

INTRODUCTION



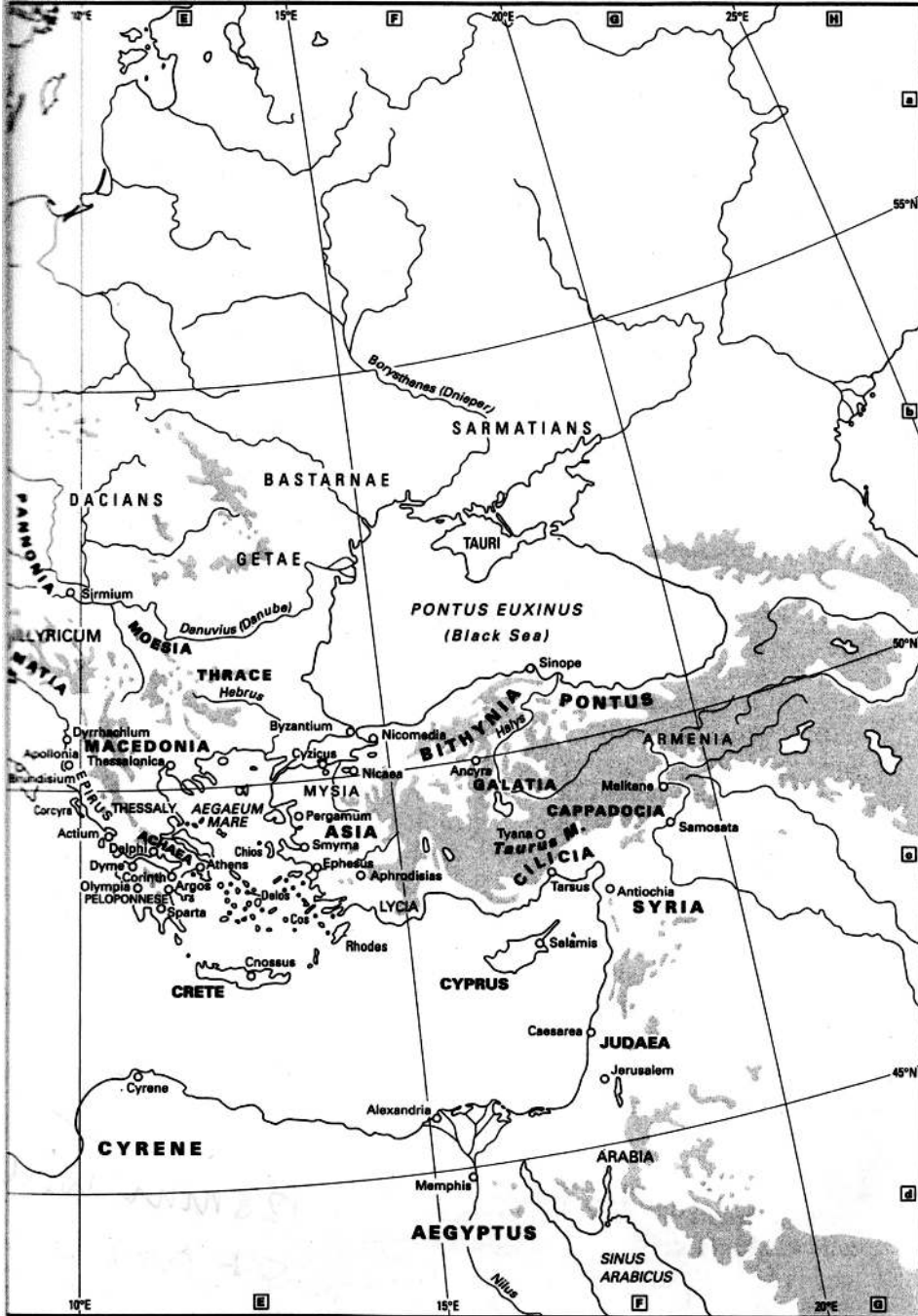
1 *The Roman Republic*

The Roman Republic (509–31 BC) had no government as we understand the concept today. Rather, it was ruled by a narrow clique of rich families resident in the city of Rome. Members of these families were elected to magistracies by the adult male citizen population (the *populus*) formally gathered into voting assemblies (*comitia*), themselves presided over by a magistrate. A council of elders, the Senate, was comprised mostly of ex-magistrates (exclusively of them after Sulla) and numbered for most of the Republic about 300–500 members. Indeed, it has been estimated that the entire senatorial class represented 0.002 per cent of the Roman Empire’s population. The Senate had no formal powers of legislation. Its edicts (*senatus consulta*) were pieces of advice issued to the magistrates and the assemblies as to how they should vote on a given proposal. But the collective social standing, wealth, and experience of the Senate ensured that as time went on, its edicts increasingly passed into law as a matter of course.

