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Res Publica Restituta?

Republic and Princeps in the Early Roman Empire

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According to early second century Roman historian Suetonius, Augustus, on his deathbed in 14 C.E., remarked, “Since well I’ve played my part, all clap your hands And from the stage dismiss me with applause.”¹ Augustus’s final words were symbolic of his career and historical legacy. Under the Augustan political settlement the *Princeps*, the title of the Roman Emperors, only exceeded his peers in “*auctoritas*.” However, in reality, the Emperor was *Dominus* in all but name. This illusion maintained by the Emperors, was the rhetorical heart of the first phase of imperial history, the *Principate*. Augustus, while creating a despotic regime, had to portray himself as the ‘restorer of *res publica*.’ This is clear in the rhetoric used by Augustus himself. In the immediate transition between republican and despotic government, the Augustan regime made extensive use of rhetorical appeals to the Roman Republic, specifically the old senatorial order, in the form of *Res Publica Restituta*. However, as time progressed emperors became increasingly comfortable with their political status and began to abandon the façade of the Republic in order to claim more direct and absolute powers. Thus, the transition from Republic to *Principate* did not occur entirely within Augustus’s lifetime. Instead, it was the result of a long-term process where the rhetoric of *Res Publica Restituta* became increasingly irrelevant, replaced by the reality of despotic rule under the Emperors. Ultimately, the rhetoric of this

¹ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, trans. John Carew Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 302-303.

transition was so effective that it became an archetype for emerging despots seeking to solidify their rule well after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Augustus, originally Gaius Octavian, was born into a chaotic world where the Roman Republic was plagued by a series of political crises and civil war. This dynamic, which threatened to destroy the Roman state, had much earlier origins in Roman history. Rome was already a territorial empire by 146 BCE following the final defeat of Carthage in the Third Punic War.² This territorial expansion made Rome's agrarian constitution unworkable; as a result, the Roman state became increasingly imperial. Tribune of the Plebs Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, the first of a line of populist politicians in the late Republic, provided the foundation of the Augustan revolution. They exposed the weakness of the constitution and split Roman politics into two factions: the *Populares* and the *Optimates*.³ Gaius Marius, a *novus homo* and *populare*, reformed the legions into a professional force and dropped the land requirement, thus incorporating the poor landless masses; each soldier would be given a pension and land by their general following the end of their service. These reforms made soldiers loyal not to the state but rather to their commanders.⁴ This new dynamic allowed Marius and later his rival Lucius Cornelius Sulla to assert complete control over the Roman state.

Gaius Julius Caesar struck the fatal blow to the Roman Republic. He crossed the Rubicon in 49 BCE, defeated Pompey at Pharsalus in 48 BCE, and the Senate declared him *Dictator perpetuus* in 44 BCE. Before his assassination on the Ides of March later that year, Caesar "was absolute master and proposed to maintain that mastery openly...[likely] planning to have himself

² Christopher S. Mackay, *Ancient Rome: A Military and Political History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 74.

³ Chester G Starr, *A History of the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 515.

⁴ Starr, *A History of the Ancient World*, 518-519.

made deified king on the Hellenistic model.”⁵ Following Caesar’s death the Republic experienced another period of civil war. In 31 BCE Octavian defeated his rival Marcus Antonius at the battle of Actium and subsequently was declared Augustus and *Princeps* by the Senate in 27 BCE. While still the Republic in theory, it was clear that this new order was despotic and imperial in practice. The Roman Emperor of the Augustan *Principate* was an autocrat in all but name. By the time of Augustus, a constitution of republican tradition, which remained, in theory, and the Senate that enforced it had been rendered inoperable by decades of social unrest and civil war. There is little reason not to acknowledge Augustus as *Dominus* in hindsight even if the Romans carried on the charade for more than two centuries. The maintenance of this illusion of the Roman Republic was at the center of the Augustan regime.

The central challenge that Augustus faced was to maintain the semblance of the Republic while also ensuring monarchical power as to secure the stability of the Roman state and his regime. Importantly, under Augustus, “the [*Principate*] was an institution which was created by a form of law, and which was superimposed on, but did not replace the institutions of the *res publica*.”⁶ The rhetoric used by the Augustan regime reflects this dynamic. The most prominent example is the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* - a funerary inscription that provides insight into the idealized image of the *Principate* that Augustus sought to establish. For Augustus the fundamental basis of imperial power came from two, seemingly contradictory, sources. On the one hand the imperial state was novel, a necessary reform following the chaos of the late Republic – *Novus Status*. That said, this ‘revolution’ was done almost entirely under the guise of *Res Publica Restituta*; in other words, the restoration of the old senatorial order. Augustus’s *Res*

⁵ Starr, *A History of the Ancient World*, 541.

