

CRITICAL THINKING USING PRIMARY SOURCES IN WORLD HISTORY

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Contents

To the Teacheriv
About the Authorsvi

Unit 1: Octavian Augustus and the Formation of the Roman Empire

Historical Background 1
Critical-Reading Questions 2
Documents 3

Unit 2: Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Angevin Empire

Historical Background 9
Critical-Reading Questions 10
Documents 11

Unit 3: Martin Luther and the Suppression of the Peasant Revolt

Historical Background 16
Critical-Reading Questions 17
Documents 18

Unit 4: Oliver Cromwell and the English Civil War

Historical Background 27
Critical-Reading Questions 28
Documents 29

Unit 5: Peter the Great and the Westernization of Russia

Historical Background 35
Critical-Reading Questions 36
Documents 37

Unit 6: John Newton and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Historical Background 42
Critical-Reading Questions 43
Documents 44

Unit 7: Maximilien Robespierre and the “Republic of Virtue”

Historical Background 53
Critical-Reading Questions 56
Documents 57

Unit 8: Robert Peel and the Corn Laws

Historical Background 66
Critical-Reading Questions 67
Documents 68

Unit 9: Sylvia Pankhurst: Advocate or Subversive?

Historical Background 75
Critical-Reading Questions 77
Documents 78

Unit 10: The Boxer Rebellion and the Westernization of China

Historical Background 86
Critical-Reading Questions 88
Documents 88

Unit 11: Francisco (Pancho) Villa: Outlaw or Revolutionary?

Historical Background 95
Critical-Reading Questions 96
Documents 97

Teacher’s Guide

Key Features of Documents
Used in This Book 104
Grading Rubric for
Document-Based Essays 109

Mock Trials—Student Information Sheets

1: Courtroom Personnel and Their Roles 111
2: Trial Procedure and Glossary of
Legal Terms 113
3: Looking at the Evidence 115

Mock Trials—Guidepost Activities

1: Opening Statement 116
2: Witnesses 117
3: Witness Affidavit 118
4: Evidence Information 119
5: Closing Arguments 120
6: Newspaper Account of the Trial 121

Mock Trials—Witness Lists

Other Historical Figures Connected
With Each Unit 122

Resources 129



UNIT 1

Octavian Augustus and the Formation of the Roman Empire

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although he was born simply Gaius Octavius, this Roman became the first true Emperor of Rome. He has been known throughout history as Emperor Augustus or Caesar Augustus. His reign is controversial because he engineered the end of the ancient Roman Republic and began the imperial legacy. Depending on one's viewpoint, Octavian can be seen as either a hero or a villain. Because he reigned for a long time (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), he was able to create a new type of government that endured for more than 300 years of Roman domination.

Octavian was first able to rise in Roman governmental affairs through his uncle, Julius Caesar. When Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C.E., his will revealed that Octavian had been adopted by his uncle. Octavian vowed to avenge his (now) father's murder. He tried to undermine the power of Mark Antony and Aemilius Lepidus, who were in control in Rome. In this effort, Octavian gained the support of the leader of the Senate, Cicero. Eventually, Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus came to an agreement. They formed a triumvirate, defeated Julius Caesar's assassins, and divided control of the empire among themselves.

When Lepidus lost his power, Antony and Octavian began a long struggle for control of Rome and its territories. In 31 B.C.E., Octavian defeated Antony and the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra. He became the undisputed military leader of Rome, but his constitutional position was unclear. In what has become known as the First Settlement in January of 27 B.C.E., Octavian

pretended to restore the Roman Republic and give power back to the all-important Senate. In reality, the entire process was designed so that Octavian would get most of the power back again. He continued to be elected as *Consul*, a position that gave him executive authority in the Senate.

To honor Octavian for “restoring” the Republic, the Senate conferred many honors upon him, including the name *Augustus*. This meant that he was exalted and given a sacred status. Although it appeared that the newly revitalized Senate had a strong role to play in the government of Rome, Octavian really held the ultimate power. He was commander-in-chief of the army (*Imperator*), and he held the titles of *Tribune* (traditionally held by a member of the plebeian class) and *Princeps Senatus* (President of the Senate). All of his titles were legal terms from the days of the Republic, but the fact that now they were held by one man made this a fairly absolutist regime.

