Augustus

Historic World Leaders, 1994
From World History in Context

Born: September 23, 63 BC in Rome, Rome (Ancient state)
Died: August 19, 14 AD in Nola, Rome (Ancient state)

Other Names: Gaius Julius Caesar (Roman emperor); Octavian; Augustus; Augustus Caesar; Octavianus, Gaius Julius Caesar; Octavius Caesar; Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus; Caesar, Augustus (Roman emperor)

Nationality: Roman
Occupation: Emperor

"This ruler, Augustus, who truly deserves the title `Averter of Evil,' is the Caesar who lulled the storms which thundered everywhere, who healed the ills common to the Greeks and barbarians alike." PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA

First and greatest of the Roman emperors, who transformed the Empire into a dictatorship while maintaining the outward trappings of the Republic, thus staving off collapse and guaranteeing its survival for nearly 500 years.

- 63 b.c. Octavian born at Rome
- 45 b.c. Accompanied Julius Caesar on his Spanish campaign
- 44 b.c. Caesar assassinated; Octavian made his heir
- 42 b.c. Octavian became part of the "Second Triumvirate" with Antony and Lepidus; Battle of Philippi
- 35-33 b.c. Campaigns in Dalmatia
- 31-30 b.c. Civil War between Octavian on one side and Antony and Cleopatra on the other
- 27 b.c. Octavian granted the title augustus
- 25-24 b.c. Campaigns in Spain
- 12 b.c. Appointed high priest of the state religion
- c. 6 b.c. Jesus of Nazareth born
- 2 b.c. Declared "Father of the Country"; exile of daughter Julia
- a.d. 4 Adoption of stepson Tiberius as his heir
- 6 Illyrian revolt; Judaeana Revolt
- 9 Battle of the Teutoburg Forest
- 14 Augustus died at Nola

Name variations: Caesar Augustus; Octavian; Caius Julius Caesar Octavianus after his adoption as the son and heir of Julius Caesar. Born Caius (or Gaius) Octavianus (or Octavius) on September 23, 63 b.c.; died on August 19, a.d. 14; son of Gaius Octavius (a native of Velitrae to the north of Rome) and Atia (a niece of Julius Caesar); married: Claudia (stepdaughter of Marc Antony; divorced); married: Scribonia; married: Livia Drusilla (whose son Tiberius by a previous marriage became his heir and successor); children: (second marriage) daughter, Julia.

Cold, calculating, and extraordinarily ambitious, Augustus made himself master of the Roman world. In
his long reign as its first emperor, he transformed the state into a monarchy while maintaining the outward forms of a republic, a brilliant feat of statesmanship that enabled the Roman Empire to survive another five centuries after he came to the throne. His work of consolidation crowned the centuries of territorial expansion that had preceded him and made the Roman Empire a viable, functioning political organism. A patron of the arts, he presided over what has since come to be considered the Golden Age of Roman Civilization.

Of middle height (five-foot-six by report), Augustus was handsome with blondish hair and a strong "Roman" nose but with poor teeth and badly spotted skin. Possessing the dignified bearing so much esteemed among the early Romans, he held the respect and devotion of the Roman people throughout his long reign. Constantly overworking and often seriously ill, he ate sparingly, lived simply and quietly, and devoted himself to the care of his health. A womanizer in his youth, he became less so after his marriage to Livia, a woman of the highest birth. Fond of ball-playing, horseback riding, and gambling, most of his time was devoted to every aspect of statecraft. As a military leader, Augustus has been characterized as a coward, and a psychosomatic cause has been postulated for his frequent illnesses on the eve of battle that prevented him from seeing action.

