

AUGUSTUS AS *PRINCEPS*

Now Octavian turned from winning the war to securing the peace, a task that most wise leaders have understood is far more difficult. In 28 BCE, Octavian again served as consul along with his loyal general Agrippa; the emergency was over and a general amnesty had been proclaimed. The same year saw the first celebration in Rome of the Actian Games. More than half of the sixty **legions** were being demobilized, and over 100,000 veterans pensioned off with grants of land. Wary of the insurrection that had followed his earlier land confiscations in 40 BCE, Augustus used the spoils of his successful Egyptian campaign to purchase land for some soldiers. Many were settled in new colonies founded in Italy and throughout the provinces.

The first step in Rome itself was to repair the bitter wounds of civil

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war. While he led his armies, the young Octavian had welcomed the title of *dux*, a title used informally for generals or party leaders during the civil wars. (Nineteen centuries later, Mussolini resurrected *dux* in his own title, *Duce*. His devotion to Augustus resulted in excavations of the Forum of Augustus and a massive celebration of the bimillennium of the birth of Augustus in 1937.) After 29 BCE, however, Octavian preferred to deemphasize those struggles. He was given the title of *Princeps senatus* (leader of the Senate), despite the fact that it had in the past usually been reserved for the most senior senator. The ruler and his advisors were giving serious thought to the names and titles that would define his place in the new regime.

On January 13, 27 BCE, in his own words, Octavian “transferred the Republic from my own power to the authority of the Senate and the Roman people.” This was a carefully scripted piece of political theater: the Senate awarded him the additional name of *Augustus*, and mobs demanded that he retain power (see Document 12). Indeed, the people of Rome welcomed the end of civil war, the abundance of imported food, and the periodic distributions of money. They would continue to push enthusiastically for greater honors for Augustus, who presented himself as a *popularis* like Julius Caesar. The Senate was more grudging. Although many aristocrats may have lamented the demise of the Republic, others saw the real value of the Republic to be the protection of property and the security of life. New coins of 28 BCE had even proclaimed Augustus as the restorer of *libertas*, by which he meant that Romans were now free from the arbitrary use of force. Augustus’ argument was that, by ending the civil wars, he had restored the Republic.

Octavian had initially thought of taking the name of the founder of Rome, Romulus, until second thoughts brought the realization that “Romulus” also carried unpleasant associations: he had been a king, and he had killed his brother Remus. So Octavian chose *Augustus*, which is related to the Latin words for growth (*augeo*) and authority (*auctoritas*), and carries positive connotations of both political authority and religious veneration. Octavian always preferred to attribute his dominance to *auctoritas* rather than the naked force implied in *potestas* (power). The sixth month in the Roman calendar, *Sextilis*, was renamed *Augustus*, as the fifth month had previously been named *Julius* after Julius Caesar.

This was the beginning of the astonishing transformation of the pitiless and ambitious young Octavian into the genial, cultured, and beloved Augustus (see Document 14). The senators set up an honorific gold shield to honor him in the Senate-house, and placed an oak crown of victory on the door of his home. In the legal fiction of restoring the Republic, Augustus modestly claimed that he held “no more power than the others who were my colleagues in each magistracy” (see Document 1). But Augustus did not derive power from his offices; his goal was to legalize, and veil, his real power, which came always from the army’s loyalty and the elimination of rivals. A century after Augustus’ death, the historian Tacitus wrote: He took on “himself the functions of the Senate, the magistrates, and the laws” (see Document 7).

Although Augustus held the consulship every year from 31 to 23 BCE, his power did not come from any single magistracy but from

the authority of victory and a patchwork of powers carefully designed to avoid the hatred Caesar aroused with his dictatorship. The details were traditional; the totality, unprecedented. Again and again, he cloaked his political and ideological innovations under a guise of traditional Roman values. Since the 30s BCE, Octavian had used *imperator*—a title awarded to victorious generals—as part of his nomenclature; it comes down to us in English as “emperor.” Senators preferred his adopted name of “Caesar,” which eventually became a title of his successors. But, in 27 BCE, the Senate named Augustus *princeps* (leading man of the state), which later became the official title of the Roman emperors. Although we refer to the Roman Empire, the Romans called it a “principate,” because it was ruled by a *princeps*. Augustus went to great lengths to avoid the titles of *rex* (king) and *dictator*. Fear of the first and the reality of the second had aroused a conspiracy against Julius Caesar; his heir would tread more carefully.

