

Octavian (Augustus Caesar)

By History.com Editors

UPDATED: Aug 21, 2018 | ORIGINAL: Nov 9, 2009

As the first Roman emperor (though he never claimed the title for himself), Augustus led Rome's transformation from republic to empire during the tumultuous years following the assassination of his great-uncle and adoptive father Julius Caesar. He shrewdly combined military might, institution-building and lawmaking to become Rome's sole ruler, laying the foundations of the 200-year Pax Romana (Roman Peace) and an empire that lasted, in various forms, for nearly 1,500 years.

Augustus: Birth and Inheritance

Of Augustus' many names and honorifics, historians favor three of them, each for a different phase in the emperor's life. From his birth in 63 B.C. he was Octavius; after his adoption was announced in 44 B.C., Octavian; and beginning in 26 B.C. the Roman Senate conferred on him the name Augustus, the august or exalted one. He was born Gaius Octavius Thurinus in Velletri, 20 miles from Rome. His father was a senator and governor in the Roman Republic. His mother Atai was Caesar's niece, and the young Octavius was raised in part by his grandmother Julia Ceasaris, Caesar's sister.

Did you know? In 8 B.C. Augustus had the Roman month of Sextilius renamed after himself—as his great-uncle and predecessor Julius Caesar had done with July. August was the month of several of the emperor's greatest victories, including the defeat and suicide of Antony and Cleopatra. He did not increase the month's length, which had been 31 days since the establishment of the Julian calendar in 45 B.C.

Octavius donned the toga, the Roman sign of manhood, at age 16, and began taking on responsibilities through his family connections. In 47 B.C. he went to Hispania (modern-day Spain) to fight alongside Caesar. He was shipwrecked along the way, and had to cross enemy territory to reach his great-uncle—an act that impressed Caesar enough to name Octavius his heir and successor in his will.

Augustus: The Path to Power

The 17-year-old Octavius was at Apollonia (in present-day Albania) when the news of Caesar's death and his own inheritance arrived. The dead ruler's allies, including many in the senate, rallied around Octavian against their powerful rival Mark Antony. But after Octavian's troops defeated Antony's army in northern Italy, the future emperor refused an all-out pursuit of Antony, preferring an uneasy alliance with his rival.

In 43 B.C. Octavian, Antony and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus established the Second Triumvirate, a power-sharing agreement that divided up Rome's territories among them, with Antony given the East, Lepidus Africa and Octavian the West. In 41 B.C. Antony began a romantic and political alliance with Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, which continued even after a Senatorial decree forced his marriage to Octavian's sister Octavia Minor. Lepidus remained a minor figure until Octavian finally had him ousted after the triumvirate's renewal in 37 B.C.

Antony's affair with Cleopatra continued, and in 32 B.C. he divorced Octavia. In retaliation, Octavian declared war on Cleopatra. In the naval battle of Actium a year later, Octavian's

fleet, under his admiral Agrippa, cornered and defeated Antony's ships. Cleopatra's navy raced to aid her ally, but in the end the two lovers barely escaped. They returned to Egypt and committed suicide, leaving Octavian as Rome's undisputed ruler.

Augustus: Emperor in All but Name

Historians date the start of Octavian's monarchy to either 31 B.C. (the victory at Actium) or 27 B.C., when he was granted the name Augustus. In that four-year span, Octavian secured his rule on multiple fronts. Cleopatra's seized treasure allowed him to pay his soldiers, securing their loyalty. To mollify Rome's Senate and ruling classes, he passed laws harkening back—at least on the surface—to the traditions of the Roman Republic. And to win over the people, he worked to improve and beautify the city of Rome.

During his 40-years reign, Augustus nearly doubled the size of the empire, adding territories in Europe and Asia Minor and securing alliances that gave him effective rule from Britain to India. He spent much of his time outside of Rome, consolidating power in the provinces and instituting a system of censuses and taxation that integrated the empire's furthest reaches. He expanded the Roman network of roads, founded the Praetorian Guard and the Roman postal service and remade Rome with both grand (a new forum) and practical gestures (police and fire departments).

Augustus: Family and Succession

Augustus married three times, although his first union, to Mark Antony's stepdaughter Clodia Pulchra, was unconsummated. His second wife, Scribonia, bore his only child, Julia the Elder. He divorced in 39 B.C. to marry Livia Drusilla, who had two sons—Tiberius and Drusus—by her first husband, Mark Antony's ally Tiberius Claudius Nero. The family tree became more complicated after Augustus had his stepson Tiberius briefly marry his daughter, and then adopted Tiberius outright as son and successor in A.D. 4.

Augustus Caesar died in A.D. 14, his empire secured and at peace. His reported last words were twofold: to his subjects he said, "I found Rome of clay; I leave it to you of marble," but to the friends who had stayed with him in his rise to power he added, "Have I played the part well? Then applaud me as I exit." Soon after that acknowledgement of human frailty, the Roman Senate officially declared their departed emperor, like Julius Caesar before him, to be a god.

