

CHAPTER 13

THE EMPEROR'S NEW NAMES

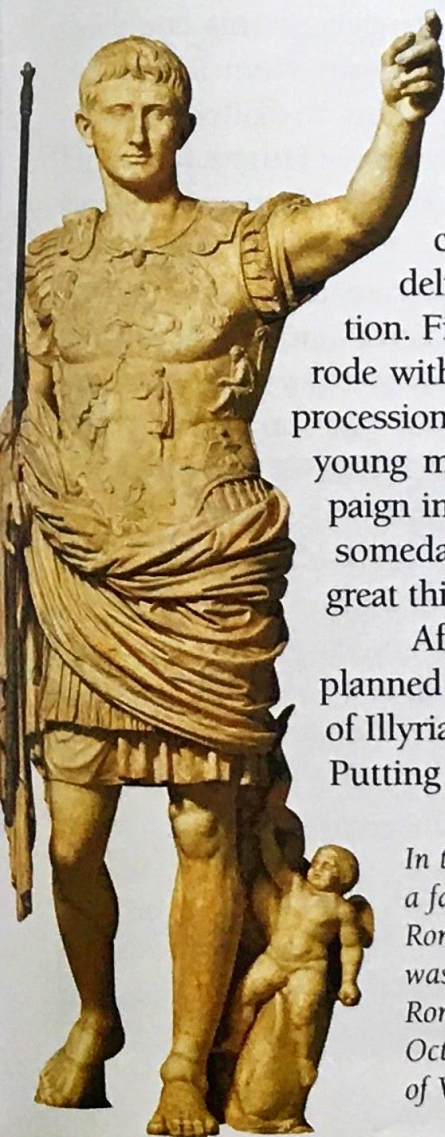
THE REIGN OF AUGUSTUS

“When I was 18 years old . . . I raised an army and used it to bring freedom back to the Roman state. I spent my own money to do it. . . . Because of this, the Senate passed a special resolution to make me a senator.” These words were written by Julius Caesar’s great-nephew: the first person to serve as a Roman general and member of the Senate while he was still a teenager.

Julius Caesar, who had no legitimate sons of his own, was especially fond of his sister’s grandson, Gaius Octavius. When his sister Julia died, the dictator chose 12-year-old Octavius to deliver his grandmother’s funeral oration. Five years later, in 46 BCE, Octavius rode with his great-uncle in his triumphal procession into Rome. The next year, the young man joined Caesar’s military campaign in Spain. The dictator believed that someday his great-nephew would do great things for Rome.

After his victories in Spain, Caesar planned a war against the rebellious tribes of Illyria, a region across the Adriatic Sea. Putting young Octavius in charge, he

In this first-century statue, Octavius wears a fancy breastplate showing the heroes of Roman mythology. The actual suit of armor was discovered in his wife’s villa near Rome. The small statue of Cupid shows Octavius’s divine ancestry as a descendant of Venus, the mother of Cupid.



“ AUGUSTUS AND
SUETONIUS

“ Augustus, *My Achievements*,
14 CE

“Legitimate” comes from the word *legitimus*, which is kin to the Latin word for law, *lex*. A “legitimate” child is one whose parents are married to each other.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The Romans called Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus by the name “Caesar,” but we have three other names for him as well. We call him Octavius (his given name) when he was young, Octavian after Julius Caesar adopted him, and finally Augustus after he is given this honorary title.

sent the army to Illyria with instructions to wait for him there. Then Caesar returned to Rome to begin reforming the government—a big job. Caesar set to work with energy and determination. But his plans were foiled by the daggers of his enemies, when he was assassinated on the Ides of March.

Eighteen-year-old Octavius was in Illyria when he got news of his uncle's death. He made up his mind to return to Rome. While he was packing to leave, a second messenger came with the surprising news that, in his will, Caesar had adopted Octavius as his son and made him the heir to an enormous fortune. This news was sure to raise eyebrows—and perhaps some swords—in Rome.

Although he was still an inexperienced teenager, Octavius was suddenly a public figure. He would soon be plunged into the cutthroat world of Roman politics. His mother and stepfather saw how dangerous this could be. They tried to persuade him to stay away from Rome. But Octavius was determined, and he set out to claim his inheritance. As a first step, he took his adoptive father's name and combined it with his own birth name. He became Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus.

Rome, meanwhile, was in the hands of Caesar's deputy, Mark Antony. He had seen the assassination and moved quickly to grab power. Octavian was not yet in Rome, so Antony delivered Caesar's funeral oration. His speech helped to persuade people that the dictator's assassins were the enemies of Rome. With lightning speed, Antony took over Caesar's money, property, and all of his official papers.