Born Caius Octavianus (Octavian) in 63 B.C., he was only four when his father died. First raised by his stepfather, L. Marcius Philippus, Octavian was then taken up by his mother's uncle, the famous Roman general, statesman, and dictator Julius Caesar, who used his influence to see his nephew appointed to the college of priests when Octavian was scarcely 17. The following year, Octavian joined Caesar on his Spanish campaign, where he displayed good sense and discretion in handling the tasks assigned him, after which he was sent to Apollonia in Epirus to complete his education. It was there, in 44 B.C., that he learned of Caesar's assassination and that Caesar's will made him son and heir. Returning to Italy, Octavian quickly assumed control of Caesar's private fortune, saw to the probate of his will, and personally attended to the distribution of his various legacies, including the monies left to Caesar's veterans and to the common people of Rome. Taking the advice of Cicero, Octavian took the army that Caesar had raised at his own expense and placed it at the disposal of the senate.

After Caesar's assassination, Marc Antony had been all-powerful in Rome. But the senate feared him, and, realizing that he was in danger, Antony seized public funds and headed to Cisalpine Gaul (northern Italy) with the legions at his disposal. Immediately, the senate declared him a public enemy and--with no one else to turn to--gave Octavian, still a boy, full command of the Roman Army to protect the city.

Leading his troops against Antony, Octavian defeated him at Mutina (present-day Modena) on April 21, 43 B.C., but Antony escaped to the south of Gaul (France), where he took refuge with the local governor, Lepidus, together with whom he raised a new army. Octavian, realizing that an alliance with Antony would be better than a civil war, called upon the senate to reverse its declaration of Antony as public enemy. When the senate refused, Octavian crossed the River Rubicon and marched on the capital. Upon his arrival, the senate gave way to his demands.

The Triumvirate Gains Power

Fearing civil war, the senate enacted legislation granting extraordinary powers to the three new strongmen, Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus, who thereby formed a triumvirate which was legally
empowered to govern the Empire for five years. Immediately, the triumvirs launched a bloodbath to rid
the capital of the "enemies of Rome." Three hundred senators and over 2,000 knights were slain
(among the victims was Cicero, executed on December 7, 43 b.c.). To fight Cassius and Brutus, the
surviving assassins of Julius Caesar, an army was dispatched to Macedonia, where two successful
battles were fought at Philippi. After the first, Cassius committed suicide. After the second, Brutus
followed suit. The murder of Julius Caesar had been avenged.

In October of 40 b.c., weary of civil war and fearing another, the triumvirs divided the Roman world
between them: Octavian received Europe; Antony the East; and Lepidus the African provinces. To
further deter trouble with Antony, Octavian gave his own sister Octavia as Antony's wife. But, although
Antony sired children by her, the marriage remained purely political.

At this time, the admiral Sextus Pompeius was still in command of the seas around Italy. Octavian was
forced to recognize him as ruler of the islands of Sicily, Corsica, and Sardenia, though he was little
better than a pirate and constantly interfered with the shipment of grain to Italy. Hoping to exercise
some influence over Sextus, Octavian then married Scribonia, a divorcée older than himself who was
the sister of Sextus's father-in-law. Scribonia provided Octavian with his only child Julia, after which he
immediately divorced her. Sextus resumed his piracy. To defeat him, Octavian needed ships and thus
entered into an arrangement with Antony, who needed troops for his war on Parthia. Octavian
received 120 ships in return for the loan of four legions.

Wishing to retain power at the end of the designated five years (43-38 b.c.), Octavian arranged to
have the triumvirate renewed for yet another five. During this time, Octavian's fleet, commanded by
Marcus Agrippa, defeated Sextus Pompeius, whose piratical acts came to an end. After this brief war,
some of the soldiers rebelled, demanding special bonuses, but Octavian dealt firmly with them,
thereby asserting the government's control over the armed forces of the Empire. Lepidus by now had
gradually lost his role in this government but would be allowed to remain as Pontifex Maximus (High
Priest) until his death in 13 b.c., at which time the triumvirate would come to an end.

On January 13, 38 b.c., Octavian married Livia Drusilla, taking her from a previous husband by whom
she had had a small son, and by whom she was once again pregnant. The following year, in a
personal affront to Octavian, Antony married his paramour, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt, while still
married to Octavian's sister Octavia. Antony's intention to rule with Cleopatra as joint-sovereigns over
his share of the Empire soon became clear. Octavian and the senate turned against him. And a new
civil war, so long avoided, was now inevitable.