⁶ Fergus Millar, “Triumvirate and Principate,” in *Augustus*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 79.

Gestae sought to balance these elements as the basis of the new imperial state. He did this through populist rhetoric, assurance of security, war and conquest, and the restoration of the ‘old order’ through reinvention - *Res Publica Restituta* and *Novus Status*.

Julius Caesar, the essential figure in the destruction of the Republic and Augustus’s adoptive father, provided the model for Augustus. During Caesar’s Consulship in 59 BCE, with the support of Pompey and Crassus,⁷ he supported a clearly populist agenda, including a prominent series of agrarian laws; “[Caesar] framed [the laws] about the land, which he wished to distribute to the whole populace... he wished to allocate all public land except for Campania...he stated that a large amount of surplus money from the booty taken by Pompey...should...[be spent]...on citizens.”⁸ Caesar used the “popular mob” so effectively that he completely intimidated his opitmate co-consul Bibulus into submission, ruling Rome with nearly dictatorial powers during his consulship: “some wags began to sign and seal documents not ‘done in the consulship of Caesar and Bibulus,’ but ‘done in the consulship of Julius and Caesar.’”⁹

Augustus, though with greater subtlety, uses a similar populist model. “In 23 B.C.E Augustus accepted the *tribunicia potestas*, and we are reminded repeatedly, not least by Augustus himself...that the populace of Rome was one of his primary concerns...he boasts of the...sums spent to feed and entertain the masses...to improve their quality of life.”¹⁰ For example, in Augustus’ *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, he claims “to each member of the Roman Plebs

⁷ An unofficial alliance known as the First Triumvirate.

⁸ Lynda Garland and Matthew Dillon, *Ancient Rome: From the Early Republic to the Assassination of Julius Caesar* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 581.

⁹ Luciano Canfora, *Julius Caesar: The Life and times of the People's Dictator* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 79.

¹⁰ Hartmut Galsterer, “A Man, a Book, and a Method: Sir Ronald Syme's Roman Revolution after Fifty Years,” in *Between Republic and Empire Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub and Mark Toher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 14.

I paid...300 sesterces, and in my own name gave them 400 each from the booty of war...I gave three gladiatorial games in my own name...I produced a naval battle as a show for the people.”¹¹ For the Augustan regime, support of the people was of fundamental importance; they had little interest in the chaotic oligarchic rule of the late Republic, which Augustus had shattered, and were particularly receptive to Augustan propaganda. Put simply, Augustus realized that “even assuming the upper classes at Rome.... did not take [Augustan propaganda] seriously...the mass of citizens.... unconcerned with the details of constitutional law.... looked to the [*Princeps*] to solve their...problems.... and to secure...law and order.”¹² The people thus constituted the base of Augustus power. However, only the promise of peace and conquest could win their loyalty.

The late Roman Republic was a time of violence and political chaos: first the social violence of the Gracchi, the civil wars of Marius and Sulla and Caesar and Pompey, and finally the ultimate victory of Octavian against Antony. Augustus was aware that Romans were tired of constant civil war and political upheaval. He would use this to his advantage, creating an imperial executive based on peace, security and military conquest.¹³ This ideological basis is evident in the *Res Gestae* as Augustus claimed to have driven “into exile the murderers of [his] father...undertook many civil and foreign wars by land and sea throughout the world...added Egypt to the Empire...recovered Spain and Gaul...made the seas peaceful... [and] extinguished civil wars.”¹⁵ While this list of accomplishments is certainly hyperbole, the emphasis on conquest as a tool for peace is nonetheless telling. Augustus had to portray himself as a bringer of peace and stability while also detailing his success as a military leader and conqueror to

¹¹ Augustus, “Record of His Accomplishments,” in *Rome: Late Republic and Principate*, ed. Walter Emil Kaegi Jr. and Peter White, vol. 2 of *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, ed. John Boyer and Julius Kirshner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 96-99.

¹² Galsterer, “A Man, a Book, and a Method: Sir Ronald Syme's Roman Revolution After Fifty Years,” 15.

¹³ J.W Rich, “Augustus, War and Peace,” in *Augustus*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 138-139.

¹⁵ Augustus, “Record of His Accomplishments,” 94-100.

demonstrate the Augustan regime's ability to secure the state and its territory. For Augustus, his ability to secure both success in war and a lasting peace, was essential to the development of his personal jurisdiction over the entire Roman state. That said, while populist rhetoric and 'pacification through victories' was the basis of Augustan power, it required co-opting and reforming the old Republican regime.

