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Roman Propaganda in the Age of Augustus

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Roman Propaganda in the Age of Augustus

A senior thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in
partial fulfillment of the requirements of a Bachelor of the Arts in History

By

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San Rafael, California

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INTRODUCTION

The Roman empire is arguably the most influential empire that has ever existed. The Roman influence permeates all aspects of Western civilization from politics and law to military organization and strategy. Originally a small kingdom on the Italian peninsula, the Romans eventually conquered, coerced, and assimilated the entire Mediterranean world creating an empire that stretched from the northern reaches of Britain to North Africa, as far west as Portugal, and the Persian Gulf in the east.

The Roman's territorial expansion was not the only impressive aspect of their legacy, their longevity is equally impressive. Legend says that Rome was founded in 753 BCE by Romulus who named the city after himself.¹ The empire did not end with the fall of Rome (476 CE) however.² The Romans endured as the eastern Byzantine Empire for nearly an additional 1000 years. The end of the Roman empire was heralded with Ottoman cannons at the fall of Constantinople in 1453.³ The resulting refugees fled west and sparked the Italian Renaissance.⁴ This is just one example of the impact of Rome.

The success of Rome can be attributed to many factors, but perhaps one of the most important was the stability of the government. For many polities, this credited to having good leaders; Rome is no exception. Throughout the 2,000-year history of Rome, there have been many great leaders and statesmen. Cicero, Julius Caesar, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, and Constantine the Great represent a small sample of the individuals that led the Roman civilization and appear to leap off the pages in the annals of history. However, there is one Roman leader, the first Emperor, that most scholars agree stands alone in his greatness: Caesar Augustus.

¹ Simon Baker, *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (BBC Books, 2007), 9.

² Ibid, 415-418.

³ Lars Brownworth, *Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire that Rescued Western Civilization* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 292-299.

⁴ Ibid, 302-303.

The future emperor Augustus was born Gaius Octavius (commonly referred to as Octavian before being granted the title of Augustus) in the town of Velitrae (now Velletri) in 63 BCE.⁵ Before he became Augustus, Octavian was being groomed for leadership by his adoptive father, Gaius Julius Caesar, who personally imparted many important lessons in nearly all aspects of life. Julius Caesar is often remembered for his military conquest of Gaul (modern France) and his infamous assassination, timelessly portrayed in Shakespeare's famous play, but perhaps the most important teachings imparted upon Octavian was Julius Caesar's mastery at political manipulation to garner popular support.

Julius Caesar was considered one of the great orators of his time and some of his works survive to this day. His war memoirs chronicled his exploits in Gaul and during the civil war against Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (there are other memoirs but it is questioned whether Caesar himself wrote them). These narratives were written for the people of Rome and were important in shaping his public image.⁶ Additionally, the fact that Caesar was successful and brought the wealth from his military conquests back to Rome inflated his public image.

The plebeians (lower class Roman) were not the most literate group of people but Caesar knew he needed their support. Caesar apparently sent runners from his camps in Gaul to Rome. These runners would themselves read aloud Caesar's writings in a public area.⁷ This allowed the illiterate citizens of Rome to hear the firsthand accounts of the war. These accounts must have made Caesar seem like quite the hero to the average citizen. Caesar needed support and he was doing an excellent job gaining it.

⁵ Anthony Everitt, *Augustus: The Life of Rome's First Emperor* (New York: Random House Trade, 2007), 3.

⁶ T.P. Wiseman, *The Publication of De Bello Gallico* (Classical Press of Wales, 1998).

⁷ "Caesar's Gallic War," *Livius.org*, last modified 15 February 2017, <http://www.livius.org/sources/about/caesar-s-gallic-war/>.

The military has always been an important component in keeping control particularly in ancient empires. The Roman legions were an efficient and deadly fighting force that was respected and feared by all. Maintaining control of the legions was important but was not the only component needed to stay in power. Caesar garnered favor by being an excellent general with a reputation of looking after his men. Roman citizenship was closely tied to military service. Only citizens of Rome could enlist in the legions and thus Roman patriotism was largely tied to the military. This is one reason why Caesar's *Commentaries* were effective. This deliberate focus on public opinion was important to Caesar and would in turn be a major component to solidifying Augustus' rule. Augustus was a master statesman that took the propaganda lessons from Caesar and perfected them.

In the early 20th century there was radio, film, posters, and various other forms of public manipulation. Some of these outlets also serve as mediums for watchdogs in the modern era to keep politicians in check. Rome did not have such powerful counters to imperial rhetoric. Augustus instead made use of the methods of his time, which included some means that are still exploited today. The written word was perhaps the most obvious and useful tool at his disposal. Manipulating events to tell the story from his perspective and ensuring that this perspective would be considered historical fact is a tool rulers have used since people first began to write. Statues were also utilized to further solidify and spread his image. There were various images presented to the people of Rome: Augustus the military commander, Augustus the statesman, and Augustus the peace bringer/keeper. Monuments, coins, and other methods also existed to spread his image and ideals across the empire.

