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Augustus and the Equites:
Developing Rome's Middle Class

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Professor Moralee

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From its founding in 753 B.C.E. until the end of the republic in the late first century B.C.E., Rome was constantly changing, growing, and developing. As Augustus led Rome through a transition from republic to principate in 27 BC.E., he turned the city into an empire. According to Syme, Augustus “built up, for Rome, Italy, and the Empire, a system of government so strong and a body of administrators so large and coherent that nothing should shatter this fabric.”¹ Under the principate of Augustus, a more intricate political system arose which was able to handle the growing administrative needs of the Roman empire. This need was no longer able to be filled solely by the main political body at the time, the senatorial class. In order to fill the gaps in the empire's new political infrastructure, Augustus built up a preexisting social class into a new order that would be able to complete the new bureaucracy of the principate. This class was the equites, a modern translation of which could be “knights” or “cavalry.” Augustus transformed this archaic class into an integrated political group of the principate. This paper will determine the equites' role in the principate, concentrating on how the class changed as Rome transitioned from republic to principate. Examining this change will prove that Augustus provided the means and drove the development of the equites, which would then lead to a complex system of government more able to handle a larger empire. The development of this class created a recognizable middle class in Rome, unable to achieve the elite status of the senators but of formidable enough wealth, skill, and status to set these individuals apart from the plebians.

The importance of this development was that once the equites became a more prominent group, it bridged a gap between the low and high classes, creating a middle class in Roman society. This middle class was both social and political, as in Roman society these two

¹ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939) 331.

areas were closely linked. In the hierarchy of Rome, the common people were referred to as the plebeians. These were the laborers of Rome, those who did not have a true political voice. On the other end of the hierarchical scale were the elites, known as the senatorial class. This group was the main political body in Rome, which had a vote in the most important decisions. Although there were internal variations within these two groups, it was not until the principate that a identifiable middle class became recognizable. The equites, also known as the equestrian order, was a group that was not required to be of high birth, but could also achieve this status by experience and money earned. They fulfilled various judicial, financial, militaristic, and political roles. Once developed by Augustus, this group increased the ability of the government under the principate to develop in its infrastructure, therefore becoming more successful at handling the political gap created by the growing empire.

In order to understand how the equites filled a certain political need in the principate, it is important to understand the foundations of this group. The early form of the class was the Roman cavalry, known under Rome's earliest leader, Romulus, as the *celeres*.² Throughout the period of Roman kingship through the late republic, the group transformed under different names such as the *flexuntes*, and later on were known as the *troussuli*, named for a town captured solely by this group.³ As the group which would eventually be known as the equites developed through the early years of Rome's history, it was known mainly for its military function as a cavalry class, common knowledge being that this group was wealthy enough to own and equip its own war horse, and afford the accompanying costs. The group's name originates from the Latin word *equester*, meaning “mounted on a horse,” once again attributing the title of this group

² Pliny, *Natural History*, Volume IX. Translated and Edited by H. Rackham. (Cambridge: Harvard, University Press, 1961) XXXIII. 9.5

³ Pliny, *Natural History*. XXXIII.9.6-7

to its origin as a cavalry class.⁴ However, by the late republic, the equites became a more unified and organized group, for whom “it was natural to borrow the name of the old Roman cavalry, with its associations of high rank.”⁵ This was a foreshadowing the political role the group would fill as the republic transitioned to principate.

By the late republic, the equites had begun to grow from its archaic function as a cavalry class as it started to develop into a middle class. What set this class apart from the senatorial class and the plebeians was that it was a status which could not only be gained through inheritance, but could also be acquired.⁶ The status of this order could be gained through a combination of service and earnings.⁷ When a Roman citizen went through the proper steps, and was recognized by the government as a member of the equestrian order, he would be granted a gold ring. However, during the republic the granting of these gold rings remained unorganized, evidence that it was not until Augustus' influence that the class solidified as a recognizable, integral part of the principate's government. According to Henderson, “individual grants of the gold ring by magistrates or emperors were never controlled by forms of law.”⁸ Since distribution was not decided by law, disorganization of this procedure is confirmed, but there is an implied acknowledgement that this status was able to be acquired by those with the right qualifications. Therefore it was higher than the status of the plebeians, the common citizens of Roman, but not as distinguished as the senatorial class.