Augustus accomplished this in many ways. On the most obvious and superficial level, he did not abandon republican political and religious titles and institutions. For example, Augustus held the consulship thirteen times and was also the chief Republican religious official, the Pontifex Maximus. However, Augustus did not fashion himself simply as an accomplished magistrate of the Republic. Instead, he depicted himself as a restorer and savior of the Roman Republic and its traditions. Once again, the *Res Gestate* provides the greatest clarity on how Augustus fashioned himself. Augustus claims to have "at a time when with universal consent I was in complete control of affairs, I transferred the Republic from my power to the dominion of the Senate and people of Rome."¹⁶ Seemingly aware of the obviousness of his charade, he qualifies his power asserting that "after this time I excelled all in influence, although I possessed no more official power than others who were my colleagues in the several magistracies."¹⁷ Through this claim, Augustus wanted to demonstrate that his personal jurisdiction over the Roman state, functionally a monarchical regime, was not the result of tyrannical violence and power. Rather, his authority came from the traditional Republican order as a result of his extraordinary skills and character. This demonstrates that despite Augustus's reputation as a populist in much of the secondary literature, he also structured much of his regime around co-opting the infrastructure and traditions of the old senatorial order: "Augustus [knew he] could

¹⁶ Augustus, "Record of His Accomplishments," 101.

¹⁷ Augustus, "Record of His Accomplishments," 101.

only defeat the Republic thoroughly and definitively by restoring it...[the Augustan monarchy] could be realized only if [he]...succeeded in insinuating himself into the role of the foremost defender of the Republic... the *Principate* had to be built with the very elements...of the traditional Republic.”¹⁸ Consequently, Augustus made a conscious decision to portray his despotic rule not as that of a people’s dictator, as his adoptive father had done, but rather as first citizen (*Princeps Civitatis*) and savior of the traditional Roman Republic. While the *Res Gestae* portrays the clearest and most idealized version of the *Principate*, from Augustus himself, it was not the only source of this rhetoric. Instead, the entirety of the state prorogated the rhetoric of the Augustan regime through coinage, changes to the calendar, and sponsored literature.

The exact political nature of Augustan coinage remains a controversial topic among scholars. Ancient Historian Karl Galinsky postulated, “[Augustan] coinage at best can reaffirm propaganda though not create it,” citing the fact that “some of Augustus’ major programs, such as legislation on morals and marriage, found no expression in his coinage.”¹⁹ While Galinsky’s analysis appears to be largely true when applied to specific reform programs of the Augustan regime, he fails to address the macro-rhetorical value that the coinage presented: “that the organization of the coinage and the details of the messages to be transmitted...were decided by the emperor himself appears self-evident when we consider the parallelism with the particulars Augustus underlined in the *Res Gestae*.”²⁰ For example, this Aureus of Octavian from 28 BCE, a year before the senate bestowed the title Augustus, celebrates that “[Octavian] restored the laws and rights of the Roman people,”²¹ using very similar rhetoric to the *Res Gestae*.

¹⁸ Galsterer, “A Man, a Book, and a Method,” 15.

¹⁹ Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 39.

²⁰ G. M Paul, *Roman Coins and Public Life under the Empire: E. Togo Salmon Papers II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 28.

²¹ Jean-Louis Ferray, “The Powers of Augustus,” in *Augustus*, ed. Jonathan Edmonson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 92.

While coins with Republican slogans were common, they were not the only rhetorical purpose of Augustan coinage. Other coins demonstrate that, even at an early stage, Augustus was progressively claiming more powers, even portraying himself as the god Neptune, demonstrating his increasing confidence in his position. It is clear that even if not used as propaganda for specific reforms, coinage was certainly an important tool to spread the rhetoric of *Res Publica Restituta*.

Nonetheless, a far less controversial case of the Augustan regime's propaganda is evident in his patronage of civic architecture. The best example of this is the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, the Altar of Augustan Peace. Like the *Res Gestae*, it celebrates Augustus as a bringer of peace and stability and savior of the traditional Roman Republic while also emphasizing the new realities of the Augustan socio-political settlement: "the Ara Pacis sums up all the themes of Augustan propaganda, in its suggestion of continuity with the traditions of the past and its allegorical reference to the contemporary role of the imperial family and the general political and social situation."²² Similar propaganda policy is seen in depictions of Augustus himself, most prominently in the statue, Augustus of Prima Porta commissioned by Emperor Tiberius in 15 C.E. Significantly, the statue does not portray Augustus as a king or a dictator. Instead, it emphasizes his authority in more subtle ways. He demonstrates his *auctoritas* as a powerful warrior, and head of the Roman military, wearing a general's breastplate and wielding a spear, and orator through the *Adlocutio* gesture.²³ Rather than unbridled conquest, the imagery on Augustus's breastplate celebrates "pacification through conquest" through the surrender of the Parthians and the return of lost standards from the defeats of Crassus and Mark Antony. Perhaps

²² Peter Garnsey, and Richard P. Saller, *The Roman Empire Economy, Society and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 183.

