

CLASSICVM

Joint Journal of the Classical Association of New South Wales
and of the Classical Languages Teachers Association of New South Wales
C/o Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University, N.S.W. Australia 2109.

Vol. XXXVI.1, April 2010

Editor: I. M. Plant
Reviews Editor: T.V. Evans

ISSN 0155 0659

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WHAT DID AUGUSTUS THINK HE WAS DOING?

(HSC Study Day, 19 September 2009, Macquarie University, by E.A. Judge)

Young Gaius Octavius (63 BC-AD 14) was catapulted into power at 19 years of age (*RG* 1.1) by the news of Julius Caesar's will (44 BC). He was to be principal heir (three-quarters of the estate), if no son had been born, but on condition of assuming Caesar's name. Against parental advice, Octavius set out for Rome, but landed in Italy secretly.

He soon discovered the troops were already treating him as a Caesar, and expected him to avenge his adoptive father against the assassins. The name gave him the upper hand in the public eye as well. But its political legacy was to prove a poisoned chalice, for Caesar had been made dictator for life (which was why his protégés assassinated him).

With two rivals Octavianus settled for a quasi-dictatorial '**commission of three for settling public life**' (*triumviri rei publicae constituendae*) which lasted for two five-year terms (42-33 BC). By his victory at Actium in 31 over his colleague Antonius (who had been consul with Caesar in 44), Octavianus was left unchallenged in the Roman world, but without any ongoing appointment carrying the title to power. He had been granted *imperium* ('command') in 43, however, and was still holding it at his death (AD 14). He had been consul for the second time in 33 BC, and (like the dictator Sulla in 79) might have retired to the dignity of political eminence in the senate while lesser men took their turn in the magistracies.

In retrospect Augustus justified his failure to do so in various ways. For the year 32 he could appeal to the oath of personal loyalty by which '**the whole of Italy**' (not the Roman state) had '**spontaneously**' (*sponte sua*) '**demanded me as general**' (*ducem, RG 25.2*). In 22 BC he had repeatedly been voted the dictatorship (*RG* 5.1) but had refused it, as also with a perpetual consulship (5.3), and then twice rejected the unheard-of position of 'supreme curator of laws and morals' (6.1). To avoid any suggestion of window-dressing he spelled out the more restricted terms under which he had nevertheless actually dealt with the crises of those occasions.

In 27 BC Augustus had been given a ten-year provincial command. It was renewed at intervals, sometimes only for five years. In 23 BC, on resigning the 11th consulship, he was granted 'the power of a tribune'. This would enable him to have a convenient (though not supreme) standing in the senate when on leave from his command.

The ostensibly familiar sound of these arrangements was however lost in the booming prestige that was only magnified as he lived on beyond all expectation (he was ready to die when ill in 23 BC). Thus increasingly an explanation was needed for the unparalleled ascendancy over 58 years that outstripped the memory of almost everyone.

At three dramatic sessions of the senate attempts were made to express the essential legitimacy of this position:

- I 13 and 16 January, 27 BC;
- II 5 February and 12 May, 2 BC;
- III 4 and 17 September, AD 14

In each case one should distinguish:

- (a) What actually happened;
- (b) What Augustus intended should follow;
- (c) What others made of it later

I Consuls imp. Caesar VII, M. Agrippa III (27 BC)

(a) On 13 January in the senate Octavianus announced the **'transfer of public life' (*rem publicam transtuli*) from his own control (*potestas*) to the discretion of the senate and people of Rome (RG 34.1)**. Already in the previous year an issue of gold coins had announced, **'He has restored to the Roman people (their) laws and rights' (*leges et iura p(opulo) r(omano) restituit*)**. The *Fasti Praenestini* (a calendar compiled by Verrius Flaccus, tutor of Gaius and Lucius Caesar, before their grandfather's death) record for 13 Jan. 27 the award of the laurels and civic crown to Augustus which the latter registers in RG 34.2 (along with the golden shield commemorating his *virtus*, 'enterprise', and *clementia*, his *justitia* and his *pietas*, 'loyalty').

