

# IN THE YEAR 1 AUGUSTUS LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

The year 2000 is almost upon us, but what in the (western) world was happening when the counting began?

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**A**S THE SECOND MILLENNIUM OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA DRAWS TO AN END, THE EDITORS OF *TIME* WILL be pondering their choice for the outstanding figure of its last year, Man of the Year AD 1999, to put on the cover of the appropriate issue. What if they had to add a choice for the first year of the era, Man of the Year AD 1? More specifically, Man of the Year AD 1, in the Western world, this being where the reckoning of time from the birth of Christ was invented and took hold. Our system of dating was thought up by a learned Christian monk, Dionysius Exiguus (Little Dennis), who lived in Rome around the close of the fifth century AD and the beginning of the sixth. The system in his day had been instituted by Diocletian, a Roman emperor infamous for his merciless persecution of the Christians. Dionysius, deeming it no fit system for Christians, devised a new one that was, and, as we all know today, chose the birth of Jesus Christ, as he calculated it as his starting point (SMITHSONIAN, February 1999).

In the year Dionysius would choose to start with, one man bestrode the Western world like a colossus. He was not Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, whose bestriding had ended abruptly on the Ides of March, 44 years earlier, but his grandnephew Augustus, whom Julius Caesar had named as his heir. Augustus was a youth of 18 when Caesar's murder propelled him into the Roman political arena; he was only 32 when Mark Antony's suicide in 31 BC left him overlord of territory that reached from Spain to Syria. He transformed that territory into the Roman Empire, with the reins of power securely gathered into his own hands. He put in place the machinery of government that ran it; he created the army and navy that protected its borders. He did such a good job that the Roman Empire endured for centuries after, the first two of which were the centuries of the celebrated Pax Romana, the longest period of peace the Western world would ever enjoy.

The year 1 was the 30th in the reign of Augustus, who ruled over the empire with absolute power. By this time the government he had put in place was operating smoothly. The curtain had also gone up on the prosperity that peace can bring. The whole Mediterranean was now open to commerce, and its sea-lanes were safe, since the Roman navy, with no enemies to fight, concentrated on getting rid of pirates.

Massive amounts of commodities moved over the waters in vessels that could be as large as the East Indiamen of the 18th century. Grain was the prime commodity, for making the bread and porridge that were the basis of the ancient diet. Olive oil and wine were runners-up. Olive oil was shipped in quantity because, for Greeks and Romans, it was considerably more than a food item. It did what electricity and soap do for us – people burned it for light in lamps and anointed themselves with it as a cleanser. And wine was shipped in quantity because it was more than something to drink with meals. They took a cup of it when we would have one of coffee or tea, both unknown in antiquity. Since whiskey, brandy and other alcoholic beverages were equally unknown, the sole drink at all festive occasions was wine. The Romans diluted it liberally with water – the view was that only barbarians and sots took it straight – but despite this, they managed to get tight; some famous figures, such as Alexander the Great and Mark Antony, were notorious drunks, and so was one of the gods – Hercules, who imbibed as mightily as he fought.

A shipper could prosper handling cheap and bulky commodities like oil and wine. If he hankered for a richer return, he went in for importing silks and spices and similar expensive luxuries from far-off India – goods whose value made a vessel a veritable treasure ship. Whether dealing in olive oil or exotic silks, the trader got the sizable sums he needed to finance his venture through maritime loans, in which he pledged as security the cargo he would buy with the borrowed funds. He would have to pay interest of 30 percent or better; no matter, the

profit he could turn when he sold his goods easily covered it. Besides, under the laws governing maritime loans, he repaid only after the cargo arrived safely home. If the ship went down, the lenders stood the loss. Investors were ready to take the risk. In ancient Greece and Rome, where real estate rarely went on the market, where there were no corporations, and such things as stocks and bonds did not exist, maritime loans were among the few ways available to make a financial killing. There was no shortage of men willing to stake a shipper to the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of dollars, even though a bit of bad luck with wind and weather might wipe out the total investment. For, if the ship came in, and most of the time it did, they reaped over three times what they would have netted on an ordinary loan.

