

Augustus Caesar: The Forgotten Leader

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The end of the first century BC was a time of tumultuous change. Civil war and political turmoil had enveloped the Roman world. For close to a century, *the huge and hungry armies of rival generals had fed upon the empire; whole provinces had been reduced to desert, cities had been ruined.*¹ The Republic had reached the end of its natural lifespan and the Empire was waiting for the right moment to spring forth.

It was into this world that Gaius Octavius² was born the morning of September 23rd, 63 B.C.³ The adopted son of Julius, young Octavius rose quickly through the political ranks, earning his great uncle's respect and admiration and eventually succeeding him as the second Caesar. In doing so, he consummated the transformation to Empire and cemented the role of Emperor in Roman history. It is an unfortunate aspect of history that the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth occurred during Augustus' rule. This pivotal moment in Christianity often overshadows the accomplishments of the second Caesar's legacy. If not for this event, Augustus might well be remembered as the definition of his time, marking the transition from the instability of the past to an era of prosperity and growth that was the critical enabler of Christianity's rapid spread.

The end of the Roman Republic finally came in January 49 B.C., when Julius Caesar *took the fateful step into open revolution and crossed the Rubicon.*⁴ This single act of defiance plunged the Roman world into Imperialism and sowed the seeds of Empire; *the country had been transformed, and there was nothing left of the fine old Roman character.*⁵ Yet before Julius could fully realize this transition, he was

¹ J. Kelley Sowards, *Western Civilization to 1660* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1969), 133.

² Although Augustus had three successive names, his birth name, adopted by Suetonius, is used here.

³ G Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, translated by Robert Graves, (Penguin Books, 1983), 56.

⁴ Sowards, 130

⁵ Michael Grant, *The World of Rome* (New York: Meridian, 1960), 45.

assassinated in the senate on the Ides of March, 44 B.C.⁶ His death left a power vacuum that the senate was eager to leverage into a restoration of its authority. Hoping to *weld the frightened factions of the senate into a moderate majority under his own leadership*,⁷ the outspoken senator Cicero led his fellow senators in a vain attempt to return control of the state to the senate and abruptly halt its metamorphosis.

The fate of the newly born Empire could therefore not have been more uncertain when Octavius succeeded to the emperorship in 44 B.C. For many of the long-standing aristocracy in the senate, *Caesar had gone too far, and so he [had] died*.⁸ These men united behind Cicero in his calls for a return to Republican governance. They called upon Octavius to use his gathering power to put down the growing threat represented by Antony, whom many believed to be Julius' natural successor. There was a feeling that perhaps the two could be pitted against one another and rid the state of both possible future Imperators. However, unfortunately for the senate, *there had existed and continued to exist, a widespread feeling that a 'savior' was needed to rescue Rome and its homeland from the protracted chaos which the Republican government had been powerless to avert*.⁹ To the average Roman, the world was a continuum of commotion and confusion. Much of the countryside lay in shambles, casualties of a near century of war. The fact that the senate had presided over this long period of turmoil and yet been incapable to stop it had demonstrated that it no longer possessed the strength to hold the country together. Thus, rather than allow himself to be destroyed as a puppet of the senate, the young Octavius joined forces with Antony and Lepidus, realizing that the

⁶ Sowards, 131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸ Grant, 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*

critical time had arrived. If he acted now to move against his enemies, and dispatch the assassins of the first Caesar, Octavius stood a chance to perpetuate the Imperator. Yet if he waivered and allowed them to gain strength and the continued support of the senate, the world might revert back to a Republic. These needs led to the establishment of the Second Triumvirate, a union of Octavius, Antony, and Lepidus.¹⁰

The political and militaristic might of the Second Triumvirate permitted Octavius and Antony to effect a purge of the Roman populace of all who were sympathetic to the Republic; *not only the proven conspirators and partisans, but all who might conceivably be a danger...were outlawed and their property confiscated.*¹¹ For a short while, *murder and denunciation made a jungle of Italy,*¹² but in the end, Octavius and Antony had amassed sufficient support to cross into Greece in 42 B.C. and begin their series of campaigns against the assassins of the first emperor.¹³ Fiercely loyal to Caesar's image, for Octavius, *the underlying motive of every campaign was [the duty], above all, to avenge Caesar and keep his decrees in force.*¹⁴ For Octavius, the pursuit of his great uncle's assassins was a personal mission, motivated by loyalty and devotion to the greater good of Rome.