It is vital to appreciate that, unlike the United States, no written constitution regulated the relationship between the Senate, the people, and the magistrates. Instead, rather as in Great Britain, the Roman system of governance was the product of long tradition, precedent, and historical compromise. Practice was modulated by accepted codes of behaviour rather than constitutional law. While the Roman aristocracy had a long history of domestic competitiveness, at the end of the second century BC some unscrupulous politicians began to push the boundaries of tradition and precedent, to exploit class differences within Rome’s hierarchical society, and to spend greater and greater wealth drawn from the expanded empire on their political struggles with each other. Eventually, they came to use force. As bad precedent piled upon worse, the Roman Republic tore itself apart in a bloody vortex of chaos, rioting, civil war, and vicious political purges. The unarmed Senate and people were sidelined as general fought



1 Map of the Roman Empire in the time of Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors.



with general to determine the mightiest. (For more, see Beard and Crawford 1999; Lintott 1999.)

2 *The end of the Republic*

In 45 BC, Julius Caesar emerged as the ultimate victor in this contest and set himself up as sole ruler of Rome. Senatorial tradition reviled the concept of kings (in reaction to whom the Republic had been founded in the distant past), but Caesar paid no heed to that tradition and behaved as an open autocrat, complete with purple robes and a golden throne in the Senate House. As is well known, he died at the hands of senatorial assassins on 15 March 44 BC. He left no natural heir.

In his will, however, Caesar adopted as a son his grand nephew, C. Octavius, then in his late teens. Unknown to most, Octavian (or 'Caesar', as he preferred to be called) harboured a ruthless ambition, coupled with considerable powers of leadership and great political acumen. Over the course of the next fourteen years, he manoeuvred and fought against various rivals until, after defeating Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium in 31 BC, he emerged predominant over the entire Roman Empire. In 27 BC, he was named Imperator Caesar Augustus. He had become the first emperor of Rome and reigned for forty-five years. (For more, see Appian, *The Civil Wars*; Syme 1952.)

3 *The nature of the Principate*

Augustus was concerned to prevent civil war and consolidate his own power, while at the same time avoiding the fate of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. Over the first three decades or so of his rule, he arranged a position for himself in the state as *princeps*, or 'first citizen' (the imperial system is therefore called the 'Principate'). In this role, he could exercise control over all areas of government (command of the armies, appointment of military governors, proposal of legislation, etc.), but the package of powers and privileges that enabled him to do so was voted to him in blocks of five years (later ten) by the Senate and people. Augustus behaved and dressed modestly, lived in a simple house, initiated conservative-looking reforms in society and in religious practices, and consulted the Senate and its magistrates as if they were his peers. He liked to get things done by wielding his towering and intangible influence (*auctoritas*), rather than by constantly exercising his

legally conferred powers (*imperium* and *potestas*). He thus did not appear as a raw autocrat like Caesar, but rather seemed to be a super-magistrate and a respecter of Roman traditions. In reality, however, traditional forms were maintained, even as tradition was usurped. His reforms initiated a lasting period of peace and order – the *Pax Augusta*. (For more, see Eder 1990; Lacey 1996.)

4 *Some remarks on Roman society*

Roman society, in all periods, was highly stratified. Legally enforced social distinctions divided the freeborn from the slave (ex-slaves, or ‘freedmen’, were considered only slightly more respectable than slaves). Among the freeborn, distinction was made between citizen and non-citizen, and the citizens were themselves grouped into ‘ranks’ (*ordines*) of senators (the most privileged), equestrians (who overlapped with senators in socio-economic terms but did not take part in politics), and the *plebs* (everyone else). In this status-obsessed world, rank was declared by public appearance: influential men could be noted by the size of the entourage of slaves and dependants around them as they moved about in public, by the kinds of (legally regulated) clothes and jewellery they wore, and by the (legally regulated) seats they occupied at public spectacles. In this universe, much got done by wielding influence and pulling rank, and the closer a lesser being could get to a luminary, the more important he became. In this way, the favourite freedmen of emperors could wield greater clout than freeborn senators, bizarre as that may sound (see especially the *Claudius* selections). (For more on Roman society, see Alföldy 1988.)