This was not what Caesar had wanted. In his will, he promised a generous gift of money to every Roman citizen. But Antony refused to honor the murdered hero's wish.

When Octavian reached Rome, he honored his great-uncle by giving his own money to the citizens. With the help of Cicero's speeches and with Caesar's veterans marching behind him, Octavian earned the support of the Senate. Not only was he elected to the Senate, he also became a consul—even though, according to Roman law, he was too young to hold these offices. Octavian bragged about it when he later wrote his memoirs.

For about a year, Octavian and Antony battled for control, but they finally became allies. They joined with Caesar's general Lepidus to form a triple alliance, the Second Triumvirate. The three men, called *triumvirs*, were determined to hunt down Brutus and the other conspirators in Caesar's murder. Some suggested that Brutus be decapitated, and his head brought back to Rome and thrown at the feet of Julius Caesar's statue.

Antony and Octavian left Lepidus in charge of the government while they went off with their armies to find the assassins of Julius Caesar. At Philippi in northern Greece, the *triumvirs* were victorious and Brutus committed suicide. Even though Antony was the more successful general and Octavian was sick during the decisive battle, all three men claimed victory and divided the empire among themselves.

Octavian and Antony may have been partners, but they were never friends for long. While Antony was busy reorganizing Roman territories in the East (and meeting Egypt's queen, Cleopatra), Octavian **confiscated** land in the Italian countryside and gave it to retired soldiers as a reward for their services. Because of these landgrabs, trouble flared again between the two leaders. Antony's wife and brother led a rebellion against Octavian while Antony was away.

cum + spirare =
“together” + “breathe”
Conspirators “breathe together”—secretly plot in whispers, as did the murderers of Julius Caesar

“Confiscated” stems from the Latin word *fiscus*, which originally meant a woven basket or chest, but later came to mean “the imperial treasury.” When something is confiscated, it is taken by the authorities.



Mother Earth basks among the symbols of plenty—birds, animals, fruit—that Italy enjoyed during Augustus's reign. This marble carving is from the Altar of Augustan Peace, which was built in 13 BCE and dedicated in 9 BCE.



Octavian built the Altar of Peace shown on this coin. The letters S and C stand for "Senatus Consulto," which tell us that it was produced "by the order of the Senate."

When Antony heard about it, he had to come home to deal with the crisis.

By 30 BCE, the war had ended. Antony was dead, and Octavian had defeated all of his rivals. At 33 years of age, he was suddenly the master of the Roman world.

Octavian wanted everyone to know that he had brought peace to Rome after decades of civil war. He called it the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, and built an elaborate Altar of Peace on the main road leading into Rome to celebrate his accomplishment. Octavian also demonstrated his victory by closing the doors of the temple of Janus—the god with two faces who guarded the doors of homes and cities. By tradition, these doors were kept open in times of war so that Janus would be free to help Rome against its enemies. In 500 years of almost-constant war, the temple doors had only been closed twice.

Rome was at peace, but its government was a mess. Enemies along the frontiers had taken advantage of Rome's turmoil by rebelling against its control or refusing to pay its taxes. Octavian had to overcome these troublesome neighbors, but he also had to quiet the quarrels among the leaders of Rome. It was tricky to keep the Senate on his side while attacking corruption within it.

Hundreds of senators had died in the civil wars. Octavian filled their places with men who had been loyal to him over the years. Many of these new Senate members were not from Rome, but from other Italian cities. Men like Octavian's best friend, his general Agrippa, formed the new ruling class. Octavian chose them not for their family ties, but for their ability and loyalty.

Although Octavian was wise enough to avoid the title of king, he accepted the name of Augustus in 27 BCE.

After I had put out the fires of civil war, . . . I transferred the Republic from my power to the control of the Senate and people of Rome. For this . . . I was named Augustus by the Senate. . . . From this time on, I topped everyone in influence.

66 Augustus, *My Achievements*, 14 CE

Augustus Caesar, now the emperor of Rome, worked to reorganize the government and the military. His greatest accomplishment was the creation of a system of government that lasted in Rome for five centuries: the Roman Empire.

Augustus created Rome's first police and fire brigade. He created a network of roads that connected the major cities of the empire, linking them all to Rome. He changed the way finances were handled and issued new gold and silver coins. He gave free food to the poor. He built the Forum of Augustus and decorated it with statues of his ancestors. He beautified the city and boasted of this accomplishment: "I found a city made of brick and left it a city of marble." Augustus also sponsored artists and poets like Horace and Virgil, whose works glorified Rome—and, of course, himself.