In 23 B.C.E., Augustus fell seriously ill. When he recovered, he once more altered the government of Rome in what has become known as the Second Settlement. Augustus resigned the consulship, but the Senate gave him tribunician authority for life. This meant that he could convene the Senate as well as the Tribal Assembly (popular assembly), propose legislation in both bodies, and have veto power over any enactments. Augustus also expanded his power over the provinces. Many historians see this as the true beginning of the Roman Empire, since, with his control of the army, no one could

challenge the authority of Augustus as emperor.

During his leadership of the empire, known as the Augustan Age, Octavian sought to make his reign the beginning of a new era after the long civil war that had marked the decline of the Republic. He undertook to rebuild the city of Rome; people said that he found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble. Augustus also passed laws regulating the morals and family life of Rome. He even went so far as to exile his own daughter for adultery.

That he was a consummate politician and careful in his relationships with leading citizens

is shown by the fact that there was only one plot against Octavian. Moreover, even allowing for the fact that the emperors who followed him were poor rulers, the regime as set up by Octavian Augustus became the standard for the long history of Rome. His influence was demonstrated in 2 B.C.E., when the Senate gave Augustus the new title of *Pater Patriae*, "Father of his Country." Augustus died in 14 C.E. An account of his achievements, known as the *Res Gestae*, was inscribed on pillars set up at the entrance to his mausoleum.

Critical-Reading Questions

Keep these questions in mind as you read the primary-source documents.

- How do Tacitus and Suetonius differ in their evaluations of the reign of Octavian? What can account for the difference in their viewpoints?
- List the five most significant "reforms" of Octavian. Why have you chosen these?
- It has been said that the Roman emperors kept the support of the people by offering them "bread and circuses." What evidence do you find that Octavian began this tradition?
- How did Octavian keep good public relations with the Romans?
- Was Octavian successful due to his own talents, or did the time in which he lived provide the opportunity for him to succeed?
- What problems with Roman society and government did Octavian successfully address?

Mock Trial

Here are the charges against Octavian Augustus (the defendant): Gaius Octavius, also known as Caesar Augustus, is charged with the overthrow of the Roman Republic, the usurpation of the traditional rights of Roman citizens, and the establishment of the Roman Empire with himself as the Emperor.

DOCUMENTS

Document A

Excerpts from *The Ancyra Inscription*, Detailing the Life of Caesar Augustus, c. 13 C.E.

(From: *Augustus: The Life and Times of the Founder of the Roman Empire*, translated by Evelyn Shuckburgh. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903, pp. 293–301. As found in William H. McNeill and Jean W. Sedlar, eds., *The Classical Mediterranean World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 253–267)

When I was nineteen I collected an army on my own account and at my own expense, by the help of which I restored the republic to liberty, which had been enslaved by the tyranny of a faction; for which services the Senate, in complimentary decrees, added my name to the roll of their House in the consulship of Gaius Pansa and Aulus Hirtius (B.C. 43), giving me at the same time consular precedence in voting; and gave me imperium [supreme civil and military power]. It ordered me as propraetor [highest judicial authority] "to see along with the consuls that the republic suffered no damage." Moreover, in the same year, both consuls having fallen, the people elected me consul and a triumvir for revising the constitution. . . .

I had to undertake wars by land and sea, civil and foreign, all over the world, and when victorious I spared all citizens who asked for pardon. Those foreign nations, who could safely be pardoned, I preferred to preserve rather than exterminate. About 500,000 Roman citizens took the military oath to me

I twice celebrated an ovation, three times curule triumphs, and was twenty-one times greeted as imperator. Though the Senate afterwards voted me several triumphs I declined them. I frequently also deposited laurels in the Capitol after performing the vows which I had taken in each war. For successful operations performed by myself or by my legates under my auspices by land and sea, the Senate fifty-three times decreed a supplication to the immortal gods I had been consul thirteen times at the writing of this, and am in the course of the thirty-seventh year of my tribunician power (A.D. 13–14).

The Dictatorship offered me in my presence and absence by the Senate and people in the consulship of Marcus Marcellus and Lucius Arruntius (22 B.C.) I declined to accept. I did not refuse at a time of very great scarcity of corn the commissionership of corn supply, which I administered in such a way that within a few days I freed the whole people from fear and danger. The consulship—either yearly or for life—then offered to me I declined to accept.

In the consulship of M. Vinicius and Q. Lucretius (19 B.C.), of P. and Cn. Lentulus (18 B.C.), and of Paullus Fabius Maximus and Q. Tubero (11 B.C.), when the Senate and people of Rome unanimously agreed that I should be elected overseer of the laws and morals; with unlimited powers and without a colleague, I refused every office offered me which was contrary to the customs of our ancestors. But what the Senate at that time wished me to manage, I carried out in virtue of my tribunician power, and in this office I five times received at my own request a colleague from the Senate.