The Senate’s role had also changed drastically. In the days of the Republic, it had been the state’s pre-eminent political entity (at least from the mid-third century BC onwards). It had a long and proud tradition behind it, and the mainstay of that tradition was *libertas* – the freedom of political choice that senators enjoyed by virtue of their station. But with the establishment of the Principate that *libertas* evaporated, and the Senate was reduced to little more than a pool of administrators on hand to help a higher power run the Empire. Augustus chose to treat the Senate with due respect, although he did not have to. Later emperors, as we shall see in the selections, felt no such compunction. (For more, see Talbert 1984.)

Unsurprisingly, a strong anti-emperor tradition evolved among senatorial writers of history. Such men could vent their spleen on dead emperors

even as they accommodated living incumbents. This facet of our surviving Latin sources must always be borne in mind when trying to assess their accuracy as reporters of events.

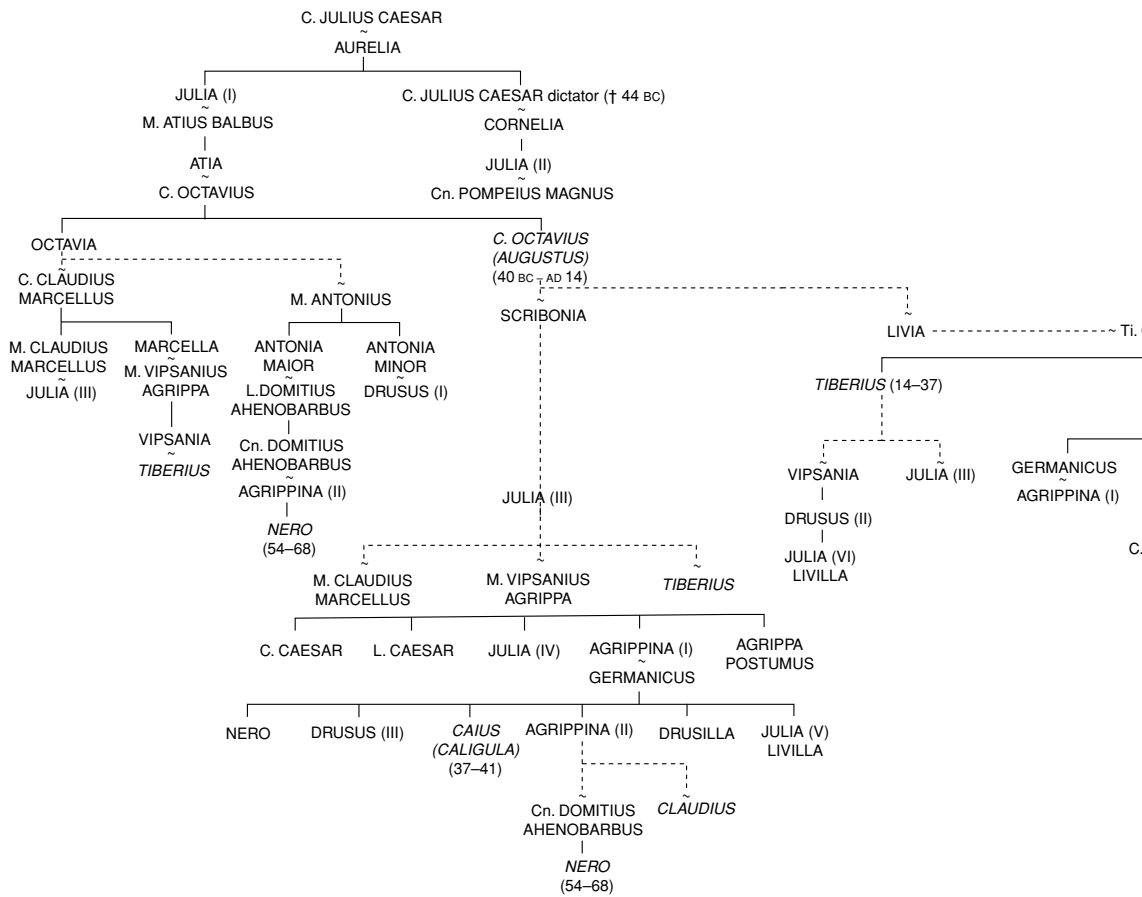
5 Augustus

(Born 23 September 63 BC; died 19 August AD 14; reigned 31 BC – AD 14.)