Augustus' control of the famed Roman Legions was critical in his ability to maintain power, but it was also the manipulation of the Roman people at all levels of society that enabled

him to maintain that power. Augustus ushered in an unprecedented age of peace and stability known as the *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace; however, this famous period in Roman history did not occur naturally. The fact that he was able to maintain control of not only the common people but of the government and other political rivals is a testament to his power and ability to influence the minds of Rome's people. Augustus calculated his ascent towards preeminence in Rome using a variety of manipulative political techniques. Julius Caesar's influence provided Augustus with manipulative techniques he would need such as literature, statues, monuments, and coins in order to gain preeminence in Rome and secure an era of peace and stability unheard of in the ancient world.

Gaius Julius Caesar and his Influence

One of Augustus' greatest influences in life was his great uncle, Gaius Julius Caesar. Caesar's conquests in Gaul (modern day France) won him increased renown in Rome. Rome had always put great importance on strength and military service in the name of the Republic. Gaul provided Caesar with glory and wealth.⁸ It should be clarified that one of the primary reasons Caesar benefited from his conquest was because Rome itself benefited.

Rome now had an entirely new source of revenue thanks to Caesar's conquests. Roman citizens and veterans had a large landscape they could now settle and trade routes between Transalpine (beyond the alps) Gaul and Spain were now safe from barbarian raids. Perhaps most important to the average Latin was that the Italian peninsula was now much better protected from invasion. All of these positives were credited back to Caesar and he made sure Romans knew

⁸ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar: Life of a Colossus* (New Haven, US: Yale University Press, 2006), 358.

who was responsible. However, not everyone was pleased, Caesar's increased popularity did not go unnoticed by certain concerned groups however.

Caesar's renown also caused fear and disdain amongst his enemies. Marcus Tullius Cicero was a famous Roman statesman, philosopher, and orator who provided a revealing comment on Caesar's influence and the danger it represented in the minds of his enemies: "All this has made him [Caesar] so powerful, that the only hope of standing up to him rests on one citizen [Pompey Magnus]. I really wish that the latter had not given him so much power in the first place, rather than waiting till he was strong before fighting him."⁹ This quote illustrates Caesar's power and influence in Rome as well as why he needed it. His enemies were present and would do whatever it took to ruin him.

Gladius (Latin for sword) and *Scutum* (Latin for the shield used during this time) were not Caesar's only tool. The Roman people saw regular inflows of loot from Caesar's conquests, but it was his own word that provided a sort of context for what was happening in that barbaric land to the north. Caesar wrote of his campaigns in stunning simplicity in his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (*Commentaries on the Gallic War*).¹⁰ Cicero again provides commentary on Caesar's achievements: "The Gallic War is splendid. It is bare, straight and handsome, stripped of rhetorical ornament like an athlete of his clothes...There is nothing in a history more attractive than clean and lucid brevity."¹¹ Cicero's comment illustrates the simplicity that Caesar's prose contained. Even his enemies had to admit that it was a stylistic achievement in Latin literature.

This style was completely intentional. Though literacy rates in the ancient world were less than stellar, there were still plenty of individuals who could read Caesar's writings. Caesar

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gaius Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. by Carolyn Hammond (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹ "Caesar's Gallic War," *Livius.org*, Last modified 15 February 2017, <http://www.livius.org/sources/about/caesar-s-gallic-war/>.

had many adherents in Rome, particularly amongst the *populares* (a political group that carried favor from the *plebeians* (commoners)). These people could (and would) read to others in an effort to spread the word of Caesar. The simplicity made Caesar's writings ensured the less educated common man could understand his narrative.¹²

Caesar wrote other works besides his *Gallic War* commentary. The *Bellum Civile* or *Civil War* represents another example of Caesar's literary and propaganda works. One of Caesar's strategies depicted in his *Bellum Civile* is his generosity and clemency towards his enemies. On numerous occasions, Caesar is presented with an opportunity to punish or imprison an enemy commander and/or force but instead elects to show mercy and release them. This acts as a sort of psychological propaganda in that Caesar's enemies were growing increasingly concerned about Caesar's popularity. They were worried that he would use his power and influence against Rome itself in order to secure ultimate power. By showing generosity towards his enemies, Caesar could deflect these accusations by saying his actions prove otherwise and he has no bloodthirsty intent.¹³

Following his taking of Auximium, Caesar released an enemy commander and incorporated some of the surrendering troops into his service.¹⁴ At Sulmo, Publius Attius Varus (a supporter of Pompey) was captured and demanded to be brought to Caesar. This was done by Marc Antony who also brought Attius' cohorts. Caesar released Attius unharmed and incorporated the cohorts into his own army.¹⁵

Caesar's capture of Corfinium is perhaps the most notable example of Caesar's clemency and generosity. Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus was betrayed to Caesar by his men when they

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Goldsworthy, *Caesar: Life of a Colossus*, 361-376.

