it might have some seductions for him and he's got to guard against it.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you, Catharine, Catharine Edwards, in Marcus Aurelias we have an opportunity to examine the making of an emperor's mind. Can you tell us about his tutor Fronto, and his impact?

[13:39]
[Catharine Edwards] Well, Fronto is appointed to be Marcus's tutor around the time that Antoninus Pius becomes emperor. He's sort-of 18 or 19 at this point. So he comes to work with Fronto initially as a teenager, and we're very fortunate because we do actually have a collection of letters exchanged between Marcus and Fronto written over a roughly 20, more than 20, year period. They only come to an end, it seems, with the death of Fronto in the late 160s. What's frustrating about this collection of letters is that we don't have any dates on them. So people have sort-of tried to guess or what order they they come in. But they're a very sort-of intimate body of correspondence in in many ways. And what's quite interesting is ...

[Melvyn Bragg] What do you mean by intimate?

[Catharine Edwards] Well, Angie's just been talking about and you were talking about the ways in which in the Meditations, Marcus appears to be disgusted by the body and very sort of detached from his physical self as much as he could be. In fact, in the Letters there's an awful lot of kind-of toing and froing about the health of Fronto, indeed, the health of Marcus that seems to be in a very different kind of a register. There's almost a flirtation between them, which is very intriguing. And some scholars have suggested they were lovers, potentially. And even if one doesn't want to go quite that far, I mean, I think we can certainly see here a sort of engagement in the sort of tradition, perhaps within the Platonic school, of kind of the teaching relationship as a sort of almost eroticized relationship.

[Melvyn Bragg] But what did Fronto teach him?

[Catharine Edwards] OK, so Fronto was teaching Marcus oratory. So Fronto was a distinguished orator. He came from North Africa - one of many North Africans in Rome; prominent in Rome. He was regarded as the Rome's best orator since Cicero. And so he was really teaching Marcus how to make speeches, and during this time Marcus was actually called upon to make speeches in the Senate. So this was putting that teaching into practice straight away, but he was also training him in how to write letters, because that's also another really important part of the Emperor's job and writing letters to officials and subjects in distant provinces of the Empire.

[Melvyn Bragg] Angie, do you want to come in?

[Angie Hobbs] Yes, because I wanted to ask Catharine and Simon, because though I knew the Meditations fairly well, I hadn't actually read the correspondence with Fronto before preparing for this program and I was pretty startled reading it for the first time. To my ears, it read as if this was a really intimate and romantic relationship and I thought maybe I've misunderstood. Maybe this is typical of letters of the time between student and master. But as I said, I was quite startled, and particularly as Marcus is already moving away from Fronto's sort-of, rather, contempt for philosophy. Marcus is interested in philosophy from about 11 or 12; he's got stoic mentors from quite early on in his teens. So it's very much not ...It's Fronto's character and personality that's really appealing to him. And as I said, to me, it did read very romantically.

[Simon Goldhill] Yeah. Well, I think it's quite important that the letters survive and they're not going to be deeply embarrassing to the emperor, so they're not suggesting there was some sort of corrupt and dangerous relationship between teacher and pupil. I think it's a heightened emotional sense that gives us some idea of the sensitivity and intimacy that you might expect from a philosopher king.

[Melvyn Bragg] Yes. Right. Simon, while I'm with you... Another influencer was Herodes Atticus....He was another tutor, as I understand, another teacher. What was he and what impacted him?

[17:38]
[Simon Goldhill] He was a very different sort of character. He was Greek rather than Roman. He certainly wasn't from North Africa. He was from Athens. And he went on to be a Roman senator, a consul actually. He was super rich, which always helps.

[Melvyn Bragg] "It also helps" - helps what in this case?

