

Did Augustus restore the Republic?

‘Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception.’

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe* (1531)

Often considered the model for Machiavelli’s *Il Principe* ‘The Prince’, though never explicitly mentioned by the Renaissance political philosopher, the achievements of the Roman emperor Augustus (known as Octavian or Caesar before 27 BC) are numerous. He is widely known as the first emperor of the Roman world, the man who brought peace to the Empire (the *Pax Augusta*), and the man whose political, social and religious reforms consolidated Rome’s role in the Mediterranean and Augustus’ place in world history. However, as a powerful and revered figure who sponsored many historical and literary accounts of his reign 27 BC–AD 14, it can be difficult to differentiate between the myth and the man himself. By examining the historical, literary and archaeological evidence, this case study will assess one aspect of Augustus’ career, his claim to restore the Republic.

Historical background

The question of whether or not Augustus restored the Republic to the people of Rome seems like quite a straightforward line of inquiry which should, in theory, have a clear (if not simple) answer. However, before evaluating the question one must consider not only historical sources, but also the historical context: *What was ‘the Republic’ at this time in Roman history?* In the century prior to Augustus’ meteoric rise (see Chapter 2) the Roman people bore witness to years of chaos and numerous civil wars fought between Roman leaders, public disorder, provincial revolts, slave revolts, executions without trial, conscription lists, marches on the capitol city, as well as mass extortion at home and abroad (cf. *Cicero In Verrem*). These events divided Roman families, redistributed lands and wealth, and undermined the social and economic fabric in the Empire as well as the system of checks and balances in the **Roman Constitution**. Addressing the arising issues involved claiming super constitutional powers on the part of the Senate (e.g. *senatus consultum ultimum*) and private individuals (e.g. Prolonged dictatorship for Sulla and Caesar, successive consulships for Marius and Caesar). These offices warped the constitutional systems and cast negative connotations on certain offices (particularly that of dictator), which made them undesirable.

While the term ‘res publica’ ‘public matters’ seems innately rooted in the concerns of the people, yet, as Rome’s Empire expanded and its population (citizen and slave) expanded, the concerns of the everyday citizens of Italy were often marginalized, as power was consolidated into the hands of fewer and fewer individuals. Arguably, those who paid the highest price in the political, economic and military acrimony were the citizens of Rome, who fought in the civil wars and suffered under economic inflation and uncertain markets, whilst gaining relatively little from chronic shifts of power among individuals. By 27 BC, no one under the age of 35 would have had a living memory of a government before the first triumvirate (59 BC), and those who did, did not necessarily have an idealized view of the Republic. It is certainly worth considering: did the Roman people yearn for the restoration of the Republic? In the unlikely event that there was a popular movement for restoration, was such a task possible? One revealing example of an Augustus ‘restoration’ was to reduce the Senate membership (whose numbers had reached 1,000) to 800 members, and then to

its ‘original’ 600. Did this act ‘restore’ the traditional essence of the Roman Senate? It certainly benefitted Augustus by allowing him to remove 400 potential adversaries. Even in a modern context, it is not so hard to see how a purge of certain longstanding senators (America) or MPs (Britain) would be seen in a negative light by the general public. It is important to consider the broader social consciousness of the Republic, before assessing the surviving literary evidence, which tends to reflect the views of an elite minority.

Literary sources

‘Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.’

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe* (1531)

Our sources on the Republic at the end of the 1st century BC range from contemporaries such as Cicero, Caesar and Augustus himself, to historians such as Suetonius (ca. AD 69–after 122) and Cassius Dio (AD 155–235). The latter, who lived more than 100 years after the events and wrote during the decline of the Empire, has a tendency to add dramatic flourish and a sense of foreboding to the accounts of his predecessors, seeing many a Marius in the younger Caesars of Roman Imperial rule. Each set of sources has its limitations. Learned politicians such as Cicero, Cato the younger, and many subsequent scholars of Stoic philosophy in the Imperial Period (e.g. Seneca, cf. Chapter 8) record an idealized image about what the Republic should be, as set out in the history and law books, as a series of checks and balances, based on promotion by a system of meritocracy. However, all these men struggled (and ultimately failed) to apply their ideals in practice. For Cicero, in particular, one can see both his political ideals of a just government (in his *De Legibus* ‘On the laws’ and his entreaties to the jury in his political speeches e.g. *In Verrem*) as well as his cynicism in his letters to his friend Atticus:

‘The fact remains that for all his patriotism and integrity he is sometimes a political liability. He speaks in the Senate as though he were living in Plato's Republic instead of Romulus' cesspool.’