THE NEW CONSTITUTION

The third-century historian Cassius Dio created an imaginary debate between Augustus’ closest advisors, Maecenas and Agrippa, on how the emperor should organize the new state (see Document 16). Of course neither Dio nor modern historians have had access to such discussions, but they must have occurred. The old system of government had obviously failed to adapt; in the first century BCE, Roman leaders had pursued their private ambitions to the detriment of the common good. Despite Cicero’s and Brutus’ rhetoric of liberty, only a few dozen men had controlled the fate of the Republic, and they had repeatedly brought it to civil war. Augustus felt he could do better, but how could he govern the state more effectively? The acquisition of power was not enough; Augustus had to guard against Caesar’s fate as well as exercise power effectively. Could he restore Rome to order, or would the state once again slip into anarchy?

Scholars have described the new “constitution” of the Roman Empire. Of course there was no written constitution any more than there had been one for the Roman Republic. Rome’s constitution had long been flexible; what was outrageous at one point, like immediately repeated consulships or tribunates, was acceptable later. So much that was unprecedented had happened during the civil wars that it is difficult for us—and perhaps was for the Romans—to grasp what was “normal” by 27 BCE. In the nineteenth century, scholars were interested

in the legal and constitutional underpinnings of states. Thus Theodor Mommsen, who won the second Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902 for his *History of Rome*, thought that Augustus had established a dyarchy in which constitutional power was shared between the emperor and the Senate (see Document 34).⁸ In the twentieth century, scholars have realized that—in the words of Mao Tse-tung—“political power comes from the barrel of a gun.” Men like Hitler and Mussolini, Stalin and Mao, Kim Il Sung and Saddam Hussein cared little for legal niceties—they created constitutions suitable to their needs. So some historians in the twentieth century, like Sir Ronald Syme, saw Augustus’ constitution as “a fraud and a façade.”⁹ But it was more than that. Augustus devoted so much time and effort to his “arrangements” that we must take them seriously (see Document 16).

We must remember that Octavian was not omniscient. He could not know that he would reign for forty-five years, nor exactly how the army, people, and senators would respond to his changes. Nor could he have hoped for the overwhelming popularity he later achieved with the Roman people. The transformation of Rome was so vast that later historians—even Romans like Tacitus and Cassius Dio—were tempted to see it as part of an overarching plan. Augustus began with less ambitious goals and had the political genius to adapt flexibly and pragmatically to changing circumstances. His motto was said to be *festina lente* (make haste slowly), and so his creation of the Empire’s “constitution” was a gradual, adaptive process.

Multiple sources of political power existed in the Republic. A Roman consul—and there were always two—held *imperium* (military power), which carried the right not only to command an army but to exercise authority in Rome and to summon the Senate into session. Former consuls, called **proconsuls**, served as provincial governors (as Caesar did in Gaul) and held *imperium* over a specific territory. In 27 BCE, after Augustus’ “resignation” of all special powers except his consulship, the Senate gave him, for ten years, proconsular *imperium* over the provinces of Syria, Spain, and Gaul, including the Rhine frontier. (Julius Caesar had held his proconsulship in Gaul for ten years.) Those provinces contained the great bulk of the Roman army—twenty of a total of twenty-eight legions. Because Augustus administered them through his deputies, called **legates**, he held effective control over the military apparatus of the Empire (see Document 35). The combination of powers was extraordinary but not unprecedented: in 52 BCE, Pompey had been consul in Rome and proconsul of Spain. As

always, it was important to Augustus to link his powers to earlier precedents to emphasize the return of the Republic.

