

At this point, the Romans had subjugated most of the Mediterranean basin (see map), but they had not yet imprinted their language, law, culture, and values on the conquered territories. In fact, they had not yet learned to govern, as opposed merely to exploiting, the provinces. If Roman politicians and generals had continued to turn their armies against each other for the indefinite future, the state would in time have fallen apart and the Greco-Roman synthesis would never have come into being. For only under the Roman Empire (27 BCE–476 CE), which brought with it the longest period of peace and prosperity that the Mediterranean world had yet known, did Rome become a world power. During that time Roman culture spread throughout Europe so that Greek civilization and Christianity come to us filtered through a Roman prism. For that to happen, the Roman Peace still had to be secured, and the political and religious institutions, economy, administration, and army of the Roman Republic had to be transformed into the Roman Empire.

THE RISE OF OCTAVIAN

The assassins were naïve. Caesar's troops were not appeased by a senatorial decree that freedom had been restored; they sought to guarantee the privileges Caesar had given them and to exact revenge for their fallen general. The Roman masses were perhaps briefly aroused by the ringing shouts of "Freedom!" and the celebratory bonfires, but all that soon passed. Caesar's will, read in the Forum by his colleague as **consul**, Marc Antony, gave 300 **sesterces**—four months' pay—to every male Roman citizen, and bequeathed Caesar's extensive private gardens to the Roman people. Stirred up by Antony's speech, crowds of Romans furious over Caesar's death drove Brutus and his allies from the city.

Antony had served under Caesar for ten years, and he was the *dictator's* political deputy in Rome. He seemed to be Caesar's logical successor, and rumors had long circulated that he would be adopted by Caesar. He quickly seized command of Caesar's troops and control of his war chest, but there was another, unexpected claimant to Caesar's wealth and, more important, to his name. In his will, Caesar had posthumously adopted his eighteen-year-old great-nephew Gaius Octavius, who was then studying and training across the Adriatic in Apollonia. Almost at once, that inexperienced youth revealed the courage, intelligence, ruthlessness, and self-control that would later bring him mastery of the Roman world as the emperor Augustus (Figure 1).

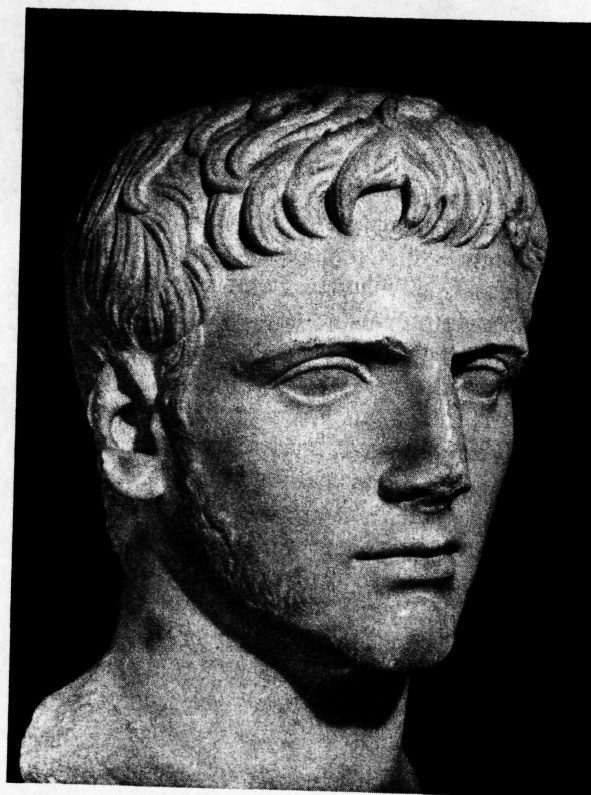


Figure 1.
Octavian
in 44 BCE.

Bust of the young Octavian at age eighteen, wearing a beard as a sign of mourning after the assassination of Julius Caesar. Musée de l'Arles antique, Arles, France.

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.