¹⁴ Julius Caesar, *The Civil War: Books I and II*, trans. By J.M. Carter (Warminster, England: Aris & Philips, 1991), 19.

¹⁵ Ibid, 44.

learned he was planning to abandon them. They offered to open the city to Caesar and surrender Domitius. However, Caesar refused due to the fear that if his army entered the city by night, they would begin looting the town. The following day, “Caesar ordered all the Roman senators and their families, the military tribunes and the knights to be brought before him.” Caesar claims he protected them from the ridicule of his men and promptly released them all. Additionally, a sum of 6 million sesterces was brought to him from the treasury. This sum was deposited by Domitius and was given to him by Pompey for the levying of troops. Despite this, Caesar returned the sum to him claiming that he had as little desire for money as he did bloodshed. As was his custom to this point he also incorporated the captured soldiers into his own ranks.¹⁶ This is of course coming directly from Caesar and may be exaggerated.¹⁷

There are many more examples of Caesar showing clemency towards his enemies despite the knowledge (though he may have hoped otherwise) that some of these individuals would repay his mercy with renewed attacks. One cannot and should not prescribe Caesar's actions as indicative of some sort of character trait however. Caesar was not sparing troops and commanders out of some substantial generosity alone. Roman statesman and orator Gaius Scribonius Curio makes the claim that Caesar's general strategy of clemency was a practical strategy employed to aid his own goals.¹⁸ He claims it “was only a matter of policy, which conflicted with his naturally cruel disposition. In time the veil would be drawn aside and his [Caesar] true nature revealed.”¹⁹ Curio was a friend of Cicero and was not particularly fond of Caesar. This led Curio, and others like him, to believe that Caesar had ill intentions toward the Republic that was fought so hard to establish. Caesar was an intelligent general. He knew what

¹⁶ Ibid, 45-47.

¹⁷ “Caesar's Gallic War.”

¹⁸ Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, 408.

¹⁹ Ibid.

needed to be done to give himself the greatest chance at victory both in the fields of battle and in the streets of Rome.

There was much propaganda and fear from certain members of the political elite that Caesar would follow in the footsteps of Marius or Sulla and commit acts of bloodshed. Caesar needed to counteract these fears. By doing so, he created a positive aura around himself that led some towns/cities to open their gates to him (such as Sulmo and Auximium).²⁰ This was certainly helpful in the onset of his campaign in Italy. Additionally, by sparing enemy soldiers, he increased the size of his own forces while diminishing that of his enemies. Cicero, likely saw through this 'generosity.' Cicero referred to the events at Corfinium as “Caesar's insidious clemency.”²¹ Obviously, he was aware of exactly what Caesar was doing and the benefits such a strategy could have especially in rallying public support amongst the *plebs*.

It is important to note that Caesar was offered the title of *imperator* (where the English *emperor* originates) but did not use this title or any other that would evoke remembrance of the etruscan kings that the Roman people had overthrown to create the Republic. Instead, he preferred to be referred to as Caesar. This deliberate naming tactic would not be lost on Augustus.²²

Caesar's popularity earned himself a cult of personality that would later be replicated by many prominent historical figures such as Benito Mussolini and Napoleon I.²³ Most importantly, it would be imitated by the future emperor of Rome, Augustus. This cult of personality enabled Caesar and later Augustus to gain and maintain power through popular support as well as

²⁰ Caesar, *The Civil War*, 42, 44.

²¹ Caesar, *The Civil War*, 177.

²² “Julius Caesar,” Romanemperors.com, Accessed 9 March, 2017, <http://www.romanemperors.com/julius-caesar.htm>.

²³ Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism* (Westport, US: Greenwood Publishers, 2003), 137-138; Peter Baehr, *Caesarism, Charisma and Fate: Historical Sources and Modern Resonances in the Work of Max Weber* (Transaction Publishers, 2008), 54.

military control. Following his assassination, Caesar named Gaius Octavius (the future Augustus) as his son and heir.

Octavian becomes Augustus

With the influence of Julius Caesar, it seems appropriate that Augustus became a political savant. Much of Caesar's practices and propaganda works would serve as inspiration for his adopted son. One of the less discussed, though still important, aspects of Augustus' propaganda is in the name 'Augustus' itself.

