

Octavian: Rise to Power

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"Caesar Augustus" wasn't always powerful! First, he was "Octavian."

Map of Ancient Italy, 1st Century BC

In March 44 BC, eighteen-year-old Octavian was away at a military camp in Apollonia, Illyricum (current Albania), with his two best friends, Marcus Agrippa and Gaius Maecenas. The three of them were sent there to further their education by Octavian's great-uncle, Julius Caesar.

When Octavian received the news of Caesar's assassination, the three boys made their way back, sailing across the Adriatic Sea to the lower east coast of Italy. They then made their way, travelling along the Appian Way, the major road that connects Brundisium to Rome.

The port city of Brundisium was a gateway to the eastern Mediterranean from Italy to Greece, Egypt, Asia (current day Turkey), Judea, Syria, etc. It has an inner and outer harbor which made it ideal for the Romans to use as a naval base as well as a port for maritime trade.

When he arrived in Brundisium, Octavian learned that Caesar had adopted him as his son in his will. He then decided that he wanted find out what Cicero, Rome's great statesman and a family friend, thought about the political situation in Rome. So, he sent a message to his stepfather asking him to set up a meeting with Cicero at their family villa in Puteoli, on the Bay of Naples. They met in early April, 44 BC.

Not long after Caesar's assassination, Sextus Pompey, son of Pompey the Great, took control of Sicily by force with his navy and started acting like a pirate, blocking the grain shipments from the east, primarily Egypt, from reaching Rome. Sextus was starving the Roman people. Octavian was unable to defeat him at sea. Finally, he enlisted his personal friend and great military commander, Marcus Agrippa, to take on the challenge. Though he had never fought a battle at sea, Agrippa prepared well and defeated Sextus in the "Sea Battle of Naulochus 36 BC" off the northeast coast of Sicily.

Other key cities; Mutina, Perusia, Misenum, Tarentum, Actium are marked on the map because an important battle occurred there or a treaty was signed there. The small hill town of Sutrium just north of Rome was a key location in the story of the "Battle of Perusia," so it is included as well.



Gaul (current day France) is located north of Italy. That portion of Gaul that was situated north of the Alps was known as “Transalpine Gaul,” and that portion of Gaul situated south of the Alps was known as “Cisalpine Gaul.” The “Rubicon River” and the Apennine Mountains combined to form the border between northern Italy and Cisalpine Gaul in the first century BC.

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