In an attempt to avoid criticism, since much of his power was based on his guarantee that there would
be no such war, Octavian cleverly declared war only on Egypt, whose queen was providing Antony
with her navy and footing most of the bills for their grandiose dreams. This move was doubly clever on
Octavian's part, for there was now an enormous psychological stake at risk for Antony's supporters
who were being required, in effect, to support a foreign country at war with their beloved Rome.
Granted dictatorial powers to deal with the emergency in October 31 b.c., Octavian sped to Greece
with an army and a fleet. On September 2, 30 b.c., Octavian defeated Antony at the Battle of Actium,
after which Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide. Egypt became a Roman province. Octavian
became master of the Roman World.
Octavian Becomes Augustus

Antony's son by his first wife Fulvia and his two sons by Cleopatra were executed (as was Caesarion, Caesar's son by Cleopatra and his only child). Selene, Antony's daughter by Cleopatra, was married off to Octavian's friend King Juba II of Mauritania (Morocco). Fearing assassination if he remained dictator, Octavian renounced his extraordinary powers and proclaimed the restoration of the Republic (28 b.c.). It is doubtful, however, that he really intended to relinquish the total power he held, knowing it was necessary to keep the Empire from dissolving into another civil war that might destroy it completely. A new system had to be developed, and, over the years, step by step, Octavian crafted a dramatically new form of government. At first, he continued to hold the consulship but in 27 b.c. offered to step down, whereupon a grateful senate gave him supreme power for ten years, granted him the unprecedented title *augustus*, and decreed that the month of Sextilius should henceforth be known as "Augustus" (August), as once before it had renamed the previous month "Julius" (July) in honor of Caesar. Basing himself on the proconsular power that allowed him to continue commanding the army, Augustus, as Octavian must now be called, gradually developed what became the office of the Roman emperor, leaving the two consular posts to be held by new, younger men seeking political advancement. In 23 b.c., the senate accorded him the tribunal power for life (even though he had declined the position and the title, which were long associated with the defense of the rights of the common people and were not supposed to be held by a nobleman). In 19 b.c., the senate granted Augustus the consular power, again without the position or title, and seven years later, after the death of Lepidus, appointed him High Priest. Finally, although he refused the position of censor, Augustus acted in that capacity also, conducting a census in 8 b.c. and yet another before he died.

Though the Roman constitution was unwritten, there were certain understandings between the articulate elite of the capital and the Roman government that legitimized political power. Most important of these was the utter rejection by the Romans of the concept of a Roman king. After the overthrow in 510 b.c. of their seventh king, the semi-legendary Tarquin the Proud, the Romans maintained the fiction that the state remained a republic, even though it passed ever more frequently under the domination of individual strongmen. Julius Caesar, for example, had been assassinated by members of the senate devoted to the Republic on the mere suspicion that he wished to set himself up as king. Thus, Augustus's greatest achievement was the way in which he forever altered this constitution, placing the power in the hands of a single man without openly violating the basic understanding that the Romans were a free people, governed by the senate and never again to be subjected to the rule of a king. Not even the most insane of the "mad" emperors (Caligula, Nero, etc.) dared to assume the royal title, for to have done so would have ended the legitimacy of the emperor ipso facto and would have opened the way to his legal overthrow.

The emperor was not an emperor in our sense of the term (i.e., a kind of super king), but rather his position, as formulated by Augustus, embodied the sum of the powers granted to him through the various titles and offices accorded him by the senate. The emperor was--above all else--the commander in chief of the armed forces (which was the ultimate reason why no woman could aspire to the throne). He was also, however, *princeps*, "first citizen or president of the Republic." Again, he was *augustus*, "awesome," a title of religious significance which passed to Augustus's successors and signified their role as his heirs. He was also *Caesar*, the name of the family to which Julius Caesar belonged and so, in time, the heir to the first five emperors, who were all of that illustrious house. The emperor too, was *pater patriae*, "father of the fatherland," and hence the embodiment of the patriotic feelings of Republican Rome. He was *pontifex maximus*, "chief bridge-builder," the title of the High
Priest of the Roman faith and so the supreme head of the state religion. Finally, as divus, "divinity," he was, at least potentially, in the Latin West (and actually so in the Hellenized East), a divinity on earth destined to join the gods upon his earthly demise. In addition to all of this, Augustus adopted the technique, already known in the Republic, of holding the power of an office without holding the office itself.

