

# The many guises of the emperor Augustus



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## Introduction

This free course focuses on Rome's first emperor, Augustus, who lived from 63 BCE to 14 CE. The rule of Augustus marked a significant political change in Rome, and Augustus' position as emperor was initially fragile and controversial. Key to his success in holding onto power was his masterful use of visual propaganda to cement his position and underline his legitimacy. The course examines the various roles Augustus constructed in an attempt to appeal to as many people as possible, and highlights the central importance of dress in Augustus' imagery. To illustrate this, the course will also look at Abdullah II, who became king of Jordan in 1999, and who applies a similar principle to his portraiture.



**Figure 1** Bust of Augustus, Augustan period. Munich: Glyptothek.

Before you get started we would really appreciate a few minutes of your time to tell us about yourself and your expectations for this course, in our optional [start-of-course survey](#). Participation will be completely confidential and we will not pass on your details to others.



## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand how political leaders can construct various different roles to appeal to as many people as possible
- understand the key role that visual representation and dress plays in these roles
- show knowledge about the personality and history of Rome's first emperor Augustus, and some of the ways in which he consolidated his power
- analyse images and source texts, and compare them to one another.

# 1 Rome: republic to empire

Rome's first emperor, Augustus, was a king in all but name. This may seem unsurprising; after all, one of the things people often associate with Rome is powerful rulers with extravagant tastes, control over a mighty army, and power of life and death over their **subjects**. But in reality, it was a lot more complicated than this, and the history of Rome's first emperor illustrates why. Before Augustus came to power, Rome had been a **republic** (i.e. governed by the people rather than a king) for roughly 500 years, with power carefully balanced in a mixed **constitution** combining a **people's assembly**, a **senate** and elected **magistrates** with fixed terms of office. By the mid-first century BCE, however, the system was breaking apart and Rome was plunged into two bitter civil wars between powerful political and military figures, such as **Julius Caesar** and **Mark Antony**, one after the other. Augustus – at this stage still called Octavian – was the last man standing after the second civil war, and this is how he came to be in control of the Roman state.



**Figure 2** The Chiaramonti bust of Julius Caesar, Rome: Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican Museums; **Figure 3** Bust of Marcus Antonius, Rome: Vatican Museums, Chiaramonti Museum; **Figure 4** Bust of Cleopatra, Berlin: Altes Museum, Antikensammlung.

The **civil war** period (49–31 BCE) was a highly traumatic experience for the Roman people as a whole and counted a number of its most colourful figures as its victims. From this tender political situation emerged Augustus as the undisputed leader of Rome. In principle, he was just one more power-hungry young Roman aristocrat who got caught up in the storm of power-wrangling at end of Republic: even after emerging victorious over Mark Antony and **Cleopatra** in 31 BCE at the Battle of Actium (the final battle of the second civil war), it was by no means a given that he would be able to maintain his position of control over the Roman state and avoid the violent fate of his rivals and peers. Augustus managed, first, to stay alive and, more importantly, bridge the bitter gap between political ideals while maintaining absolute control.

510 - 49 BCE	49 - 45 BCE	44 - 31 BCE	31 BCE onward
Republican period	First civil war	Second civil war	Imperial period (Augustus sole ruler)

Augustus' ability to maintain power was largely down to his genius for public relations, in which portraiture and imagery played a key role. This allowed him to represent himself in a range of guises to appeal to as many people as possible. Dress can be an important tool for portraying oneself in a particular way, in the Roman period just as it is now, and it is largely through dress that Augustus was able to create his various guises. He was not the first ruler to use dress to project a particular public image, however, nor would he be the last. So, before we look at Augustus, let's explore this in a more modern setting in the form of the king of Jordan, Abdullah II.

## Study note: a note on dates

You will notice that this course uses the abbreviations 'BCE' and 'CE' when dating events, texts and objects. These abbreviations stand for 'Before the Common Era' and 'Common Era'. You may be familiar with an alternative method of referring to dates as 'BC' ('before Christ') and 'AD' (*Anno Domini*, Latin for 'in the year of our

Lord'), and you may find that the authors of other things you read on the topics discussed here use instead BC and AD instead of BCE and CE. Remember that BCE years count backwards – therefore the eighth century BCE is earlier than the seventh century BCE.

## 2 King Abdullah II of Jordan

Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein became king of Jordan, in the Middle East, in 1999, after the death of his father, Hussein. King Hussein had been an exceptionally popular leader, and Abdullah clearly had very large shoes to fill. Jordan is a **constitutional monarchy**, meaning that the king's powers are limited by a constitution, but while the king has a great deal of power, he is also very keen to appeal to his subjects. As a result of both these things, Abdullah has developed a public image that involves portraying himself in an array of different guises. In this context, clothing plays a key role.