²³ Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction*, 24.

most importantly the style of the statue embodies much of Augustan rhetoric: “the statue has simple, clear-cut lines....By avoiding the excess, the statue reflects Augustan virtues such as simplicity and morality... [and] the continuity of traditional style parallels Augustus’s continuity of the Republican tradition.”²⁴

The Augustan state pursued similar policy through the creation of state holidays. In 30 BCE, August 1st was declared a public holiday by the senate as “Egypt [returned to the power] of the people of Rome.... [The day was made] a holiday by [decree of the senate] because on this day Imperator Caesar Augustus freed the [Republic] from the most terrible danger.”²⁵ While this rhetoric likely would have been unconvincing in 30 BCE, it is clear evidence that Augustan rhetoric was co-opted into the entirety of the state with the hope of creating a lasting political settlement.

Unsurprisingly, this rhetoric, particularly *Res Publica Restituta*, is a common trope in the Augustan sponsored literati. Horace, one of the key propagandists for the Augustan regime, described Augustus in book four of his *Odes* (13 BCE) as “Sprung from the kindly gods, best guardian of Romulus’ people...you are the wonder of the world...all marvel at you, Italy’s present guardian...Rome’s protector.”²⁶ The first century Roman historian Velleius Paterculus is even more direct in his praise of Augustus in his *History of Rome*: “There is nothing then that men can wish for...that Augustus...did not immediately deliver to the Republic, the Roman people, and the whole world....Strength was restored to the laws, authority to the courts, dignity

²⁴ “Augustus of Prima Porta,” *MIT*, accessed August 20, 2016, <http://web.mit.edu/21h.402/www/primaporta/>

²⁵ “Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius,” *Macquarie University*, accessed August 20, 2016, https://www.mq.edu.au/about_us/faculties_and_departments/faculty_of_arts/departments_of_ancient_history/current_students/program_information/documents_illustrating_the_reigns_of_augustus_and_tiberius/#Calendars

²⁶ Horace, “To Augustus,” in *The Lyrics of Horace: done into English rhyme*, trans. Charles Thomas Baring (London: Rivingtons, 1870), 188.

to the senate, the power of the magistrates was reduced to its former limits... [and]the ancient and traditional form of the Republic was restored.”²⁷

Direct praise of Augustus as the restorer of the Republic was common; however, this propaganda often manifested in far more subtle ways. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which tells the story of Aeneas the mythical hero of the Trojan War and the ancestor of the Romans, heavily reflects Augustan values in its prose. In book six of the *Aeneid*, Sybil, who sees future Roman heroes in the underworld, describes Augustus to Aeneas with the strongest praise: “Now fix your sight, and stand intent, to see Your Roman race, and Julian progeny. The mighty Caesar waits his vital hour, Impatient for the world, and grasps his promis'd pow'r. But next behold the youth of form divine, Ceasar himself, exalted in his line; Augustus, promis'd oft, and long foretold, Sent to the realm that Saturn rul'd of old; Born to restore a better age of gold.”²⁸

While this is the most direct praise of Augustus throughout the narrative, the hero Aeneas is consistently described and praised for the very same characteristics and values that were celebrated by the Augustan regime; “Aeneas... [is] set up as [a] historical [model] and [parallel] for Augustus, [his] relative and the newest founder/savior/father.... Aeneas...presents the quintessential image of *pietas*, loyalty toward...family... [and] the Roman state.”²⁹ While this rhetoric is powerful, it is once again difficult to know whether the Augustan patronized literati actually believed in what they wrote. Many historians have described Horace as “at most only a half-hearted propagandist,”³⁰ and the Augustan historian Livy hoped that “Augustus would

²⁷ Philip de Souza, “*Parta victoriis pax*: Roman emperors as peacemakers,” in *War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, ed. Philip de Souza and John France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82.

²⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. John Dryden (New York: Cosimo, 2010), 238.

²⁹ Beth Severy, *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 171-173.

³⁰ Janice M. Benario, “Book 4 of Horace's Odes: Augustan Propaganda,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 91 (1960): 340.

become the new Camillus, rather than a new Romulus... [he] worried about the restoration of the monarchy under Augustus.”³¹

Regardless, the Augustan rhetoric in the writings of the state patronized literati demonstrates the long-term vision Augustus had for his regime. He not only re-imagined himself, but also re-imagined all of Roman history to suit the new Augustan political settlement. While this would provide the basis of the *Principate*, it would transform throughout the reigns of his successors. The Julio-Claudians, the Flavians, and the “Five Good Emperors,” would maintain *Res Publica Restituta* as the theoretical basis of the *Principate*. However, gradually over time as the Republic faded from memory, the Emperors would emerge as increasingly overt despotic figures and the rhetoric of *Res Publica Restituta* became irrelevant.