Upon his victorious return to Rome in 29 B.C. as the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, Octavius turned his energies towards the domestication of the senate.¹⁵ The political purges of the Second Triumvirate proved a tremendous asset at this time, as his most outspoken critics had long since been silenced. To ensure that the senate would

¹⁰ Sowards, 132.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Suetonius, 58.

¹⁵ Sowards, 133.

never again rise up against him, Octavius consummated the emasculation begun by Julius. During Julius' reign, the Senatorial Order had swollen to more than 1,000 men, many entirely unsuited for the position, *the sight of this sad and ill-assorted rabble decided Augustus to restore the Order to its former size.*¹⁶ Yet merely reducing the ranks of the senate would not be enough to ensure its continued subordination. Thus, the *Senate of the emperors*¹⁷ was born, a governing body in which open debate was officially sanctioned, but *little encouragement to do so was provided by the sudden transformations, from time to time, of great generals or administrators from the emperor's closest friends into imprisoned, executed, and unmentionable traitors.*¹⁸ The senate therefore became the simple spokesman of the emperor's policies, allowing him to present new legislation while maintaining an air of constitutional legitimacy. Octavius took advantage of his domesticated senate to *[dress] his constitutional settlements in the most elaborate Republican forms.*¹⁹ He took great pains to assert that he was the savior, the *Liberator*²⁰ of Rome, to always remain in the forefront of the populace's mind.

Perhaps Octavius' greatest accomplishment was the Pax Romana and the growth and prosperity of Rome that it enabled. This remarkable set of reforms was made possible by his newly subjugated senate. Through them he was able to effect tremendous change in every aspect of Roman law and culture. For Octavius, the wellbeing of the state came first and foremost. His ultimate wish was *that of being known as the author of the best possible Constitution, and of carrying with [him], when [he died], the hope that*

¹⁶ Suetonius, 74.

¹⁷ Grant, 44.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 42.

²⁰ Ibid.

*these foundations which [he had] established for the State [would] abide secure.*²¹ He knew that the populace was tired; *even most of the older generation had come into a world of civil wars.*²² Rather than launch on a fresh campaign of conquest and expansion, Octavius choose to strive for an internal peace that would allow him to rebuild his new Empire and give it a chance to heal itself. He embarked upon many public-works projects during this time, organizing *night-watchmen to guard against fires; and, as a precaution against floods [clearing] the Tiber channel which had been choked with accumulation of rubbish and narrowed by projecting houses.*²³ He repaved and repaired many of the primary roads to Rome, improving transportation flow to and from the city. Indeed, his architectural and engineering overhauls of Rome were so impressive that he once stated *I found Rome built of bricks; I leave her clothed in marble.*²⁴ Upon their completion, his changes were so extraordinary that *one world and one culture were beginning to appear. It was bound together by the ribbon of Roman roads that extended from Italy to every center...all roads literally led to Rome.*²⁵ This tremendous transportation network made it possible for a new environment of rapid dissemination of ideas across large distances. New doctrines like Christianity could now proliferate fluidly through the Empire, reaching every corner in short order. News of the crucifixion of Jesus could reach his followers in prompt fashion, and His teachings could just as quickly permeate the realm.

²¹ Suetonius, 69.

²² Grant, 45.

²³ Suetonius, 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁵ Sowards, 136.

Gaius Octavius finally died on the afternoon of August 19th, 14 A.D., just thirty-five days from his seventy-sixth birthday²⁶ A procession of senators bore his body from Nola to Vobillae, where a party of Roman knights had the honor of carrying it to its resting place in the vestibule of his home in Rome.²⁷ His body was burned on a pyre on the Campus Martius and his ashes returned to the family Mausoleum.²⁸ Although many posthumous honors and tributes were proposed,²⁹ in the end two simple funeral eulogies were given, by Tiberius in the Julius Caesar's Temple, and by Tiberius' son Drusus, in the Old Rostra.³⁰ Later deified in tribute of his exalted service to the Roman existence, perhaps the ultimate honor to Augustus has come in his historical commemoration. The man who crafted much what the modern world remembers as Rome ultimately paved the way for so many facets of modern culture. Indeed, his success in uniting the Empire came as both a blessing and a curse to his memory. The ease of travel, which he had made possible,³¹ permitted the spread of new ideas to vast distances in a short time. One of these ideas, Christianity, eventually grew to overshadow Augustus' accomplishments, relegating him to the unhappy tribute of presiding over the death of Jesus of Nazareth, rather than being remembered as the founder of the modern world.

²⁶ Suetonius, 110.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 111.

²⁹ Ibid., 110.

³⁰ Ibid., 111.

³¹ Ibid., 70.