Who was Octavius? The Octavii were a wealthy but politically undistinguished family. At the time of Octavius' birth in 63 BCE, none of the Octavii had ever held high office, but his mother, Atia, was the daughter of Julia, the sister of the rising politician Julius Caesar. In 61 BCE, the boy's father died, and Caesar (now in Gaul) did what he could for his great-nephew. In 52 BCE, the eleven-year-old Octavius delivered the funeral oration for his grandmother Julia. After Caesar defeated Pompey in 48 BCE, young Octavius' career began with his assumption of the *toga virilis* (man's toga) and election to a priesthood. Although illness prevented his participation in Caesar's African war against the republicans, Octavius rode behind Caesar in the **triumph** of 46 BCE. The following year, the young man went to Spain, where Caesar was fighting Sextus Pompey, the son of his old rival. At this point, Octavius became closer to Caesar, or so he later claimed. For example, we are told by later sources (which probably relied on Augustus' lost autobiography) that the *dictator* often asked the young

man's advice (see Document 2). Caesar was a busy man in the last year of his life. He not only kept a traditional Roman household with his wife Calpurnia but also had a villa across the Tiber for the Egyptian queen Cleopatra and their baby son, Caesarion. He was preparing a large legislative program and planning a military campaign against Parthia. Nevertheless, it was at this time that he developed sufficient respect and affection for Octavius to write a secret will in which he not only gave his great-nephew three-quarters of his property but also adopted him as his son. (It was relatively common for a Roman nobleman without a son to adopt a young relative to keep his family name alive and ensure that his family cult would survive.) Late in 45 BCE, Caesar sent Octavius with his close friends Agrippa and Maecenas across the Adriatic, where the *dictator* had established headquarters for his anticipated Parthian campaign. Octavius was there when he heard of Caesar's murder a few days after the Ides of March.

Crossing to southern Italy against the advice of his mother and stepfather, Octavius learned of Caesar's will and took the name Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus—following the custom of taking the adoptive father's name and keeping a form of his old family name as an added name. (He preferred to be called "Caesar," but writers from Shakespeare to the present call him "Octavian" to avoid confusion.) Antony had been spending Caesar's war treasury freely and he claimed to find justification for his actions in Caesar's papers, which he had impounded; his naked ambition alarmed the Senate and even offended many of Caesar's followers. By the late summer of 44 BCE, Octavian had begun to recruit Caesar's troops to defend his inheritance. He held no state office, while Antony was still consul, yet his name and loans from Caesar's wealthy friends allowed him to assemble a private army and pay the 300 sesterces that Caesar had bequeathed to each citizen (which Antony had refused to pay). Cicero and other senators flattered Octavian ("the divine youth") and furiously denounced what they saw as the real danger, Antony (see Document 5). After war broke out, Octavian and the consuls defeated Antony in northern Italy in April 43 BCE and caused him to withdraw to Gaul. When both consuls fell on the battlefield, Octavian expected to be rewarded, but the senators thought they could now ignore the nineteen-year-old youth. In the year after Caesar's murder, Octavian had learned well the arts of political psychology and dissemblance (see Document 4). Although he forced the Senate to name him consul in August 43 BCE, he understood that the senators would discard him as soon as they were free of Antony. Octavian paid an enormous bonus of almost ten years' salary

to his troops to secure their loyalty, while he took diplomatic steps to make peace with Antony and reunite the Caesarian forces.

In November 43 BCE, Octavian, Antony, and Caesar's former aide, Marcus Lepidus, met near Bologna and formed a new triumvirate "for restoring the state." They gave themselves the authority to make law, to name consuls and other magistrates, and to command Rome's armies (see Document 6). As they marched toward Rome, they issued death warrants for their opponents. Even the great orator Cicero was struck down on a road near his villa. Many escaped to join Brutus and Cassius in the East, but their lands were confiscated and sold. The *triumvirs* used executions not only to purge their opponents but also to raise funds to pay their troops for the coming war.