Augustus is not a name, but rather a title. It was bestowed upon Gaius Octavius in 27 BCE in the wake of an important speech to the Roman senate. In his seventh consulship (highest elected official in the Roman Republic), Octavius uttered the following words to the senate: "I lay down my office in its entirety and return to you all authority absolutely-authority over the army, the laws and the provinces-not only those territories which you entrusted to me, but those which I later secured for you."²⁴ Octavius' statement shocked the senators in attendance. According to historian Anthony Everitt, Octavius' words were met with great protest. There was so much protest that Octavius "reluctantly" accepted an "unusually large province" that consisted of Spain, Gaul, and Syria. He also accepted newly created honors.²⁵

These honors included a new *cognomen*. A *cognomen* was a personal name that functioned similar to a nickname but was much more formal. Initially, there was discussion of naming Octavius after Rome's mythological founder Romulus. Rhetoric, which was the art of persuasive, motivational, or informative discourse, insisted this was symbolic as Octavian was acting as Rome's second founder. From a historical perspective, this seems rather poetic, but

²⁴ Anthony Everitt, *Augustus: The Life of Rome's First Emperor*, 208.

²⁵ Ibid.

Octavius had other ideas. The name Romulus was quickly discarded, because the historical Romulus was a king who was murdered by an angry senate which evoked memories of Caesar.²⁶

The name chosen was *Augustus*, meaning Revered or Illustrious One. From this point on Octavius' official title was *Imperator Caesar Augustus*. However, there was a less formal title that was also adopted for everyday use: *princeps* meaning First or Leading Citizen. *Princeps* was fitting as it had traditionally been used in the form *princeps senatus* to signify the leader of the senate, which Augustus very much was. Famous Romans like Pompey and Crassus had also held the title.²⁷

Augustus himself felt this moment was significant enough to include in his own literary work the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (The Deeds of the Divine Augustus). This text will be discussed in more detail later, but the 34th verse is relevant here:

In my sixth and seventh consulates (28-27 B.C.E.), after putting out the civil war, having obtained all things by universal consent, I handed over the state from my power to the dominion of the senate and Roman people. And for this merit of mine, by a senate decree, I was called Augustus and the doors of my temple were publicly clothed with laurel and a civic crown was fixed over my door and a gold shield placed in the Julian senate-house, and the inscription of that shield testified to the virtue, mercy, justice, and piety, for which the senate and Roman people gave it to me. After that time, I exceeded all in influence, but I had no greater power than the others who were colleagues with me in each magistracy.²⁸

Augustus' words show he understood the significance of what had just occurred. This single verse serves as representation of the entire document. It simultaneously displays Augustus' power and authority while also 'clarifying' that Augustus was no more powerful than any other magistrate. This was not the reality, but it certainly served its purpose as the image Augustus wished to portray to the people.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 208-209.

²⁸ Augustus, "The Deeds of the Divine Augustus," trans. by Thomas Bushnell, BSG, classics.mit.edu, Accessed 9 March 2017, <http://classics.mit.edu/Augustus/deeds.html>.

This nuanced propaganda perpetuated the inaccurate idea that the Republic still existed and that the power ultimately rested with the people. Augustus says he had “no greater power than the others [senators and statesmen] who were colleagues with me.” This was simply not true. Augustus had learned from Julius Caesar’s mistakes and knew he could not allow himself to be declared sole ruler as Caesar was declared dictator in perpetuity prior to his assassination. In reality, Augustus had all the power.

Augustus’ power base came from his control of the military, public support, and a web of contacts spread across the Mediterranean. Though Augustus had ultimate power, he was not acting unconstitutionally. He acquired these contacts through his own experiences in the military and politics, but he also acquired Julius Caesar and Mark Antony’s clientele. Augustus acquired the former as a result of being Caesar’s close relative and supporter. He gained a majority of Antony’s when he defeated him at Actium. Augustus was acting in full accordance of the rights and privileges afforded to him by the senate and thus the people of Rome. For this fact alone, many citizens were grateful.²⁹

Augustan Propaganda in Literature

When studying propaganda in the age of Augustus, it is paramount to inspect the most important of Augustus’ literary works, the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. This document was meant to be seen and read by as many people as possible. It was posted in several different cities throughout the empire and was even translated into Greek in places where Greek was the dominant language.³⁰ The *Res Gestae* is a short and concise literary work that summarizes Augustus’ image and deeds to the people of Rome. Augustus never tells any outright lies, but he

²⁹ Everitt, *Augustus*, 208-210.

³⁰ Ibid, 311.

does omit some information. For example, Marc Antony's name is never directly mentioned in the text.³¹ *Res Gestae* was written shortly before Augustus' death and thus had no immediate impact during his life, it is still important in how it shaped his legacy and still serves as evidence for his political propaganda machine.