[Simon Goldhill] It helps in having a strong relationship with power. So he was a Greek who came right up to the center of power. He worked under Hadrian; he worked under Antoninus Pius, and then he got to work with the third Emperor as a teacher. Well, a teacher of culture. Hirodes Atticus was a patron of the arts. He, as I said earlier in terms of cultural politics,... built stadiums; he built religious buildings; he built Odeons where you could go and listen to poetry. And he was not a Stoic; he was very much not a Stoic. In fact, he thought Stoics were rather dull. And by getting rid of emotions in the way that Angie was talking about in terms of control and not liking the body, he thought that just made you rather heavy and boring. And I think he'd much rather have a glass of wine and sit around, and he had no problems whatsoever in having sex and he didn't have any problems about his body. So I think he was giving a quite different

version of the world to Marcus Aurelius. And one of the fascinating things is to see how Marcus Aurelius emerges from Fronto on the one side and Herodes Atticus on the other, to become his own man.

[Catharine Edwards?] We should note that Marcus Aurelius and his wife Faustina do have at least 13 children. So he obviously overcame his revulsion to sex fairly often.

[Melvyn Bragg] Not necessarily.... In what ways, Angie? Can we go back to the stoicism of Marcus Aurelius? Were there any ways in which he was not a typical stoic?

[Angie Hobbs] Yes, we've already touched on some of these. We've touched on his sort-of revulsion from the body and bodily functions. And I think that's part of a sort of rather melancholy, almost elegiac worldview that comes through really quite often. In the Meditations, again and again, he writes of humans, including emperors, including the most powerful generals of all time, that we are just insignificant specks in the limitless sweeps of time and space, and when we die, we're all going to sort-of disappear into the great nothingness and we'll all be forgotten very quickly. I mean, he was wrong about that in his case, but there is this rather melancholy...

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, he was right in terms of being a tiny spec like the rest of us...

[Angie Hobbs] Indeed..but he was wrong about being forgotten. So he is struggling quite often to go along with the stoic idea that you should always embrace what happens and be cheerful and be calm and accept everything gladly. I think he's quite often ... of a melancholy disposition, and he has to struggle quite hard to be a good stoic. Another big difference, I think, is that he's much more gentle and more forgiving of moral failings in others than the original founding stoic fathers, who were pretty uncompromising, pretty stern. That said...

[Melvyn Bragg] Can I?...

[Angie Hobbs] Sorry... That said, he's often pretty irritated with those around him, and he has again struggled quite hard to be forgiving. You get the sense that he didn't suffer fools gladly, but he did suffer them stoically.

[Melvyn Bragg] I also get the sense here... Forgive me, Angie... you've been a star contributor to this series for a very long time, but there's a bit of whitewash going on there. I mean, he was a military commander. He went into wars. The big monument to him is ringed by the number of barbarians he slaughtered. Christians were... seemed to be near his philosophy in a way, but they were still criminals when he took power, and he didn't pass a law stopping them being criminals... And so on. He got about the business of being a good old battling, butchering Roman Emperor ... emperor when it was necessary. Is that a bit of a caricature, too?

[Angie Hobbs] He's a complex character. I think that's one of the reasons he fascinates me. And there are always these tensions between his practical daily life as a ruler, as a very active ruler, very hands on, and these sort of quiet retreats in the evening to sort-of write up the Meditations of the day. And in fact, he says in the Meditations that he reprimands himself for wanting to just reflect and study and read all the time. And he says, no, no, no, you can only have short retreats into the the citadel of your mind, and

then you've got to go back to being to being active. And, yes, he was he was pretty tough. I mean, there were two known instances of persecution of the Christians in his reign...

[Melvyn Bragg] Catharine, if we look at other of his actions, can we see signs that Marcus Aurelius was acting ... as a stoic should, or was [he] only acting as a stoic when it suited him? I know this is a bit coarse, but what do you think of that?

