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Augustus's Expansionist Efforts: Necessary, or Vainglorious?

When Julius Caesar was assassinated, his great-nephew Octavian—the future Augustus—was named his heir. By the time of the assassination, Caesar had conquered much of Gaul and some of the other European lowlands, and even made incursions into Britain. Originally an initiative to, ostensibly, protect Rome's northern borders and attack precious metal-rich Romania, by 58 B.C.E., Caesar's attentions were, in Rome's assessment, needed in warring, tribal Gaul. In Gaul and later in Britain, Caesar found fertile lands. Centuries of expansion had led to an influx of people into Italy, an increase in landless peasants, and Rome's vast army was filled with soldiers hoping for a piece of land in return for enduring dangerous, lengthy campaigns. Conquered territories within and without Italy were a solution to the land problem.

In his final years, Caesar had begun civil reforms in Rome to improve its economy and overall conditions. He did so as dictator, a title and position that had fallen out of use until about forty years earlier, when Roman general and statesman Sulla revived the title upon sacking Rome, rewriting the constitution, stocking the senate with supporters, and limiting the power of tribunes. In 48, Caesar was given honors for his victories in the civil war against Pompey: named dictator with indefinite tribunal power. Having already revised the constitution and stocked the senate with supporters, Caesar's titles of honor were beginning to resemble those of a monarchy—an emperor. Those same honors, as well as the reasons they'd been bestowed upon him, were reasons given for his assassination.

Into this den of vipers, young Octavian arose. To connect himself with Caesar—the man credited with ending the republic but who’d enjoyed relative popularity with Romans outside of a murderous senate faction—Octavian took the name Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus. (Eventually, he’d be given the title “Augustus” by the senate, a name of religious and secular meanings: lofty and serene.) Knowing the inherent dangers of his new position and the need to act fast, Augustus quickly rallied Caesar’s loyal veteran forces and marched on Rome. Though his arrival at Rome was peaceful, coming home at the head of a large army is reminiscent of how Sulla “cowed Rome into acquiescence”¹ four decades earlier by setting upon Rome with an army and waging a prolonged, bloody, street-by-street sack of his own city. Undoubtedly, Romans remembered Sulla’s terrifying conquest of the city. Augustus arriving at Rome in such a manner was a two-pronged calculation: backed by the army of Caesar, he both played to Romans’ emotions over their assassinated leader and recalled the bloody memory of Sulla. Caesar’s assassins were on the run and the city was his. The moment Augustus took lead of Caesar’s army, he showed calculated, manipulative cleverness and ambition and a belief that Rome and Caesar’s title and power were his for the taking, despite the facts that powerful senators disagreed with the form Caesar’s leadership had taken and that Mark Antony, who’d been granted vast areas of the empire and controlled the treasury, was a powerful rival for the job.

¹ "Ancient Rome." *Britannica Library*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 22 Mar.

He set to work on Rome (“I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble”²) and avenging Caesar’s assassination. He allied with and then fell out with Antony, eventually resulting in Antony’s flight to Egypt, affair with Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, and open hostilities between Rome and Egypt. Seizing the opportunity to demonize Antony and Cleopatra and cement himself as a true Roman and capable leader, Augustus spread propaganda about Rome’s enemies while publicly aligning himself with Roman values and traditions and gradually gaining more power, both openly and covertly. He claimed Antony intended to take power and move the center of power to Egypt, preying on Roman fears about Cleopatra’s influence on the republic and their fears about their general welfare; already, Augustus’s rebellious father-in-law, Sextus Pompeius, had seized control over Mediterranean trade and stopped the flow of grain from areas like North Africa into Italy to cause famine and undermine Augustus. Egypt supplied Rome with grain, and power struggles between Augustus and Antony causing a food shortage and a return to disruptive civil war were very real fears for the Roman people.

After a decisive loss to Augustus in 31 B.C.E., Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide a year later, effectively ending Rome’s war with Egypt. This brought Egypt back into the Roman fold, secured the Egyptian grain upon which Rome depended, and Cleopatra’s treasury paid Augustus’s soldiers. Having rid Rome of its most potent enemies and neutralized rivals, Augustus founded the principate, a monarchical system led by an emperor with lifetime power. With the “emperor” part masked by constitutional legalese, Augustus assumed total control over all things Roman, including direct command of its army. He appeased senators and the

² "Augustus: Quote on Rebuilding Rome." World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras, ABC-CLIO, 2018, ancienthistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/639757 (accessed 6 Aug. 2018).

aristocracy with laws “harkening back—at least on the surface—to the traditions of the Roman Republic”³.

With grain secured and Roman-held lands offering land and natural resources, and a new supreme leader with lofty plans, the peace and prosperity Romans had so long desired were becoming realities. Augustus cleaned up the streets and judicial system, stimulated the economy, served as a patron to poets, and commissioned public works. For a city famous for its ability to rule an empire but not rule itself, Rome had a more positive than usual outlook with Augustus at the helm; his reign is heralded as the beginning of Pax Romana. Still, Augustus resumed Rome’s imperialist endeavors: by 30 B.C.E., he returned Rome’s troops to Gaul and Egypt. In the decade that followed, he campaigned in Spain, the Danube, and the Alps.