The Augustan regime set the basis for the *Principate*. That said, the *Principate* was by no means static. While the façade of the *Res Publica Restituta* would remain, overtime Augustus’s successors would become increasingly assertive. Nevertheless, this very gradual process occurred over many generations and imperial dynasties. Critically, even as the monarchical rule of the Emperors became increasingly obvious, the rhetoric of *Res Publica Restituta* could not simply be abandoned due to the long-standing Roman aversion to monarchy since the overthrow of the last Etruscan king. Consequently, no Emperor, at least during the early Empire, could simply declare themselves *dominus*: “the autocratic associations of the term *dominus* made it inappropriate... [and] modest emperors like Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius...all rejected the title...while bad emperors like Caligula [and] Domitian...insisted on it.”³² This tension set the

³¹Nadejda Popov-Reynolds, “Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2010.07.48,” *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, accessed August 20, 2016, <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2010/2010-07-48.html>.

³² Carlos F Norena, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation, Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 293.

stage for how Emperors were judged in the early Empire. Successful emperors would maintain the rhetoric of the Augustan regime while also gradually claiming greater powers.

In contrast, unsuccessful emperors were those who marginalized or even abandoned the rhetorical infrastructure of the traditional Republic in favor of explicit despotism. Emperors Caligula and Domitian are the archetypal tyrannical *Princeps*. The supposedly insane and depraved Caligula is notorious for his erratic behavior, infamously making his favorite horse Incitatus a Senator. Through this gesture, Caligula had mocked the senate by bluntly acknowledging how useless the body had become under the Augustan regime. Additionally, Caligula, ignoring traditional Augustan subtlety on the issue, saw himself as a god on earth. When Caligula visited Judea he demanded that a statue of his person be placed in the Temple in Jerusalem and chastised the Jews for not worshiping him: “you sacrificed to somebody else, even if it was on my behalf. So where’s the merit in that? You did not sacrifice to me.”³³ Caligula’s disrespect of the Senate, “megalomania, unpredictability, and religious arrogance alienated many,” and as a result he was assassinated by his own Praetorian Guard.³⁴ Similarly, Domitian openly detested the senate, “not [hesitating] to boast in the Senate...that he had conferred their power.”³⁵ The alienation of the senate was complete as Domitian “insisted on being addressed as *dominus et deus* (lord and god)... [and] his supreme prerogatives shattered the illusion that the *Princeps* was first among equals.”³⁶ As a result, like Caligula, Domitian was assassinated. Emperors like Caligula and Domitian were unable to maintain the delicate balance of despotism and the illusion of the Republic created by Augustus. These Emperors had the potential to

³³ Philo, “Embassy to Gaius,” in *Religions of Rome: Volume 2, A Sourcebook*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 259.

³⁴ Mary Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 320.

³⁵ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, trans. John Carew Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 347.

³⁶ Mary Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 320.

permanently undermine the stability of the Augustan regime by making the *Princeps* appear as an overt monarch. To preserve the Augustan façade of the Republic, overtly despotic Emperors were erased from history, a practice known as *damnatio memoriae*, often to emphasize the ‘Republican’ credentials of the successor. This practice saw “images [of the Princeps] systematically mutilated or physically altered into the likenesses of other emperors.”³⁷ For example, early in the reign of Emperor Nerva, according to Suetonius, “the senators were overjoyed [at Domitian’s death]...they even had ladders brought and his shields and images torn down before their eyes and dashed upon the ground...they passed a decree that his inscriptions should everywhere be erased, and all record of him obliterated.”³⁸ Emperor Nerva and the senate had effectively re-written history to ignore the tyranny of Domitian and better suit the Augustan tradition, particularly the claim of *Res Publica Restituta*. In general, *Princeps* who abandoned the Augustan regime to claim greater despotic powers were quickly regarded as tyrants and ultimately either achieved very little or, like Caligula and Domitian, assassinated. In contrast, Emperors that did succeed in expanding their power did so in much subtler ways that remained, largely, tied to the infrastructure established by the Augustus.

For most Emperors the key to claiming greater powers was to tie themselves with the Augustan tradition and to respect the senate. Emperor Claudius addressed the senate with profound respect, even asserting in deliberations “If these proposals meet with your approval, say it so at once...if, however, you disapprove find another solution...you must state your own view...it is altogether unbecoming to the majesty of this body to have one man alone [decide].”³⁹

³⁷ Eric R. Varner, *Monumenta Graeca Et Romana Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 1.