[Catharine Edwards] Well, I mean, in some ways, one of the things that we need to recognize about stoicism, and particularly the Roman version of stoicism, is that it's very much about embracing the job that you're given. So Marcus is given the job of being a Roman Emperor, and so performing his job properly is actually being a good stoic. And even though some of it he finds uncongenial, it's a struggle for him, the very struggle is itself... can be embraced with stoicism. Stoics like to struggle. When you struggle, that's when you get to exercise your virtue. So doing things that are not your taste is kind of actually a good thing if you're a stoic in some respect. So doing the job of being a Roman emperor... In some ways we don't really see any very obviously, stoic actions on Marcus' part in terms of the way ... He's praised for the attention that he gives to the law; he makes some minor adjustments to the law; his interpretation of the law tends to favor a slave being given their freedom, all other things being equal; he's conscientious about registering the births of children so that their free status can be more easily proved, if necessary, at a later stage. So there are ways in which he's a ...sort-of very good emperor, but he's exercising those absolutely traditional imperial virtues of clemency, justice and so on. That's exactly the sort of virtue that the Emperor Augustus was praised for exercising.

[Melvyn Bragg] But the fact is, he went to war, slaughtered a lot of people, saw the people slaughtered, saw a law passed that made Christians criminals. One way out for them was to become gladiators so that it's [upped] the stock of gladiators and so on. I just think there's that side of him which has to be faced up to. And maybe I'm missing something, but I don't think...

[Simon Goldhill] I don't think you are. I think you're absolutely spot on on that, because I think the crucial thing is, if we did not have the texts of the meditations, we would simply say, "Here is an extremely strong, powerful ruler of one of the biggest empires the world has ever seen. Who was involved with military activity and during the course of it, some Christians were killed." I don't think he cared a great deal about them, they weren't important enough at that point and he would have gone down as a decent emperor, but the fact is, the Meditations has become one of the best publicity documents for power that's ever been. ...

[Melvyn Bragg] Let's start talking about them ... Simon, can we start talking about the Meditations here? We have quite a bit to say. How would you describe them in outline?

[Simon Goldhill] There's twelve books and each book is taken up with a series of paragraphs, each one of which you could call a saying. And as such it fits very well into two sorts of traditions. One of them is the miscellany tradition. And in this period of culture, people liked to put together anthology as miscellanies, culture got morselized into bits so that you have a nice paragraph and you could learn it and you could bring it out at a dinner party and say something profound in that way. And that was part of the

culture of the Roman Empire at that point. But there was also a stronger tradition, which was the sayings of philosophers, and that circulates in various forms. When somebody was a strong philosopher, his sayings might be put together and that would also help. And of course, some people think that's how Jesus's sayings first circulated. So the one thing it's not is a coherent treatise. So if you were looking for a long philosophical argument...

[Melvyn Bragg] No, but I'm looking for a taste of it, not looking for a long ... Can you give us a few instances?

[Simon Goldhill] So he would say something like ...so I've just got one open here in front of me... and he says "Harmonize yourself to the circumstances which you are allotted, and love the men with whom you share the circumstances and do so truthfully." Now, you could say that's philosophy, or you could say it's a piece of homespun wisdom to help control power. That is, "Don't long to be somewhere where you're not", as Catharine said, "Do your duty, do your job."... That's good stoicism. "Care for the people who you're put in the circumstances with." that's also good advice. "And do so honestly and be an honest person." So you could see it as a bit of moralism. I'm not sure I would say that's a piece of philosophy. I would say it's a piece of good advice that he's writing for himself and for others to think that he thinks ...

[Melvyn Bragg] So do you have any more examples in front of you.

[27:23]
[Angie Hobbs] "Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be, be one." And then, rather sadly, "Just because you have given up all hope of being a thinker and a student of science, you can still be free, modest, sociable and obedient to God." So again, very much trying to sort of urge himself towards stoic acceptance of his role in the universe. So he is a good stoic...

Do you have any to hand, Catherine?