I was one of the triumvirate [supreme commissioners] for the re-establishment of the constitution for ten consecutive years. I have been princeps senatus [presiding officer of the

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Senate] up to the day on which I write this for forty years. I am Pontifex Maximus [chief priest], Augur, one of the fifteen commissioners for religion, one of the seven for sacred feasts, and Arval brother, a sodalis Titius, a fetial [all are types of priesthood].

In my fifth consulship (29 B.C.) I increased the number of the patricians by order of people and Senate By new laws passed I recalled numerous customs of our ancestors that were falling into desuetude [disuse] in our time, and myself set precedents in many particulars for the imitation of posterity. . . .

By a decree of the Senate my name was included in the ritual of the Salii, and it was ordained by a law that my person should be sacred and that I should have the tribunician power for the term of my natural life. I refused to become Pontifex Maximus in succession to my colleague during his life, though the people offered me that sacred office formerly held by my father. Some years later I accepted that sacred office on the death of the man who had availed himself of the civil disturbance to secure it; such a multitude flocking to my election from all parts of Italy as is never recorded to have come to Rome before

To the Roman plebs I paid 300 sesterces [Roman currency] per head in virtue of my father's will; and in my own name I gave 400 apiece in my fifth consulship (29 B.C.) from the sale of spoils of war; and a second time in my tenth consulship (24 B.C.) out of my own private property I paid a bounty of 400 sesterces per man, and in my eleventh consulship (23 B.C.) I measured out twelve distributions of corn, having purchased the grain from my own resources. In the twelfth year of my tribunician power (11 B.C.), I for the third time gave a bounty of 400 sesterces a head. These largesses of mine affected never less than 250,000 persons. . . .

I four times subsidised the aerarium [national treasury] from my own money, the sums which I thus paid over to the commissioners of the treasury amounting to 150,000,000 sesterces. And in the consulship of M. Lepidus and L. Arruntius (A.D. 6), to the military treasury, which was established on my initiative for the payment of their good service allowance, to the soldiers who had served twenty years or more, I contributed from my own patrimony 170,000,000 sesterces. . . .

I built the curia and Chalcidicum adjoining it, and the temples of Apollo on the Palatine with its colonnades, the temple of the divine Iulius, the Lupercal, the colonnade at the Flaminian circus, . . . the state box at the Circus Maximus, the temples of Jupiter Feretrius and of Jupiter Tonans on the Capitol, the temple of Quirinus, the temples of Minerva and of Juno the Queen, and of Iupiter Libertas on the Aventine, the temple of the Lares at the head of the via Sacra, the temple of divine Penates in the Velia, the temple of Youth, the temple of the Mater Magna on the Palatine.

The Capitolium and the Pompeian theatre—both very costly works—I restored without any inscription of my own name. Water-conduits in many places that were decaying from age I repaired; and I doubled the aqueduct called the Aqua Marcia, by turning a new spring into its channel. . . .

In my sixth consulship (28 B.C.), I repaired eighty-two temples of the gods in the city in accordance with a decree of the Senate, none being omitted which at that time stood in need of repair. . . .

I three times gave a show of gladiators in my own name, and five times in the name of my sons and grandsons; in which shows about 10,000 men contended. I twice gave the people a show of athletes collected from all parts of the world in my own name, and a third time in the name of my grandson. . . .

I gave the people the spectacle of a naval battle on the other side of the Tiber . . . in which

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thirty beaked ships, triremes or biremes, and a still larger number of smaller vessels contended. In these fleets, besides the rowers, there fought about three thousand men. . . .

I cleared the sea of pirates. In that war I captured about 30,000 slaves, who had run away from their masters, and had borne arms against the republic, and handed them back to their owners to be punished. . . .

I extended the frontiers of all the provinces of the Roman people, which were bordered by tribes that had not submitted to our Empire. The provinces of the Gauls, and Spain and Germany, bounded by the Ocean from Gades to the mouth of the river Elbe, I reduced to a peaceful state. . . .

In my sixth and seventh consulships (28, 27 B.C.), when I had extinguished the flames of civil war, having by universal consent become possessed of the sole direction of affairs, I transferred the republic from my power to the will of the Senate and the people of Rome. For which good service on my part I was by decree of the Senate called by the name of Augustus. . . . After that time I took precedence of all in authority (*auctoritate*), but of power I had nothing more than those who were my colleagues in the several magistracies.