(b) The name Augustus had been chosen because it reflected the contemporary understanding of Numa, the second founder of Rome, the one who 'founded it in law and morality' (Livy 1.19.1), rather than Romulus (Suetonius, *Aug.* 7.2) who had founded it 'by force of arms' (Livy). This may even have been the year in which he issued the edict cited by Suetonius, *Augustus* 28.2: **'So may it be granted me to settle the public life (*rem publicam*) safe and sound in its place, and to win from that the reward which I seek, that I may be known as the author of the best possible order (*optimi status auctor*) and at my death take with me the hope that the foundations I have laid for the public life will remain in place.'**

At the founding of the city the ceremony was described (by Ennius, cited in Suet. *Aug.* 7) as the *augustum augurium* ('the august augury'). Being himself an *augur* (a member of that priestly college), the name 'Augustus' echoes this. It also expresses the status of *auctoritas*, lit. 'authorship', or being the 'developer' (*auctor*) of something. In RG 34.3 Augustus states that while he was now no greater in lawful power (*potestas*) than his colleagues in each magistracy, in *auctoritas* he stood ahead of everybody.

(c) A century later, when Suetonius cited the edict in which Augustus had aspired to be known as *optimi status auctor*, he added that Augustus also saw to it no one regretted 'the new order'. Augustus would not have thanked him. Innovation was certainly not his aim. But we have made him 'the founder of the empire', as though that was something new in the 'public life' (*res publica*) of the Roman people. *Imperium* had always been there, invested in the magistrates through whom Rome was ruled, and herself ruled over other places. Conversely the 'public life' (*res publica*) continued to be the domestic practice of this imperial power even in the sixth century AD.

We owe to the third-century Greek historian Cassius Dio the theory that Augustus in 27 BC had to choose between two constitutions, democracy and monarchy. He chose the latter, but pretended it was the former (Dio 53.11). In the year 1863 such a constitutional analysis led Theodor Mommsen to restore the broken text of the *Fasti Praenestini* to make it say that they gave the oak crown to Augustus because he 'restored the Republic' to the Roman people. By 1883 Mommsen thought better of this, but 'the restored Republic' lingers on in our textbooks (though abandoned by the revised *Cambridge Ancient History* of 1996).

II Consuls imp. Caesar XIII, M. Plautius Silvanus (2 BC)

(a) On 5 February, the *Fasti Praenestini* register a holiday to commemorate the day when Augustus was called **'father of his country' (*pater patriae*) by the senate and people of Rome**.

On 12 May, the temple of Mars Ultor was dedicated in the new Augustan forum (though Dio 60.5.3 says 1 August).

The two events must be connected, since Augustus states that the resolution of the senate on the title included its inscription under the *quadriga* (his triumphal chariot) which they resolved should be set up in the forum Augustum (RG 35).

(b) Since Augustus made this title the climactic point of the RG, it clearly represents the final validation of *auctoritas* as the principle of leadership (RG 34.3). He was named *pater patriae* by senate, equestrian order, and Roman people acting 'as a whole' (*universus*). This was not a novel

salutation, but had historic precedent, and as long ago as 29 BC had been anticipated for him in Horace, *Odes* 1.2.50. Why then wait until now?

Prior to the battle of Philippi in 42 BC Augustus is said to have vowed a temple to Mars Ultor ('the Avenger') if given the victory over Caesar's assassins. This seems to have become parasitic upon Caesar's own vow for such a temple to celebrate the planned recovery of standards lost to the Parthians by Crassus. Augustus needed a show of strength before it could be built in the new forum, to be set at right angles to the Julian one. Mars was to gaze down from his temple across the *quadriga* of Augustus and on towards the statue of Julius in the latter's forum. In this coherent panorama the divine Avenger beheld his avenging agent facing the avenged parent.

Yet this potent scene was disrupted by the owners of property essential to its implementation, perhaps including a relative of Pompeius, Caesar's old rival (Ovid, *Ex Ponto* 4.5.10). Augustus did not 'dare' dispossess them, says Suetonius (*Aug.* 56.2). The vow must be fulfilled by personal means, not public ones (*RG* 21.1). In the end Augustus could wait no longer. The forum was truncated.

Not only was the past at stake, but also the future leadership of Rome. Suetonius says that next to the gods Augustus honoured the 'generals' (*duces*, 31.5) who had from nothing 'made the *imperium* of the Roman people all powerful'. He had therefore put up statues of them all in his forum, explaining by edict:

'I have done this so that by their model as it were I myself so long as I live and the leaders of subsequent ages may be tested by the citizens.'