[Catharine Edwards] Marcus talks about sort-of dying ... his thoughts dying the character of his thoughts by repeating things, and in some ways, this practice of writing his own little sayings, but also quotations from Epictitus, quotations from other philosophers. It's all a way of sort-of keeping these thoughts kind-of at the forefront of his mind, keeping himself in the right place, if you like.

[Simon Goldhill] Yeah. I mean, Seneca said you should, at the end of every day ... you should make an account of what you've done and write it down and think about it. And that's a way of becoming a better person. And in some sense, that's what he's setting out to do, to write down his thoughts at the end of each day and to ... help him become a better person. So it's a very... I mean, I can say it's a very common thing until quite recently that people would keep common-place books, they would write down sentences that occurred to them. It's only recently, with Google and the rest, that we've lost that particular habit.

[Angie Hobbs] I think we're being a bit unfair to him as a stoic and in terms of his philosophical knowledge, because I think the Meditations shows really quite a deep engagement with the physical and logical basis of stoic ethics - not an enormous

amount, but it's there. He understands the arguments that fate sort-of gives us the push, but it gives the cylinder the push. But it's because the cylinder is the shape that it is that it ... rolls down the hill. So he's really thinking about the relationship between our individual moral responsibility and what's been predetermined. And also there's a real knowledge of a lot of philosophers. I mean, we've mentioned Plato, and he had some Platonic teachers as well as stoic ones. He knows a lot of Plato. He loves the Theaetetus and the comparison between the philosopher and the man of affairs there. But he also ... he quotes a lot of the presocratics. He quotes Heraclitus; he knows about Empedocles; he knows about Parmenides; he knows about the cynics and the skeptics...The only person he doesn't, as far as I can remember, really discuss is Aristotle, whose works were not well known at this time.

[Melvyn Bragg] We keep describing what it is and not saying what they are. I think it would be terrific for the listeners to have a few more of these Meditations headlines - bullet points from the past.

[30:11]
[Simon Goldhill] I'd be delighted to give you some short ones, because I think Angie is over ... I think Angie is completely overstressed the philosophy [laughter]. Consider this: "Train yourself to train yourself to pay careful attention to what's being said by another and as far as possible, enter into his soul." Well ... be a good listener. I'm not sure that is a philosophical statement so much as a piece of self help. "We need not form any opinion about the thing in question or be harassed in our soul for nature gives the thing itself no power to compel our judgments." Okay, fine. Is that philosophy? I think these are just a lot of what you'll get in there is extremely familiar sentences that you might, as it were, have seen sewn into a sampler onto a Victorian wall. And I think Angie has rather overstressed the philosophy here.

[Catharine Edwards] There certainly are some moments where we get this slightly more paradoxical, kind of more obviously stereotypical [?] statement, so he says, "Where life can be lived, so can a good life." but life can be lived in a palace, therefore a good life can be lived in a palace. That sort of grudging sense that virtue is possible anywhere. You could say, well, even a slave can live a virtuous life - for Marcus, that even an emperor can live a virtuous life; kind-of a recognition of the particular challenges that an emperor faces. That is the sort of sense, as Angie was emphasizing earlier, that for the stoics only virtue is important. And that's what we see a kind of quite specifically stoic edge to his observations, I think.

[Angie Hobbs] No, I shall continue to defend Marcus, really. So I think it's a really good example of Stoic ethics in practice by a man of action. He's not pretending to be an original thinker, but he knows his stoic philosophy and he's really trying to put it into practice.

[Catharine Edwards] He was celebrated by his philosophical interest, even by his contemporaries. So the biography of him - admittedly a rather sort of unreliable work - ... but the biography of him that has survived from antiquity specifically praises his kind-of philosophical calm at the very outset and connects that with his virtuous rule.

[Simon Goldhill] But of course, there's a great deal of pressure being put on this, because everybody wants to appear to be the good philosophical ruler. So it's also

about self presentation and how you want to be remembered and how you want to come across. After all, he didn't just write these down. He wrote them down in such a way they were preserved and passed on. He published them.

