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AUGUSTUS
CAESAR

63 B.C.—14 A.D.

Augustus Caesar, the founder of the Roman Empire, is one of the great pivotal figures in history. He ended the civil wars that had disrupted the Roman Republic during the first century B.C., and he reorganized the Roman government so that internal peace and prosperity were maintained for two centuries.

Gaius Octavius (better known as Octavian; he did not receive the title “Augustus” until he was thirty-five years old) was born in 63 B.C. He was the grandnephew of Julius Caesar, who was the leading political figure of Rome during Octavian’s youth. Julius Caesar, who had no legitimate sons of his own, liked the youth, and helped prepare him for a political career. However,

when Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C., Octavian was still only an eighteen-year-old student.

The death of Caesar set off a long and bitter struggle for power between various Roman military and political figures. At first, his rivals, who were all men of long experience in the rough arena of Roman politics, did not consider the youthful Octavian a serious threat. Indeed, the young man's only visible asset was that Julius Caesar had adopted him as his son. By making skillful use of this advantage, Octavian managed to win the support of some of Caesar's legions. Many of Caesar's troops, however, chose to support Mark Antony, who had been one of Caesar's closest associates. A series of battles over the next few years eliminated all the other contestants for power; by 36 B.C., Rome, and the many territories she had already conquered, were divided between Mark Antony, who controlled the eastern portion, and Octavian, who controlled the West. For a few years, there was an uneasy truce between them. During that time, Antony seems to have paid too much attention to his romance with Cleopatra, while Octavian steadily improved his position. War broke out between the two men in 32 B.C., and the issue was decided by the great naval battle at Actium (31 B.C.), which was won by Octavian's forces. The following year, the war ended with the complete triumph of Octavian, and Antony and Cleopatra both committed suicide.

Octavian had now achieved the same position of power that Julius Caesar had attained fifteen years earlier. Caesar had been assassinated, because it had been obvious that he intended to end republican government in Rome and set himself up as a monarch. But by 30 B.C., after many years of civil war and the obvious failure of republican government in Rome, most Romans were willing to accept a benevolent despot, as long as the pretense of democratic rule was continued.

Octavian, though he had been ruthless during his fight to the top, was surprisingly conciliatory once he was established in power. In 27 B.C., to soothe senatorial feelings, he announced that he was restoring the Republic, and he offered to resign all





*The Roman Empire
at the death
of Augustus.*

his government posts. In fact, however, he retained his position as head of the provinces of Spain, Gaul, and Syria. Since the majority of Roman troops were in these three provinces, the actual power was securely in his hands. The Senate voted him the honorific title of Augustus, but he never assumed the title of king. In theory, Rome was still a republic, and Augustus was no more than *princeps* (first citizen). In actual practice, the grateful and docile Senate appointed Augustus to whatever positions he chose, and for the remainder of his life he was effectively a dictator. By the time he died, in 14 A.D., Rome had completed the transition from republic to monarchy, and his adopted son succeeded him without difficulty.

Augustus stands out as perhaps the best example in history of a capable, benevolent despot. He was a true statesman, whose conciliatory policies did much to heal the deep divisions resulting from the Roman civil wars.

Augustus ruled Rome for over forty years, and his policies influenced the Empire for many years to come. Under him, Roman armies completed the conquest of Spain, Switzerland, Galatia (in Asia Minor), and a large portion of the Balkans. By the end of his rule, the northern boundary of the Empire was not much different from the Rhine-Danube line which was to be the northern border for most of the next few centuries.

Augustus was an extraordinarily able administrator and played a major role in building up a capable civil service. He revised the tax structure and financial system of the Roman state; he reorganized the Roman army; and he established a permanent navy. He also organized a personal bodyguard, the Praetorian Guard, which in future centuries was to play a great role in selecting and deposing emperors.

Under Augustus, an extensive network of excellent roads was constructed throughout the Roman Empire; many public buildings were erected in Rome itself; and the city was greatly beautified. Temples were constructed, and Augustus encouraged observance of and loyalty to the old Roman religion. Laws were passed encouraging marriage and the raising of children.

From 30 B.C. on, Rome had internal peace under Augustus. The natural result was a greatly increased prosperity. This, in turn, led to a great flourishing of the arts, and the Augustan Age was the Golden Age of Roman literature. Rome's greatest poet, Virgil, lived during this period, as did many other writers, including Horace and Livy. Ovid incurred the displeasure of Augustus, and was banished from Rome.

Augustus had no sons, and a nephew and two grandsons died before him; he therefore adopted his stepson, Tiberius, and designated him his successor. But the dynasty (which later included the infamous rulers Caligula and Nero) soon became extinct. Nevertheless, the period of internal peace that commenced with Augustus, the so-called *Pax Romana*, was to endure for some two hundred years. During this extended period of peace and prosperity, Roman culture was suffused deeply into the territories that Augustus and other Roman leaders had conquered.

The Roman Empire is the most celebrated empire of antiquity, and rightly so. For Rome was both the culmination of ancient civilization and the principal conduit by which the ideas and cultural achievements of the peoples of the ancient world (Egyptians, Babylonians, Jews, Greeks, and others) have been transmitted to western Europe.

It is interesting to compare Augustus with his granduncle, Julius Caesar. Despite Augustus's good looks, intelligence, strength of character, and military successes, he lacked his predecessor's charisma. Julius excited the imagination of his contemporaries far more than August did, and he has remained more famous ever since. In their actual influence upon history, however, Augustus was by far the more important of the two.

It is also interesting to compare Augustus with Alexander the Great. Both started their careers when quite young. But Augustus had to overcome much tougher competition in order to reach the top. His military ability was not as exceptional as Alexander's, but it was certainly impressive, and his conquests were to prove much more enduring. That, in fact, is the greatest difference between the two men. Augustus carefully built for the

future, and as a result, his long-term influence on human history has been considerably larger.

Augustus might also be compared with George Washington. Both of them played important (and somewhat analogous) roles in world history; but in view of the length of Augustus's rule, the success of his policies, and the importance of the Roman Empire in world history, I believe that Augustus should be ranked the higher of the two.

Statue of Augustus Caesar at the Vatican.