The triumvirs could now turn their attention to avenging the murder of Julius Caesar, whom they consecrated as a god at the beginning of 42 BCE. The senatorial forces had control of the eastern Mediterranean for two years, imposing taxes on the provinces and confiscating money to pay their armies. Even the idealistic young poet Horace, later so close to Augustus, had left his studies in Athens to follow Brutus into battle to defend the Republic (see Document 45). In 42 BCE, Antony and Octavian took their army to northern Greece, and met Brutus and Cassius near the town of Philippi. They were the two largest Roman armies ever to confront each other. Antony's army fought well and, thinking Brutus had been defeated, Cassius committed suicide. Without his experienced ally's advice, Brutus did not take advantage of his ample supplies to outwait the enemy. Pressured by his troops to take action, he engaged in battle unnecessarily, and himself committed suicide after his defeat. It was not a great personal military success for Octavian (who was reportedly sick during the decisive battle), but Antony could now for the first time claim a major victory and stand as the military heir of the avenged Caesar.

The triumvirs embarked on a program of pacification of the East and resettlement of both the Caesarian and republican armies. Antony took on the more desirable task: the administrative reorganization of the wealthy eastern provinces. There, like earlier Roman governors, he gained personal wealth and the loyalty of both his troops and Rome's dependent monarchs. One of them was Cleopatra of Egypt, whom Antony had known during her years as Caesar's lover. Although Cleopatra may not have been considered a great beauty, she spoke nine languages and had personal charm and a remarkable intelligence (Figure 2b). Antony met her again at Tarsus in 41 BCE and took up with her where Caesar had left off (see Document 8).



(a) Denarius of Marc Antony and Octavian.



(b) Cleopatra.

(c) Augustus Conquers Egypt.

Figure 2. *Coins of the Age of Augustus.*

(a) Silver denarius issued by Antony and Octavian after their agreement at Brundisium in 40 BCE. Each triumvir appears on one side.

Photos by David Garstang.

(b) Bronze coin issued by Cleopatra VII, who was queen of Egypt for twenty-one years.

Courtesy of the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow.

(c) The legend "AEGYPT CAPTA" on this Roman coin of 28 BCE celebrates the conquest of Egypt; the crocodile made the event clear even to the illiterate. *British Museum, London.*

Photo by Werner Forman/Art Resource, N.Y.

Octavian's tasks were far less pleasant. He had to confront Sextus Pompey, whose fleet of republican exiles still controlled much of the western Mediterranean and could disrupt Rome's food supply. Even more challenging was Octavian's need to find land in Italy on which to settle the demobilized armies, lest they roam unrestrained across the Roman world. This task required confiscations and inevitably caused resentment and even rebellion. Antony's brother and wife, Fulvia, led angry landholders in a widespread rebellion against the expropriations, in what might have been a fatal blow against Octavian. The rebels were finally trapped in Perugia. Octavian pardoned the two leaders out of respect for his ally, then brutally slaughtered the fighters and city councilors of Perugia. (The story that he also sacrificed three hundred senators on the altar of the deified Julius seems to have come from Antony's later propaganda campaign, but the reality was savage enough.) Octavian here increased his reputation for ruthless cruelty, but ever the shrewd politician, he won the loyalty of his troops with land distribution. He now turned, like his father Julius Caesar, to building a political base among the leading citizens of the Italian towns.

Eventually ambition and mutual suspicion between the triumvirs almost led to war in 40 BCE, when Antony sailed to the Italian port of Brundisium, but the **centurions** of both armies—many of whom had fought together under Caesar—forced their leaders to compromise (see Figure 2a). Antony married Octavian's widowed sister, Octavia, and Octavian married Scribonia, a relative of Sextus Pompey. The triumvirs reached an agreement with Sextus at Misenum to lift his blockade of the shipments of grain. When Antony left Rome in October 39 BCE, he would never return. Although Octavia followed him to his headquarters in Athens, two years later Antony resumed his love affair with Cleopatra and publicly acknowledged his children by her.

