

Augustus and the use of propaganda

[History](#), [Ancient History](#)



It is often said that history is written by the victors, and the quote could not be more appropriate than for Augustus. He is often called the 'restorer of the Republic' by contemporary and ancient time historians. Being a major influence on his life, Augustus was inspired by Caesar practices and propaganda works.

He took those propaganda lessons and perfected them. The unprecedented age of peace and stability that Augustus brought, known as the Pax Romana or Roman Peace, did not occur naturally. He was able to maintain control of not only the common people but of the government and other political rivals. The written word was perhaps the most useful tool at his disposal and he used it to manipulate events to tell the story from his perspective and ensured that this perspective would be considered historical fact. When studying propaganda in the age of Augustus, it is crucial to mention Augustus' own literary works, *The Deeds of the Divine Augustus*. The document was written by Augustus himself and meant to be seen and read by as many people as possible. The document summarizes Augustus' image and deeds to the people of Rome. He never tells any outright lies, but does manipulate the light in which certain historical events are presented. The document was written shortly before Augustus' death, meaning that it had no immediate impact in his life.

Nonetheless, it is still important in how it shaped his legacy and still serves as evidence for his political propaganda machine. One of the less discussed aspects of Augustus' propaganda is in the name 'Augustus' itself, that is not a name, but rather a title. Augustus included the moment he was bestowed the title in his own literary work *The Deeds of the Divine Augustus*: In my

sixth and seventh consulates, after putting out the civil war I handed over the state from my power to the dominion of the senate and Roman people. And for this merit of mine, by a senate decree, I was called Augustus

After that time, I exceeded all in influence, but I had no greater power than the others who were colleagues with me in each magistracy. When analyzing Augustus' words, it is clear that he understood the significance of what had just occurred. This single verse simultaneously displays Augustus' power and authority while also carefully 'clarifying' that Augustus was no more powerful than any other magistrate. Even though this was not the reality, it served its purpose. It portrayed the image that Augustus wished to present to the people. The nuanced propaganda depicted the inaccurate idea that the Republic still existed and that the power ultimately rested with the people. Augustus says he had no greater power than the others [senators and statesmen] who were colleagues with him, which was simply not true. Augustus had learned from Julius Caesar's the importance of propaganda, but also not to commit the same mistake as Caesar did. He knew he could not allow himself to be declared sole ruler of the Republic as Caesar did prior to his assassination. Furthermore, another telling example of the image he wishes to portray is in the first verse, A copy below of the deeds of the divine Augustus, by which he subjected the whole wide earth to the rule of the Roman people, and of the money which he spent for the state and Roman people From the very beginning we see reference to his public image, Augustus' the Divine. The Res Gestae is filled with many other indications of his legality and importance to Rome.

In the first paragraph, Augustus states: on my own initiative and at my own expense, I raised an army with which I set free the state, which was oppressed by the domination of a faction. Here we see that it was Augustus that saved Rome from those who would bring her to ruin. Augustus also shows his dominance in military affairs as well. Throughout the document there are numerous mentions of Augustus conquests, I drove the men who slaughtered my father into exile with a legal order, punishing their crime, and afterwards, when they waged war on the state, I conquered them in two battles. Here, Augustus simultaneously establishes the criminal nature of Caesar's assassins while also establishing his military superiority when he claims he won the battle against them twice. Importantly, in the 5th paragraph, Augustus establishes and emphasizes that he had no desire for dictatorship when he says, When the dictatorship was offered to me, both in my presence and my absence, by the people and Senate I did not accept it. When the annual and perpetual consulate was then again offered to me, I did not accept it. Augustus is telling the people of Rome that he declined an offer of dictatorship twice, both publicly and privately.

As mentioned above, he knew the dangers of calling himself the only ruler and used all his skills to remove the idea from the people of the Republic. Augustus' devotion to propaganda is visible also in Suetonius' writings, in his writing *The life of Augustus* he mentions that From early youth, he devoted himself eagerly and with utmost diligence to oratory and liberal studies. In fact, he never afterwards spoke in the Senate, or to the people or the soldiers, except in a studied and written address, although he did not lack the gift of speaking offhand without preparation. Augustus' dedication to

written words, in a period when not many could read, is a testament of his grand vision of control of the then present and future historical record. In Suetonius writing we also read,

Moreover, to avoid the danger of forgetting what he was to say he adopted the practice of reading everything from a manuscript. Even his conversations with individuals and the more important of those with his own wife Livia, he always wrote out and read from a note-book, for fear of saying too much or too little if he spoke offhand. The desire to control all aspects of his image stretched into his intimate relationship with close friends and his own wife. Furthermore, being aware of the fact that not many could read his writing, he used the ones that could as magnifiers that would spread his word, as Suetonius writes, He wrote numerous works of various kinds in prose, some of which he read to a group of his intimate friends, as others did in a lecture-room; for example, his “ Reply to Brutus on Cato. Although these encounters were considered informal and intimate, they served their purpose in the propaganda machine that Augustus’ bulletproofed. Augustus’ dedicated a lot of time to writing, especially during his later years, most of it was about his life but he also tried to write a tragedy. In Suetonius Life of Augustus he writes that He also wrote “ Exhortations to Philosophy” and some volumes of an Autobiography, giving an account of his life in thirteen books up to the time of the Cantabrian war, but no farther. Thirteen books dedicated to his life show, written during his later years show that Augustus’ was not only interested in the control that the propaganda provided. He wanted to be immortalized in the image of his choice.

In conclusion, Augustus is remembered as arguably the greatest leader in Rome's history. His accomplishments as a leader are well known amongst contemporary Romans and historians alike. Bringing his writing into historical context and facts, it is clear that some of his deeds and character may be exaggerated. But, Augustus did bring an unprecedented era of peace to the Mediterranean world that helped ensure the longevity of the Roman empire. Nonetheless, when studying such an important figure it is important not to fall prey to Augustus' propaganda itself.