

This week marks the bimillennial anniversary of the death of the first Roman emperor, Augustus. He died on 19th August AD 14 at the age of 75 after a 41-year reign, the longest in Roman history.

Augustus left his mark on Rome and western civilisation like few others. He vastly expanded the Roman Empire, established a period of relative peace known as the “Pax Romana” (or “Pax Augusta”), a period of immense architectural and artistic achievement whose effects were felt far beyond the capital. His legacy is perhaps best represented in the abundance of statues that were erected throughout the empire during and after his reign.



Augustus of Prima Porta, discovered in the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta

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Portraits of Augustus were used as symbols of his political propaganda. Abandoning the realistic style of the Republican period, his portraits always showed him as an idealized young man. This would set the standards for imperial portraiture used by Roman emperors over the next three centuries.

The Roman historian Suetonius (*The Lives of the Caesars*, Book II, "Augustus") describes Augustus as

“remarkably handsome and of very graceful gait. His teeth were small, few, and decayed; his hair, yellowish and rather curly; his eyebrows met above the nose; he had ears of moderate size, a nose projecting a little at the top and then bending slightly inward, and a complexion intermediate between dark and fair.”

Suetonius also mentions that Augustus cared so little about his personal appearance and particularly his hair, that sometimes he would have two or three barbers working on it together to save time. However most of the portraits of Augustus idealize him dramatically, and he does not age over the length of his reign.

More than 200 images of Augustus survive, more than of any other emperor. The longevity of his reign, his popularity during his lifetime, his deification after his death, and the tendency of following emperors to be identified with him (including Hadrian) are factors that guaranteed an abundance of portraits of this man.

In addition to the famous statue of Augustus from Prima Porta (a larger-than-life, idealized statue of him in military dress – image above), here is a selection of 12 of Octavian-Augustus finest surviving portraits:

1. Bust of Octavian



*Bust of Octavian, probably created ca. BC 31 after his victory at the
Battle of Actium*

Rome, Musei Capitolini

© Carole Raddato

2. Head of Octavian



Head of Octavian, dating to the Triumvirate at the time of the Battle of

Philippi (BC 42), the oldest portrait known
Museo Archeologico Statale di Spoleto
© Carole Raddato

3. Equestrian statue of Augustus



*Bronze torso from an equestrian statue of Augustus dating from the end
of the 1st century BC*

National Archaeological Museum, Athens

© Carole Raddato

4. Bronze head of Augustus



Bronze head from an over-life-sized statue of Augustus, found in the

ancient Nubian site of Meroë in Sudan, BC 27 – 25

British Museum

© Carole Raddato

5. Augustus as Pontifex Maximus



Augustus as Pontifex Maximus, late Augustan period
Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome
© Carole Raddato

6. Veiled head of Augustus



Veiled head of Augustus, end of 1st century BC

Ancona, Museo Archeologico Nazionale delle Marche

© *Carole Raddato*

7. Cameo of Augustus



Cameo portrait of Augustus, about AD 14-20

British Museum

© Carole Raddato

8. Bust of August wearing the Corona Civica



Bust of Augustus wearing the Corona Civica, ca. BC 29
Rome, Musei Capitolini
© Carole Raddato

9. Statue of Augustus from Arles



*Marble statue of Augustus, found in the Roman theatre in 1750
Arles, Musée de l'Arles et de la Provence antiques
© Carole Raddato*

10. Augustus Bevilacqua



The so called "Augustus Bevilacqua", bust of the emperor Augustus wearing the Corona Civica

Munich, Glyptothek

© Carole Raddato

11. Bust of August wearing the Corona Civica



Bust of August wearing the oak crown discovered on the site of the

Roman villa of Chiragan, BC 19-18
Toulouse, Musée Saint-Raymond
© Carole Raddato

12. Posthumous portrait of Augustus



Posthumous portrait of Augustus, discovered in Saintes (France), ca. AD

40

Musée archéologique de Saintes

© Carole Raddato

Augustus was an important role model for Hadrian. He had a portrait of the first Princeps on his signet ring and kept a small bronze bust of him among the images of the household gods (*Lares*) in his bedroom. In restoring Augustan buildings at his own expense in Rome and in the provinces - ie. the temple of Augustus at Tarragona- Hadrian was able to revive the memory of Augustus and associate himself with that name. (*Source: Anthony R Birley, Hadrian: The Restless Emperor*)

He wished to be seen as the new Augustus. The imperial coinage of Hadrian drastically abbreviates Hadrian's titulare. Instead of the usual "Imp. Caesar Traianus Hadrianus Aug.", he would soon be presented simply as "Hadrianus Augustus".



HADRIANVS AVGVSTVS



HADRIANVS AVGVSTVS

Antoninus Pius, who was perhaps motivated by a desire to be publicly associated with the first emperor, restored the Temple of Divus Augustus built to commemorate the deified first Augustus. The restored temple was shown on coins which depict it with an octostyle design with Corinthian capitals and two statues - presumably of Augustus and Livia - in the cella. The pediment displayed a relief featuring Augustus and was topped by a quadriga.



Temple of Divus Augustus on a coin of Antoninus Pius issued circa AD 158

Many more portraits of the Emperor Augustus can be viewed from my [image collection on Flickr](#).

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