On his return from campaigning in Spain in 24 BCE, Augustus found discontent in the capital. Although the army and masses supported him, the senatorial oligarchy was grudging. There was a growing gap between the Senate’s public fawning and private dissent. Early in 23 BCE, the *princeps* became very ill, so ill that he expected to die and gave his papers and signet ring to Agrippa, the only man who could have kept the armies united. When he recovered after several months, Augustus decided to change the structure of his rule. He recognized that he had been monopolizing the consulship, which he had held for nine consecutive years between 31 and 23 BCE. The consulship was the peak of ambition for Roman nobles, for through it they could equal the high achievements of their ancestors. Augustus needed the administrative expertise and institutional memory of these senators, yet he was blocking their career path. So in July 23 BCE, he resigned the consulship, and held it only two more times in the next thirty-seven years. It was a brilliant stroke: he relinquished the office while retaining the power in other ways.

The emperor retained his proconsular *imperium*, and now took a newly devised **tribunician power**, adapted from the powers the tribunes held during the Republic. This allowed Augustus wide powers, including the right to propose or veto legislation. He and his successors regarded it as so emblematic of imperial power that they dated their reigns on coins and inscriptions by the year of their tribunician power. The Senate also voted *imperium maius* (superior power to command), which gave Augustus primacy over all other consuls and proconsuls. He did not need to hold the consulship; he had all the effective powers of any consul.

It was probably in 22 BCE that a conspiracy was discovered; one consul and another senator were executed. This was one of several “conspiracies” that are poorly documented in the ancient sources. Over the five decades Augustus held power, we find occasional mention of executions, exiles, and suicides of the regime’s opponents. Tacitus later called it “a peace stained with blood” (see Document 55). Details are usually murky, though, so it is unclear whether the opposition was ideological or personal. In any event, there seems to have been no widely organized opposition. Augustus was certainly confident enough to allow some writers to take jabs at him. Cremutius Cordus wrote a republican version of history in which he called Brutus

“the last of the Romans.” Cordus lived with impunity under Augustus, although he was prosecuted later under Augustus’ paranoid successor, Tiberius.

There were repeated calls for Augustus to take even more power. A food shortage in 22 BCE led to riots, with the crowds demanding that Augustus become *dictator*. He took direct control of the grain supply, and the shortage soon disappeared. On other occasions, when he left Rome for extended stays in Asia (22–19 BCE) or Gaul (16–13 BCE), Rome saw unrest that only his reappearance calmed. We might suspect that the *princeps* was not unhappy to see popular passions unleashed in his favor; they allowed him to neutralize potential opposition from the senators.

Other titles and honors were heaped upon Augustus: consular *imperium* for life; *ensor*, which enabled him to revise the roll of the Senate; *pontifex maximus*, the high priesthood once held by Julius Caesar; and finally, in 2 BCE, *pater patriae*—“Father of the Country.” These offices and titles gave Augustus no real added power, for he already controlled every aspect of religious, civil, and military life. In fact, he held as much power as any absolute despot, but he knew enough to disguise it in republican trappings, to allow the senators to keep their pride and he their loyalty. We might regard these constitutional changes as a process of “negotiation” through which Augustus and the senators could reach a viable political consensus. Only later in the Empire did the law codes contain the famous clause: “What pleases the emperor has the force of law.” Augustus held such power *de facto*; much later his successors would hold it *de jure*.

CREATING A NEW ELITE: SENATORS AND EQUESTRIANS

Although Augustan propaganda emphasized the restoration of the Republic, the late Republic was a failed political system. Huge resources were expended every year in political campaigns, and the elected officials then turned their attention to recouping their fortunes in the provinces. The Republic never governed the provinces effectively; there was no civil service, and governors, like the magistrates in Rome, normally changed every year. In Augustan Rome, provincial funds had to go to the central government rather than to individuals for two reasons: (1) to fund the state and its army and (2) to prevent individuals from amassing the resources to challenge the emperor. Augustus had

to create new administrative structures and, perhaps more important, to choose the men to staff his administration. The new role of the Senate was administrative, not legislative; rather than make policy, the senators gave advice and carried out the emperor’s will. As governors, they lost many of their opportunities to amass personal fortunes. Augustus was less interested in the Senate than in individual senators, whom he used as policy advisors, provincial governors, military commanders, and senior administrators. He allowed them to maintain their honors and status, because he needed their expertise to manage his empire. There was to be a division of labor, if not of political power.