Augustus is a figure of immense historical importance for the history of Rome and of Europe. He singlehandedly brought the mayhem of the Late Republic to an end, though not without a degree of ruthlessness, and re-established the state on a firm footing. The Principate (see above, section 3) endured for almost 250 years, the longest period of peace and prosperity in Europe's recorded history. The period is often dubbed the *Pax Augusta* or *Pax Romana*. As his dominance became secure, Augustus presented a tactful and statesmanlike face to the world, a defender of traditional Roman values and practices, and the supreme patron to the people and the empire. He was 'the father of his country,' as his cherished title of 2 BC declared (*pater patriae*). (For more, see Brunt and Moore 1967).

For all its artfulness, however, the Principate was fragile. Rather like the Republic before it, it was based on precedent and acceptable modes of conduct, instead of being founded on constitutional law (despite efforts to make it so, such as the *lex de imperio Vespasiani* of AD 69 or 70; see *ILS* 244). What would happen if someone lacking Augustus' tact and political skill should become *princeps*? For that matter, *who* should become *princeps* when Augustus died, and how should a successor be chosen? This problem of the succession proved to be a fatal weakness at the heart of the Principate. As a sort of super-magistrate, Augustus had no right to name a successor in the manner of an autocrat; at the same time, if the choice were left to the Senate and people (as technically it should be), what would stop some popular general from challenging that choice under arms? That way led back to civil war and the ruination of everything for which Augustus had worked.

Augustus therefore, like any good Roman aristocrat, looked to his own family for potential successors. By a variety of means, both subtle and obvious, he indicated to the Senate and people his favourites, and in a long series, since several of them died. The fact that a chosen favourite (if he survived) eventually shared significant portions of the emperor's



2 Family tree of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

legal powers ensured that, when Augustus himself died, a quasi-*princeps* was already in place, who only needed confirmation by the Senate and people. But the informality of the Augustan succession scheme bred terrible instability within the imperial house (see *Augustus* passage 5).

Relying on such flimsy arrangements for the succession, the Julio-Claudian dynasty (the family of Augustus) ruled the Roman Empire for fifty-four years after Augustus' death in AD 14. Their rule proved to be something of a rollercoaster ride. (For more on Augustus, see section 3 above and Fagan in *DIR*; Southern 1998.)

6 *Tiberius*

(Born 16 November 42 BC; died 16 March AD 37; reigned AD 14–37.)

Tiberius was a man of a very different disposition to Augustus. Whereas Augustus, as emperor, had been tactful and charming, Tiberius was blunt and dour. He had spent more than half a century waiting in the wings under Augustus' shadow, and in many respects he never escaped from under it. Prone to depression and beholden to his mother Livia until her death in AD 29 (Tiberius missed the funeral), he disengaged from the tedium of administration by abandoning Rome altogether in AD 26 to settle, in the following year, into a life of depravity at his villa on the island of Capri, near Naples (see *Tiberius* passage 13).

The first years of Tiberius' reign were dominated by his relationship with his adopted son, Germanicus. This youth's charm, good looks, and dash as a commander made him a popular figure, in contrast to the sour and reclusive emperor. But Tacitus, an austere critic, offers a nuanced and subtle portrayal of Germanicus that makes him far more than a foil to Tiberius. As a result, readers should be alert to hints of Germanicus' ineptitude or innuendoes of less-appealing personality traits as they study Tacitus' account of the prince's campaigns in Germany in *Tiberius* passages 1–7 (see Pelling 1993 and Ross 1973).

