

The Life and Times of the Other Caesar

By Joseph H. Zerbey IV



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His civic activities include being Immediate Past Chairman and current member of the Board of Trustees of the University of Toledo; on the Board of Directors and Executive Committee of the National Museum of the Great Lakes; on the Board of Directors of the Toledo Symphony; on the Board of Trustees of the Marathon Oil LGPA Classic Tournament; and member of the Toledo Rotary Club.

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As Julius Caesar rose to prominence as a fighting general and then crossed the Rubicon in 49 BCE, a frail and lithe tow-headed boy named Gaius Octavius Thurinus was running in plush gardens, arguing with tutors, and being raised at his father's house in Velletri, about twenty-five miles from Rome. It was less crowded there, healthier, and comfortable. His cognomen, Thurinus, most likely commemorated his father Gaius Octavius's participation in putting down an uprising of slaves led by Spartacus at Thurri in the boot of Italy. His mother, Atia, was the niece of Julius Caesar.

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When imagining Augustus Caesar, we need to imagine his world. Rome was all-powerful, the most important nation-state in the world. Its people had created massive water projects (the aqueducts); stadiums that seated thousands (the Coliseum); thousands of miles of highways (some still around today); the world's most powerful army and navy (the Roman Legions and naval trireme or warship); a ruling congress (the Roman Senate); a money

system (the denarius); free libraries (attached to their temples); and even recreational sport (gladiators). In some ways Rome, in the First Century BCE, was the precursor of the America of today.

Young Octavius moved to a house high on the Palatine Hill above all the filth and humanity in the streets of Rome. They and their neighbors were the elite of Roman society. Think of Beacon Hill in Boston, Pacific Heights in San Francisco or the Main Line in Philadelphia. The Roman household resembled ours of today to some extent. It was where the nuclear family lived, but in Roman times it included slaves who lived in the doorways of the master's bedroom, acting as a human early alarm system. The house usually had two stories. Inside were bedrooms, a dining room, a kitchen, and a foyer, but additionally there were Roman features such as the atrium, the *impluvium* (a sunken structure in an atrium, designed to carry away rainwater), and a central pool with shaded walkways where the head of the household would conduct business in the morning hours. The *tablinum* was a main reception room set off from the atrium where the owner would meet business associates, army officers, priests, or common petitioners. And there was always the *peristyle*, an open air courtyard or garden.

Houses were decorated according to one's standing in society and the scale of one's wealth. (Sound familiar?) The wealthiest of Romans took great pains in having their walls painted with murals, often depicting their standing in life and military conquests. Floors were marble, some with mosaic inlays, and furniture was easily moved and often replaced. Octavius's father used

his home for entertaining but also for business purposes, so it was adorned with special artwork and murals.

Octavius and his family ate very well, getting a wide variety of foodstuffs brought in from all the various trade networks of the Republic. For a dinner party, a family such as Octavius's might serve salad of mallow leaves, lettuce, chopped leeks, mint, and arugula, mackerel garnished with rue (rew, an ornamental herb), sliced eggs, and marinated sow udder. The main course was succulent cuts of a young goat, beans, greens, a chicken, and leftover ham, followed by a dessert of fresh fruit and vintage wine.

Here is part of a recipe for Parthian Chicken from Apicius, a Roman chef whose cookbook is still in print today: spatchcock a chicken, crushed pepper, lovage (a leafy plant that smells like lime) and a dash of caraway; blend in fish sauce to create slurry, and then thin with wine. Pour over chicken in a casserole with a lid. Dissolve asafoetida (dried gum from the root of the herb ferula) in warm water and baste chicken as it cooks. Romans obviously took cooking seriously.

Food played a big part in politics; the Roman *convivium* or banquet centered on gourmet food rather than the Greek tradition of a drinking party. A banquet held by Octavius when he was Augustus Caesar and running the country might have included pike liver, brains of a pheasant and peacock, flamingo tongue and lamprey milt (fluid of a mollusk) along with mullet, shellfish, and a stew made of oysters, mussels and sea urchins. All of these ingredients were brought to Rome by a fleet of merchantmen from the far reaches of the empire, from the Parthian frontier (basically today's Iran, Jordan and Iraq) to the Straits of Gibraltar.

The common Roman citizen benefited from grain distribution from the wealthy class. Roman leaders used

it as a means to control the populace—full bellies meant no trouble on Palatine Hill. As long as the citizenry had bread and the army received denarii, peace ruled the day.

