

Document 18: Soldier

Background

Caesar Augustus was arguably the most important Roman Emperor, restoring the empire and overseeing a period of relative peace, prosperity, and expansion. Historians have noted the apparent contradictions of Augustus, who could be at once ruthless and forgiving, rash and calculating. In this lesson, students corroborate evidence and arguments from a set of primary and secondary sources as they investigate the question: What kind of leader was Augustus? The passage below was written by Velleius, who served as a soldier while Augustus was emperor.

There is nothing a man can desire from the gods, nothing that the gods can grant to a man, which Augustus did not bestow upon the Republic, the Roman people, and the world. The civil wars were ended after twenty years, foreign wars were suppressed, peace restored; validity was restored to the laws, authority to the courts, and dignity to the Senate. The old traditional form of Republic was restored. Agriculture was returned to the fields, respect to religion, to mankind freedom from anxiety, and to each citizen his property rights were now assured; old laws were usefully amended, and new laws passed for the general good. Augustus was forced to hold the office of consul eleven times in a row, despite his frequent efforts to refuse. But he stubbornly refused the dictatorship, which the people persistently offered him. To tell of the wars waged under his command, of the peace of the world by his victories, of his many works at home and outside of Italy would weary a writer who had his whole life to devote to the task.

Vocabulary

- **restored:** to bring back
- **validity:** legally acceptable
- **amended:** changed or revised

Dio, C. Roman History, p. 234

Background

This excerpt was written by the historian Cassius Dio, who was born 150 years after Octavian died.

Octavian wanted to be thought of as democratic. He gave the Senate control of the weaker provinces, on the ground that they were peaceful and free from war, while he retained control of the more powerful provinces (like Egypt), claiming that they were insecure and might begin a serious revolt. He said that he wanted the Senate to enjoy the finest portion of the empire, while he himself had the hardships and the dangers; but his real purpose was that by this arrangement the senators would be unarmed and unprepared for battle, while he alone had arms and maintained soldiers. Octavian was destined to have absolute control of all matters for all time. When his ten-year period came to an end, he was voted for another five years, then five more, after that ten, and again another ten, and then ten for the fifth time, so that by a series of ten-year periods he continued to be sole ruler for life. The name Augustus was given to him by the senate and by the people. They wished to call him by some distinctive title, and men were proposing one title and another. Octavian took the title of "Augustus," signifying that he was more than human; for all the most precious and sacred objects are termed "augusta." In this way the power of both people and senate passed entirely into the hands of Octavian, and he became, strictly speaking, a monarch; for monarchy would be the truest name for it. Romans, to be sure, so hated the idea of monarchy that they called their emperors neither dictators nor kings nor anything of the sort.

Vocabulary

- province: a region of a country or empire
- retain: to keep or maintain
- destined: certain to happen