Tiberius' demonstrated reluctance to accept the responsibilities of power left room for other, less scrupulous people to make their moves. Chief among his satellites was L. Aelius Sejanus, commander of the praetorian guard. Between AD 23 and 31, Tiberius fell under this man's spell. That Sejanus became embroiled in dynastic politics is clear from his ultimate demise, but scholars have long debated exactly what he wanted to achieve, and even whether he was guilty of conspiracy at all (see, e.g., Boddington

1963). Sejanus' most likely goal was to become Tiberius' successor. The emperor's absence from Rome after AD 26 greatly strengthened Sejanus' hand; he now controlled access to Tiberius. As Dio puts it (58.5.1), Sejanus appeared the emperor, and Tiberius an island potentate. But on 18 October AD 31, Tiberius denounced his favourite in a letter read to the Senate. Sejanus was summarily executed the same day. The witch-hunt for his followers lasted two years.

Tacitus comments at the opening of AD 23, 'Either Tiberius himself began to behave savagely, or he provided the means for others to do so' (*Ann.* 4.1: *coepit saevire ipse aut saevientibus vires praeberere*). This, in fact, could stand as the epitaph for his entire reign. (See further: Levick 1976; Fagan in *DIR*; Seager 1972.)

7 Caligula

(Born 31 August AD 12; died 24 January AD 41; reigned AD 37–41.)

Caligula (Gaius) was the youngest son of Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder, and therefore a direct blood relative of Augustus himself. This parentage and ancestry made him immensely popular – at least, at first. As an infant, he accompanied his parents to the legions' camps in Germany, where he was fitted out in a miniature soldier's outfit. The troops were especially taken with his tiny military sandals and nicknamed him 'Bootikins', *caligula* in Latin – the name by which he is known to posterity. Caligula's childhood was not a happy one. His father died when he was seven, and his mother and brothers suffered under Sejanus' ascendancy. On 16 March AD 37, Caligula was on Capri when Tiberius died. He was quickly hailed as the next emperor, despite having no administrative or military experience. It proved a terrible mistake.

Caligula initially played the role of benevolent ruler. Among other beneficent acts, he had all of Tiberius' private papers about the trials of his relatives burned in the Forum. Those papers undoubtedly contained the names of many informers against his relatives, so this public immolation was an extravagant declaration of amnesty. (According to Dio [59.4.3], however, he kept secret copies and later had anyone implicated executed on the strength of their testimony.)

The honeymoon did not last. What happened to Caligula is still a matter of uncertainty. Some modern scholars ascribe his increasingly bizarre

behaviour to some physical ailment (hyperthyroidism, epilepsy), or to a mental illness (mania, depression). But attempts to diagnose a patient 2,000 years dead on the strength of slanted literary testimony are surely doomed to failure. Overall, the issue of Caligula's 'madness' is greatly affected by the view one takes of the sources: if they are basically truthful, then Caligula was clearly deranged (Ferrill 1991); if they are questionable and tainted by exaggeration, then something other than insanity may have been at play (Barrett 1989). Because the pertinent book of Tacitus' *Annals* is lost, we are thrown back on the sensationalistic biography of Suetonius, supplemented by summary accounts in later Greek writers, principally Josephus and Cassius Dio. This situation makes discerning rumour from reality, accusation from action very difficult. Much of Caligula's reported behaviour, while not likely to be complete fabrication, ought to be taken with a grain of salt, since a tradition about him can be shown to have arisen and snowballed following his death (Charlesworth 1933).

Caligula was the first Roman emperor to be assassinated openly, cut down by members of the praetorian guard, acting on personal motives. (For more, see *Fagan* in *DIR*; Hurley 1983).

8 *Claudius*

(Born 1 August 10 BC; died 13 October AD 54; reigned AD 41–54.)

For much of his life, Claudius was sequestered. On the assumption that his physical disabilities reflected mental incapacity, his elders and peers dismissed him as a fool. Our largely hostile ancient sources are also unanimous in portraying Claudius as a bumbling dupe manipulated easily by his wives and secretaries, comprised of ex-slaves. Since the sources are mostly senatorial in origin, their hostility is understandable. Claudius had been foisted on them by the soldiers of the praetorian guard, and he appears to have operated more in the palace, surrounded by his wives and household, than in the traditional settings of forum and Senate. To Roman senatorial sentiments, such a condition was unconscionably ignominious, and a man who could not control his own household was hardly fit to rule an empire. So his reign is portrayed as a farce.

A cardinal incident in Claudius' reign was the fall of his third wife, Valeria Messalina (see *Claudius* passages 3–16). In the ancient sources, she is portrayed as an out-and-out sex fiend (e.g. Juvenal *Satires* 6.115–32). In