[Melvyn Bragg] Simon do we know how they were valued at the time, early in their existence?

[Simon Goldhill] Well, that's a very ...

[Melvyn Bragg] You said they were copied.

[Simon Goldhill] Copied - yes, they were, obviously, ... otherwise we wouldn't have them. And they were preserved by Christians, too, who liked the sound of them. But it's very striking that there are almost no references to this book in his own lifetime or shortly afterwards. It takes quite a long time before they become as popular as they now are. So, in fact, we don't know...

[Melvyn Bragg] How do you think that is?

[Simon Goldhill] It's extremely hard to tell. It could be just by chance. But there are very good reasons why it would have survived and why it might have circulated. After all, it's written by the emperor - the most powerful man in the world. It's a coherent book, as Angie will say [laughter]; it gives us a fascinating insight into his inner life and it lets us see something about power's, ability to control itself - as you said earlier, to self control, and whether education really can temper absolute power. And, of course, we're also talking ... we started by saying it was a period of calm, but it's also a period which has been called an age of anxiety. This is the period in which Christianity is getting going, in which there are a lot of cults going, going. Rabbinical Judaism is getting going. There's lots of people trying to understand how we might live with the world. And Marcus gives another version of that for people to work with....

[Melvyn Bragg] And the Antonine Plague of course...

[Simon Goldhill] ...And how to deal with the Antonine plague, something that has become slightly more pressing now. But there are lots of reasons why people might have wanted to read it. But oddly enough, we don't, I think, have any reference to it until really quite late. Well, can we talk about the quite lateness of it? Catharine, When were the Meditations really picked up by more readers - because they went underground for a while - and what was most valued in them?

[Catharine Edwards] Okay, well, stoicism becomes quite popular in the sort-of early modern period, but that initial interest in stoicism focuses perhaps more on Seneca and Epictetus, and Marcus only really becomes kind of prominent in the mid 17th century. So there's a couple of English translations of Marcus's Meditations in the mid 17th century, and he's quite widely read at that time, particularly favored by royalists in turbulent time, who found comfort in the words of this Roman emperor. In the 18th century, Gibbon *does* single him out as among the more admirable Roman emperors, with perhaps a little bit of a comment about the way in which he liked to think of himself as being virtuous,

[laughter] just to sort of pick up on the kinds of comments that Simon was making earlier. There's another sort of really big Marcus Aurelius moment in the Victorian period where we find John Stuart Mill thinks he's really great, and particularly Matthew Arnold, who writes an essay on Marcus Aurelius in 1863 that really sort of accommodates his kind of genial stoicism to a sort of Judeo-Christristian perspective. So he's sort of made to cohere with Christianity in a way which we might think is slightly curious, given that he's associated with persecutions of the Christians. And obviously there's a lot of effort to kind-of massage that away. But he's seen as being a sort of prototype for the man of action, who is not a sort-of bloodthirsty kind of violent person, but who has these virtues of self control, who exercises power reluctantly, governs his empire, conducts these great military campaigns... And, of course, you know, for for another imperial nation, that's a fantastic model really - sort-of the virtuous exercise of power, just defending the empire's borders, no militarism, no gung-ho campaigns, but a model of kindness and geniality, justice....

[Angie Hobbs] Except ... he was also the favorite book of Cecil Rhodes so a slightly darker side of imperialism there. I mean and you mentioned Matthew Arnold, and of course, his father had been headmaster at Rugby School. So, as you say there's, the kind of muscular Christianity meets stoicism which was kind of the religion of the British public schools, you know, meant to be training officers for the Empire. But there is a darker side to this; it is a popular work amongst imperialists.

[Catharine Edwards] And for sure, I wasn't at all suggesting that this wasn't a dark conjunction. I mean, I think it's precisely because of that sort of imperial mission, the sort of reluctant imperial mission that is detected in Marcus Aurelius that makes it the ideal work for those who want to present virtuous imperialism.