The equites were also disorganized in the sense that they had slightly withdrew from

⁴ Glare, P.G.W. ed. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982. 614.

⁵ M.I. Henderson, “The Establishment of the Equester Ordo,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 53 (1963) 63.

⁶ Lily Ross Taylor, “Republican and Augustan Writers Enrolled in the Equestrian Centuries,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (1968) 469.

⁷ Erich S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) 383.

⁸ M.I. Henderson, “The Establishment of the Equester Ordo.” 63.

politics after being adversely affected by Sulla's proscriptions.⁹ Under Sulla's command, those who had spoken out against his political platform were sentenced to death. The equites, who were by this time participating in politics, felt the pressure as was intended, and allowed Sulla's supporters to assume a more central role in politics. The equites therefore remained on Rome's political scene, but not as a unified group.

Despite the setbacks in growth facilitated by disorganization and Sulla's proscriptions, the equites had begun to gain prominence in the political arena of the late republic. Syme describes acceptable duties for an equites in the republic: "Knights were eligible for administrative posts that in dignity and power surpassed many magistracies or proconsulates, their importance increased steadily as the reign drew to its close."¹⁰ In addition to administrative duties, the equites also gained more prominence in the financial matters of Rome, preferring "a solid profit from the burden."¹¹ Since many equites had earned the gold ring of the order and not been born into it, perhaps this signified a desire to increase one's personal wealth to an even greater level than required for the status of an equites.

By the end of the republic, the equites were still not a fully integrated political group, nor was the process of attaining this particular status organized in its methods. However, the group had already begun to grow as Rome's middle class, an idea which would further develop once the republic transitioned into a principate. This middle class status was distinguished from the common people and those of high birth. Higher than the common people because they were considered *boni*, the good men of the republic, which due to their acquired wealth and financial responsibilities were considered more elite than the plebeians.¹² Although the gold ring of the

⁹ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 94.

¹⁰ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 409.

¹¹ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 13.

¹² Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*. 14.

equestrian order could be acquired through talent, earnings, and more than one generation of free birth, the financial requirements were unachievable by a great number of free men in Rome, setting them apart from the plebeians. Alternatively, the equites were lower than the senatorial elite because they were *novus homo*, or new men, not of the old, distinguished bloodlines of Rome, and “could claim no share in the splendor and pride of the governing class.”¹³ The members of the equestrian order were also considered of a lower class than the senators since between them, the “contrast lay in rank and prestige” with the senatorial order considered to have been more elite.¹⁴ So although the equites did not constitute a fully organized class in the time of the late republic, they still began to be distinguished as having a higher rank than the plebeians, but a lower rank than the senators.

As Augustus led Rome's transition from republic to principate at the end of the 1st century B.C.E., the equites also began a transition of their own to a fully functional political group of middle class status. It was during this period when “emperors were to appoint men of excellence and experience to equestrian office.”¹⁵ Since it was now the emperor's responsibility to appoint this group, Augustus' role in the transition of the equites would be crucial. In regard to the new importance of this group, Syme states “The class of knights, indeed, is the cardinal factor in the whole social, military and political structure in [the principate].”¹⁶ This does not become a necessary and integrated group just because of a need, Augustus nurtures the equites to this more important place in Rome's political infrastructure, which is evident in the standards surrounding this group during the early principate. The qualifications were more regulated, and appointment into the order was more organized and unified. On appointment, the gold rings and

¹³ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 13-14

¹⁴ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 13.

¹⁵ Saller, R.P. “Promotion and Patronage in Equestrian Careers.” *The Journal of Roman Studies*. 70 (1980) 55.