The most telling example of Augustus' image he wishes to portray is in the first line of the text: "A copy below of the deeds of the divine Augustus, by which he subjected the whole wide earth to the rule of the Roman people, and of the money which he spent for the state and Roman people..."³² The title itself serves as a reference to one of Augustus' public images, "Divine." The *Res Gestae* also contains many other indications of his legality and importance to Rome. In the first paragraph, Augustus states: "...on my own initiative and at my own expense, I raised an army with which I set free the state, which was oppressed by the domination of a faction."³³ Here we see that it was Augustus that saved Rome from those who would bring her to ruin.³⁴

Augustus also shows his dominance in military affairs as well. There are numerous mentions of how Augustus conquered others: "I drove the men who slaughtered my father [Julius Caesar] into exile with a legal order, punishing their crime, and afterwards, when they waged war on the state, I conquered them in two battles."³⁵ Here, Augustus simultaneously establishes the criminal nature of Caesar's assassins while also establishing his military superiority when he claims he "conquered them in two battles." Another excerpt: "I often waged war, civil and foreign, on the earth and sea, in the whole wide world, and as victor I spared all the citizens who

³¹ Augustus, "The Deeds of the Divine Augustus."

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Augustus is referring to Julius Caesar's assassins and those who allied with them.

³⁵ Augustus, "The Deeds of the Divine Augustus."

sought pardon.”³⁶ Here, Augustus shows his experience in war while also expressing his clemency towards his enemies just as Caesar did. The 5th paragraph establishes that Augustus had no desire for dictatorship when he says:

When the dictatorship was offered to me, both in my presence and my absence, by the people and senate, when Marcus Marcellus and Lucius Arruntius were consuls (22 B.C.E.), I did not accept it. I did not evade the curatorship of grain in the height of the food shortage, which I so arranged that within a few days I freed the entire city from the present fear and danger by my own expense and administration. When the annual and perpetual consulate was then again offered to me, I did not accept it.

Here Augustus declines tells the people of Rome that he declined an offer of dictatorship both publicly privately. He also claims to have personally saved the city from a grain shortage. The rest of the document chronicles all the deeds performed by Augustus in his life. These are in the form of political, public, and religious buildings consecrated, money given to the people, and theatrical spectacles like gladiatorial games and mock naval battles. Augustus is increasingly looking like a model ruler to any who would read of his deeds.

One of the most prominent pieces of literature written during Augustus’ time was Virgil’s *Aeneid*.³⁷ The epic poem tells the story of Aeneas, a Trojan warrior who escapes Troy and travels to Italy, becoming a common ancestor to all Romans. Along the way he becomes embroiled in many exploits such as meeting the Carthaginian queen, Dido, which set up the animosity between the two cities.³⁸ More importantly, it serves as an unwilling piece of propaganda. According to historian Anton Powell, it is not believed that Virgil was a diehard supporter of Augustus in any way.³⁹ He would not outwardly support policies he did not believe in. Virgil

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. by Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin Group, 2010).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus*, Ed. by Anton Powell, (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2004), 141.

was however “happy to salute the new period of peace.”⁴⁰ This was most likely due to two factors. The first is that Augustus did bring peace. The last century of the Republic was ripe with war both against foreign enemies and amongst fellow Romans. Another possibility is that Virgil simply wanted to convey that his writings would not impede the new order.

Having said this, there is a rather interesting excerpt in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In this passage, Virgil expresses a glowing presentation of Augustus himself:

...Time and again you’ve heard his coming promised-Caesar Augustus! Son of a god [Julius Caesar], he will bring back the Age of Gold to the Latian fields where Saturn once held sway, expand his empire past Garamants [North African tribe] and the Indians to a land beyond the stars, beyond the wheel of the year, the course of the sun itself, where Atlas bears the skies and turns on his shoulder the heavens studded with flaming stars. Even now the Caspian and Maeotic kingdoms quake at his coming, oracles sound the alarm and the seven mouths of the Nile churn with fear. Not even Hercules himself could cross such a vast expanse of earth...⁴¹

This passage reads both as a salute to peace, as well as a salute to Augustus himself. Certainly if it was a salute to Augustus, it is because he brought this peace. Regardless of Virgil’s intentions, it still serves as a great piece of indirect propaganda for Augustus and how he wished to be viewed and remembered by the Roman people. It is Augustus that will usher in a new golden age, it is Augustus that will expand the empire to new lands, no one would dare stand up to Rome so long as Augustus was in charge.

It is also worth mentioning the fact that Virgil’s *Aeneid* provided the Roman people with their own mythological foundation story and national epic. The poem is symbolic in that it tells the story of Aeneas founding the Roman people. This can be reflected back to Augustus as it was he who founded a new Rome with the end of the Republic. The *Aeneid* also ties the Julio-Claudian dynasty as the descendants of the founders and heroes of Rome and Troy. This is done through the ancestral linkage between Aeneas and Augustus. When Aeneas travels to the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 208.

underworld, he meets his father who tells him of his descendants including Romulus who will eventually found the city of Rome. Aeneas' father finishes by describing Augustus himself.⁴²

This is a powerful propaganda piece as Romulus is an important figure for all Romans. Likewise, Aeneas has now become an integral part of Roman culture and history. By linking Augustus to these individuals, Virgil provides legitimacy and even a sort of divine aspect to Augustus as both individuals were later deified according to Roman tradition.