In 37 BCE, the triumvirate was renewed for another five years. In 36 BCE, through the brilliance of his friend and admiral, Agrippa, Octavian defeated the impressive fleet of Sextus Pompey, whom his propaganda later dismissed as a "pirate." Finally, Lepidus, the weakest of the triumvirs, attempted to seize Sicily, but Octavian easily won over the loyalty of his troops and took his provinces. Because Lepidus had been *pontifex maximus* (high priest) since the death of Caesar, Octavian respectfully allowed him to live under house arrest in a country villa until his death twenty-four years later.

In the East, Antony's destiny became increasingly enmeshed with that of Cleopatra. By 36 BCE, she had borne him three children, and he had even gone through an Egyptian marriage ceremony. Why did

Antony do so? Antony may have entered into this marriage because in the multicultural world of Alexandria these celebrations provoked enthusiasm, and Antony needed Egyptian resources for his coming expedition against Parthia. But Antony's Parthian campaign was a humiliating calamity. He lost much of his army, although he heroically led the survivors back to safety. Had he defeated Parthia, his repute as a military leader would have been indisputable. Two years later, he tried to retrieve his reputation by launching a war against a much weaker Armenia. He celebrated that victory with an extravagant triumph in Alexandria, at which he bestowed Rome's eastern provinces on his children by Cleopatra. This act was portrayed in Rome as part of his unmanly submission to the queen: to hold a triumph away from Rome was considered a sacrilege to Jupiter! The eastern panoply played into Octavian's hands, as did Antony's repudiation and divorce of Octavia in 32 BCE.

The 30s BCE was a decade of vicious propaganda, which infects all the sources (see Documents 9 and 10). Although Suetonius' biography of Augustus survives, no complete narrative of the reign exists. Appian's *Civil Wars* gives a good account as far as 35 BCE, when it breaks off. Cassius Dio's narrative is comprehensive until 6 BCE, but the last twenty years (6 BCE–14 CE) contain many gaps. These later writers all depend on sources that survived until their time, but the descendants of Augustus and his wife Livia (whom he married in 38 BCE) held power for a century, so the sources were obviously heavily biased toward Augustus. Octavian played on Roman prejudice against easterners to pillory Antony: that he planned to make Cleopatra queen of Rome; that he would move the capital itself to Alexandria; and that his will said he wished to be buried in Alexandria. Octavian depicted himself as a Roman traditionalist. Antony might appeal to surviving republicans who were repelled by the cruelty and naked dynastic position of Caesar's heir, but Octavian focused his propaganda and his resources at the armies, the urban masses, and the Italian elite. He extended his patronage throughout Italy, and incorporated many Italians into his regime. He launched military campaigns in Illyricum between 35 and 33 BCE both to give himself an aura of military success and to train his armies for the inevitable war. His coins depicted himself with Venus, and his building program in Rome emphasized his links with the past. The balance of prestige had begun to tilt toward Octavian, who boldly compared his military success in Illyricum—modern Croatia—with Antony's Parthian disaster.

By 32 BCE, the triumvirate had ended. Because both consuls were

sympathetic to Antony, Octavian's legal position was shaky. They feared his ambition and fled to Antony with, we are told, several hundred senators. In 31 BCE, Octavian declared war on Cleopatra, as though she alone was Rome's enemy, and sailed with his flotilla to Greece. Yet many of those senators and republican sympathizers, quickly disenchanted when they witnessed Antony's own ambitions and his subservience to Cleopatra, soon fled back to Octavian. They had trouble deciding which alternative was worse. Antony's delays allowed Agrippa to position Octavian's armies favorably. Having suffered numerous defections, Antony was outnumbered and defeated at the sea battle at Actium. He and Cleopatra fled to Egypt, abandoning much of their army and fleet to Octavian.