³⁸ Lauren Hackworth Petersen, “The Presence of ‘Damnatio Memoriae’ In Roman Art,” *Notes in the History of Art*, 30 (2011): 1.

³⁹ Michael Burger, *The Shaping of Western Civilization: From Antiquity to the Present* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 124.

While certainly hyperbole, this respect afforded to the senate overtly allowed Claudius to play a more direct role in senate deliberations than either of his predecessors Augustus or Tiberius.⁴⁰

Emperor Vespasian used similar rhetorical strategies to claim greater and more explicit powers for the *Princeps*. This can be seen in this inscription, *The Law Bestowing Power on the Emperor*:

I. [The *Princeps* Emperor Caesar Vespasian] shall...make a treaty with whomever he wishes just as it was lawful for the deified Augustus, Tiberius Caesar, and Claudius Caesar...

IV. And when he commends to the Senate and people those who are seeking magistracy, power, *imperium* or responsibility over anything...they will be given extraordinary considerations at the elections. And that he will have the right and power to do whatever he thinks is in the public interest for the majesty of divine and human, public or private affairs just as the deified Augustus, Tiberius Caesar, and Claudius Caesar had the right...

VII. And that whatever laws and plebiscites it was written that deified Augustus, Tiberius Caesar, and Claudius Caesar were not bound, the emperor Caesar Vespasian shall be free from those laws and plebiscites, and whatever the deified Augustus, Tiberius Caesar, and Claudius Caesar could do in accordance with a law or proposal, it shall be lawful for the emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus to do those things.

⁴⁰ Mary Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 322.

VIII. And whatever, before the passage of this law, has been done, carried out, decreed or order by the emperor Caesar Vespasian by his order or instruction, those things in the future will be legal and binding just as if they had been enacted by a law or plebiscite.

Oath: If anyone due to this law has or shall have acted contrary to laws, proposal, plebiscites, or decrees of the Senate, or if he does not do in consequence of this law anything he must in accordance with a law, proposal, plebiscite, or decree of the Senate, he shall not be punished nor shall he have to pay any penalty to the people, nor shall anyone have the right to bring lawsuit or charges concerning such matter, nor shall any official allow charges before him on this matter.⁴¹

In this decree, Vespasian claimed powers that were overtly despotic, seemingly shattering the Augustan regime's illusion of the Republic in a fashion akin to the tyrannies of Caligula and Domitian. However, unlike Caligula, and his own son Domitian, Vespasian claimed these powers not because he was "*dominus et deus*" but rather by appealing to tradition, "just as the defied Augustus, Tiberius Caesar, and Claudius Caesar had the right." Consequently, Vespasian was appealing directly to the Augustan regime and, by connection, the tradition of *Res Publica Restituta*.

Even when Vespasian punished Roman senators, one of the major crimes perpetrated by Caligula and Domitian, he is fashioned in terms that seem similar to those used by Augustus and Claudius or shifted the blame elsewhere. Vespasian's decision to execute the senator Helvidius Priscus exemplifies this rhetoric: "It cannot readily be shown that any innocent person was punished save in Vespasian's absence and without his knowledge, or at any rate against his will

⁴¹ "The Law Bestowing Power on the Emperor (70 CE)," in *The Historians of Ancient Rome: An Anthology of the Major Writings*, ed. Ronald Mellor (London: Routledge, 2012), 8-9.

and by misleading him. Although Helvidius Priscus was the only who greeted him on his return from Syria by his private name of Vespasian and moreover in his praetorship left the emperor unhonored and unmentioned in all his edicts, he did not show anger until, by the extravagance of his railing, Helvidius had all but degraded him. But even in his case, though he did banish him and later order his death, he was most anxious for any means of saving him, and sent messengers to recall those who were to slay him; and he would have saved him but for a false report that Helvidius had already been done to death. Certainly he never took pleasure in the death of anyone, but even wept and sighed over those who suffered merited punishment.”⁴²

In this account, Suetonius portrayed Vespasian as having absolute power but being very hesitant to use it because he sees himself as first citizen rather than *dominus*. This was the ideal perception for an Emperor according to the Augustan regime. It was this image of the *Princeps*, not that of Caligula and Domitian, that allowed the Emperor to claim greater powers as seen in Vespasian’s *Laws Bestowing Power On the Emperor*. Ironically, adherence to the Augustan regime’s illusion of the Republic and the rhetoric of *Res Publica Restituta* allowed the Emperors to become increasingly, and explicitly, monarchical. When Caligula died, before the Praetorian Guard declared Claudius *Princeps*, the Roman senate attempted to re-establish the traditional Republic as it had existed before Augustus established the *Principate*. No such discussion occurred with Domitian’s death and the end of the Flavian dynasty. By the time Nerva was declared Emperor by the senate in 96 C.E. it had become clear that “the victory of Actium, the death of Antonius, and the stabilization of affairs in Rome [and the Augustan political settlement that followed] all marked steps towards, not away from, the establishment of a monarchy.”⁴³ As a result, while the overt despotism of Caligula and Domitian remained despised, emperors

⁴² Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, ed. J.C. Rolfe (New York: Barnes & Noble Publishing, 2004), 300.