–*Ad Atticus* 21.8

Caesar's actions as consul in 59 BC illustrate the lack of ‘due process’ in the political sphere of the late Republic: after unsuccessfully trying to check one of Caesar's proposals, his co-consul Marcus Bibulus, along with the tribune of the plebs (who tried unsuccessfully to veto the proceedings), and the younger Cato were covered in excrement and thrown from the speaker's platform. Suetonius records that from this point onwards, Bibulus was a ‘lame duck’ in politics and it became a joke to sign dodgy documents as ‘in the consulship of Julius and Caesar’ rather than the traditional ‘in the consulship of Julius and Bibulus’ (*Caesar*, 20). It was this sense of disorder and corruption in the system of constitutional ‘checks and balances’ that Augustus would address in his ‘restoration’. Whether this process was packaged as a ‘revival’ or a new process, did not seem overly significant to an audience seeking a long-lost sense of peace and prosperity.

Augustus' own record of his resignation of powers on 13 January 27 BC illustrates the difficulties both in working with monumental inscription and bias in using an autobiographical text. The most well-preserved versions of this inscription survive in the Eastern parts of the Empire (in Asia Minor: Psidian Antioch, Ancyra and

Apollonia) and the Greek text has, at times, been used to fill in the gaps in the Latin version. A.E. Cooley's recent translation and commentary of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* offers a careful treatment of a passage that has often been translated as a 'restoration of the Republic' (*rem publicam*).¹ Noting that the Greek version of this document often uses vocabulary that is more explicitly monarchical than its Latin counterpart, Cooley illustrates how both the Greek and Latin texts do not necessarily refer to a specific event (the restoration of the Republic) but could refer to the return of the provinces. Equally, she notes how Augustus does not record the provinces that he subsequently took back under his control (Cassius Dio 53.12-16; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 47). Whether or not Augustus himself used the phrase '*res publica restituta*' is a key factor in establishing whether or not he intended to appear in this role.

Later sources on the matter offer a different set of problems. Suetonius' sexed-up dossier of Imperial rule records that 'on two occasions, Augustus thought about restoring the Republic' (*Augustus*, 28): after the victory at Actium (31 BC) and during a spate of ill health (probably 23 BC). However, he decided that it was too dangerous (for himself and the state) to entrust it to another. So, according to Suetonius, the Republic was not 'restored' for its own benefit. Cassius Dio, whose *Roman History* has been known to conflate the aristocracy and ideals of his own time with those of the late Republic (cf. **Hail Caesar**), records a speech of Augustus (53.4.3–5.4) to the Senate (more likely to reflect a idea than a verbatim account):

'I give up the government in its entirety, and I give back to you absolutely everything – armies, laws, provinces.... Take back both freedom and democracy, take charge of the army and the subject peoples, and govern yourselves as you used to.'

Cassius Dio, known for his flare, seems to be laying it on a bit thick here (note the dramatic adverbs: 'in its entirety' 'absolutely everything') and the question emerges: would this act have been sufficient to resolve the constitutional imbalances that troubled the Roman Republic? Certainly, Augustus appears to be talking about a restoration, but in practice, were the Senate or the Roman people keen to go back to the way things had been before Augustus? The question of restoring the Empire requires not only a restorer but also a recipient. Now that Augustus held many of the Republican office titles (consul, tribune, pontifex maximus), to whom was he meant to entrust 'the Republic', which, in no small way, included himself? To restore the Republic to a single entity would be to decide who had the ultimate powers (the debate of the last century: the Senate? The consul? The courts? The people?). The very idea that a single person could restore the Republic seems to imply a monarchy. Overall, literary sources do not offer a conclusive answer about of Augustus' restoration of the Republic. One must now turn to the material evidence from Augustus regime.

Material evidence

'The vulgar masses are always fooled by appearances, and the world consists primarily of these people.'

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe* (1531).

¹ Cooley, 2009, 260.

The material evidence from the reign of Augustus, including sculpture, coins, and monuments represents another way in which Augustus' 'restoration' was represented to a broader audience of individuals. This section will consider three ways in which Augustus could be seen to 'restore' and element of the Republic. The first is his Parthian Arch (restoring the fasces lost by Crassus (also ref on the Cuirass of his iconic Prima Porta Statue)) the honours for Augustus bestowed by the Senate with the *Clipeus virtutis* 'Shield of virtue', and the symbolic imagery of Augustus as a restorer laws, of peace, and of the *Res Publica* herself.