Throughout his reign, Augustus never forgot that his great-uncle had been killed by jealous enemies who feared his power and popularity. Augustus pretended that his powers were all voluntarily given. He allowed freedom of speech and encouraged people to give him advice. But he was clever. He knew how to use power without seeming to seek or even treasure it. During his rule, magistrates were still elected to govern Rome. By sharing power with the magistrates, Augustus kept people from worrying that he was governing Rome alone. In fact, the soldiers were loyal to him and him alone—he paid their salaries and his treasury would pay their pensions.

The emperor's authority was so great that everyone left all the major decisions to him. But he was also very careful. Augustus kept a force of 4,500 soldiers to defend him. These soldiers, later called the Praetorian Guard, protected all of Italy. But some of them were always on hand to protect the emperor. To be on the safe side, the guards allowed only one senator at a time to approach the emperor, and they searched each man before he came close.

Augustus was a hard-working emperor. He traveled to many of the provinces under his care, but he was sickly and didn't expect to live very long. After his military campaign in Spain, Augustus returned to Rome and, in 23 BCE, became

66 Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*, 130 CE

OCTAVIAN'S
CAREER

44 BCE

Murder of Julius
Caesar; Octavius
becomes Octavian

43-33 BCE

Second Triumvirate:
Octavian, Antony, and
Lepidus

42 BCE

Defeat of Brutus at
Philippi

31 BCE

Defeat of Antony and
Cleopatra at Actium

27 BCE

Octavian given name
of "Augustus"

2 BCE

Augustus named
"Father of the
Country"

14 CE

Death of Augustus at
age 77

quite ill and began thinking about a successor to follow him as Rome's ruler. His first choice had been his nephew Marcellus, but Marcellus had died young—not long after he had married Julia, the emperor's only daughter.

Julia played the key role in her father's search for a successor. After Marcellus died, she had to marry again, to a man of her father's choice. For her next husband, Augustus chose his general Agrippa, his closest friend and advisor. Although Julia was much younger than Agrippa, she dutifully married him, and the couple had five children. Then Agrippa died.

Although Augustus adopted his young grandsons as his heirs, he still needed a husband for Julia to protect the boys in the event of his own death. So he forced his stepson Tiberius to divorce his wife, even though Tiberius loved her very deeply. (He used to follow his former wife on the streets, weeping.) The marriage between Julia and Tiberius was a disaster: Julia was unfaithful, and Tiberius went into exile on the Greek island of Rhodes. Augustus was forced to banish his own daughter from Rome for her crime of adultery.

Julia must have spilled many tears over her father's marriage choices for her—especially the last one. She hated Tiberius, and he felt the same way about her. Even so, she would never have questioned her father's right to select her husbands. This was a parent's duty, especially if dad happened to rule the Roman Empire.

In spite of his poor health, Augustus lived to be 76 years old and reigned for 41 years as emperor. In the last years of his life, he realized that he must choose a successor. But whom? His beloved grandsons had both died young. With only one logical choice left, Augustus summoned his stepson Tiberius to Rome. He named this gloomy man as his co-ruler and successor.

In 14 CE, Augustus took a last journey by sea. He caught a chill in the night air and became quite ill. He called Tiberius to his bedside and spoke with him for a long time in private. Then, on August 19, knowing that the end was near, he called for a mirror and had his hair carefully combed. The biographer Suetonius tells the story:

"he summoned a group of friends and asked 'Have I played my part in the comedy of life believably enough?' Then he added lines from a play:

If I have pleased you, kindly show
Appreciation with a warm goodbye.

Augustus Caesar had played many roles well: the dutiful heir of Julius Caesar; the victor over Antony; the reformer of Roman government; the generous sponsor of literature and art; and, in his final years, the kindly father figure of Rome—providing food, entertainment, and security to his people. Near the end of his life, he remembered: "When I was 60 years old, the Senate, the equestrians, and the whole people of Rome gave me the title of Father of my Country and decreed that this should be inscribed in the porch of my house."

When Augustus died, all Italy mourned, and the Senate proclaimed him a god. His rule marked a turning point in history. In his lifetime, the Roman Republic came to an end. But he rescued the Roman state by turning it into a system ruled by emperors—a form of government that survived for another 500 years. In an age in which many rulers were called "saviors" and "gods," Augustus Caesar truly deserved to be called the savior of the Roman people.

☞ Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*,
130 CE

☞ Augustus, *My Achievements*,
14 CE