Octavian returned to Italy to settle his and Antony's troops, because the lovers were now powerless to stop his advance into Egypt. Following a battle near Alexandria a year later, Antony committed suicide. After an unsuccessful attempt to entice Octavian to become her third Roman lover, Cleopatra chose suicide rather than be led as a prisoner in Octavian's Roman triumph (see Documents 11 and 46). Although the victor spared Cleopatra's children by Antony, his men hunted down and murdered Caesarion, Caesar's son. The boy was a potential rival to Caesar's adopted son, and only one "Caesar" could be left alive. Because victors win the privilege of writing history, the writers of the Augustan Age so entangled Antony's memory in political propaganda and historical romance that the myths will forever obscure the historical reality of a fine general, an ambitious politician, and a generous extrovert, who has been branded "the triple pillar of the world transform'd into a strumpet's fool" (Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.1.13–14).

If we can never fully understand the motivations of Antony, we can appreciate why Octavian needed not only to defeat Antony but to bring Egypt under complete Roman control for the first time (see Figure 2c). Any new constitutional order would be worthless without his pacifying the mob and bringing the soldiers under control—and that would take a great deal of money. The greatest single source of wealth in the Mediterranean was the extraordinary fertility of the Nile valley—the huge barges that for millennia had brought surplus grain to the Delta, whence it could be traded throughout the Near East for cedar and luxury goods (see Document 11).

The products of Egypt—glass, ivory, and papyrus—were welcome in Rome, but its agricultural fertility was what made Egypt unique. Octavian saw the opportunity to stabilize the capital's grain supply and

ameliorate the social tensions that had ravaged Rome since the Gracchi (see Figure 3). How much grain? One-third to one-half of Rome's grain came from Egypt: as much as 100,000 tons a year.⁷ Although most of the capital's grain still came from North Africa and Sicily, Egyptian imports would not only stabilize the city's food supply but also provide adequate grain for the army. The surplus would eliminate the food confiscations that aroused so much anger among provincials. To gain permanent and secure access to this food supply, Octavian had to replace the last Ptolemy (Cleopatra) with some form of Roman administration. Within weeks after the death of Cleopatra, Octavian proclaimed himself Pharaoh. He kept Egypt as his personal possession—it never became a normal province—and he and his successors ruled it through a **prefect of Egypt** from the equestrian order; senators were even banned from visiting Egypt. The emperor understood the value of Egypt, and its danger in the hands of a rival.

The Republic had had no standing army. For a century, the great generals had recruited their soldiers and rewarded them either with booty from conquest or with land gained through their political position to support the soldiers and their families. For the last twenty years, however, these armies had been fighting each other—not much booty there! When Octavian had tried to find land to settle the veterans of Philippi, he inflamed civil war in Italy. Now he again needed to retire an enormous number of troops—his own and those of Antony—and establish a permanent army with a central treasury, if he were to have any hope of ending the cycle of armies following whichever general promised them the most. He also needed to embark on campaigns—in the Alps, in Spain, and along the Danube—to secure areas that had become unstable during the civil wars.

After the defeat of Cleopatra, Octavian was able to redeem his promises by using the accumulated treasure of the Pharaohs. His boast in his *Res Gestae* (*Achievements of Augustus*) that he actually *purchased* land for his troops after Actium was true, but the purchase occurred a year later, after Cleopatra's treasury was taken. So Egypt's treasure allowed Octavian to settle his troops and create a loyal standing army. When Augustus said at the end of his life that he had paid 2.5 billion sesterces of public expenses out of "his own money," we should remember that much of that money came from Egypt, which remained the personal property of the emperor (see Document 1).

Although there were occasional temporary food shortages, Egyptian wheat, along with that of north Africa, satisfied Rome's needs through the third century CE—an extraordinary feat in the fragile



Figure 3. *Bust of Octavian from Meroë.*

This bronze bust of Augustus was found beyond the Egyptian frontier at the city of Meroë in Nubia. It seems to have been cut from a full-size statue set up in Egypt soon after Cleopatra's death and then taken south as booty by a raiding party during the 20s BCE. *British Museum, London.*

HIP/Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

agricultural economy of the ancient world. Compared to the late Republic, there was little civic unrest. After 330 CE, Egyptian wheat was diverted to the new capital of Constantinople. Octavian had the foresight to know that the grain and treasury of Egypt would provide the economic means to reconstitute the Roman state in a new, more stable, form. Without them, any new "constitutional" arrangement would have been temporary.