¹⁶ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 355.

dress of the order also became more uniform. Within the equites, duties were more clearly defined, and it was these duties which transformed the equites into a middle class of Rome's social and political hierarchy. No longer did the name merely distinguish the cavalry of the Roman military who were able to afford a war horse and its upkeep. During the early period of the principate under Augustus, the equites transformed into a middle class of Rome, which was able to fill gaps in the political infrastructure caused by a growing Roman empire.

In the year 23 C.E., the equites “came to unity” and in order to avoid the undeserving gaining the gold ring of the Order, more limits were set, the first being that each candidate must have “three generations of free birth and the equestrian census.”¹⁷ By these qualifications, a man's father and grandfather must have been born free men in order to gain equestrian status. While this distinguished the order from the common mass, it also distinguished them from the senators, as a man did not need outstanding bloodlines in order to acquire equestrian status. Men were also required to hold “a minimum property qualification of 400,00 sesterces who had been given, as a distinction, the right to a horse at the public cost, and who were enrolled in 18 centuries, voting units in the Roman assembly.”¹⁸ Although it could be earned throughout a man's lifetime, money was necessary to gain the status of an equites.

As far as experience necessary to gain the gold ring of the equites, judicial service was one option, although the *iudices* or judges, and the equites were not one sole group.¹⁹ Under Augustus, the judicial system transformed into a more complicated system, which required a loyal group the princeps could rely on in political matters. In Syme's words, “Military experience was another type of experience suitable for gaining the gold ring, an equestrian career in the

¹⁷ M.I. Henderson, “The Establishment of the Equester Ordo.” 67.

¹⁸ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. Edited by P.A. Brunt and J.M. Moore New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 56.

¹⁹ M.I. Henderson, “The Establishment of the Equester Ordo.” 68.

army, in finance and in administration is gradually built up...the knights acquired from the princeps both usefulness and dignity.”²⁰ When Augustus furthered the development of the equites, he did so in a way that created a functional, unified political group in different matters of the state.

Distribution of the equites' gold rings was a significant change under Augustus, as it furthered the unification of this group and also separated it from other groups. Only members of the order were allowed to wear the gold rings, and since the qualifications were more organized under the principate, it was a true sign of those who deserved classification as an equites. In the history of Rome according to Pliny, this ring was a signification of the middle class of Rome. He wrote that “wearing rings clearly introduced a third order, intermediate between the commons and the senate, and the title that had been previously conferred by a possession of a war horse is now assigned by money rates.”²¹ Even the finger on which these rings were meant to be worn would have been specified under a common rule.²² With the ring distribution being unified, and the equites signifying an intermediate between the plebeians and the senators, under Augustus a new middle class now stood out, whereas before the remnants of the Roman cavalry had not been a distinct group.

The duties and benefits of the equites reflected the middle class status of this group, but also the growing prominence under the new structure of Augustus' principate. This group filled a very specific niche, with a “career in jury duty, military service, and administrative procuratorships” which would not have been necessary without the growth of the governmental structure under Augustus.²³ The importance of the equites increased, as they grew from merely

²⁰ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*. 355.

²¹ Pliny, *Natural History*. XXXIII.VII.30.

²² Pliny, *Natural History*. XXXIII.VI.24

²³ Lily Ross Taylor, “Republican and Augustan Writers Enrolled in the Equestrian Centuries.” 486.

filling suitable positions to following a certain path of occupation crafted by Augustus. This new formation of the class is detailed by Syme: “The military knight found ample occupation – and increased rewards, as service became a career, with hierarchy and graded honors.”²⁴ This “ample occupation” came from Augustus' encouragement of the order's involvement in political matters. In financial matters, these men were often tax collectors, a task too mundane for the senators, but too serious to entrust to the plebeians. In administrative matters, equites were often chosen to govern provinces, including some very prominent locations such as Judea and even Egypt.²⁵ Some of these records are found in inscriptions, which would have increased the visibility of this group as it transformed from the less public image it held in the republic.²⁶ The administrative position of governor reflects the status of the equites as lower than that of the Senators, as they were not part of the directly influential government within the city of Rome itself, but rather in a fringe position, although still one granted to a trusted member of the Roman government.