**Map 1** Map of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, showing the location of Jordan.

### Activity 1

 Allow around 25 minutes for this activity

Have a look at the following images of King Abdullah II, also paying attention to the information in the captions. Then fill in the table below with key details with a row for each image: note form is fine. The first one has been done for you.

Figure number	Description of image, especially clothing	Location of image (if known)	What is the image trying to convey/who might it especially appeal to?
5	The king in military uniform with lots of medals, in front of a Jordanian flag	Outside a military installation	The king as soldier and military commander. Serious face. Looks like someone who is militarily capable/experienced and willing to lead from the front in the event of war. Likely to appeal to military personnel ('I am one of you') as well as citizens wanting to know their country is in safe hands.

6

*Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...*

7

*Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...*

8

*Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...*

9

*Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...*

10

*Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...**Provide your answer...*

**Figure 5** Portrait of King Abdullah outside the military installation on the border with Israel near Aqaba.



**Figure 6** Portrait of King Abdullah outside the bazaar in Wadi Musa in southern Jordan.

### Study note: Bedouins

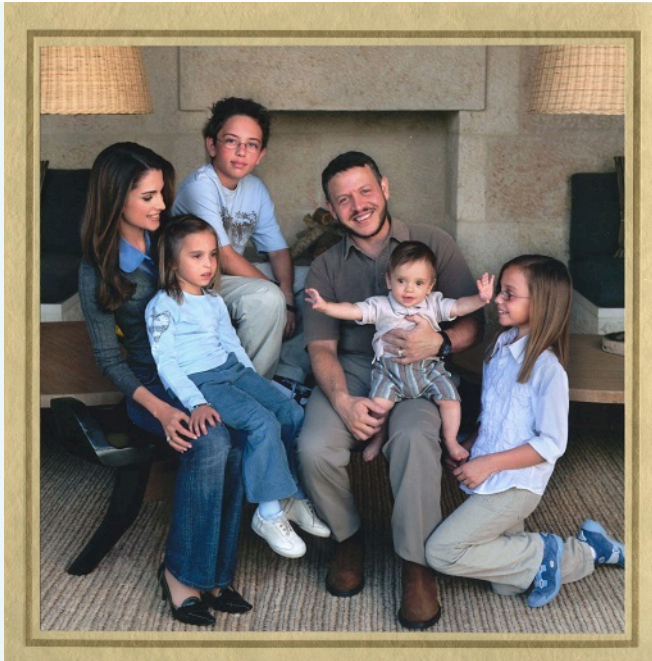
Bedouins are nomadic people who are the traditional inhabitants of large parts of the Middle East. In Jordan most live in the south of the country. Their traditional lifestyle includes herding sheep and goats, living in large tents and distinctive dress, which for men includes a red-and-white headscarf held down with a black band. The Bedouins of Jordan see King Abdullah as their leader.



**Figure 7** Poster of King Abdullah in the commercial centre of the Jordanian capital, Amman.



**Figure 8** King Abdullah participates in an Umra pilgrimage with his brother Prince Ali Mecca (the key Muslim pilgrimage site in Saudi Arabia) wearing the *rida* (sash) and *izar* (loincloth) of pilgrims.



**Figure 9** King Abdullah and his family inside their home, posing for a New Year's Eve card.



**Figure 10** Portraits of King Abdullah (r.) and his father King Hussein (l.) in Petra, southern Jordan.

### Discussion

This table may look different from yours: perhaps you spotted fewer details, or perhaps you spotted more!

Figure number	Description of image, esp. dress	Location of image (if known)	What is the image trying to convey? Who might it especially appeal to?
5	The king in military uniform with lots of medals, in front of a Jordanian flag	Outside a military installation	The king as soldier and military commander. Serious face. Looks like someone who is militarily capable/ experienced and willing to lead from the front in the event of war. Likely to appeal to military personnel ('I am one of you') as well as citizens