However, the Senate had been transformed by two decades of civil war; many of the gifted had been killed, and the various factions had made their own loyalists senators. Augustus was determined to reinvigorate the senatorial order, to eliminate the disloyal and incompetent, and to add his own new men. During the 30s BCE, Augustus had begun to surround himself with a group of loyalists, but he was shrewd and understood that not all the ambitious men he needed to gain power—the thugs of revolution—would be suitable for the administration of the Empire. Now he would need the nonpolitical class—men, often from Italy, who did not have the money, ancestry, or connections to get elected, but who had the energy and skill to administer. So Augustus “nominated” them to the assembly for election, and thus transformed the Senate.

Three times Augustus was given the authority of a censor to revise the membership roll of the Senate (see Document 18). The major changes of 28, 18, and 11 BCE were crucial to the success of the new regime. The first two reduced the Senate from 1,000 members to the 600 it had had in more normal times. Like any politician, the *princeps* turned first to supporters whose loyalty had been proven. During the civil wars, the Italians had been his most devoted followers and they were generously included in the new regime. Augustus even brought talented Italians into the Senate and high office by giving them sufficient funds to meet the minimum property qualification for all senators, one million sesterces—a thousand times a soldier’s annual salary (see Document 19).

The emperor’s vast wealth was central to his transformation of the Senate. He could bestow on the favored money, office, and honor—the most important elements for a Roman noble. Augustus took care not to humiliate the senatorial order; he built no large palace and avoided haughtiness and pomposity in his contacts with other Romans. He met frequently with a personal advisory council to keep in touch

with a wide circle of senators. The Senate now acted as a court for charges brought against senators. Undoubtedly, many secret meetings were held in which Augustus solicited recommendations and identified talented young men for promotion or perhaps old adversaries for execution.

An empire of sixty million needed more administrators than the Senate could provide. Augustus turned to the equestrian order—those citizens possessing more than 400,000 sesterces—for a wide range of administrative tasks (see Document 20). The *equites* served in financial posts in Rome and abroad, where they even acted as governors in some smaller provinces such as Judaea, where the equestrian Pontius Pilate ruled in the 20s CE. As with the Senate, Augustus was prepared to provide the necessary funds to bring talented men into the equestrian order. The highest equestrian offices were posts with so much control over troops or the food supply that Augustus preferred not to entrust them to ambitious senators. The emperor remembered well republican generals like Pompey and Caesar, who had used their armies to seize power. Thus, on the model of the prefect of Egypt, the emperor gradually assigned new tasks to equestrian administrators called *prefects*: in 2 BCE, the two **prefects of the praetorian guard**, who controlled troops stationed in Rome and Italy; in 6 CE, the **prefect of the grain supply**; and, in 8 CE, the **prefect of the watch**. Even equestrians could have dangerous ambitions, though. The first prefect of Egypt, Cornelius Gallus, took credit for an unauthorized war, fell out of imperial favor, and committed suicide.

For the first time, Rome had the beginnings of a civil service, one that would be expanded and regularized under later emperors. The numbers were still small but larger than under the Republic, and competent officials held their posts for longer terms than earlier. A clear promotion ladder developed for senators and equestrians: for senators, the proconsulship of Asia was at the top; for equestrians, it was the prefectureships of Egypt and the praetorian guard. In time, retired centurions, often Italians or even provincials, were promoted to equestrian posts in the civil administration, while effective equestrians were promoted into the senatorial order. Augustus began a process that gradually brought far more social mobility into the Empire than the Republic had ever seen.