Augustus is known to have had two monumental arches in Rome, neither of which have survived. One of which, the Actian arch, was set up by the Senate in 29 BC near the temple of Divus Julius to commemorate his victory over Cleopatra and Egypt. A coin (RIC 1 267; [Slide 1](#)) depicts the arch, focusing on Augustus and a triumphal quadriga of horses that were set atop the arch. The arch bears the inscription: IMP[ERATOR] CAESAR and flying victories with wreathes on the reliefs below. Given the nature of the Actian victory (a civil war, even if it claimed Cleopatra as an adversary) it is not surprising that a victory figure (usually seen crowning the victor) is absent from the sculptures atop the arch. Clearly, the coin is a subjective depiction of the monument rather than an accurate portrayal: Octavian (not yet 'Augustus') and his quadriga are larger than life, the arch is tiny, and there is no mention of the dedicators (the Senate) in the inscription (though they were most certainly listed on the inscription).

It is believed, but not conclusively proven, that the Actian arch was replaced by the Parthian Arch, set in up 19 BC commemorating Augustus' diplomatic victory over the Parthians in 20 BC ([Slide 2](#)).² This victory, won against a foreign adversary by cunning, and reclaiming the lost standards of Crassus, was superior victory on a number of levels. While the arch has been lost, a coin minted in 16 BC by L. Vinicius (RIC 1.359) portrays a monument with triple bays that cast Augustus and his team of horses (in the central bay) visibly above the bays on either side, which carried statues of defeated Parthians. Monumental reconstructions of the arch and its inscription place the role of the Senate at front and centre, and one can also see how the bottom line (which could have been added to an earlier inscription) would include the titles of Augustus. The first arch may not have represented Augustus as a 'restorer', but the second arch, which monumentalized the return of the military standards (a golden eagle, called an *aquila*) lost by Crassus in 53 BC illustrated Augustus' role in bringing back peace, order and military supremacy. The return of these standards was portrayed on coins (RIC 1 288), the arch and on the centre of breastplate in the famous 'Prima Porta' statue of Augustus. In all cases, note that the standards, which symbolize military as well as political power, are being handed back (and not directly to Augustus) by the Parthians in a victory that was achieved by negotiation with a foreign adversary, not war ([Slide 3](#)). Augustus restored a sense of pride as well as superiority in his Roman audience with these victory monuments and coins which seemed to say 'Make Rome Great Again!'.

Unlike Julius Caesar, Augustus showed much more discretion in the offices and honorary titles that he was willing to accept, often noting that he turned down more

² For a summation of the latest debates see Pollini (2012) pp 81–82 and especially notes 85 and 87.

awards than he accepted. Thus, it is worth looking closely at the imagery and honours that he did allow (for a thorough treatment of this see Zanker and Koortbojian in the Bibliography). One of his most famous honours is the shield of virtue which he accepted (alongside other modest and traditional honours: a laurel tree and a *corona civica* (the highest honour for civic service in Rome)), which were displayed at his home. This gold shield, a marble copy (26 BC) of which survives in France (Arles) was hung in public at the Senate house (Slide 4).

‘For this service [the restoration?] I was named Augustus by the resolution of the Senate. The doorposts of my house were officially decked with young laurel trees, the *corona civica* (oak wreath) was placed over the door, and in the Curia Julia was displayed a golden shield (*clipeus virtutis*) which the Senate and the people granted me on account of my bravery, clemency, justice and piety, as is inscribed on the shield itself.’

–Augustus, *Res Gestae* 34.

‘The honours voted by the Senate were particularly well chosen – no doubt in consultation with the honouree himself. For those familiar with the Roman tradition, such honours suggested many associations with the spirit of the old republic, while their lack of specificity also admitted a different interpretation [e.g. Tomb of Scipio Barbatus, Chapter 2].’

–P. Zanker, 1990, 92.