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Rome was known for its sanitary conditions and the marvel of running water, fountains, public baths and a sewer system for waste removal. Romans were practical builders, aqueducts bringing fresh water to Rome from the northern mountains, roads linking major cities and remote parts of the empire. Their buildings were magnificent although less aesthetic than the fancy artful structures of the Greeks. Romans were about survival, power and money, and comfortable living for the ruling class.

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Octavius grew up into a slight, blond headed teenager as his great-uncle Julius became more and more powerful. Caesar won many battles against Rome's enemies both real and perceived. They provided slaves and treasure and triumphant marches through Rome for the conquering hero. While Rome was still a nominal republic, Julius Caesar joined with Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey) and Marcus Licinius Crassus to form the First Triumvirate to govern all of

the Roman territory. The threesome never had the official sanction of Roman law to rule, but they who had the army could do what they wanted. The Roman people were at peace, grain was plentiful, water abundant, and there was money to be made. Life was good if you weren't a slave, a gladiator, or a Gaul brought back by Julius Caesar and chained to an oar in a war trireme.

By 49 BCE, when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, Octavius was 14. He was a bit short of stature, handsome, well proportioned. He had something many Romans lacked, grace. The biographer Suetonius described his appearance as "unusually handsome and exceedingly graceful." He had clear bright eyes; his teeth were wide apart, hair curly and golden, and his complexion dark but sometimes fair. He was most likely 5'9" tall; his nose bent a little at the top and then sloped slightly inward. He cared little for his personal appearance, rarely having his hair cut or shaving his beard. When getting ready for a public appearance, he would have several barbers working on him at once while he read or wrote. His public images, however, were tightly controlled, and he preferred the Hellenistic style of royal portraiture to Roman realism.

He was a cruel young man, but later in his life he mellowed and stayed in the shadows. As he gained power, he became surer of himself, but could be brutal and deadly when he was crossed. When entertaining in his home, he had a sense of humor, loved to play dice, and often provided money to his guests so they could join in the game. He cheated on his wife Livia Drusilla, but protected her and was devoted to making sure her standard of living was the highest possible. His public morals were very high, even though he was an adulterer of the topmost order. He was made a priest or *pontifex* at fifteen or sixteen and ruled over the enforcement of homage to the Roman Gods. He later exiled his daughter and

granddaughter for abusing those principles.

Augustus was sick many times during his 75 years. He suffered from ailments common to people of the time. Although the Romans made improvements in sanitation, diseases were rampant; Romans associated good health with the bath, but the sick and the healthy bathed together in pools emptied only occasionally, so diseases spread quickly. Another disease transmitter was the latrine, which in Roman houses was usually right next to the kitchen and water supply; little more than cesspits, they had to be cleaned by hand by slaves, who then helped prepare the evening meal, spreading diseases to family members. Romans suffered from malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid fever and gastroenteritis. Augustus had several of these ailments but survived. He had good care, ate the right food (after a taster nibbled at what was served), and left the city for the better air and sun like most nobles.

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Julius Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March (in our calendar, March 15), 44 BCE. Anarchy was in the air, and the mob, or the common folk, was up in arms and going after the nobles and wealthy merchants. Rising above the storm was Augustus. He was named Julius Caesar's adopted son in the dictator's will and immediately changed his name to Caesar. He forged a pact with Mark Antony and Marcus Lepidus and set about murdering those who assassinated his "father." He didn't just kill those senators, but had their entire households—families, children, slaves and animals—put to the sword. Thousands were liquidated. To be associated or related in any way with the assassins meant instant death.

He soon tired of Antony and Lepidus. He forced them from Rome, stripped them of their official rank, and went after them. He defeated Antony in the battle of Actium in 31 BCE. Antony

and Cleopatra committed suicide and Caesar Augustus had their adopted son Caesarion, the son of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, murdered. In effect, he ordered the death of his own stepbrother.

In 27 BCE, Octavian orchestrated what was called the "First Settlement," in which he surrendered his power to the senate and thus restored the Republic. It was a farce, as he retained most of his former authority. The "Republic" was over, the Roman Empire begun. Octavian now took the name Augustus, which means "sacred" or "revered," and held the title of *imperator* to emphasize his position as head of the military. He would not accept the title of emperor, but he was in fact the sole ruler of Rome.

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One of his greatest achievements was persuading the Senate to accept him as head of the Roman state, which left him free to concentrate on subduing rebellious tribes in outer fringes of the empire and left the senators to political ambitions. Caesar Augustus spent several years away from Rome putting down rebellions. Between 27 BCE and 24 BCE, he waged a war with tribes in

Gaul and Spain. He was not known as a military genius, but he knew men. He could judge men and place those most loyal and talented around him.