The reason for these regimented positions in the civil, military, and judicial service often was reflected by the princeps' desire for loyalty. Equites were expected to be educated in a variety of areas, including civil, military, and judicial. Through this “the emperor will provide himself with men who are 'suitable for every job,' for such training instills loyalty.”²⁷ This loyalty was important for Augustus, whose adoptive father Julius Caesar was assassinated by a plot of a senatorial faction. There is even some speculation by scholars that Augustus chose the equites for governing distant but significant provinces such as Egypt because “senators could not be subordinated to him” increasing the need of a middle class which had adequate qualifications,

²⁴ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*. 356.

²⁵ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*. 356.

²⁶ P.A. Brunt, “Principes and Equites,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 73 (1983) 55.

²⁷ R.P. Saller, “Promotion and Patronage in Equestrian Careers.” 52.

but was not as powerful as the senators.²⁸ Egypt was a powerful province, important in its provision of a steady supply of grain to Rome.²⁹ It was considered to have a tumultuous atmosphere, and Roman historians, including Tacitus and Dio, thought Egypt ready to revolt without warning. Knowing this, it is plausible that Augustus feared putting a senator with the vast resources of an elite in control of Egypt, who had the means to encourage a revolt, if the particular senator was interested in breaking away from Rome. Putting an equites in control of Egypt, particularly one appointed by and therefore loyal to Augustus, ensured this tumultuous province remained under Roman control. Therefore, in creating a desirable status symbol which could be acquired by earned wealth, civil duties, and selection, Augustus crafted a middle class loyal to him in the early principate.

The transformation of the equites during the early principate was not a random occurrence of separate events, rather, the development of this group was driven by Augustus' need for a class loyal to him, able to fill positions in the new system of government. Although government during the principate was not fundamentally different from that of the republic, growth and certain influential changes led to a government not able to be completely filled by aspiring senators ascending the *cursus honorum*, the traditional political ladder among the Roman elites. Those of equestrian status were needed to govern, trusted by Augustus to do so without securing loyalty to themselves in preparation for an uprising.³⁰ Therefore, the need for a middle class able to fill certain military, judicial, and civil roles aligned with the need for a loyal class, which together urged Augustus to develop the equites as a new, more important political group in Rome.

Augustus' personal involvement, in addition to setting stricter standards and

²⁸ P.A. Brunt, "Princeps and Equites." 61.

²⁹ P.A. Brunt, "Princeps and Equites." 61.

³⁰ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 504.

regulations for the order, included appointing members of the equites himself:

They were picked, by the emperor himself...for their probity and judgment. They could be expected to exercise their franchise responsibility. They had, moreover, to be domiciled in Italy, and, from the nature of their duties, had to spend much of their time in Rome. They could therefore be counted upon to attend the elections. They would thus be the preponderating body...at full strength they would outnumber the senators by five to one.³¹

By handpicking members for the order, Augustus ensured further loyalty and was also able to make sure members were suitable for the duties he intended. The expectation of Augustus that the equites would attend elections and vote in his favor are reflected in the large number appointed during this period, increasing the vote in Augustus' favor.³² In his autobiographical record of his own achievements, Augustus even confirms the loyalty he created by describing the equites of Rome supporting him in political decisions.³³ Loyalty in this period of time would have been especially important, considering one important reason for the fall of the republic was a lack of agreement and loyalty between opposing political factions. By selecting from those who qualified and appointing them to be equites, Augustus created a loyal group who would not only fulfill certain predestined roles in Roman politics but also support him politically.

The equites were suitable for certain civil, military, judicial, and administrative duties. Although they gained many benefits due to their earned status, there was a downside to this status as well. The equites, who were men of education and experience sometimes equal to even that of the senators, were limited by their middle class status. As a group, they were not able to surpass the political status of the senatorial class. Although the equites suffered this inability to reach Rome's top positions except in rare occasions, the group continued to grow under Augustus. The equites developed as Rome and its government did, growing in complexity

³¹ A.H.M. Jones, "The Elections Under Augustus," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 45 (1955) 17.