Though the big money was to be made on the sea, in those peaceful times the land also offered good opportunities. Tradesmen and craftsmen could do very well – and manufacturers very well. One of the major areas of manufacture was the molding and firing of clay utensils. These included not only small items, such as oil lamps, dishware and cookware for household use, but also the huge clay jars, or amphorae, commonly standing about five feet high, that served as containers for shipping oil, wine and other foodstuffs, since wood was too expensive to use for barrels. Huge numbers of these jars were needed: the ordinary oil or wine freighter held 3,000 or so of them, and a large freighter, as many as 10,000. If several vessels arrived at a port to load, it could well take tens of thousands of amphorae to fill the holds. The manufacturing of such numbers of large jars was done, like all other manufacturing in ancient times, by hand, in small factories. The organization and direction that made it possible must have been ruthlessly efficient.

Not only the many who prospered but also their less fortunate neighbors enjoyed the public amenities supplied by the towns or cities they lived in. A town was not a proper town, the Romans felt, unless it offered its denizens paved streets, a water supply, which often had to be brought in over aqueducts from miles away, and public baths with hot, warm and cold pools – baths that were open to everyone, rich or poor. In AD 1, the poor in Roman cities and towns drank better water and washed more often than many of their counterparts in American cities and towns will in AD 2000.

Another amenity the towns and cities supplied free to the denizens was entertainment, including the Roman spectator sports par excellence, chariot racing and gladiatorial combats. Chariot races were part of the program at official religious festivals; gladiatorial combats were also put on, not as a regular feature but as added attractions paid for by ambitious politicians or, in Augustus' time and after, by the emperor. Augustus, in the course of his reign, gave the public eight gladiatorial shows in which no fewer than 10,000 men fought – an average of 1,250 per show. One of the eight took place in 2 BC, and it must have been a big one, for it was part of the ceremonies at the dedication of the temple of Mars Ultor, "Mars the Avenger," which the emperor erected in thanks for his victory in the decisive battle against Caesar's assassins, a vital step in his path to the throne. In his day, gladiatorial contests were no longer necessarily associated with religious festivals, although chariot racing continued to be. In either case the spectators were unaffected: admission was gratis.

Health care was, if not free, at least within the reach of the poor. The source of the benefaction in this case was not the government but religion. The payment required was a donation to the god, and he compassionately accepted whatever he was given. The god was Asclepius, whose sanctuaries, equipped with the appropriate buildings and staffed by priests with the appropriate training, provided the services of a medical center. Patients from all over flocked to them because there, they knew, their case would be handled by an infallible doctor – the god himself. After receiving a solemn ritual preparation, they passed the night in a sacred dormitory, and he appeared in their dreams and prescribed the treatment to be carried out. If the dream was unclear, the

temple priests were there to offer an interpretation. From the patients' accounts the priests could usually prescribe standard remedies such as a change in diet, exercise, medicines, purging, bleeding. None of these cures would have helped much with the two most prevalent maladies in antiquity, malaria and tuberculosis, and probably did little for many of the other maladies that confronted the priests, but what unquestionably helped in all cases was the psychological effect of the impressive procedure.

A major contributor to the bright days of AD 1 as well as the years before and after it – the thriving economy, the flourishing towns and cities with their public services and entertainment – was the security the empire enjoyed, thanks to the armed forces. Before Augustus' time, troops were recruited and warships launched only when the need arose; – one of Augustus' *greatest* accomplishments was his establishment of a standing, professional army and navy. Both were of top quality. The members were all volunteers, who eagerly signed on for hitches of at least 20 years because the services gave a man status, lodging, good pay and benefits on discharge to boot. The biggest item in the army's budget was the payroll, since the men bought their own weapons and food. The biggest item in the navy's budget was the ships. The standard man-of-war was the trireme, a combat galley large enough to accommodate almost 200 oarsmen, arranged in three superimposed lines, and marines, who boarded other vessels or repelled boarders. Some combat galleys were larger, with even more oarsmen.

The fleets had a total of several hundred such vessels, and each represented a sizable outlay. The timber that went into each combat galley was the finest, and to ensure proper strength in the hull, the construction was more like cabinetwork than carpentry; the planks were fastened to each other with thousands of closely set mortise-and-tenon joints, each, of course, painstakingly hand cut.