⁴³ Millar. “Triumvirate and Principate,” 89.

became increasingly admired, or criticized, for the ability to unilaterally control the state, muting the rhetoric of *Res Publica Restituta*.

It was under the “Five Good Emperors” (96-180 CE) that this new dynamic emerged. Pliny’s *Panegyric to Trajan* demonstrates the complexity of this new imperial rhetoric with both continuity and transformation of the Augustan tradition. On the one hand, Pliny celebrates Trajan for truly acting as first citizen rather than *dominus*: “you have spontaneously subjected yourself to the laws, which no one ever drafted to be binding upon the *princeps*...the same restrictions apply to Caesar when consul as to others...all Emperors before you said about the same, but none before you was believed.”⁴⁴ Pliny adds further, “our enemies crave permission to obey [our] commands. They see that Rome has a leader who ranks with her heroes of old...you refuse the title of Father of your country...you do not direct your subjects to grovel at your feet...we are ruled by you and subject to you, but no more than we are to the law.”⁴⁵ From Pliny’s *Panegyric* one would think that Trajan is the ideal Emperor of the Augustan regime. However, the reality is not so simple. In Pliny’s letters he praises Trajan “as [*dominus*] no less than eighty-two times; this usage is polite and deferential, apparently synonymous with his other, less common but manifestly polite, forms of addresses such as *imperator optime* (most excellent commander).”⁴⁶ This reveals a fundamental change from the Augustan *Principate*. Under the Augustan regime the *Princeps* was celebrated only as a “restorer and savior” of the Republic while the role as an absolute monarch was marginalized as a political liability. In contrast, under

⁴⁴ Pliny, “Panegyric Addressed to the Emperor Trajan,” in *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings, Volume 2*, ed. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 21.

⁴⁵ Pliny, “Panegyric to Trajan,” in *Rome: Late Republic and Principate*, ed. Walter Emil Kaegi Jr. and Peter White, vol. 2 of *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization*, ed. John Boyer and Julius Kirshner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 139-140, 142.

⁴⁶ Christopher S Mackay and Matthew B. Roller, *Constructing Autocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 258.

Trajan, as seen through Pliny, the Emperor is celebrated both as an “Augustan” and monarchical figure.

While writers now praised the Emperors as masters of the entire Roman state, this ironically also opened them up to new and far more direct criticisms. The clearest example of this is late first century historian Tacitus’ *Annals*. While Tacitus accepts the necessity of the *Principate* following the violence of the late Republic, he also criticizes nearly all of the Roman Emperors as tyrannical despots. Astoundingly, he is particularly critical of Augustus, a figure who in the early *Principate* was often beyond reproach: “Augustus...subjected [the people of Rome] to empire under the title of Prince... [and] the histories of [the Emperors], while they were in power, were falsified through terror.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, Tacitus openly acknowledges the Augustan regime’s basis of the *Principate*—*Res Publica Restituta*—as the act it really was, “the state had been revolutionized, and there was not a vestige left of the old sound morality. Stripped of equality, all looked up to the commands of the sovereign without the least apprehension for the present.”⁴⁸ In his *Life of Agricola* Tacitus is even more critical of Emperor Domitian on the basis of the new expectation of the Emperor to be both an ‘Augustan’ archetype and a unrestrained despot: “Now at last our spirit is returning...the dawn of a most happy age Nerva Caesar [and Nerva Trajan] blended things once irreconcilable, sovereignty and free...[remedying] those 15 years [where] a large portion of human life...fell [victim] to [Domitian’s] rage...[his rule being] one continuous blow, [draining] the life-blood of the [Republic].”⁴⁹ This criticism is most telling in that it abandons the possibility for the perfect

⁴⁷ Tacitus, “Annals,” in *The Historians of Ancient Rome: An Anthology of the Major Writings*, ed. Ronald Mellor (London: Routledge, 2012), 307.

⁴⁸ Tacitus, “Annals,” 308.