The new structure allowed Augustus to transfer many bureaucratic functions from private, profit-making companies to imperial employees. One of the notably corrupt aspects of republican administration was tax-collecting, in which companies overcharged provincials, speculated

in grain, and frequently bribed Roman governors. Now taxes, whether collected by local cities, private employees, or civil servants, were supervised by imperial financial officials—not the local governor. Income flowed directly into the imperial treasury, and the provincials were treated far better than during the Republic (see Document 32).¹⁰

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORM

Cicero approvingly quotes an older poet: “The Roman state rests on ancient customs and men of the old type.” This appeal to traditional Roman values formed an essential part of Augustus’ program to turn back the clock to an idealized Roman past before the calamity of civil war. He was shrewd enough to draw on the Romans’ desire to attribute political conflict to moral decline. He proclaimed himself to be a moral reformer who would remedy the corruption of the political elite in the late Republic.

For the Romans, religion focused on relations between humans—individually or, more usually, collectively—and the gods who protected their city and their families. Religion reflected society, since gods and humans were members of a single community. If their community was troubled (as in civil war), Romans would attribute the difficulties to their neglect of the gods. The purpose of religion was to bring order and comprehensibility to a potentially chaotic world. Roman morality had less to do with the gods than with the Romans’ own practices in following the *mores maiorum* (customs of the ancestors), the source of our own word “morality.”

Augustus passed more legislation than any Roman leader before him, much of it directed at what he regarded as moral issues. Of course we recognize that legislation on marriage, inheritance, and the emancipation of slaves all was aimed at an increasing control of society. Because freed slaves automatically became Roman citizens, Augustan legislation tried to moderate this dilution of the citizen body (see Documents 28 and 29). His marriage reforms of 18 BCE and 9 CE may have been welcome to the lower classes, the army, and the Italian elite, who looked scornfully at changing sexual mores among the senatorial class. One senator, who praised the virtues of his dead wife, makes it clear that she was exceptional (see Document 27). Sexual promiscuity and the pursuit of political advantage had led to an increase in bachelorhood, divorce, and irregular liaisons among the upper classes. These changes had resulted in a marked decline in

the aristocratic population already decimated by the civil wars. As a result, Augustus' program had not just a moral dimension but a practical one as well. Because the emperor needed Roman citizens to administer the Empire and serve in its legions, he passed legislation to encourage marriage and childbearing (Documents 25 and 26). The unmarried and the childless suffered political and financial penalties, while those with three or more children received special privileges. New inheritance laws aimed to keep property within the family and thus also strengthen marriage. Augustus made adultery a criminal offense, sending his own daughter and granddaughter into exile.

In addition to his moral legislation, Augustus revitalized many aspects of traditional Roman religion. He boasted that he revived old ceremonies, appointed the first *flamen Dialis* (priest of Jupiter) in many years, and restored eighty-two temples that had fallen into ruin (see Documents 1 and 23). In fact, the Romans of the late Republic were not so much neglecting these temples as turning attention to new forms of worship and building other temples. However, Augustus trumpeted his achievements as examples of his piety and traditionalism. He also built a dozen new temples, including one to Apollo, his patron at Actium, on the Palatine, and the splendid complex to Mars the Avenger in the Forum of Augustus to commemorate his victory over Caesar's murderers at Philippi. In 17 BCE, Augustus held splendid celebrations called "Secular Games" to mark the sacred anniversary of the founding of Rome and the arrival of a new Golden Age. In 13 BCE, he vowed to build the magnificent Altar of Augustan Peace (*Ara Pacis Augustae*), which was dedicated four years later. In 12 BCE, at the death of Lepidus, the emperor finally was elected *pontifex maximus* (Figure 5).

Despite Augustus' identification with Roman religious traditions, he also made innovations, like his deification of Julius Caesar through a temple built in his honor in the Forum. After Actium, Octavian was offered divine honors by cities he visited in the Greek East. This was no innovation; for two centuries, Greek cities had deified Roman generals, as they had earlier deified local kings. When the province of Asia set up such a cult, Octavian allowed himself to be worshipped only with the goddess Roma (Figure 6) and only by non-Romans (see Document 21). Worship of the emperor took many forms in the cities and provinces of the empire—from altars, games, and priesthoods, to the temples set up by the Gallic provinces at Lyons and by the Athenians on the Acropolis. This proliferation of emperor-worship was not



Figure 5.
*Augustus after
Becoming High
Priest in 12 BCE.*
This is a view of
a full-size statue of
Augustus with his
toga drawn over
his head as when
performing a sacri-
fice or in prayer. It
is probably Augustus
as *pontifex
maximus* (high
priest). There are
numerous exam-
ples of Augustus
"veiled with a
toga" to emphasize
his religious piety.
*Museo Nazionale
delle Terme, Rome.*

Photo from the
Albert Hoxie Slide
Collection, UCLA.

inspired or directed from Rome but was usually the result of local desire to honor, or flatter, Augustus (see Documents 22 and 24).