			wanting to know their country is in safe hands.
6	Traditional Bedouin dress	Outside a bazaar in southern Jordan	The king as Bedouin leader. Likely to appeal to Bedouin locals. (Also, he is leaning against a pile of cushions of the kind sold in Jordanian bazaars, so this might appeal to tradespeople working in the bazaar?)
7	Business suit	Commercial centre of Amman	The king as capable businessman. Likely to appeal to Jordanian businesspeople, businesspeople visiting Jordan and Jordanian citizens who place importance on Jordan's commercial success. All of these people are likely to predominantly operate in central Amman.
8	<i>Rida</i> and <i>izar</i> of pilgrims	Mecca (Muslim pilgrimage site)	The king as pious Muslim. Likely to appeal to devout Muslims and those who want their leader to be a religious man.
9	Casual clothes	Family home	The king as family man. Likely to appeal to ordinary people, people who place importance on family and those who feel their leader should be a loving family man. Also: the king is supplying male children to take his place, so he is securing the dynasty and, as a result, the stability of the country.
10	Bedouin clothes	Petra, southern Jordan	Bedouin dress likely to appeal to local people, but worn with a suit to appeal to non-Bedouins as well? Also: portrayed next to Hussein. Abdullah benefitting from his connection to his father, who was popular and well-loved. This is also maybe showing political stability/continuity and family honour.

Hopefully this brief discussion has shown how, even today, imagery can be key to a political leader's public relations and how a prominent figure such as a king can use different forms of carefully chosen imagery to enhance their appeal with their people. Hopefully you also saw how clothing can play a key role here. Clearly, there

are many differences between King Abdullah and Augustus: ancient Rome and modern Jordan are two entirely different types of state with very different cultures, different dress codes and different possibilities for portrait production. (As you will discover later in this course, ancient Romans could use coins, statues and a range of other options for portraits.) However, the decisions King Abdullah of Jordan has made in his image construction provide us with a more modern example of the visual framework constructed by Augustus as we turn back to Augustus and his use of portraits for political ends.

## 3 Roman male dress

'He always had clothes and shoes, fit to appear in public, ready in his bedroom for any sudden occasion.' So recounts the Roman writer [Suetonius](#) (circa 69–122 CE) in chapter 73 of his biography of Augustus, showing that Rome's first emperor was fully aware of the importance of appearance for someone in his position. In this section, you are going to look at different styles of male Roman dress and their meaning, with a view to being able to understand the symbolism of a number of images of Augustus you will encounter later on. Clothing had a special importance in the ancient world because textiles were hand-woven on looms, so they were time-consuming to produce and therefore expensive. For some people, their clothing will have been the most expensive thing they owned; therefore, it was one of the main ways in which a person could show identity and status.

So, what kinds of clothing did an elite Roman man like Augustus have at his disposal?

### 3.1 The toga: how it looked

The main garment we tend to associate with Rome today is the toga, and indeed it was the most important symbolic garment of the Roman man. The toga was essentially a huge cloak that was wrapped around the body, usually over a knee-length tunic. It was semi-circular in shape, which gave it a characteristic round hem (setting it apart from other ancient cloaks). By the time of Augustus, it was worn almost exclusively by men. It was very important that the toga was draped correctly, and the styles of draping changed over time.

#### Activity 2



*Allow around 25 minutes for this activity*

First, watch the following video on how to drape a toga, taking note of how it is put on and worn. This is a reconstructed toga from the period of Augustus with the draping style of that period (you'll come back to this shortly).

Video content is not available in this format.



Then watch the video again, this time making notes to answer the following questions:

1. Roughly how big is the toga in the video? What effect do you think this had on what it cost? Can you imagine what a cheaper toga might have looked like?
2. How is the toga kept on the body? What kinds of things would you *not* have been able to do while wearing it?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

1. As you can see in the video, the toga was a massive garment, which would have made it expensive. A toga that was somewhat smaller in size and did not have the second layer of cloth of the toga in this video would have been substantially cheaper, but it still had to be big enough to wrap around the body, and as such will still have been fairly costly. In addition, in order to get the toga onto your body and drape it in the correct way, you needed at least two people to help you.
2. The toga is entirely draped: there are no pins, buttons or other fastening aids. As a result, it could easily fall off if its wearer did not sit, walk and gesticulate in certain ways. You could certainly not do anything physically demanding in it, such as manual labour or armed combat.

As a result of its special properties, the toga was, then, the garment worn on an everyday basis only by men who were not involved in manual labour: politicians, lawyers, clerks and businessmen, for example. As it required someone to help put it on, people who wore it on a regular basis would also have normally had household slaves to do this – another

expense. Because of its formality, however, it was also the required dress for important formal occasions, like weddings, funerals, court hearings and religious ceremonies. As a result, many artisans and manual labourers will have had a toga stored away for these kinds of events, like many people today have an outfit that they only wear for special occasions.



**Figure 11** Fresco from Pompeii showing a magistrate in a tunic and toga (top right) handing out free bread to poor people wearing dark tunics and hooded capes, first century CE.

## 3.2 The toga in Roman culture

But why would a man bother with the expense of a toga at all? The answer lies in what the toga symbolised.