Another Latin author who wrote during the time of Augustus was Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid). Ovid's magnum opus was his *Metamorphoses*. This poem chronicled the entire history of the world up to the deification of Julius Caesar. Interestingly enough, it also contains a short celebration of Augustus:

...Seeing his son's [Augustus] good works, Caesar [Julius] acknowledges they are greater than his own and delights at being surpassed by him. Though the son forbids his own actions being honoured above his father's, nevertheless fame, free and obedient to no one's orders, exalts him, despite himself, and denies him in this one thing...Jupiter commands the heavenly citadels, and the kingdoms of the threefold universe. Earth is ruled by Augustus. Each is a father and a master. You gods, the friends of Aeneas, to whom fire and sword gave way; you deities of Italy; and Romulus, founder of our city; and Mars, father of Romulus; Vesta, Diana, sacred among Caesar's ancestral gods, and you, Phoebus, sharing the temple with Caesar's Vesta; you, Jupiter who hold the high Tarpeian citadel; and all you other gods, whom it is fitting and holy for a poet to invoke, I beg that the day be slow to arrive, and beyond our own lifetime, when Augustus shall rise to heaven, leaving the world he rules, and there, far off, shall listen, with favour, to our prayers!⁴³

This is another glowing interpretation of Augustus that certainly pleased the Emperor. This passage links Augustus' lineage to legendary figures and outright states Augustus' relations to the divine. It also attempts to show a bit of modesty on Augustus' own part by claiming he "forbid his actions being honored above the father."⁴⁴ Like Virgil, Ovid alludes to the importance of Augustus in maintaining peace and order on Earth.

⁴² Ibid, 207-208.

⁴³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* trans. by Anthony S. Kline, Web, <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm>, Book XV: 843-870.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Physical Images of Augustan Propaganda

Perhaps of more importance to spreading Augustus' image and ideals were the physical forms of propaganda that existed in the form of statues, monuments and everyday currency. These forms of propaganda are more potent because they could be consumed by anyone. Literacy rates in the ancient world left a lot to be desired, even in Rome. Even though propaganda would be read aloud, statues and coins were pervasive and thus the common Roman was unable to avoid Augustus' image. A book or reading is finished once the content ends, but statues, coins, and monuments are part of everyday life.



Figure 1: Augustus of Prima Porta. Photo by Till Niermann. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Statues were an important part of how Augustus wished to spread his image, particularly because they were specific representations of how Augustus wished to be viewed in different contexts. There are two major depictions of Augustus that bear discussion. The first is Augustus “the leader” which is represented in the famous *Prima Porta* statue seen in figure 1. The second is the *Via Labicana Augustus* which portrays the emperor as Pontifex Maximus (head of the Roman college of priests and arguably the most prestigious title in the Rome).

The Prima Porta statue was most likely constructed sometime around 20 BCE to celebrate Augustus' victory over the Parthian Empire (an eastern empire centered in modern

Iran).⁴⁵ There had been animosity between Rome and the Parthians for much of their respective histories. This particular victory was important to Roman prestige. Roman statesman and politician Marcus Licinius Crassus led a campaign against the Parthians and suffered one of the worst military defeats in Roman history.⁴⁶ The legionary standards (totem-like standards that identified individual legions) were taken by the Parthians and Crassus himself was forced to kneel before the Parthian King.⁴⁷ Crassus was killed and his head was sent to Armenia, a territory long fought over between Rome and Parthia.

Julius Caesar had planned to reclaim the legionary standards, but his plans ended when he was assassinated. Mark Antony also attempted to reclaim them, but these attempts ended in failure. Augustus succeeded where they had failed, and he did so through diplomacy. The Parthian King's son was taken hostage by a failed usurper. The usurper fled to Rome where Augustus was able to negotiate the return of the King's son in exchange for the standards as well as the surviving Roman prisoners.⁴⁸

This was an important victory for Augustus who wasted no opportunity to take advantage of it. Augustus' *Res Gestae* mentions the return of the standards in verse 29: ...I compelled the Parthians to return to me the spoils and standards of three Roman armies, and as **suppliants** [emphasis mine] to seek the friendship of the Roman people."⁴⁹ The word "suppliants" is notable. Even though Augustus' victory was not a military one, he still twists the event to make it seem as though Rome was somehow superior to the Parthians.