Thus, while rejecting the title rex, "king," the Romans allowed the emperor to accumulate, through his various titles and by means of their theocratic political theory, far more power than any Roman king had possessed before the Republic and more than the typical Hellenistic kings of the Middle East had ever envisioned. The emperor came to possess every power imaginable save the one power possessed by a king alone: the right to be unconditionally succeeded by his flesh and blood. Though the emperor might designate his heir and even nominate his son for the position, the emperorship was never presumed to be ipso facto hereditary and this one lacuna in the imperial powers proved to be a major problem in Roman political affairs that was never fully resolved. Ultimately, no one was emperor unless he had the approval of the senate, the acclamation of the army, or the acceptance of the people--although, to be sure, the support of the one was usually sufficient to garner the support of the other two. Augustus saved the crumbling Roman Republic by transmuting it into a monarchy hidden behind a carefully maintained republican facade, but, although he arranged for his position to remain hereditary in his own extended family, this only lasted until the death of Nero 54 years after his own.

Augustus ruled, in effect, through what has been called a "discreet autocracy" backed by the army. Although he did not invent the practice of giving gifts of wine and grain to the population and regaling them with magnificent shows, under his rule these were both systematized and expanded until they became part of the government's stock in trade in dealing with the capital's population--the notorious "bread and circuses." Although the majority of Rome's upper class accepted his "dictatorial republic" without examining the implications too closely (and the grateful senate heaped him with titles), many of the old republicans remained hostile to the new order, and Augustus lived constantly in fear of sedition.

As master of Rome, Augustus lived a most unpretentious life in a modest but tastefully appointed house on the Palatine Hill that was not even new when he acquired it. To protect the emperor, he developed a private imperial army called the Praetorian Guard, loyal directly to him alone. Because of the great size of the senate, he formed around himself a smaller body of special "friends of the emperor," from among whom he selected an even smaller group to act as an advisory council. Chief among his advisors was the general and admiral Marcus Agrippa, whose aid had been indispensable in Augustus's rise to power; Augustus gave in marriage his daughter Julia to Agrippa's son Marcellus, who was the heir apparent when Augustus fell dangerously ill in 23 B.C. Second to Agrippa in influence was the plutocrat Maecenas, famed as a patron of arts and letters, who managed Augustus's affairs at Rome when the emperor was absent from the city, suppressed sedition for him, and served as his confidant, go-between and messenger on countless occasions in every conceivable affair.

A major achievement of Augustus's reign was his transformation of the equestrian order or knights, the lower level of the old upper class, into a systematically organized body from which judges, officials, and civil employees were drawn. Augustus also expanded the role of the central government in justice, gradually instituting a senatorial court and an imperial court (at the latter of which he was the judge),
both of which served as supreme courts of appeal for the cases brought before them. He revived the earlier post of Prefect of the City, to manage its food supply, established a corps of urban cohorts that served as an embryonic police force, and formed a body of freedmen assisted by slaves who served as a fire brigade. Despite his own not-terribly-edifying example, he was also concerned with public morality. Believing, like many Romans, that this could be amended through legislation, he sponsored the passage of laws making adultery a criminal offence, permitting freeborn citizens to marry former slaves, and imposing penalties on unmarried persons and married couples who had no children.

Outside of Rome and Italy, Augustus engaged in a major work of consolidation. With little faith in the ability of Greeks and other easterners to govern themselves without supervision, he allowed the different provinces to continue to be administered in different ways and allowed the traditionally free cities of the East to maintain their local privileges while retaining ultimate power securely in the hands of Rome. Gratetful for the peace he brought, cities and towns all over the Empire took his title Augustus (and its Greek translation sebaste) as their names: e.g., Augusta Vindelicorum (Augsburg, Germany), Augusta Praetoria (Aosta, Italy), Caesaraugusta (Saragossa, Spain).