[Angie Hobbs] Yeah.

[Simon Goldhill] And not only that, but of course, because of its form as a sort-of miscellany - that taps right into Victorian literary culture, where sayings from George Elliot, sayings from Shakespeare were big sellers, where you would get books with little individual quotations that you could use. And the great advantage from Marcus, unlike some more severe philosophers, is that you can pick and choose your remarks. And so for the Christian imperialist who wanted to have classical training and classical support for imperialism, Marcus as an emperor became a very useful machine for quotation. And I think that's when he becomes really popular, and I think that's how he's continued today.

[Melvyn Bragg] Is there any other way that it went into our culture? Let's talk about this country for a while. Went into our culture?

[Simon Goldhill] Well, I think, first of all, the idea of the Christian Emperor, the idea that goes all the way back to Constantine, finds a formation in Marcus Aurelius as a stoic. I think both Angie and Catharine said, look, there's a way in which some of this material is close to Christianity, so if we want to imagine what is a good ruler, Marcus Aurelius has been absolutely crucial in the formation of that imaginary. And that continued particularly strongly in the 19th century, when people spent a lot of time trying to imagine what a British Empire would look like and what good rule would look like. And the idea that you could do it through self control and through decency was a very

important part of self justification for the Victorians. But as Angie said, it was self justification for imperialism.

[Catharine Edwards] And of course, that sort of regime of sleeping on the floor and eating very basic meals fits perfectly with the public school ethos as well.

[Angie Hobbs] But also there's been a revival in recent years in stoicism generally, and Marcus Aurelius' meditations has played a huge part in that - and in cognitive behavioral therapy in the mindfulness movement, and I can understand why. So I want to continue defending the Meditations a bit here, because though I personally don't subscribe to the stoic doctrine that everything is ordained for the best and that grief and anger are never appropriate responses, I do think it can still be helpful sometimes to ask whether I can change how I view and respond to something and I certainly think it can be helpful to focus on enjoying the positive - "preferable" in stoic terms"... the preferable things about one's present situation and not spend too much time or energy regretting the past or worrying about the future. And I strongly and probably unfashionably agree with the stoic emphasis, and particularly Marcus's emphasis, on trying to cultivate one's own virtues. There's a current fashion for cynically dismissing all these attempts at virtue cultivation as mere virtue signaling. But I personally find that a really lazy response and I think we could do with a bit more virtue amongst...

[Melvyn Bragg] Well Angie, apart from everything else you're a mind reader. I've got on my sheet of paper here [that there is] very little time left and we haven't talked about the thing that mattered most to him, which was virtue. Yes. Well, what did he mean by virtue and how did he want to see it practiced?

[Angie Hobbs] Virtue is your rational acceptance of your place as ... a rational spark of the cosmic rational order. It's acceptance of that. And more than acceptance, it's embracing it and all that follows from it, which will result in you living in accordance with nature. So virtue is literally living in accordance with nature but to understand what that means...

[Melvyn Bragg] But what sort of nature? The nature of wolves or the nature of...

[Angie Hobbs] No the nature of the cosmos, which is this rational ordered whole permeated by divine rational fire, in which everything has been preordained for the best.

[41:11]
[Simon Goldhill] Self control is absolutely crucial, and control of the emotions and that would be part of the virtue that you didn't allow... Crucially, you don't allow anger to disturb you; you don't allow grief to disturb you; don't allow pleasure to disturb you. But you always aim at the balance, which leads to the control of yourself and to harmony with the universe. The danger with that - where Aristotle would come back and say, a just man has to be angry at injustice.

[Angie Hobbs] I know and I agree with Aristotle over there.

[Simon Goldhill] And I agree with Aristotle - so that's why I'm resisting this.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, thank you all very much. I enjoyed it. I hope everybody else did. Thanks to Angie Hobbs, catherine edwards and Simon Goldhill.