³² A.H.M. Jones, "The Elections Under Augustus." 14.

³³ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. 24.

after the transition from republic to empire. Looking at particular members of the equites clarifies the usefulness of this class for Augustus, therefore perhaps justifying his development of the group.

During the late republic, a model equites to consider was Marcus Tullius Cicero. He died in 43 B.C.E., before the principate was founded, and therefore represented a period which was less organized for the equites. However, his life demonstrated the culmination of the equites' transition through the republic, by this period its definition from other groups was recognizable. What is useful about the study of Cicero is that not only are writings about his status as an equites available, he writes about the group himself. In Plutarch's biography of Cicero, the historian writes, "he said that he was going to do his best to make the name of Cicero more famous than such names as Scaurus or Catulus"³⁴ demonstrating the drive that was necessary for an equites to overcome the boundaries set by middle class status.

An important requirement for the equites was that they possessed a certain skill or valor which would set these men, middle class by nature, apart from the common people, Cicero's skill being intelligence and rhetoric. Plutarch writes this about Cicero's admirable qualities:

His natural abilities made him altogether remarkable, and won him such a name and reputation among the other boys that their fathers used often to go to the schools to see Cicero with their own eyes and to observe the quickness and intelligence which he showed at his work and which they had heard so much about, though some of them, who had less respect for culture, would get angry with their sons when they saw them walking with Cicero in the streets and giving him a place of honor in the middle of them.³⁵

Here, Cicero's mental abilities are undeniably great, and even as a boy he is admired and sought after. However, is it impossible for him to completely overcome his middle class status, seen in

³⁴ Plutarch. *Fall of the Roman Republic*. Translated by Rex Warner. New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972. 312.

³⁵ Plutarch. *Fall of the Roman Republic*. 312.

the fathers' disdain at Cicero being given a place of honor. Although he was intelligent, this did not make him equal to the elites of Rome. Plutarch also describes him as “the sort of person who takes gladly to every branch of learning and who rejects no aspect of literature or of education.”³⁶ This thirst for knowledge continues on to his adulthood and political career, in which he was well respected for his abilities. Plutarch writes about his election to the praetorship in 66 B.C.E., wherein Cicero is chosen over men of great names, presumably members of the senatorial order.³⁷ Due to his fair nature and supremacy in public speaking, he continued to ascend politically.

Cicero was even able to bring to light threatening conspiracies such as the plot of Catiline against the state. Although his life was threatened by Catiline's men, who were “to take their swords and go to Cicero's house at daybreak, as though to pay him their respects. They were then to fall on him and make an end of him”³⁸ Cicero persevered in this trial, demonstrating an important quality of the equites: *integritas*. This idea of honesty and integrity was important for members of the equites to possess, for they were expected to prove worthiness of their equestrian status.

In his own writings, he glorifies the equestrian order. He writes this regarding the order: “*equites Romani, honestissimi atque optimi viri*”³⁹ hailing the Roman equites as being most respected and the best men. Although it is to be expected that Cicero would write favorably of his own class, at least the reputation of this group being reputable and respected can be assumed to be valid. This close study of Cicero and his writings reveal an equites of unusual intelligence and political skill, one who was respected but acquired positions only through work

³⁶ Plutarch. *Fall of the Roman Republic*. 313.

³⁷ Plutarch. *Fall of the Roman Republic*. 319.

³⁸ Plutarch. *Fall of the Roman Republic*. 326.

³⁹ Cicero. *In L. Catilinam Oratio Prima*. Edited by Karl Frerichs. Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc. 2002. VIII.21.205.

and diligence.

Another member of the equestrian order was Marcus Agrippa. He persisted through the republic's transition to empire, providing a necessary example of the change in an equites' prominence. Close to Augustus, he was trusted by him even before the republic ended. This closeness is demonstrated in the sources available; he appears in both Tacitus' and Suetonius' writings on Augustus. Agrippa was not a senator, rather, he was “of ignoble names and never known before. [He] was destined for glory and for history.”⁴⁰ So although he may have been a *novus homo* or new man, he was still of a higher caliber than the commoners. His distinction as a member of the equites came after his father “used the money he inherited to improve his social position,” which is proof that this was a status which could be acquired if a candidate met the requirements.⁴¹ Since there is evidence of Agrippa's grandfather being free born, he seems a plausible choice for the gold ring of the order.