Suetonius must not have checked. Not all of them were 'generals', but as Augustus says, they were 'leaders' (*principes*). Moreover, the inscriptions beneath their statues reveal what makes one the leader of his age. It is crisis management: where others have broken down, and all regular solutions are out of reach, the leader is the one who finds a way to set it all right again.

There is a strong doctrine of history here. It asserts continuity, not change. But it depends upon initiative. That same *auctoritas* ('capacity to lead') which had always saved Rome must do so also in the future. Augustus embodies it on a grand scale, and will transmit the pattern to future leaders. The public acclamation of him as *pater patriae* on the nones (=5th) of February is treated by Ovid (*Fasti* 2.133-44) as though it echoes a formal 'inauguration' of Rome (Kearsley), the 'restoration of rights' in 28 BC perhaps. The dedication of the promised temple on 12 May (Ovid, *Fasti*, 5.552, 595) may have been tied to the prospective military career in the East of Gaius Caesar, the adopted son of Augustus, who was to deliver the show of strength needed to lend military substance to the standards already returned (Herbert-Brown).

(c) The message of this ceremonial combination, both the new title and its monumental setting loaded with historic meaning, has often been lost, in ancient times and modern alike. As a propaganda coup it has failed. It contradicts our retrospective assumption that a major break in Roman statecraft must have governed the mind of Augustus.

III Consuls Sextus Pompeius, Sextus Appuleius (AD 14)

(a) On 4 September the senate met following the arrival of the body of Augustus (died 19 August) and Tiberius, on the previous day (Dio 56.31.2). Drusus, son of Tiberius, presented the will of Augustus, which was read by his freedman Polybius. Tiberius was allocated two-thirds of the estate, with the remainder going to Livia. Then Drusus himself read the four associated documents:

- 1) funeral instructions;
- 2) the *Res gestae* (= *RG*);
- 3) the public accounts;
- 4) advice for Tiberius and the public.

On 17 September the senate met again, to deify Augustus. The consuls invited Tiberius 'to succeed to his father's position' (*statio*, Velleius 2.124.2), but Tiberius disclaimed it. They had surely

invited him to sit in the third curule chair between them, as Augustus had done since 19 BC. Tiberius however insisted on standing up when the consuls appeared (Dio 57.11.3).

(b) Augustus made no plans for any 'succession' in the magisterial sense (as when a consul succeeds his predecessor). As head of his family he was providing by will for succession to his property (he held no magistracy anyway). But the money gave his principal heir the means to succeed to his station in political life, as the ethos of the nobility (and the public) expected. The term *statio* is used this way in a private letter of Augustus to his adopted son Gaius in AD 1 (Aulus Gellius 15.7.3). It lay with Gaius however to win his way by 'taking the lead', as Augustus put it.

Augustus advised the public **'to entrust the public business to all who had the ability both to understand and to act, and never to let it depend on any one person'** (Dio 56.33.4). As Drusus read out the words on 4 September it was no surprise to Tiberius. He had long been conscripted by Augustus as a full partner in his military obligations. This appointment did not lapse with the death of Augustus. But it did not cover metropolitan leadership. On 17 September Tiberius insisted **'the public business would be more easily managed by sharing the work'** (Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.11.1). He then it seems read out (once more) the written advice of Augustus on this principle.

(c) By contrast with II (c) above, the battle of wits between Tiberius and the senate has captivated the ancient sources and modern debate alike. Although we have two contemporary authorities (Ovid and Velleius), two second-century ones (Tacitus and Suetonius), and one from the third century (Cassius Dio), none has managed to state the technical details of the issue. Modern taste cannot easily evade the insinuation of hypocrisy on Tiberius' part. Yet what we know of his character matches his protestation. He had no appetite for a monopoly of power. At his own death he split the estate equally between two heirs.

As for Augustus, he deeply regretted having to pass it all on to one not of his blood-line. Nor did he assume Tiberius would prevail. At the end, according to Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.13.2) he noted four others likely to bid for 'political leadership' (*principem locum*).

The problem is ours. We retroject our classificatory way of understanding why things change in history. But the Roman nobility did not think in terms of a constitutional choice between democracy and monarchy (as Dio, a Greek, already saw it). Nor were 'republic' and 'empire' chronological epochs to them. *Imperium* was the supreme command within *res publica*, both after Augustus as before.

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Vol. XXXVIII.2, 2012

Editor: I. M. Plant
Assistant Editor: Gil Davis

ISSN 0155 0659

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