While I was administering my thirteenth consulship (2 B.C.), the Senate and equestrian order and the Roman people with one consent greeted me as FATHER OF MY COUNTRY, and decreed that it should be inscribed in the vestibule of my house, and in the Senate house, and in the Forum Augustum, and under the chariot which was there placed in my honour in accordance with a senatorial decree.

When I wrote this I was in my seventy-sixth year (A.D. 13–14).

Document B

Excerpts from Suetonius, *The Life of Augustus*, c. 122 C.E.

From Suetonius, "Life of Augustus," in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, translated by Alexander Thomson, revised by T. Forester. London: George Bell, 1909. As found in Mark A. Kishlansky, ed., *Sources of World History*, Vol. I. New York: Harper Collins College, 1995, pp. 104–108.

He was advanced to public offices before the age at which he was legally qualified for them: and to some, also, of a new kind, and for life. He seized the consulship in the twentieth year of his age, quartering his legions in a threatening manner near the city, and sending deputies to demand it for him in the name of the army. When the senate demurred, a centurion, named Cornelius, who was at the head of the chief deputation, throwing back his cloak, and shewing the hilt of his sword, had the presumption to say in the senate-house, "This will make him consul, if ye will not." His second consulship he filled nine years afterwards; his third, after the interval of only one year, and held the same office every year successively until the eleventh. From this period, although the consulship was frequently offered him, he always declined it, until, after a long interval, not less than seventeen years, he voluntarily stood for the twelfth, and two years after that, for a thirteenth; that he might successively introduce into the forum, on their entering public life, his two sons, Caius and

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Lucius, while he was invested with the highest office in the state.

He accepted of the tribunitian power for life, but more than once chose a colleague in that office for ten years successively. He also had the supervision of morality and observance of the laws, for life, but without the title of censor; yet he thrice took a census of the people, the first and third time with a colleague, but the second by himself.

He twice entertained thoughts of restoring the republic; first, immediately after he had crushed Anthony, remembering that he had often charged him with being the obstacle to its restoration. The second time was in consequence of a long illness, when he sent for the magistrates and the senate to his own house, and delivered them a particular account of the state of the empire. But reflecting at the same time that it would be both hazardous to himself to return to the condition of a private person, and might be dangerous to the public to have the government placed again under the control of the people, he resolved to keep it in his own hands, whether with the better event or intention, is hard to say. His good intentions he often affirmed in private discourse, and also published an edict, in which it was declared in the following terms: "May it be permitted me to have the happiness of establishing the commonwealth on a safe and sound basis, and thus enjoy the reward of which I am ambitious, that of being celebrated for moulding it into the form best adapted to present circumstances; so that, on my leaving the world, I may carry with me the hope that the foundations which I have laid for its future government, will stand firm and stable."

The city, which was not built in a manner suitable to the grandeur of the empire, and was liable to inundations of the Tiber, as well as to fires, was so much improved under his administration, that he boasted, not without reason, that he "found it of brick, but left it of marble." He also rendered it secure for the time to come against such disasters, as far as could be effected by human foresight

He corrected many ill practices, which, to the detriment of the public, had either survived the licentious habits of the late civil wars, or else originated in the long peace. Bands of robbers showed themselves openly, completely armed, under colour of self-defence; and in different parts of the country, travellers, freemen and slaves without distinction, were forcibly carried off, and kept to work in the houses of correction The bandits he quelled by establishing posts of soldiers in suitable stations for the purpose; the houses of correction were subjected to a strict superintendence; all associations, those only excepted which were of ancient standing, and recognized by the laws, were dissolved. He burnt all the notes of those who had been a long time in arrear with the treasury, as being the principal source of vexatious suits and prosecutions He struck out of the list of criminals the names of those over whom prosecutions had been long impending, where nothing further was intended by the informers than to gratify their own malice, by seeing their enemies humiliated; laying it down as a rule, that if any one chose to renew a prosecution, he should incur the risk of the punishment which he sought to inflict

He was desirous that his friends should be great and powerful in the state, but have no exclusive privileges, or be exempt from the laws which governed others

The whole body of the people, upon a sudden impulse, and with unanimous consent, offered him the title of Father of His Country. It was announced to him first at Antium, by a deputation from the people, and upon his declining the honour, they repeated their offer on his return to Rome, in a full theatre, when they were crowned with laurel.

Document C

A Selection from the *Annals* by Tacitus Assessing the Reign of Augustus, c. 109 C.E.

