Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-3b Imperial Government Policies
Book Title: World Civilizations
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10-3b Imperial Government Policies

In government and constitutional matters Augustus kept the republican institutions intact. The Senate and the Citizens of Rome were supposedly still the sovereign power, with the consul simply their agent. In practice, however, Augustus had the final word in everything important through his control of the military and the Senate. His steadily increasing prestige with the commoners also helped him. Ordinary Romans were appalled by the rebellions, civil wars, and political assassinations that had become commonplace in the last decades of the republic. After 31 B.C.E., however, Augustus was strong enough to intimidate any would-be troublemakers. He became immensely popular among the common people as a result.

In social policy Augustus recognized the problems presented by the numbers of landless, impoverished citizens—especially in the cities. He therefore provided the urban poor with basic food rations from the state treasury, supplemented by “gifts” from the consul (from his own resources). This annual dole of grain and oil became an important means of controlling public opinion for Augustus and his successors. He also instituted huge public-works programs, both to provide employment and to glorify his government. Projects were carried out all over the empire, but especially in Rome. Many of the surviving Roman bridges, aqueducts, roads (the famous, enduring Roman roads), forts, and temples were constructed during his reign or were started by him and completed later.

Roman Aqueduct in Spain.

This modern photo shows the enduring nature of Roman civic architecture all around the Mediterranean basin. This aqueduct could still be used by the citizens of Segovia, Spain, to bring fresh water to them. Similar structures survive in southern France and in Turkey.

View of the Roman aqueduct (photo), Roman, (1st century) / Segovia, Spain / Ken Welsh / Bridgeman Images

Augustus also attempted to institute moral reform and end the love of luxury that had become characteristic of the aristocratic class during the late republic. In his own life with his wife, Livia (LIH-vee-ah), he set an example of modest living. He also tried to discourage the influx of slaves because he believed that the vast number of slaves being imported into Italy represented luxury and, as such, threatened the traditional lifestyle. But none of these moral reform attempts proved successful over the long run. His imperial successors soon gave up the struggle.

Augustus also tried to revive the faith in the old gods and the state cult by conscientiously serving as high priest. Here, too, he was unsuccessful in the long run. The educated classes emulated the Greeks by turning from supernatural religion toward philosophy, and the masses sought something more emotionally satisfying than the barren ceremonies of the state cult. This they found in the mystery religions, with their promise of salvation.

In foreign policy the northern frontiers in Germany and the Low Countries had long been a problem that Augustus was determined to solve by conquering the fierce tribes who lived there. This foray ended in spectacular failure: in 9 C.E. Germanic tribes ambushed and exterminated a Roman army that had pushed eastward into the Teutoburg (TOO-toh-berg) Forest. The entire province of Germania was lost, and the borders between Roman and non-Roman Europe were henceforth the Rhine and Danube Rivers (see Map 10.2). After Augustus, Rome's only significant territorial acquisitions were in the British Isles and in present-day Romania.

To govern this vast empire of about sixty million subjects, Augustus reformed its protection and administration. The outermost provinces—including Spain, Mesopotamia, and Egypt—were either put directly under his own control as "imperial" provinces or turned over to local

rulers who were faithful satellites. Most of the army was stationed in the imperial provinces, enabling Augustus to keep the military under his surveillance and control.

Augustus initiated other reforms in military matters as well. The standing army had become increasingly large and unwieldy, as well as politically dangerous, so he reduced its size by more than half, to about 250,000 men. The army was made thoroughly professional and used extensively as an engineering force to build roads and public works all over the provinces. Twenty-eight legions, each with about 6000 highly trained and disciplined infantry, were supported by cavalry and by a large number of auxiliaries taken from the non-Roman populations of the provinces. The volunteers who made up the legions served for twenty years and were given a mustering-out bonus that was sufficient to set them up as small landowners or businesspeople.

The legionaries were highly mobile, and a common soldier often served in five or six different provinces before retirement. The auxiliaries served for twenty-five years and normally were granted citizenship upon retirement. In and around Rome Augustus maintained his personal bodyguard and imperial garrison, the **Praetorian (pree-TOH-ree-an) Guard** ((pree-TOH-ree-an) The imperial bodyguard in the Roman Empire and the only armed force in Italy.) . Containing about 10,000 men, it was the only armed force allowed in Italy. Whoever controlled its loyalty had a potent lever for political power in his hand.

Augustus also reorganized the Roman navy and used it effectively to rid the major rivers and the Mediterranean Sea of pirates, who had been disrupting shipping. For the next two hundred years, the navy protected the provinces and Italy from waterborne threats. Not until recent times were the seas around Europe as safe as in the first and second centuries.

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