First, it signified Roman citizenship. From the first century BCE onward, with the exception of enslaved people, most residents of Italy and especially the city of Rome will have held Roman citizenship status, which gave them, e.g., the right to vote and participate in Roman government, to marry and bequeath property and certain tax breaks. Citizenship could be acquired by people in the **provinces** (the areas Rome conquered: see Map 2) if they fulfilled certain criteria, but the further away one went from Rome, the fewer people will have had it. As a result, it was something of a privilege. If you did not possess Roman citizenship status, you were forbidden from wearing the toga, so it served as a kind of clothing passport.





*in toga* – ‘distinguished’ (*clarus*) in civilian (as opposed to military) life (*Letters to Friends* 6.6.5).

Yet there were different types of toga and different ways of wearing it. You will turn to some of them now.

### 3.3 The Augustan toga

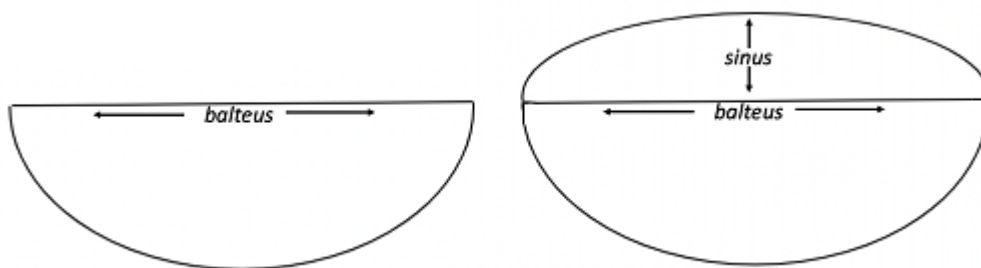
In his *Life of Augustus*, the historian Suetonius makes the following comment about Augustus:

He desired also to revive the traditional fashion of dress, and once when he saw in an assembly a group of men in dark cloaks, he cried out indignantly, ‘Behold them, Romans, masters of the world, the toga-clad race!’ (*gens togata*) and he directed the officers never again to allow anyone to appear in the Forum or its neighbourhood except in the toga.

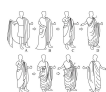
(Suetonius, *Augustus* 40)

In this passage, Augustus is observed sarcastically quoting the lines from the *Aeneid* mentioned in the previous section to bewail the sight of men in central Rome wearing dark cloaks instead of togas. For him, this was a sign of the degree to which standards of propriety and patriotism had slipped over the course of the late Republic, and he was determined to do something about it. First, as the passage says, he made the toga compulsory in the civic heart of Rome. Second, he invented a new type of toga.

The Republican toga had consisted of a simple semi-circle of cloth draped diagonally around the body with the straight edge (**balteus**) at the top and the curved hem at the bottom. Augustus’s toga had an added semicircle of cloth called a **sinus** that formed a second layer with a higher hem. It was also draped in a more complex way, with a pocket of cloth (**umbo**) pulled out over the **balteus** (see Figures 12 and 13). (NB: the toga you saw in the video in the previous section was an Augustan toga!)



**Figure 12** Outline of the earlier Republican toga (left) vs the Augustan toga (right).



**Figure 13** Draping of the Republican toga (top row) vs the Augustan toga (bottom row). The fully draped Republican toga is D, the fully draped Augustan toga is G. Parts of the toga: 1. **lacinia** 2. **balteus** 3. **sinus** 4. **umbo**.



### Activity 3

 Allow around 15 minutes for this activity

Scholars have speculated on the meaning of the imperial toga. Why do *you* think Augustus thought it a good idea to introduce a new style of toga?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

It is hard to pin down what this change meant in concrete terms: the new, Augustan toga would definitely have been more expensive, and would thus have provided a means for status distinction. (That is to say, only very rich citizens would have easily afforded one.) A new type of toga could also have been intended to symbolise the dawn of a new era. On the other hand, because it is so large and elaborate, it could be seen to symbolise an exaggerated adherence to all of the traditional values tied up in the toga as described in the previous section, such as peace, patriotism and civic duty. Perhaps it was a mixture of all of these!

## 3.4 Capite velato

It wasn't just the form of the toga that was important, but also its drapery, as the previous section showed. Another important toga draping style throughout Roman history was so-called '[capite velato](#)' or 'covering the head', in which the back part of the *balteus* – or in the case of the Augustan toga the *sinus* (see image H in Figure 13 in the previous section) – was pulled up over the back of the head. This was a sign of respect for the gods and was used during religious ceremonies such as sacrifices. When men chose to have themselves portrayed in the toga *capite velato*, it showed they wanted to be seen as pious, modest and respectful of the gods. Figure 14 is an illustration of how it looked.