⁴⁵ "Augustus of Prima Porta," *web.mit.edu*. Last updated October 2005, <http://web.mit.edu/21h.402/www/primaporta/>.

⁴⁶ Ralby, Aaron, "Roman-Parthian War, 55-63 BCE: The Beginnings of War," *Atlas of Military History*. Parragon. 2013. 66-67.

⁴⁷ Tom Holland, *Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 258-260.

⁴⁸ Garthwaite, Gene Ralph. *The Persians*, Oxford & Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. 2005. 251-252.

⁴⁹ Augustus, "The Deeds of the Divine Augustus."

Though this was a diplomatic victory, the Prima Porta statue depicts Augustus in military garb. This was an important image to portray as Rome placed a great deal of importance on military service and strength. However, it is important to distinguish that the statue is not meant to impart any ideal of the triumphant warrior. Like all depictions of Augustus, he is calm and collected. There is no anxiety or stress present on the statue's face. Even the breastplate, a symbol of Augustus' control of military power, there are no battles shown or violence of any kind.



Figure 2: Prima Porta Breastplate. Photo by Sailko. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

In figure 2 one can see front and center of the breastplate, the return of the legionary standards from Parthia. Elsewhere on the breastplate are depictions of Roman gods. Caelus (god of the sky), Sol (sun god) and Apollo (music and healing), Diana (goddess of the moon), and Tellus (Mother Earth) are all depicted. These deities hold a double meaning. They are meant to imply that peace has been attained through victory and that Augustus' victory is the will of the gods.⁵⁰

These are powerful ideas to imprint upon the Roman people. If one's ruler had obtained the gods' favor, who would dare oppose him? Additionally, the fact that the return of the standards is pictured so prominently on the statue reflects the idea that this was a major win for Augustus who used it to gain popularity. Where Antony and Crassus failed, where Caesar never had a chance, it was Augustus who prevailed over the Parthians.

⁵⁰ "Augustus of Prima Porta."

The other important image of Augustus is the *Via Labicana Augustus* seen in figure 3, which depicts Augustus as Pontifex Maximus. The statue is relatively simple compared to the elaborate Prima Porta. The *Via Labicana Augustus* displays a veiled Augustus wearing a toga. The toga was required garb for magistrates and citizens alike whenever they traveled in public areas. Augustus' head is also veiled indicating a religious connotation as this was common among Roman priests during sacred rites. Thus, the statue simultaneously displays Augustus as a citizen of Rome as well as a figure of religious significance.



Figure 3: *Via Labicana Augustus*. Photo by Bradley Weber. Courtesy of Flickr.

Seeing Augustus in these various forms would ensure that he maintained a prominent position in Roman citizens' minds. It also shows preeminence in all facets of Roman life: military, social, political, and religious. Augustus is portrayed as the leader not just of state and military affairs but in religious affairs as well. Spreading the image of Augustus was made easier through statues than literature, but coins were ubiquitous and could also be effective in spreading ideas.

Prior to Julius Caesar, coins were used to spread images of events, deities, and famous monuments. They took a turn towards propaganda when Caesar used an image of his likeness on his coins. Naturally, Augustus followed suit. Considering the literacy rate in the ancient world, physical imagery like those depicted on coins were very powerful. This is especially true when

one considers the fact that coins would have been the only time many Roman citizens would have seen Augustus' face which is depicted in figure 4. However, Augustus still used coins to illustrate famous events just as the Republic did.

Following the handing over of the Legionary standards by the Parthians, new coins were minted depicting the event. The coin depicts the goddess Feronia (fertility, abundance, health) on one side and a Parthian man, possibly Phraates IV, kneeling in submission with a legionary standard.⁵¹ This coin could mean to indicate that through the return of the standards, made possible



Figure 4 Roman Aureus with Augustus. Courtesy of Flickr

by Augustus, Rome is made healthy and fertile. It could also mean that Augustus is restoring or strengthening the vitality of Rome which is made evident through events such as the return of the standards. Coins were widespread throughout the Empire and ones such as this one were important because they could spread the controlled news of recent events. People living in Greece, Egypt, or elsewhere would possibly have just learned of the events with the standards through this coin. Coins were instrumental components to imperial propaganda, but one aspect of many imperial autocracy (masked though Rome's was), are monuments.