Octavian was now the unchallenged master of Rome and her armies, and thus of the entire Mediterranean. Yet the defeat of Antony could no more resolve the conflicts consuming the Roman Republic than had Caesar's victory over his rivals. Octavian was only thirty-three, the same age as Alexander the Great when he died, but he would have another forty-three years of rule to address Rome's problems: demobilizing the huge armies and safeguarding their future loyalty; ensuring the safety of Rome's European frontiers, neglected during long civil wars in the East; reducing class hostility and civil unrest in the capital; making the Italians an integral part of Roman social, cultural, and political life; establishing an administrative apparatus to govern the Empire; and devising a form of monarchy that would avoid any resemblance to ancient Etruscan tyranny or to the eastern kingship, which had damaged the reputation of Antony.

After a year spent settling Antony's former territories in the East, the new leader returned to Rome in 29 BCE to celebrate his triumph (Figure 4). It was actually a triple triumph for victories in Illyricum, at Actium, and in Egypt. There was a great public spectacle, with an effigy of Cleopatra that was carried through the streets in the ceremonial procession to the **Capitoline Hill**, the political and religious focus of Rome. Octavian gave 400 sesterces apiece to a quarter million Roman **plebeians** (or **plebs**). The celebrations even included the closing of the gates of the Temple of Janus, which were only closed when the Romans were completely at peace. They had not been closed for more than two hundred years.

AUGUSTUS AS *PRINCEPS*

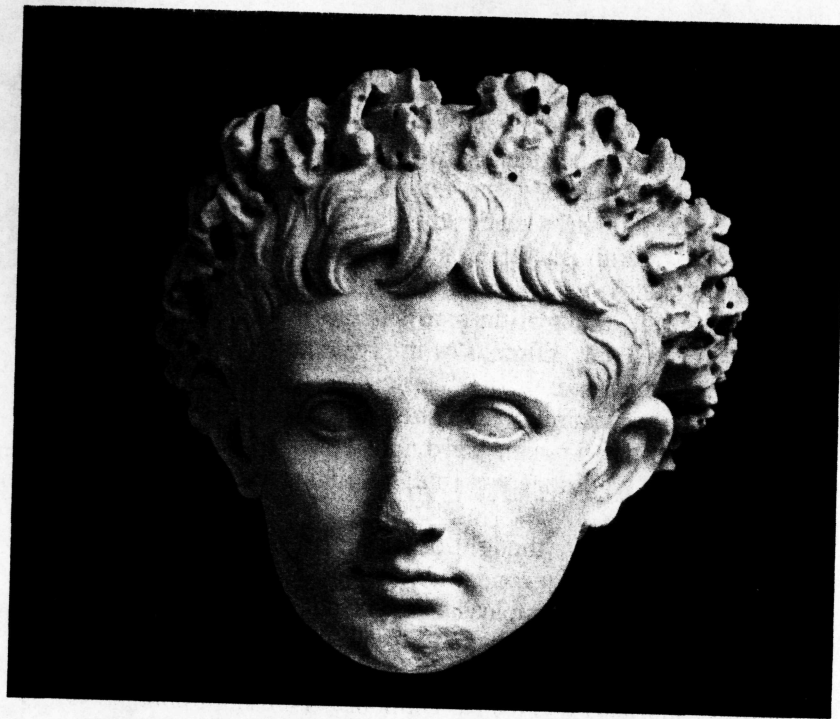


Figure 4. *Augustus with Crown.*

The emperor is depicted with the crown of a triumphant general—probably after his triple triumph of 29 BCE. Dressed like Jupiter and wearing a crown of laurel, the conquering general rode through Rome in a chariot before mounting the Capitoline Hill to pay tribute at the temple of Jupiter.

Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, N.Y.