Augustus and the Pax Romana

In the wake of this decisive battle, the Battle of Actium, Octavian emerged as the sole master of the Roman world and would rule the Roman Empire for 45 years, until his death in A.D.14. Although his rise to power was always suspect, he succeeded in overhauling and reforming almost every Roman institution. He also helped to establish the Roman Empire on a much more rational basis. His reforms carried the Roman Empire for almost 200 years, and this, the most creative period of the Roman Empire, is often called the Age of Augustus.

On January 13, 27 B.C., Octavian appeared before the Roman Senate and laid down his supreme powers. It was at this time that Octavian took the name of Augustus Caesar. The Senate had been purged of its dubious members and now the majority of the Senate were supporters of Augustus. Augustus proclaimed that he had restored the Republic. The Senate voted to allow Augustus to govern and was now left with total control of the armed forces of the Roman State. The Senate took an oath of allegiance to Augustus as emperor. In 23 B.C., Augustus was granted the authority of tribune for life. This enabled him to have ultimate veto power and also to deal directly with the people.

The reforms of Augustus as well as his long life contributed to the idea that he was something more than human -- he was certainly a hero, the Romans thought, perhaps even a god. His reforms of the system of Roman government were important. He compromised between inherited traditions and a changed economic, political and social reality. In other words, he effectively mixed the old and the new, a typically Roman idea. Augustus never did away with these old institutions; he merely united them under one person -- himself. He was consul, tribune, chief priest of the civic religion and the public censor. He was the supreme ruler, the king, the emperor and his authority was absolute.

1. What were some of the positions that Augustus held?

2. Why did he combine these offices?

3. Early in his reign, how did the Romans view Augustus?

Augustus's Reforms

Under Augustus, Rome became the capital of the Western world. Augustus established rules of law, a common coinage, civil service, and secure travel for merchants. With all these elements in place throughout the empire, stability returned to its people, and for 200 years, they enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity known as the *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace. Interestingly, however, though many of the laws were uniform throughout the empire during this period, a number of traditional customs of the people in the conquered territories survived. This meant that individual groups like Egyptians and Hebrews managed to keep their identity.

Augustus was also a firm believer that the empire was as large it could possibly be for it to be governed justly, and so had no real ambitions of conquest. He believed that his job was to unify all the different societies into one that was loyal to only Rome. In order for this peace to occur, the frontiers must be secured and Augustus believed that natural barriers would be the easiest and most effective security. The Roman Empire was so large that it did include many such natural barriers. It extended to the East to the Euphrates, in the west to the Atlantic Ocean and on the South by the great African desert.

In general, the Augustan system worked fairly well, in fact, it lasted more than 200 years. It provided a material and political base of cultural achievement that rivaled the Greeks under Pericles. This is the age of the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace. But the Augustan reforms were not limited to political, economic and social issues alone. They also envisioned a fundamental change in Roman culture itself. Augustus tried to turn Rome into a world capital and taught the Romans to identify their destiny with the destiny of all mankind. They were the chosen people who would bring peace and stability to a violent and changing world.

1. What were some reforms made by Augustus?

2. What did Augustus do about the size of his empire?

Pax Romana

    Augustus's greatest achievement was the beginning of the Pax Romana, or Roman Peace. It represented the height of Roman power. Roman law was greatly affected by the Pax Romana. Roman law throughout the empire revolved around a number of concepts prevalent in western law today. Among them were the ideas that all persons are equal before the law; accused persons are guaranteed legal protection; and an accused person is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. Women held considerable influence under Roman law and could own property. Roman law became the foundation of all European countries that had once been a part of the Roman Empire.

    For centuries, Greece had been the arts center of the Western world, but during the Pax Romana the Roman Empire was a center for the growth of arts and sciences. The arts in Rome flourished, especially literature with writers like Ovid and Virgil; architecture marked by the Pantheon, the Colosseum, and the Forum. Science also reached new heights. Ptolemy looked to the heavens and greatly influenced achievements in astronomy, while Roman engineers went to work on paved streets, sewer systems, public buildings, schools, roads and aqueducts. The Roman alphabet became the basis for most of the Western world. And Latin, the Roman language, influenced other languages such as French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. Religion was also something that changed during the Pax Romana. A new religion called Christianity had been founded by a man named Jesus Christ and was slowly becoming popular among plebeians.

1. What were some positive effects of the Pax Romana? How did it effect:

    a. Government

    b. Law

    c. Language

    d. Literature

    e. Engineering

    f. Religion