Although Augustus was not worshipped as a god in Rome during his lifetime, his deification of Caesar was a clear promise of his own future. And there were other indications. The *genius* (family spirit) of Augustus was worshipped in neighborhood shrines throughout Rome. The capital now had 265 *vici* (districts), each with an altar to the *Lares Augusti* (household gods of Augustus); fourteen of them survive. Even though the emperor was not a god in Rome, his deification at his death was expected.

Augustus, like Julius Caesar, was sympathetic to Jews in Rome and Judaea. He passed legislation to control anti-Jewish actions in Greek cities of Asia and Africa. And the Jews, alone among his subjects, were permitted to issue coinage without the emperor's portrait. Later Jewish



Figure 6. *Gemma Augustea*.

In the symbolic top register of this cameo, Augustus sits as Jupiter next to the goddess Roma. He is being crowned by Oecumene, the personification of the entire world. On the left, Tiberius descends from the chariot while Germanicus stands armed next to Roma. On the ground to the right are the personifications of Italy and the Roman eagle. Above Augustus the solar disk completes the cosmic order, smiling on the emperor. The lower register portrays Roman troops and subjugated barbarians. *Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*.

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.

writers look back to the Augustan Age as a time of privilege and protection for the Jews (see Documents 36 and 37). Although Jesus Christ was born in the time of Augustus, he was still a teenaged village carpenter in Galilee when the emperor died (see Document 38). His public life and execution took place entirely under the emperor Tiberius.

THE ARMY IN WAR AND PEACE

War was central to the life and the public propaganda of Augustus for more than a half-century. From the teenager's first recruitment of troops in 44 BCE to the old man's traumatic loss of three legions in Germany in 9 CE, the *princeps* knew that above all else his power rested on the loyalty and effectiveness of his armies. While Cicero believed the center of Roman political life was the Senate and assembly, Augustus (like Caesar before him) understood that for a century the armies in the provinces had decided who would rule Rome. Yet Augustus' ambition was more than to gain and hold power; it was to create an effective government that would ensure Rome's permanent dominance over the Mediterranean world. Hence his desire for an Augustan Peace to satisfy the millions of Romans exhausted by the confiscations, proscriptions, destruction, and deprivation of decades of civil war. For the Romans, peace was the result of victory, conquest, and subjugation. There was no contradiction between the armed statue of Augustus and the Altar of Augustan Peace (see Figure 7). We see this dichotomy in the words of Virgil, where the task of Rome is "to impose a custom of peace, to spare the humbled, and crush the arrogant" (*Aeneid* VI 851).

When Augustus reduced his and Antony's sixty legions to twenty-eight, he had to provide over 100,000 men with the traditional form of pension—land. Many were settled in more than one hundred new colonies founded in Italy and throughout the provinces. These colonies, with a core of several thousand veterans and their families, became bulwarks of Roman domination in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Such modern cities as Barcelona and Zaragoza in Spain, Nîmes and Lyons in France, Turin in Italy, Tangiers in Morocco, Corinth in Greece, and Beirut in Lebanon all grew from Augustan colonies. They provided additional security in the provinces and eventually became important centers of Romanization.

In the civil wars republican armies had been armed and paid by the general who had recruited them. Most nobles served in the army as part of a senatorial career, but there were almost no career officers. Augustus professionalized his army by instituting a standard legionary command structure, ranks, and standard rates of pay. Annual pay ranged from 900 sesterces for a legionary to 15,000 sesterces for an ordinary centurion and 60,000 sesterces for a *primipilus* (the senior of the sixty centurions in a legion). This created an enormous incentive for soldiers to succeed and gain promotion.