Knowing that Marcus Agrippa was of equestrian status provides an insight to Augustus' connection and promotion to specific members of this class. Agrippa's character is important, as it might generalize a type of person suitable for appointment into the equestrian order. Although of common birth, he is recorded in different sources as possessing some specific character or skill that allows him to rise above the masses. According to Tacitus, Agrippa was “a commoner but a first-rate soldier.”⁴² He was successful militarily, but also did not necessarily care about form and bloodline.⁴³ His military skills earned him a prominent placement in Augustus' army.

It is also significant that Agrippa received appropriate education for a member of the

⁴⁰ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 129.

⁴¹ F.A. Wright, *Marcus Agrippa* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1937) 11.

⁴² Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, Translated by Michael Grant (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1996) 32.

⁴³ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* . 341.

order, and was perhaps even educated with Augustus himself.⁴⁴ Due to this education and training, Agrippa was suitable for specific roles determined by Augustus, and was even noted for his “achievements in civil administration.”⁴⁵ He had notable military skills; the Roman historian Suetonius wrote, “Marcus Agrippa earned the right to fly a blue ensign in recognition of his naval victory off Sicily.”⁴⁶ The Latin verb which Suetonius used to describe Agrippa's ability to fly an honorable ensign is *donavit*,⁴⁷ which can mean “given” or “bestowed upon” giving the sense to the reader that these were earned rights, not inherited. Personally honoring individual actions would have been a useful strategy for Augustus to ensure loyalty. Agrippa also had admirable political skills, as he an important member of Augustus' political party.⁴⁸ This might have been useful, as Agrippa, being of common birth, may have been more accessible to the common people, therefore more likely to sway people in Augustus' favor, whereas it might have been hard for the plebeians to relate to the princeps himself. Agrippa also had financial skills, as he was an integral part of taxation of the principate.⁴⁹ These military, administrative, civil, and financial skills, along with his father's inherited wealth, made Agrippa a suitable candidate for an equites, and looking at his role in Augustus' political system can be a representative of why this group developed the way it did in the early principate.

In historical writings about Agrippa, he is always spoken of as being highly valued and trusted by Augustus. He was even trusted for administrative duties in Rome when Augustus was away.⁵⁰ Trust of the equites may be a further sign that Augustus was wary to trust the

44 F.A. Wright, *Marcus Agrippa* . 11.

45 F.A. Wright, *Marcus Agrippa* . 160.

46 Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Translated by Robert Graves (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1989) 67.

47 Suetonius. *De Vita Caesarum*. Edited by Harry Thurston Peck. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1893. 62.

48 Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*. 331.

49 F.A. Wright, *Marcus Agrippa*. 166.

50 F.A. Wright, *Marcus Agrippa* . 158.

Senators fully, as it was members of this group that assassinated his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. What was desirable about the equites to Augustus may have been that this group had earned their status and understood the value of hard work, were not of enough status to rise up against him, and also had enough education to fit political niches unsuitable for the plebeians. Agrippa fit all of these qualifications, and therefore can be considered a model for the equites.

Examining Marcus Agrippa as a case study of the equites reveals the results of the transformation which this group went through. As the republic transitioned into a principate under Augustus, this leader changed the government. In order to fill a new range of political tasks while also making sure those in these positions remained loyal to him, he brought along a preexisting class to new prominence in the hierarchy of Rome. This group, the equites, could be from common birth but also possessed wealth and good education, and was appointed in such a way that Augustus ensured loyalty. By developing this class and inserting them into the government of the principate, Augustus catalyzed the transformation of the equites to a new political and social group suitable for various militaristic, financial, civil, and administrative duties. Without the events contemporary to this transformation, as well as Augustus' involvement, the equites may not have developed into such a prominent and organized middle class.