

Augustus - two thousand years on

Caesar Augustus died on the 19th August AD 14 and so we are close to the two thousandth anniversary of his death, although with the centenary of the start of the Great War I daresay the date will pass without much notice. He was just short of his seventy-seventh birthday and had ruled without serious challenge for more than four decades since Mark Antony took his own life in 30 BC. His adopted son Tiberius succeeded him, and even when the family line came to an end with Nero, subsequent emperors took the names Caesar and Augustus as titles. During his lifetime he created the system of monarchy that would govern Rome for centuries, tactfully veiling his power without ever letting it go, but avoiding titles like king or dictator.

For all his achievement and the crucial importance of his actions, somehow Augustus is no longer among the figures from the ancient world who still register in the popular imagination. Julius Caesar, Caligula or Nero prompt instant recognition - if often with only a vague sense of who they were - but Augustus does not. These days his name is most often heard at Christmas when Luke's description of the Nativity is read out in Carol Services. Augustus appears in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* - both frequently performed on stage and often studied in schools so still well known - but did not receive a play of his own. Perhaps this was because he died of old age rather than being stabbed to death at a meeting of the Senate, like Julius Caesar, or taking his own life, like Brutus and Cassius, Antony and Cleopatra.

Yet there is no lack of drama in Augustus' story. It takes a concerted effort when looking at his early career to remember that he was only eighteen on the Ides of March 44 BC. He did not know that he was named as principal heir in his great uncle Caesar's will until after the latter's murder. Political office could not be bequeathed in the Republic, nor could someone be adopted posthumously, and yet he chose to interpret the legacy in this way. His ambition was precocious, especially at Rome where office was tied to age and maturity, but no one took him very seriously at first. Mark Antony dismissed him as 'a boy who owes everything to a name.' Cicero saw Antony as the great danger and felt that the young Augustus was a weapon to use against him - 'we must praise the young man, reward him, discard him.'

It did not work out that way. He fought for the Senate against Antony, and then joined Antony and Lepidus to form the second triumvirate. They seized Rome and executed their enemies, reviving Sulla's technique of posting proscription lists. A man who was named lost all legal rights and could be killed by anyone. Cicero was caught and killed before the lists were put up. In later years the triumvirs tried to shift the blame for this massacre onto their colleagues, but a reputation for youthful cruelty stuck to Augustus. In that pragmatic Roman way, it was seen as surprising that so young a man would already have so many enemies.

At the end of his life he described these years simply - 'At the age of nineteen on my own responsibility and at my own expense I raised an army, with which I successfully championed the liberty of the republic when it was oppressed by the tyranny of a faction.'

There is no mention of the fact that private citizens were not supposed to raise their own armies. Tacitus unsurprisingly would later judge events far more cynically - 'When the killing of Brutus and Cassius had disarmed the state; when (*Sextus*) Pompey had been crushed in Sicily, and with Lepidus thrown aside and Antony slain, even the Julian party was leaderless but for Caesar (*Augustus*).'

Augustus won, and after the Battle of Actium there were no more challengers with the military might to oppose him - something he took great care to ensure by maintaining a tight control over the army. Success did not make him popular, but what Romans and provincials alike wanted more than anything else was peace and stability. Civil war had plagued the Republic since 88 BC when Sulla turned his legions on Rome. Casualties had been heavy, especially among the senatorial families, while armies had fought and plundered all around the Mediterranean. Plenty of provincial leaders and communities loyally supported Rome, only to find themselves often on the losing side in a civil war and forced to pay dearly to satisfy the victor. Italian communities had suffered land confiscations as warlords like Augustus had to find farms to give to their discharged soldiers. In the thirties BC Virgil imagined the thoughts of one of the dispossessed - perhaps from experience since it may be that his family lost land at this time.

'Ah, shall I ever, long years hence, look again on my country's bounds, on my humble cottage with its turf-clad roof - shall I, long years hence, look amazed on a few ears of corn, once my kingdom? Is an impious soldier to hold these well-tilled fallows? A barbarian these crops? See where strife has brought our unhappy citizens!

After so much upheaval, Roman citizens wanted to be sure that they would still own their own property in the years to come, and not be conscripted to fight in yet another civil war. Leaders and governing bodies in the provinces similarly wanted to be confident that the honours and obligations given to them would not change overnight as Roman warlords rose and fell. Decades of inertia by a Senate too caught up with bitter and often violent competition for office and honours had left many appeals unanswered and many disputes unresolved. Augustus laboured to deal with this. It is often forgotten that he travelled more than any emperor until Hadrian. Augustus spent more of his reign in the provinces than in Rome or even Italy. He worked hard, receiving delegations and listening to petitions, doing this wherever he was. Deputations came to him whether he was in Rome, or Spain, Gaul, Greece or Syria, waited to be summoned, and in the end were heard and given an answer.

Augustus toiled to make the state work again, and at the same time he gave it peace - a theme constantly celebrated in art and literature, most notably in the *ara pacis Augusti* (the altar of Augustan Peace) an honour voted by the Senate in 13 BC. This was internal peace and the absence of civil war, for at the same time he was one of the greatest conquerors of new territory. Defeating foreign enemies was an entirely honourable and proper achievement for a Roman aristocrat. As Virgil put it, '... remember, Roman, - for these are your arts - that you have to rule the nations by your power, to add good custom to peace, to spare the conquered and overcome the proud in war.'

Order returned to the world, an order based on Roman victory and the respect for Roman power. Ovid wrote of the *ara pacis* in his *Fasti* and reflects the Roman understanding of peace. '... . Come, Peace, thy dainty tresses wreathed with Actian laurels, and let thy gentle presence abide in the whole world. So may there be neither foes nor food for triumphs, thou shalt be unto our chiefs a glory greater than war. May the soldier bear arms only to check the armed aggressor ... ! May the world near and far dread the sons of Aeneas, and if there be land that feared not Rome, may it love Rome instead!' Peace and prosperity came from the victory at Actium and the continued strength of Rome under the leadership of Augustus.

Augustus styled himself *princeps* - the foremost servant of the Republic - and boasted of returning power to the Senate and People. His constitutional position evolved gradually through improvisation as much as careful planning, but never altered the simple truth that he controlled the legions and could not be made to give them up. Scholars like to discern a senatorial opposition forcing him to maintain a veneer of constitutional conduct, but this exists largely in their imagination. As Tacitus put it Augustus '... seduced the army by bounties, the people by the free corn dole, the whole world by the comfort of peace, and then gradually assumed the power of the Senate, the magistrates, and the making of law. There was no opposition, for the bravest men had fallen in the line of battle or to proscription lists' The only real constraint on his behaviour came from his own sense of what was wise and right.

There was no real, still less appealing, alternative to his rule. The Republic had not functioned properly within living memory. Brutus and Cassius murdered Caesar to restore liberty and then raised armies and acted just like all the other warlords of the era - and in the end they lost. Augustus gave the empire stability and made institutions work again or created new ones. It took time, but the benefits of his regime soon became so obvious - and his intention of retaining power so clear - that the blood-soaked triumvir faded from memory and instead there was only the *princeps*, the father of his country (*pater patriae*) as he was hailed in 2 BC. Few emperors ruled as long, or were so lamented when they died.