

Octavian (Augustus) vs. Mark Antony

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In the power vacuum left by Julius Caesar's death, a struggle commenced to gain control of Rome. The main contenders were Caesar's grandnephew Octavian and Mark Antony, who partnered with the famed Cleopatra. Get a behind-the-scenes look at the battle between Octavian and Mark Antony, as well as its aftermath.

Statue of Caesar Augustus (Octavian) in Rome, Italy

Octavian Pursues Mark Antony

The war of Octavian versus Antony and Cleopatra culminated in the Battle of Actium, won in crushing fashion by Agrippa's fleet.

Just one thing, however, marred Octavian's moment of triumph. While Antony's fleet had been nearly totally sunk or captured, and most of Antony's legions had been either destroyed outright or helplessly stranded and thoroughly demoralized, Antony and Cleopatra themselves had managed to sneak through the cordon of Agrippa's warships and escape to Egypt.

As long as his rivals remained free, the war could not really be declared over, and therefore Octavian now turned his attention to their pursuit.

This is a transcript from the video series [The Roman Empire: From Augustus to the Fall of Rome](#). Watch it now, on Wondrium.

First, however, Octavian had to briefly return to Italy in order to arrange rewards for some of his own long-serving legions, who were threatening mutiny. This voyage entailed a dangerous wintertime crossing of the Mediterranean, and despite his ship suffering severe storm damage, losing a rudder and having its rigging torn away, Octavian made it to Italy.

There, Octavian soothed the disgruntled troops, and after only a month, returned to the east to organize the assault on Egypt. Antony and Cleopatra still posed a credible threat, since Cleopatra could draw upon the substantial wealth of Egypt, and Antony still possessed significant military forces, most importantly four experienced Roman legions in Cyrenaica, located in North Africa, west of Egypt.

Octavian swiftly removed the latter menace by persuading all four of the Cyrenaican legions to desert over to his side. Octavian then launched a two-pronged attack on Egypt, with the turncoat Cyrenaican legions advancing from the west and Octavian leading another army into Egypt from the east.

Antony's Humiliating Decline

No one wants to stay on a sinking ship, and by now it was clear to all that Antony's fortunes were foundering. His men were demoralized, and more and more troops began to abandon his cause.

Upon his defeat, Mark Antony returned to Alexandria to commit suicide.

The deteriorating mood of his men is exemplified by an embarrassing incident. After Antony won a minor cavalry skirmish, in an effort to boost morale, he singled out one of the soldiers who had fought bravely and had Cleopatra publicly honor the man by awarding him a golden helmet and breastplate.

The soldier took the valuable prizes and promptly deserted to Octavian's side. Seeing his best chance in a pitched battle where his superior generalship might give him the edge, Antony boldly led his entire army and navy out to confront Octavian's forces.

But instead of fighting, straightaway all of Antony's warships switched sides, and all of his soldiers simply ran from the battlefield.

In despair, Antony returned to Alexandria, determined to commit suicide rather than suffer the humiliation of being captured by Octavian. Even this turned into a humiliating debacle.

The servant who Antony ordered to stab him, killed himself instead. Antony was then forced to fall on his own sword, but only succeeded in inflicting an agonizing, but not immediately fatal stomach wound.

Unable to find anyone who would finish him off, he then went to see Cleopatra, who had taken refuge in a mausoleum. However, because the doors had already been sealed, in order to gain entrance, Antony had to be tied to a rope and awkwardly and painfully hoisted up into the structure like a sack of grain. There, he at last expired in Cleopatra's arms.

Learn more about [Octavian's civil war against Mark Antony](#)

Octavian Conquers Egypt

Octavian triumphantly took possession of Alexandria, of Egypt and its riches, and of Cleopatra herself—who, contrary to Hollywood depictions, did not kill herself right away. The surviving sources are not in agreement on the sequence of events, but it seems to have been at least another week before Cleopatra's death.

Officially, she perished by allowing a poisonous asp to bite her, but she may have been quietly killed at Octavian's order, who then announced that she had committed suicide.

There is no doubt that Octavian had several lesser members of her family executed at this time, including two teenage boys: Caesarion, who was Cleopatra's son with Julius Caesar; and Antyllus, who was Antony's eldest son from a previous marriage. Octavian did, however, spare Antony and Cleopatra's other, younger children.

With the treasury of Egypt in his possession, Octavian was able to pay off his veterans adequately. He also indulged in a bit of tourism in the famous city of Alexandria.

The leader was most eager to pay his respects at the tomb of Alexander the Great, which contained the legendary conqueror's embalmed body. With the subjugation of Egypt, Octavian had become the ruler of the known world, just as Alexander had been; and, in a nice coincidence, Octavian at this moment was 33 years old, the exact age Alexander had been when he died.

Up until now, Octavian had stamped documents using a signet ring that was engraved with a sphinx. Now, Octavian replaced it with one that bore an image of Alexander.

Octavian became Rome's first emperor, ushering in a political system that would endure for over 500 years.

Octavian's moment of reverence was marred, however, when he clumsily knocked the nose off Alexander's corpse.

Octavian returned to Rome in August of 30 B.C., and celebrated a triple triumph in which the loot acquired in Egypt was paraded through the streets of the city, along with a float bearing an effigy of the defeated Cleopatra.

Octavian lost no time in attempting to put his own spin on his defeat of Antony, downplaying the fact that it had really been a civil war, and instead stressing that he was the person who had brought peace to the Mediterranean after decades of unrest and violence. As a symbol of this role, he decreed that the doors of the Temple of Janus be ritually closed, an act that only occurred when Rome was at peace.

Octavian claimed that this closure of the temple was only the third such occurrence. The memory of Antony was systematically besmirched; his birthday was labeled a day of ill-omen, and orders went out that all of his statues should be smashed.

Meanwhile, to bolster his own popularity, Octavian bestowed largesse upon the Romans on an unprecedented scale, distributing 400 sesterces to every citizen, granting land to veterans, canceling taxes, and staging spectacles for the entertainment of the people that presented novelties such as wild beast hunts featuring the slaughter of a rhino and a hippo—exotic creatures never before seen at Rome.

Learn more about [Rome's first emperor](#)

Octavian's Legacy

Despite all of his accomplishments, Octavian might have gone down in history as just another Roman warlord in the mold of Marius or Sulla, or even Julius Caesar, who had achieved momentary dominance and then passed from the stage. But it is what Octavian did next that sets him apart from all of these men and makes him truly one of the most influential figures in history.

Octavian found a way to solve the puzzle that Caesar could not—that of how to rule Rome as one man, and not be killed for being too like a king. Not only would Octavian crack this difficult riddle, but he would become Rome’s first emperor, and the political system that he created would endure for the next half a millennium.

This system would become the template for countless later empires up through the present day, and Octavian himself would become the model emperor against whom all subsequent ones would be measured.

The culture and history of the Mediterranean basin, the western world, and even global history itself, were all profoundly shaped and influenced by the actions and legacy of Octavian. He was the founder of the Roman Empire, and we still live today in the world that he created.

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Kate is a writer, novelist, and blogger living in Los Angeles. She has been writing for The Great Courses since 2017. It incorporates her two favorite things: writing and learning.