With Rome more secure than it had been in decades, were Augustus’s expansion efforts truly necessary for its welfare, or were they the actions of a vainglorious man desperate to legitimize his rule and secure his legacy?

Students of history know that Rome’s imperialistic endeavors became too unwieldy, eventually weakening the great empire to the point of collapse. As the city of Rome and its territories settled into a more peaceful, prosperous time under his rule, one might look back and wonder why Augustus didn’t focus on maintaining Rome’s stability without introducing costly, chaotic, and casualty-heavy expansions. Instead, he created a standing army, and using the old

³ “Augustus,” History.com Staff, History.com, 2009,

<https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/emperor-augustus> (accessed Aug. 6, 2018).

Roman excuse of securing existing borders and expanding “to protect the territory against attack,”⁴ he set out.

By Suetonius’s own account, Augustus was an earnest and ambitious leader, but at times to a fault. At 20, he used an armed centurion to threaten the senate into giving him a consulship. Without the title of censor, he took a census three times—once completely on his own, without regard for checks and balances. When he considered restoring the republic (i.e., giving up the title and power of emperor), he talked himself out of it by claiming the public would be endangered if governance was put back in the hands of the people. At Antium, he rejected the title of Father of His Country, but accepted it upon return to Rome, where he was crowned with laurel in full view of his capital city’s public. He liked to think his intense eyes had divine vigor; divinely imparted power has been the basis of many monarchs’ claims. He showed his dictator side in his later years by exiling Ovid, a poet who’d mocked Augustus’s reforms. The eager young start-up seems to have indeed desired status and power often associated with a king—the one thing the Roman republic was founded to avoid “because they had found monarchy contrary to the public good⁵.”

As a boy, Augustus would have witnessed the pomp and circumstance that greeted Caesar upon his return to Rome from various campaigns and wars. Those memories were probably fresh in the mind of a young ruler who was both surreptitiously expanding his

⁴ Adas, Michael B.; Schwartz, Stuart B.; Gilbert, Marc Jason, World Civilizations: The Global Experience, Volume 1 (Pearson Education) 143.

⁵ Adas, Michael B.; Schwartz, Stuart B.; Gilbert, Marc Jason, World Civilizations: The Global Experience, Volume 1 (Pearson Education) 142.

individual power and haunted by the memory of his namesake's assassination. With Gaul subdued and under Roman governance, and more distant territories no imminent threat—at least, no threat that Rome's huge, powerful, standing army couldn't counter—Augustus had little immediate need to expand Rome's boundaries. Granaries and the treasury were at positive levels, and previously conquered territories offered farmland and resources Rome itself couldn't provide. Rome itself became more civilized under Augustus.

Even competing scholars' assessments of Rome's inclination toward conquest support the idea that, like his predecessors, Augustus's expansionist efforts weren't out of necessity, but rather out of greed, aggressiveness, and glory⁶. While always eager to align himself with traditional Roman values, expansion had always been contradictory to the republic's goals of constitutionality, limiting the gulf between rich and poor, and putting too much power in the hands of too few. Imported goods from conquered areas competed with those produced by actual Romans, causing many Romans to lose their livelihood. As the rich grew richer from an increased tax base and trade, they increasingly took control of their fellow Romans' properties. Though never a truly egalitarian system, the republic wasn't created to exploit, dispossess, and hold down actual Romans. Like Pompey and Caesar before him, Augustus declined to heed Cicero's plea to return Rome to a republican balance—a plea an educated member of the ruling class, like Augustus, surely would have read. Outside of greed and glory, expansionist campaigns—especially successful ones—were also a clever way to shift attention away from Augustus's both open and covert moves to grow his own king-like, anti-Republican-values

⁶ Adas, Michael B.; Schwartz, Stuart B.; Gilbert, Marc Jason, World Civilizations: The Global Experience, Volume 1 (Pearson Education) 143.

power. His success on the frontiers brought him popular support. He's credited with doubling the size of Rome's empire although a comparison of Secondary Sources 1 and 2 show growth under Augustus was done in areas where his predecessors had already laid the foundation for Roman rule, such as Northern Spain, the Alps, Asia Minor, and North Africa.

Aside from bringing North Africa's grain supply firmly under Roman control, were the other expansion efforts under Augustus truly worth the cost in human life and resources? Not likely. However, an emperor needs one crucial aspect of rule to justify his title and power: an empire.

For an intense, ambitious, and driven young ruler, expansion was the way to an empire, as well as glory, riches, lands, popularity, and a legacy. While Augustus was, by many accounts, deserving of his good reputation, campaigning to gain territory wasn't necessary, and he only deepened the precedent of imperialism upon which his successors seized—a precedent that would bring down the greatest empire the world had seen.

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