

Augustus, the first Roman emperor, has what modern media analysts call a high "Q" quotient - that is, most people recognize his name even if they do not really know very much about him. Indeed, the achievement of Augustus in rescuing the Roman empire from political chaos and re-establishing it upon a firm political, economic and social basis cannot be minimized. Yet, very few people today are aware of the fact that Augustus would probably have achieved none of this had it not been for a man named Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, a boyhood friend who served Augustus long and well in both domestic and foreign affairs. Augustus himself, however, recognized his immense debt to Agrippa, and even considered designating him as the second emperor of Rome. Looking back at this turbulent period of Roman history, some modern historians in fact regret that such an elevation never took place.

Agrippa, like Augustus, was born in 63 B.C., and as youths the two became close friends. When Augustus' grand-uncle Julius Caesar was murdered in 44 B.C., Agrippa accompanied Augustus (or, as he was then called, Octavian) from Greece - where they had been attending school - to Rome. Augustus had been named as Caesar's heir in the late dictator's will, and the young man had every intention of placing himself at the head of Caesar's faction (and army), despite the fact that one Marcus Antonius had his eyes on the same position. The situation was fraught with danger for Augustus, but Agrippa quickly showed his worth by raising an impressive army for his friend - an army which, indeed, forced Marcus Antonius not only to take the young Augustus more seriously, but also to join with his rival in the Second Triumvirate (in 43 B.C.). Thus the political career of Augustus was well underway, and

Agrippa's reward was to serve as praetor in 40 B.C., and then as governor of Gaul. It was there that Agrippa's military skills were clearly shown when he suppressed a rebellion by the fierce Aquitani, and even led an expeditionary force across the Rhine river.

On his return to Rome, Agrippa took on the prestigious office of consul (for the year 37 B.C.), and began to assemble a fleet of warships for Augustus, who was being challenged for control of the sea by Sextus Pompeius, the son of Pompey the Great. Not surprisingly, Agrippa again did his job well, and he should be given credit for the eventual defeat of the younger Pompeius off the coast of Sicily. But Agrippa was not one to remain at ease for long, and he soon headed off to engage in a Roman war effort in Illyria, after which he returned to Rome to serve in the office of aedile. His skills in domestic affairs were no weaker than his military skills, for his aedileship saw a much needed overhaul of Rome's sanitary facilities - new sewers, aqueducts and baths were built under his auspices. Indeed, a major temple, now known as the "first Pantheon", also came to grace the city thanks to Agrippa.

But something even more vital to Augustus' political survival was looming on the horizon: a decisive confrontation between Augustus and Marcus Antonius, who had by now closely allied himself with the famous Cleopatra, queen of Egypt. It was obvious to all that only one man could rule the empire, and, at least on paper, Antonius seemed to be that man - he was older than Augustus, much more experienced, and in a better strategic position with a large army and fleet. Yet, at the crucial battle at Actium (off the western coast of Greece) in 31 B.C., the fleet of Augustus, naturally under the command of

Agrippa, won the day and sent Antonius and Cleopatra hurrying back to Egypt. Augustus had emerged as the supreme ruler of the empire, but it had been Agrippa who had made it possible.

After Actium, Agrippa returned to domestic duties at Rome, serving as consul in both 28 and 27 B.C., and (especially) looking after Augustus' interests while the emperor himself travelled abroad. When Augustus returned to Rome in 23 B.C., he was extremely ill and thought he would soon die. Agrippa was called to his bedside, and, in an act obviously symbolizing the transference of power, Augustus gave his personal signet-ring to his old friend. Had Augustus in fact died in 23 B.C., Agrippa would have become the second emperor of Rome. But Augustus miraculously recovered (and presumably took his ring back!), and Agrippa was sent to the eastern part of the empire to look after military affairs. Nonetheless, in 21 B.C., when Augustus had again become very concerned about who would succeed him on the throne, Agrippa was recalled to Rome and had his friendship with Augustus put to a stringent test: Agrippa was asked by the emperor to divorce his wife and marry Julia, the only child of Augustus. Julia was an extremely troubled young woman, but Agrippa agreed to the match and thus became the emperor's son-in-law, moving even closer to the imperial throne.

The next few years saw Agrippa putting down rebellious tribes in Gaul and

Spain, and exercising as much power as Augustus himself. Indeed, grants of power given him in 18 B.C. made Agrippa virtually co-regent of the empire. The line of succession seemed even more firmly established once Julia gave birth to her sons; should Augustus die power would pass to Agrippa and then, in time, to one of Augustus' grandsons - or so it seemed at the time.

Agrippa continued to serve Rome well in the field, spending the years from 16-13 B.C. in the eastern part of the empire, putting out the fires of revolt wherever they flared up. In 12 B.C., however, all the plans of both Augustus and Agrippa were foiled by the latter's death at the age of 51. A vital support was now removed from the reign of Augustus and the problem of succession to the throne was renewed. In the end, when Augustus died in 14 A.D., it was to be the dour Tiberius, his stepson (the son of Livia by her first husband), who would become the second emperor of Rome.

It is, of course, futile to speculate on "what might have been" if Agrippa had come to the throne instead of Tiberius, whose reign turned out to be a strange mixture of good and evil. But one thing seems clear - in Agrippa there had been combined impressive skills, both political and military, of the type required to keep the empire strong and vital; he would have made a worthy successor to his old friend.