The navy had a sizable payroll to meet, too, for the rowers, contrary to a common misconception, were not slaves; they were freemen who, though they received less than the soldiers of the army, still got a fair wage. (The galley slave does not enter history until long after the end of the ancient period.) The navy had no trouble recruiting the thousands of men it needed, to pull the oars of its galleys; they came from Rome's subject provinces, and for them a strong inducement to join up was the discharge benefit – Roman citizenship.

An aspect of life that benefited enormously from the security the army provided on land and the navy on the sea was tourism. Before Augustus' day, chronic warfare and generally unsettled conditions discouraged sight-seeing. Besides, few were wealthy enough to go in for it. In the years of the Pax Romana, the conditions were propitious, and the general prosperity made the number who could afford to travel far greater than ever before or for centuries thereafter. And travel they did, even though it was not easy. Getting anywhere overseas meant booking deck passage on a freighter (there were no passenger ships as such), while getting anywhere overland meant jolting along in a springless carriage. Moreover, once on the road, travelers were more or less out of communication with home. The only organized postal service in existence was strictly of and for the government. A private person who wanted to send a letter had to find someone heading for the desired destination who was both willing to carry it and to take the trouble to locate the addressee – no easy task in an age when there were few streets with names, none with street signs, and no such thing as house numbers.

Tourists willingly undertook the hardships. The attraction was, as it often is today, the magnetism of relics of the past. We trek to where Washington spent a night, where Monet lived, where Napoleon is buried. They trekked to where Alexander the Great spent a night, where Socrates lived, where Achilles was buried. We flock to England for a visit to Shakespeare country; they flocked to Troy in Asia Minor for a visit to Homer country (where they were shown the beach along which the Greek ships were pulled up, the plain where Hector and Achilles rampaged, the cave where Paris gave his fateful judgment, and so on). They went to Egypt to see the very things we do – the Pyramids, the great Sphinx, the Valley of the Kings. We know many of the specific spots they visited because they had the same habit people have today, of scribbling their names on the sites they visited. One graffito, left by a Roman traveler on the wall of the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae,

far up the Nile at the First Cataract, runs: *L. Trebonius Oricula hic fuit*, or "I, L[ucius] Trebonius Oricula, was here." The ubiquitous Kilroy of World War II fame, had his native tongue been Latin, would have used these words. Trebonius adds the date: the eighth day before the Kalends of April in the 13th consulship of Augustus – which works out to be just two years before the beginning of our era, March 25, 2 B.C.

And, like his modern counterpart, the ancient tourist came home with souvenirs of his travels. One of the major sights of Antioch, for example, was a famous statue of Tyche, the goddess of fortune. A multitude of miniature copies of it have been found, from two inches to a foot high and in all sorts of materials – glass, clay, bronze, silver, stone; they were tourist gimcracks, the ancient equivalent of the miniatures of Michelangelo's *David* that are peddled in Florence today, or of the Eiffel Tower that are sold in Paris. It was the trade in such souvenirs that caused so much trouble for Saint Paul when he was in Ephesus: one of the city's great sights was the Temple of Artemis, and the silversmiths who made little Artemis shrines for sale to visitors were upset at the potential effect on their business of his preaching against the gods.

In foreign affairs, over which Augustus did not have the control he had over domestic matters, he experienced some failures. Although he had the finest army in the Western world at his command, in maintaining the peace he preferred diplomatic maneuvering and negotiation to force. In 4 BC, for example, he faced potential trouble in Palestine, a place where maintaining the peace was always a delicate business. Herod the Great, king of the region, had managed to do it for more than three decades by combining ruthless handling of enemies with deft handling of religious and political divisions. But his death in 4 BC removed him from the scene, and problems soon arose. He had married ten times and sired numerous sons, and though he killed off a number of them, enough were left to start a wrangle about the succession. Augustus settled the argument Solomonicly by dividing the kingdom among the three eldest. His solution proved to have momentous consequences: the son who acquired the southern part, which included Judea and Jerusalem, got himself so disliked that in AD 6 Augustus removed him, sent him into exile, and annexed his territory to the empire as a province governed by a Roman official. The sixth such official was Pontius Pilate. As we know, Pontius Pilate would make his own contribution to the year 1. In AD 30, he would preside over Jesus Christ's condemnation to death by crucifixion, thus starting the process that would lead the little Christian monk, Dennis, 500 years later, to choose Christ's birth as the starting point for his new, Christian era.