Similar copies were probably set up in a number of Roman cities in honour of Augustus, and the shield was also commemorated on coins. This shield, like the dedication of the Partian arch, echoes a similar hierarchy: The dedicators, the Senate and people of Rome are listed front and centre in the biggest letters and the most prominent space, followed by Augustus’ names and titles as well as list of traditional virtues: *Clementia* (Clemency), *Iustitia* (Justice), *Pietas* (Piety) and duty to God(s) and Country. In a way, these echo the sentiments of the Parthian Arch: which depicts clemency to the enemy but also justice in the return of the standards. A similar message is seen on a *denarius* from Spain (19–18 BC, RIC 47a) which depicts the traditional laurel trees and the shield (again note that Augustus is not physically present) (Slide 5). The letters on the shield are CL. V, with SPQR surrounding the shield and the names Caesar Augustus at the top and bottom. On the obverse Augustus is also portrayed wearing the *corona civica*. As with the arches and the statue of Prima Porta, Augustus is clearly associated with victory, but not directly with the figure of Nike (victory) who is presented as a separate part (in some coins, e.g. RIC 47) she holds the shield, but is not crowning Augustus. In both instances it is the Senate (a mortal body) who is depicted as offering the honours to Augustus, and this is significant. While a broader audience was clearly expected to know what the shield conveyed, the message of this coin is notably more subtle than the coin depicting the Actian arch.

Along this theme of representing concepts such as virtue and victory, often without direct association to Augustus himself, one can find a number of images depicting Augustus as a ‘restorer of rights and laws’, ‘protector liberty and peace’ (RIC). Like the victory figures and the virtues recorded on the *clipeus virtutis*, these, are deliberately vague and ideologistic representations: a tranquil figure a peace stands on an Ephesian coin, or a bountiful scene of where Roma (or Terra) reclines on the Ara

Pacis (Slides 6). Less formal scenes abound: Augustus on a couch reading a scroll (Slide 7) or a procession of families displayed on the Ara Pacis in Rome (cover slide), where it is now sufficiently safe and peaceful to stroll about with the entire family. These are not new virtues to Roman society, but their inclusion on coins and public art, was innovative at this time. While the approach could be seen as a ‘sham’ restoration, it could equally be viewed as a careful and cunning approach to a challenging personal relations situation: how do you give something back without admitting you’ve taken it? The answer appears to be: very carefully through gestures, imagery and ideology. By turning the Res Publica into an idea, indeed a personification of an idea (a female figure (Aureus 12 BC)) Augustus can be seen giving her a helping hand (Zanker, p. 91). Augustus helps the Res Publica to her feet. Joined hands.

‘The Restoration of the Roman Republic was not simply a sham to fool the Roman Republic, as is often maintained. [Even before 27 BC, it was clear that Augustus’ new political style did not represent a departure from the sense of mission that had always motivated him...] it was simply that as sole ruler he conceived of his role somewhat differently than before.’

Conclusions

‘He who aims to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived.’

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe* (1531).

‘[29 BC] Octavian had saved the Republic from destruction, but now it was up to him to “restore” it. No one sizing up the situation could realistically have expected the victor to return all the power to the Senate, but he would at least have to find ways to make a monarchy more acceptable to noble families’ (Zanker 1990, 90).

From Augustus’ perspective, what was to be gained by restoring the Republic? To formally restore the Republic, would be to accept that Augustus had fully controlled it. While Augustus made soldiers, citizens and statesmen swear an oath of loyalty to him (RDGA 32), had he ever officially been given control of the Republic? It’s not clear that there is an office with these powers, apart from ‘dictator’, a term which he deliberately avoided. Although there are many debates about the character and aims of Augustus, both ancient and modern scholars tend to agree that he consolidated powers by using the traditional means of *auctoritas* (influence or unofficial authority), often rejecting the formal titles and offices that Julius Caesar had so carelessly embraced; ‘Since that time, while I have exceeded others in respect and influence (*auctoritas*), I have possessed no more power (*potestas*) than any of those who were my colleagues in any office’ (Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 34). If Augustus had ever been formally asked if he restored the Republic, I believe his reply would have been along the lines of another famously shrewd politician (Francis Urquhart or Frank Underwood): ‘You may think that, but I couldn’t possibly comment....’

Web resources

Essay by James R. Ferguson: it's a bit outdated on secondary scholarship (though sources like Syme remain keystones) but the primary sources are fairly well treated. Extended (albeit outdated) bibliography:

<http://www.international-relations.com/History/Octavian.htm>

<http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110Tech/Augustus.html>

DIR (De Imperatoribus Romanis):

<http://www.roman-emperors.org/auggie.htm>

For reconstructions of the Actian and Parthian arches see also:

<http://www.digitales-forum-romanum.de/gebaeude/septimus-severus-bogen/?lang=en>

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