⁴⁹ Tacitus, “Life of Agricola,” in *The Historians of Ancient Rome: An Anthology of the Major Writings*, ed. Ronald Mellor (London: Routledge, 2012), 290, 300.

Augustan *Princeps*, an archetype that even Augustus fails to meet in Tacitus's eyes. Never again would the *Principate* as imagined by Augustus be the ideal. In its place, the Emperors became increasingly, and explicitly, despotic as the Republic faded from collective memory. This would set the stage for the rest of the *Principate* until, following the Crisis of the Third Century, Emperor Diocletian formalized the title *dominus* formally ending the charade that Augustus had started centuries earlier. Augustus and his successors shaped the transition from Republic to Empire through the rhetoric they, and their critics, used. This created a political settlement that would endure throughout the *Principate*.

Due to their success, it became the standard for imitation throughout history. Napoleon Bonaparte embodies this trend. A brilliant general of France's revolutionary period, Napoleon succeeded in conquering much of Northern Italy and Egypt. When he returned to France he overthrew the failing French Directory and in its place proclaimed himself First Consul of France in 1799, immediately imitating Roman titles and establishing complete control over the state. Similar to what Augustus had done nearly two millennia earlier; Napoleon was committed to keeping the illusion of the French Republic alive. Like Augustus's *Res Gestae*, this is found in the rhetoric that Napoleon himself uses. For example, upon proclaiming himself First Consul, effectively sole master of the French state, Napoleon was reported to have said, "the Revolution is over...Frenchman! ...A constitution is presented to you... [this] constitution is founded on the true principles of representative government, on the sacred rights of property, equality, and liberty....Citizens, the Revolution is established upon the principles which began it: it is ended."⁵⁰ Napoleon was ending any semblance of a functional French Republic just as he proclaimed that very same Republic restored. Napoleon, like Augustus, understood that

⁵⁰ Susan P. Conner, *The Age of Napoleon* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 29.

“[necessity of reassuring] the mass of citizens that the legitimacy of the French Republic was not contested and the Republic was still in operation... Bonaparte, just as [Augustus] had done, required a power which was [seemingly] legitimate [in the Republican tradition].”⁵¹

Nevertheless, just four years later (1804), like Augustus’s successors did overtime, Napoleon would assert his despotic power outright, with only a small hint remaining of Republicanism, through the title Emperor of the French. Once again, Napoleon echoed the Romans in this transition explicitly fashioning his image as that of a Roman *Princeps*. For example, Napoleon in his portrayals as an Emperor, copying the Roman tradition started by Augustus, wears the *Corona Civica* (Civic Crown), the second highest military honor given in the Roman Republic. All of this makes it clear that Napoleon was fashioning himself as a ‘new Augustus’ explicitly but also, unintentionally, copying Augustus’s successors through the rhetoric and tactics he used to expand his power.

The *Principate*, as established by Augustus and his successors, emerged as one of the most stable political orders in human history. The Roman Republic, while often celebrated as the pinnacle of antiquity, was a broken and destructive political system dominated by social upheaval and civil war in the decades before the rise of Augustus. In contrast, the *Principate* ushered in a two hundred year period of Roman dominance and stability, known as the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, which, at its peak, Edward Gibbon would describe as, “the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous.”⁵³ This peace was only possible because of the delicate balancing act that Augustus and his successors maintained throughout the *Principate*. Augustus set the stage by creating a

⁵¹ Valérie Huet, “Napoleon I: A New Augustus?” in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945*, ed. Catherine Edwards (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 55.

⁵³ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 89.

regime that outwardly espoused the rhetoric of *Res Publica Restituta* while in reality allowing him to become master of the entire Roman state. His successors built on this foundation, progressively claiming greater powers for the *Princeps* until, by the end of the first century, the rhetoric of *Res Publica Restituta* was rendered irrelevant by the reality of despotic rule that had obliterated the socio-political realities of the Roman Republic from collective memory. This transition from the “restored” Republic to the despotic *Principate* as the basis of government was so successful that it became an archetype for all potential despots, including Napoleon, in the western tradition. From this model, successful despots understood that one could not simply demand to be recognized as “*dominus et deus*” or reign solely through violence and fear like Caligula and Domitian had done. Instead, like Augustus, Claudius, Vespasian, and Trajan, among other “good” emperors, a successful despot had to be a skilled actor who appeared to uphold the Republican tradition while, in reality, establishing a monarchical socio-political order.

About the author

Zachary Brown is a native of Toronto Ontario and a junior studying history at Stanford University with a concentration in US history. His academic interests include the American Civil War, the rhetoric of Anglo-Indian interactions in the Colonial period, and political authority in the Hellenistic period and the early Roman Empire. Zachary hopes to pursue graduate studies in history.