One area where Augustus couldn't resort to diplomacy or negotiation was along the northern frontier between Gaul, which was part of the empire, and certain lands adjoining it that were held by German tribes, who consequently had easy access for raiding Gallic villages and took advantage of it. Here he had to use the army, and in the opening years of the century, operations went well. Then he chose to put in charge the wrong man, Quinctilius Varus. In AD 9, Varus led a force of some 20,000 strong straight into a German trap in the Teutoberg Forest, and it was wiped out; he committed suicide. The Germans captured to standards of three legions, the greatest of all humiliations for the Roman army. After Augustus got the news, for months he let his hair grow wild, didn't shave, and every so often would bang his head on a door screaming, "Varus! Give me back my legions!" The defeat had its long-term consequences: it contributed to keeping much of Germany out of the embrace of the Roman Empire, and as a result, Germans today speak their own language and not some version of Latin.

The border to the east was also a source of worry, and here Augustus managed to achieve what he was after with diplomacy. Across the border was Rome's only rival power, the Parthian kingdom, occupying the ancient land of Persia beyond the Euphrates River. The Parthians were formidable because of their army. The Romans relied on a highly trained, well-disciplined mass of infantry whose prime weapons were spear and sword; the Parthians relied on lightly armored cavalrymen whose prime weapon was the bow. One of their specialties was the "Parthian shot": they would feign retreat and, as they galloped away, suddenly fire backward at unwary pursuers. In 53 BC, a Roman

general ventured across the Euphrates with a big army and senselessly chose a flat plain on which to meet the Parthian force that came to stop him. Its cavalry, shooting at his infantry masses like ducks on a pond, administered one of the worst defeats Rome had ever suffered; the Parthians went home with the Roman legionary standards and thousands of prisoners. For decades the Romans agonized about the situation, much the way we did about Americans taken captive during the Vietnam War. Finally, in 20 BC, Augustus, mingling diplomacy with a show of force, succeeded in getting everything and everybody back.

The Parthian kings, checked by Rome in the west, expanded eastward, into India. Today India, with all its linguistic and religious and cultural divisions, is at least a political unit; at the beginning of the Christian Era it was not even that. The Parthians held the northwest, invaders from Central Asia the rest of the north, a powerful native dynasty the center, and a number of local rulers shared the south. Under this political diversity, life was recognizably Indian: the population was split, as it had been for centuries, into castes; women committed suttee; rice was the staple diet (resident traders from the west, longing for bread, used to include a bit of grain in their shipments from home); there was the welter of familiar religions – Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism.

Beyond India lay the Chinese empire, bracketing the known world on the east as the Roman Empire did on west. These two great states knew of each other, but only barely, and what contacts they had were

indirect. Western traders were aware that the silk they bought in India to ship to the Mediterranean came from China: as one of them wrote, “There is a very great inland city called Thina from which silk floss, yarn, and cloth are shipped . . . It is not easy to get to this Thina, for rarely do people come from it and only a few.” He probably got his information from Malayan or Indian seamen, who plied the waters between China and India, or from Central Asian caravaners, who plied the routes on land. It was too bad for the Western world that relations weren't closer, for it might have gotten some useful things much earlier than it eventually did. Chinese smiths, for example, knew how to make cast iron, Chinese laborers had that humble but supremely efficient instrument, the wheel barrow, for carting loads, and Chinese children were having fun flying kites; the West knew none of these until the Middle Ages and even later.

In A.D. 1, the Roman Empire, having been brought into being by Augustus less than 30 years earlier, was young and vigorous. There was peace; commerce and industry prospered; people, including the rank and file, enjoyed urban amenities and free entertainment. Rome's neighbors were quiet, except for the Germans, and the trouble they were causing would not become serious until later. The credit goes chiefly to Augustus – Man of the Year, even as he had been for more than a decade before and would be for more than a decade after.

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