And the In Our Time podcast gets some extra time now with a few minutes of bonus material from Melvin and his guests.

[Melvyn Bragg] ...Let me start where I usually start. What grieves you that we left out?

[42:24]
[Catharine Edwards] I don't want to completely defend Marcus because there are some really chilling bits in the Meditations, and the most chilling chapters to me are where he follows Epictetus in saying that you should not wish for your children to survive. The worst passage for me is when he quotes Epictetus saying every time you kissed your child goodnight, you should remind yourself that tomorrow you may be dead, the child may be dead, and not that you're wishing that that should happen, but that if it does happen, it's all been part of God's plan and thats what grief is for.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, he might have been afflicted by the fact that he had 13 children, most of whom died, so he might have been traumatized many times over. That could be a personal excuse for ...

[Angie Hobbs] I think that is absolutely right. Sorry as I was going to say ...I mean... I think we should see those comments as precisely reflecting the very great difficulty that Marcus is having with coming to terms with the death of his children. That's why he has to keep on saying, you should not be affected by the death of your child, because he very evidently was, and that was an ongoing challenge for him.

[Catharine Edwards] I completely agree with you, but I still dislike the aspect of stoicism, which says that ... which defines anger and grief as passions, which are inappropriate judgments about the world and, you know, affections are fine but the passions are not. I think that grief and anger are sometimes not only appropriate responses, but the only responses.

[Angie Hobbs] Okay, I wanted to talk about the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, which stood on the Capitoline Hill until very recently, from 1538. And it's the one of the very, very few equestrian statues to have survived from antiquity and survived because it was mistaken for the emperor Constantine for many centuries and therefore preserved. But a 12th century visitor to Rome remarks that one of the horse's hooves is actually resting on a trampled barbarian. So although the statue now sort of radiates this incredible stoic calm, we also need to think about what it might have been like, what impression it might have made when it showed the sort of triumphant emperor trampling on his enemies.

[Simon Goldhill] I think what's fascinating is the tension that's appeared. Two tensions, really. One of the tensions is between ... is he a philosopher or is he a self publicist who happens to have some nice things to say? And the second is, for me, the fascinating question about why does he matter if he's a good or a bad philosopher?

And I think there is a really, really long history here of how we think about what is good rule in which he has had a very, very powerful effect. And I don't know whether it's a good effect or a bad effect, but it's certainly been a powerful effect. And it's very interesting that both Julian the Apostate and Constantine who come not long after are emperors who are intent on proving themselves to be philosophers. And that goes off into the early modern period, as Catharine said earlier, and becomes a real issue. What is the training for rule? I mean, in our own country, we don't really believe there's any training for rule, as far as I can see.

[Melvyn Bragg] Yeah, yes

[Simon Goldhill] And it's very interesting that here somebody says, no, there is a training for rule, and it looks like this. And I think that would have been a very good and interesting thing for us to think about.

[Catharine Edwards] Bill Clinton apparently loves the Meditations and had recourse to it quite often. He didn't necessarily always put it in practice and sense of self restraint but..

[Simon Goldhill] I was going to say self restraint being his middle name...

[Catharine Edwards] No, not his middle name...

[Angie Hobbs] I'd like to ask Catherine and Simon what they think about the passage in XI-3, which is the only apparent reference to Christians in the meditations, where he appears to be irritated with them with rushing off to martyrdom when they could have recounted and they could have worshiped the Roman gods and they could have exactly.

[Catharine Edwards] Well, I mean, I think that the point of the contrast that's being drawn in that passage is between a stoic approach to choosing death where you think very carefully before you take your own life. And, of course, that's a very established and particularly stoic practice that's associated with, you know, Cato the Younger at the end of the Roman Republic, associated obviously with Seneca in the time of Nero. So there's that sort of very careful weighing up of the good and the bad in your life. Are you still able to live a virtuous life? Are you suffering so much from pain that actually it's wiser to look for a way out? That's a sort of stoic approach to taking your own life. And the Christians who just sort of throw themselves into it... that's the thing he doesn't he doesn't think is right because they're not thinking about it for themselves. They're like sheep, just kind of, you know, following on from one another...