As emperor, he pursued a cautious foreign policy. With little inclination toward the military life, he was chary of war and, while ever mindful of Roman interests, generally shied away from anything that might warrant extensive military activity. The final conquest of Spain, however, was completed by Augustus, who uncharacteristically spent three years (27-25 b.c.) in the field there. The Danubian lands of Rhaetia, Noricum, Illyricum, and Pannonia were added to the Empire as new provinces, and the main part of the Kingdom of Judea was annexed in a.d. 6. Deliberate expansion in Germany, on the other hand, proved unsuccessful, and all attempts to extend the frontier from the Rhine to the Elbe failed. In a.d. 9, the defeat of Roman general Quinctilus Varro and the annihilation of the three legions under his command by the German chieftain Arminius (Hermann) set the northeastern Roman frontier along the Rhine for the rest of its history. To the east of the Empire lay the Hellenized, and relatively weak but troublesome, Parthians. No serious threat to Rome, they could make trouble among the smaller states that acted as buffers between the two empires, and Augustus was never free of concerns in the East.

Though Augustus proudly boasted that he had found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble, most of the celebrated remains of ancient Rome were built either before his time or after it. While he erected numerous temples in the city and rebuilt or restored dozens of others, his most remarkable structures were the Forum of Augustus, with its temple of Mars the Avenger and its 108 statues; the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine hill, with its Greek and Latin libraries; his magnificent tomb; and the great Ara Pacis Augusti, "the Altar of the Augustan Peace," an open-air shrine whose magnificent friezes represent the finest Roman sculptures of the age.

**Augustus Encourages Writers**

Although Augustus did not hold court in the manner of later Roman emperors or Asiatic kings, he was, like his friend Maecenas, a patron of the arts. He both encouraged and subsidized many writers, thereby contributing to the establishment of his era as the Golden Age of Roman civilization. Of the great Roman men of letters who stand out in Augustus's time, Virgil, Horace, Livy, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid are the most remarkable. To these may be added the name of Strabo, whose description of the known world represents the summit reached by descriptive geography in antiquity. Of these
writers, the poet Virgil was certainly the finest, and his masterpiece the *Aeneid*, immortalizing the origin of Rome and glorifying Roman traditions, virtues, and values, also served to glorify the achievements and vision of Emperor Augustus.

Augustus’s declining years were pained, as one by one the young men of his family, whom he had hoped would succeed him, died; his daughter Julia, and her daughter the younger Julia, were both exiled because of immorality; and there were major revolts in Illyria and Judea in a.d. 6, both of which challenged the myth of the beneficial nature of the Roman Peace. The disaster in Germany occurred but three years later. Ultimately, Augustus fell back upon Livia for consolation as he began to fail. It was her son Tiberius by her previous marriage who became the emperor’s virtual co-ruler after a.d. 4, and it was he who succeeded him when Augustus died at Nola after catching a chill while sailing at night in the month that still bears his name.

Emperor Augustus was one of the greatest rulers in world history—a statesman without peer, whose administrative reorganization of the Roman Empire was a work of political and legislative genius. Taking a faltering republic, which for all its faults had the genuine devotion of its best citizens, Augustus devised a method of rule that, however dictatorial, never openly trod upon the ideals and traditions that Rome held dear. Cordial and accessible, his absolute rule was conducted with careful attention to public opinion as represented by the senate, and, though he brooked no public opposition, he allowed everyone in his entourage to express their views freely. While during the early years of his rise he had sometimes been ruthless, even cruel, his 41 years as ruler revealed a different nature, and clemency, even kindness, marked his rule. In later generations, his memory was handed down as the model for all future Roman emperors but—save for the “five good emperors” of the second century—few came anywhere close to being the statesman he had been. When Augustus came to the Roman world, it was a faltering republic built on sand. He left it a mighty empire founded on rock.

**Further Readings**


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