One such lieutenant was Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa. Agrippa was a boyhood friend of Augustus, they had played together on the Palatine Hill and at country estates, had been educated together, and became very close friends. He was a very tough general and was at the side of Augustus at all times. Agrippa would become the adopted son of Augustus in later years—a way of insuring power and inheriting wealth. While Augustus ruled, Agrippa was the enforcer. He was also a builder, responsible for constructing aqueducts and thousands of temples, including the Pantheon. After 2,000 years, this marvelous building still stands in Rome and boasts the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome.

On returning to Rome, Augustus was granted more titles and power and received the highest designation, *pater patriae*, the father of the country. The days of mass murder were over, primarily because there was no one left to oppose him. Agrippa led the army, the empire was safe from attack, and the food and treasure flowed unrestricted to Rome. The empire now being largely free from large-scale conflict, his reign became known as *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace. Undoubtedly the most talented, energetic and skillful administrator of his time, he set about remaking the Empire.

Providing free grain to the masses was a sound political move. The people were fed, life was good, and few criticized the government. He also took measures to keep Rome's army, one of its most powerful institutions, under control. (When historians refer to the citizens of Rome, they are by and large talking about its soldiers; Roman citizenship was, for the most part,

bestowed on the veterans of Rome's legions.) At the end of the civil war with Mark Antony, Augustus had about fifty legions. To maintain better control, he reduced that number to twenty-eight. At the same time, he increased their pay and added numerous auxiliary troops from captured regions of the empire to do a lot of the heavy fighting. He created the famous Praetorian Guard, the personal bodyguards of the Emperor, along with a permanent navy. His military administrative genius proved both politically sound and very cost effective.

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The man who would not be called emperor claimed to have built eighty-two temples in one year alone. They included the Theatre of Apollo, the Horologium (a giant sun dial), and the great mausoleum of Augustus.

One thing he did not build was a palace. He lived in his home on Palatine Hill and avoided any semblance of monarchy. He believed that his personal security, his standing with the masses, benefited from his governing in the public interest. Unlike the latter days of the old Republic, where senators fumed and assassinated one another, stole from the people, and raised their own private legions, the new empire reorganized the lives of the citizens for their betterment. Augustus, along with Agrippa, strengthened and trained a new army and sent the famous Legions

of Rome to guard the vast reaches of the empire, insuring open trade routes. He remolded the civil services, rebuilt most of Rome after tearing down the dilapidated slums, and even appointed a 3,500-man fire and police service under a chief officer.

As Augustus grew older, he shied away from the public eye more and more. He had several more bouts of illness and visited Capri to take the sun. One day he went to see the birthplace of his birth father at Nola, and there passed away in his 75th year, with his wife Livia and his stepson Tiberius at his bedside. It is rumored that Livia laced some figs with poison because she feared her husband would announce Postumus Agrippa (Agrippa's son) as Emperor instead of Tiberius. This has never been proven, however. Tiberius, named the adopted son of Augustus in his will, did succeed him as Rome's second emperor. Augustus' body was taken to Rome and given a state funeral. His ashes were placed in his mausoleum.

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Augustus Caesar was the most powerful person in an empire that reached from England and Spain to North Africa, Egypt, and the Middle East. His reign laid a political foundation that lasted for fifteen centuries, through the ultimate decline of the Western Roman Empire and the fall of Constantinople in 1453. He was no innocent; he was a murderer and adulterer. But as the *pater patriae* he wished to embody the spirit of Republican virtue and norms. He believed in connecting with the concerns of the plebs and lay people. He achieved this through his genius, his generosity, and his common sense.

He devoted his long reign to constitutional reform and expansion of the empire under his pre-eminent control. With Agrippa doing the heavy lifting, Augustus toured the provinces, managed the process, rid himself of

troublemakers, and improved the Roman way. He was no saint, but he made the people feel they were a part of a great civilization; they were investors in their own future. As Anthony Everitt wrote in his book *Augustus*, "how many statesmen in human history can lay claim to such a record of enduring achievement?"

It is said that his last words relayed to the public were "Behold, I found Rome of clay, and leave her to you of marble." But his biographers wrote that as he took his last breaths, he turned to Livia and said, "Have I played the part well? Then applaud as I exit." And there it is, a story of Rome and the greatest of all the Romans, Gaius Octavius Thurinus, Augustus, the other Caesar.

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