Perhaps the most famous Augustan monument is the Ara Pacis seen in figure 5. The Ara Pacis was consecrated on 30 January 9 BCE and was located on the northern outskirts of Rome in the northeastern corner of the Campus Martius (field of Mars). The altar acts as a monument to peace and it also likely represents a monument to Augustus and his family for bringing this

⁵¹ "Augustus of Prima Porta: Historical Context of the Statue," [web.mit.edu](http://web.mit.edu/21h.402/www/primaporta/context/historical/), <http://web.mit.edu/21h.402/www/primaporta/context/historical/>.

peace to Rome.⁵² When Augustus ended the civil wars (defeating Marc Antony at Actium) that had plagued the Republic, he brought peace and stability to Rome. Ovid supports this idea of Augustus the peace bringer

when he said: “Pray that the household that is responsible for peace may, together with that peace, last a long time.”⁵³

Quotes such as this one as well as the statues and monuments in his honor display the fact that Augustus was quite adamant in his desire



Figure 5: Ara Pacis. Photo by Jose Antonio. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

to be shown not as a warmongering dictator but a bringer of peace and divine order/stability for Rome. These are important ideals to spread to the Roman people. War had been a part of Roman life for some time now. The civil wars that had plagued the last century of the Republic as well as the campaigns in Gaul and Parthia. Augustus brought about an end to these large-scale conflicts.

It should be noted that military actions persisted under Augustus, but a major conflict would not break out until the Jewish-Roman Wars in 66 CE and the Pax Romana itself is not considered to have ended until the crisis of the third century.⁵⁴ This means that the peace that Augustus brought to Rome lasted for nearly 300 years. Though Augustus could not have known

⁵² “History,” *Museo dell’Ara Pacis*, Accessed April 9, 2017, http://en.arapacis.it/il_museo/storia.

⁵³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.

⁵⁴ Donald L. Wasson, “Pax Romana,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, http://www.ancient.eu/Pax_Romana/.

his peace would last this long, he certainly took steps in ensuring that as many people as possible knew of his achievement as possible.

The Lack of Checks on Ancient Propaganda

When discussing propaganda, it is important to note that unlike today, there were fewer checks or ‘watchdogs’ to keep politicians honest. When discussing Augustus specifically, there is a reason why he is remembered as possibly Rome’s greatest leader. With all of the literary and physical evidence, in addition to his actual real life actions, it is easy to see how this has become his legacy. Unlike in the modern era where many individuals have the capacity, power, and freedom to keep public officials honest, Rome had very few such individuals. Those who could read and write were either of a similar mind to Virgil and were “happy to salute the new period of peace,” or they simply knew that opposing Augustus, the most powerful man in the known world, was tantamount to suicide.⁵⁵

This lack of checks on the Augustan image served to expedite Augustus’ will throughout the empire. When there is no mass media to investigate or question one’s rule, it becomes easier to stay in charge and convince the people of one’s leadership. This can be contrasted with today’s modern media where there exist various media outlets that can challenge regimes to maintain transparency.

However, modern media can also act as support for regimes. This can be seen in the United States in the form of right leaning or left leaning news stations. In other less democratic nations like China or North Korea, news stations are owned and operated by the state and as a result are themselves extensions of the ruling party’s propaganda.

⁵⁵ *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus*, 141.

It was easier to manipulate large groups of people in the time of Augustus. No internet or 24-hour news cycles means less exposure and transparency for Augustus and his policies. Additionally, Augustus lived in a time where religion was a part of everyday life. This is contrasted to today where there are many more people (compared to Augustus' time) who are not religious at all. When your leader is favored by the gods and is himself a son of a god [Julius Caesar], it is difficult to act out or speak against him.

Conclusion

Augustus was a political savant that utilized various manipulative tactics in order to lead the most powerful state in the known world. He learned many of these techniques from his adoptive father Julius Caesar and improved upon them for his own purposes. In literature, many writers wrote in favor of Augustus. These writings could have been read aloud in the forum or by a literate slave thus spreading Augustus' fame and accomplishments. Augustus' own writings serve as an inside look into how he wished to be seen by the Roman people. Augustus also employed physical methods of propaganda.

Statues served as physical reminders of Augustus' rule as well as his accomplishments. They described historical events and suggested divine favor. Monuments were also used to persuade Romans of his greatness in life and in death. Coins were used to great effect due to the nature of how easily spread they were. Coins could reach the furthest corners of the empire and were a part of everyday life making them very effective forms of propaganda in the ancient world. In using these methods, Augustus became and maintained his position as the most powerful man in the known world. Had Augustus not used these methods, it is difficult to imagine how he would have maintained favor for long. Yes, he had the support of the military,

but it is important to make sure the people your ruling know that you are the best and only option. A peaceful population makes for an effective and easy governance.

Augustus is remembered as arguably the greatest leader in Rome's history. His accomplishments are widespread and well known amongst contemporary Romans and historians alike. While his deeds and character may be exaggerated, Augustus did bring an unprecedented era of peace to the Mediterranean world. He instituted numerous reforms that helped ensure the longevity of the empire. That said, it is important when studying such an important and grandiose figure that one does not fall prey to Augustus' propaganda themselves. Augustus is an incredibly influential figure and it would be easy for one to view him in the manner Augustus wished: Augustus the peace bringer.

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