From *Readings in European History*, edited by Leon Bernard and Theodore B. Hodges, translated by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb. New York: Macmillan, 1958, pp. 24–25. Also found on-line at many sites.

On the day of the funeral soldiers stood round as a guard, amid much ridicule from those who had either themselves witnessed or who had heard from their parents of the famous day when slavery was still something fresh, and freedom had been resought in vain, when the slaying of Caesar, the Dictator, seemed to some the vilest, to others, the most glorious of deeds. "Now," they said, "an aged sovereign, whose power had lasted long, who had provided his heirs with abundant means to coerce the State, requires forsooth the defence of soldiers that his burial may be undisturbed."

Then followed much talk about August himself. . . . People extolled, too, the number of his consulships . . . the continuance for thirty-seven years of the tribunitian power, the title of Imperator twenty-one times earned, and his other honours which had been either frequently repeated or were wholly new. Sensible men, however, spoke variously of his life with praise and censure. Some said "that dutiful feeling towards a father, and the necessities of the State in which laws had then no place, drove him into civil war, which can neither be planned nor conducted on any right principles. . . . The only remedy for his distracted country was the rule of a single man. Yet the State had been organized under the name neither of a kingdom nor a dictatorship, but under that of a prince. The ocean and remote rivers were the boundaries of the empire; the legions, provinces, fleets, all things were linked together; there was law for the citizens; there was respect shown to the allies. The capital had been embellished on a grand scale; only in a few instances had he resorted to force, simply to secure the general tranquillity."

It was said, on the other hand, "that filial duty and State necessity were merely assumed as a mask. It was really from a lust of sovereignty that he had excited the veterans by bribery, had, when a young man and a subject, raised an army, tampered with the Consul's legions, and feigned an attachment to the faction of Pompey. By a decree of the Senate he had usurped the high functions and authority of Praetor . . . wrested the consulate from a reluctant Senate, and turned against the State the arms with which he had been intrusted against Antony. Citizens were proscribed, lands divided, without so much as the approval of those who executed these deeds. . . . No doubt, there was peace after all this, but it was a peace stained with blood; . . .

". . . No honour was left for the gods, when Augustus chose to be himself worshipped with temples and statues, like those of the deities, and with flamens and priests. He had not even adopted Tiberius as his successor out of affection or any regard to the State, but, having thoroughly seen his arrogant and savage temper, he had sought glory for himself by a contrast of extreme wickedness."

Document D

Section from *The Aeneid*, by Vergil, (70 B.C.E.–19 B.C.E.)

(From the *Ancient History Sourcebook: Augustan Encomiums*, c. 31 B.C.E.–14 C.E. As found at www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/augustanencomiums.html)

Lo! Caesar and all the Julian
Line, predestined to rise to the infinite spaces of heaven.
This, yea, this is the man, so often foretold you in promise,
Caesar Augustus, descended from God, who again shall a golden
Age in Latium found, in fields once governed by Saturn
Further than India's hordes, or the Garymantian peoples
He shall extend his reign; there's a land beyond all of our planets

Yond the far track of the year and the sun, where sky-bearing Atlas
Turns on his shoulders the firmament studded with bright constellations;
Yea, even now, at his coming, foreshadowed by omens from heaven,
Shudder the Caspian realms, and the barbarous Scythian kingdoms,
While the disquieted harbors of Nile are affrighted!

Document E

Titles Adopted by Octavian Augustus

May 8, 44 B.C.E.—Octavian was adopted by Julius Caesar and became known as Gaius Julius Caesar.

January 42 B.C.E.—When Julius Caesar became deified, Octavian was known as Gaius Julius Caesar, *Divi filius* (son of the divine) *Imperator*.

40 B.C.E.—Octavian dropped Gaius and Julius from his name and used the title *Imperator Caesar* (this became the common name for all Roman emperors henceforth until approximately the fourth century C.E.)

January 16, 27 B.C.E.—The title *Augustus* was bestowed upon Octavian.

March 6, 12 B.C.E.—After the death of Lepidus, Octavian received the title *Pontifex Maximus*, or Chief Priest.

February 6, 2 B.C.E.—The Senate gave Octavian the honorary title of *Pater Patriae*, or *Father of His Country*.

Tribunician power was conferred on Octavian in 23 B.C.E. and renewed each year.

Consulship was conferred thirteen times from 43 to 2 B.C.E.

Octavian was acclaimed as *Imperator* twenty-one times throughout his life, beginning in 43 B.C.E. This title was usually given to a victorious general by his troops.