<https://www.history.com/.amp/topics/ancient-history/emperor-augustus>

Caesar Augustus

Caesar Augustus (23 September 63 BC – 19 August AD 14), also known as Octavian, was the first Roman emperor, reigning from 27 BC until his death in AD 14. His status as the founder of the Roman Principate (the first phase of the Roman Empire) has consolidated a legacy as one of the most effective leaders in human history. The reign of Augustus initiated an era of relative peace known as the Pax Romana. The Roman world was largely free from large-scale conflict for more than two centuries, despite continuous wars of imperial expansion on the Empire's frontiers and the year-long civil war known as the "Year of the Four Emperors" over the imperial succession.

Augustus

Originally named Gaius Octavius, he was born into an old and wealthy equestrian branch of the plebeian gens Octavia. His maternal great-uncle Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC and Octavius was named in Caesar's will as his adopted son and heir; as a result, he inherited Caesar's name, estate, and the loyalty of his legions. He, Mark Antony and Marcus Lepidus formed the Second Triumvirate to defeat the assassins of Caesar.

Following their victory at the Battle of Philippi (42 BC), the Triumvirate divided the Roman Republic among themselves and ruled as de facto dictators. The Triumvirate was eventually torn apart by the competing ambitions of its members; Lepidus was exiled in 36 BC and Antony was defeated by Octavian at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC.

After the demise of the Second Triumvirate, Augustus restored the outward façade of the free Republic, with governmental power vested in the Roman Senate, the executive magistrates and the legislative assemblies, yet maintained autocratic authority by having the Senate grant him lifetime tenure as supreme military command, tribune and censor. A similar ambiguity is seen in his chosen names, the implied rejection of monarchical titles whereby he called himself Princeps Civitatis (First Citizen) juxtaposed with his adoption of the ancient title Augustus.

Augustus dramatically enlarged the Empire, annexing Egypt, Dalmatia, Pannonia, Noricum and Raetia, expanding possessions in Africa, and completing the conquest of Hispania, but suffered a major setback in Germania. Beyond the frontiers, he secured the Empire with a buffer region of client states and made peace with the Parthian Empire through diplomacy.

He reformed the Roman system of taxation, developed networks of roads with an official courier system, established a standing army, established the Praetorian Guard, official police and fire-fighting services for Rome, and rebuilt much of the city during his reign. Augustus died in AD 14 at the age of 75, probably from natural causes.

Persistent rumors, substantiated somewhat by deaths in the imperial family, have claimed his wife Livia poisoned him.

He was succeeded as emperor by his adopted son Tiberius, Livia's son and also former husband of Augustus' only biological daughter Julia.

Was Augustus Evil?

While Augustus is ranked as the best Emperor the Romans ever had he was not a nice person always. In his early life he could be brutal though in his later life he was much more clam.

1. After becoming Consul at the age of 19 he discovered that Caesar's assassins- who now called themselves liberators- were marching to Rome with 17 legions intent on destroying Augustus. He teamed up with Antony and together they had 19 legions. But paying this many legions became an issue. To raise the needed money they started the proscriptions. Proscription is a list of "enemies of the state" whos lives and lands were forfeit. 2500 names were added to this list and all 2500 were killed. This included the likes of Cicero- one of Rome's most gifted politicians and Augustus's ally. When the stolen property was not enough they added another 1000 names and eventually resorted to just taxing the Italians.
2. After defeating the liberators Augustus was in a bad position. He had been left in charge of Rome and had to demobilize some of the 19 legions. He needed to give these man land to retire on and a retirement payment as well. These legions had fought a civil war so with no new land added to the empire there was nowhere to settle them. Augustus had to just straight up steal land from Roman citizens and give it to the legions. The people got made and Augustus stopped but then the legions got made and he resumed. The legions and people of Rome began fighting each other and this caused a bit of a revolt in Italy.
3. In the aftermath of many of the battles he was involved in he executed prisoners of war brutally and was known to be violent.
4. When he was emperor he instituted a harsh series of laws around marriage. A conservative at heart Augustus was concerned about the degradation of the Roman family. Young people were having kids and adultery had become so common that people just chose to forgo marriage altogether. He first gave big tax breaks to families that had children but then he made adultery illegal. If a woman was caught cheating she could be banished, fined, or executed.
5. After instituting these harsh adultery laws he discovered that his daughter Julia- who was married to Tiberius, the heir apparent, had been basically sleeping with every single person in Rome. Maybe not everyone but we are talking hundreds and hundreds of people. He was FURIOUS over this and banished her from Rome. From this point on she was dead to him and she died in impoverished obscurity off on some distant island.

No one really took this seriously because Augustus himself was known to sleep with nearly anyone who struck his fancy. His wife Livia had also been married and pregnant when he met her. Despite being married to a pregnant wife himself Augustus divorced his wife and married Liva.

If you want to do further research into Augustus I just made a YouTube video on his early life that can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/8XF9VxfPxxI>

Augustus Caesar Biography

<https://youtu.be/EaCbHw-ZbZQ>

Julius Caesar

<https://youtu.be/xuHwfm2lHrk>