[Simon Goldhill] Well, that's quite interesting. But if you actually look at them but if you look at the martyr texts, he's actually right that there are very few people who actually have a rational procedure to say, I'm going to do this because ... the early martyr texts in particular are full of people just saying, I must die as a martyr. And there's no argument whatsoever. So in that sense he has a good case. But we shouldn't forget that this is still the second century and it's unclear to me how much Christianity mattered to the Roman Empire.

[Angie Hobbs] No, I think probably not very much at all. I agree with that, but it's just this particular phrase, like the Christians. Do you think Marcus actually wrote that, or do you think it's been inserted later? Because to me, the grammar of that chapter doesn't quite seem to fit.

[Simon Goldhill] I think it's not there. It's the last word of the paragraph.

[Angie Hobbs] Yes. And the whole issue with the Christians in the arena in Leon seems to be sparked by the sort of shortage of gladiators. That's the real problem when you're a Roman emperor. You need to make sure everyone's being properly entertained. Marcus is praised in the ancient biography for putting on games where 100 lions are killed. But the reason there's a shortage of gladiators is often associated with the effects of the Antonine plague and gladiators have to be kind-of co-opted into the Roman army. Apparently that's his main concern, rather than what may or may not happen to the Christians.

[Catharine Edwards] I think one of the most interesting things is precisely these tensions in the Meditations between Marcus wanting to put into practice the stoic philosophy that I think he genuinely believes in - he may be a self publicist too, but I think he genuinely believes in all this - and his doubts. Some evenings he's saying 'I didn't do so well today, I need to do better tomorrow'. And he also has doubts about really core tenets of stoic philosophy. So what we haven't mentioned is how often he sets up an opposition and says, well, is it the stoic way of everything being ordained for the best? Or is it the Epicurian doctrine of random collisions and sort-of dissolutions of atomic structures? And ... he doesn't believe in Epicurianism, but he's prepared to consider it. He admires Epicurus himself. And there are moments when he has doubts about stoicism and there's a passage where he's longing for an afterlife. He doesn't think he's going to have a personal afterlife, but he really rather wishes he would. And to me, we've said that there's no particular structure to the Meditations, but actually I don't ... Even reading it all the way through, as I have done in the last few days, I thought the final books 10, 11, 12. I know, I know that the books are later divisions, but I thought there were more meditations on death and he's really thinking about his own death as imminent approaching. What's it going to be like? Is his soul going to live on? Is it going to just disperse? Is he going to disappear into infinite nothingness? And I find those doubts very attractive.

[Angie Hobbs] We could see that as already characteristic of stoicism. We find Seneca coming up with very similar sorts of reflections... again perhaps seen as a more orthodox stoic, although there are some questions about that too.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can I ask a rather bald question? What did the army think of him? Did they think he was a good general? Was he a good general?

[Angie Hobbs] He seems to have been largely successful as a military commander. I mean, he does go out there and fight with his troops and I think that's seen as absolutely key. And if we look at the relief on the column of Marcus Relius, if we look at the reliefs that seemed to have been on his triumphal arch, and he had two triumphs [triumphal arches]. His first triumph was the first in Rome for 50 years. So in a way he was kind of very much the military man and popular with the legions and very concerned that his legions should be properly looked after so that the reliefs show him

addressing his troops. That's often a key sort of scene really for showing the kind of good relationship between the emperor and his legions and that's very central to his image, I think.

[Simon Goldhill] As you said, he's trampling barbarians underfoot in his public imagery.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, thank you all very much indeed. I hope you enjoyed it and very much thanks a lot for these rather testing circumstances. Thank you...

In our time with Melvin Bragg is produced by Simon Tillotson.